

LANDING THE ELECTIONS

Preliminary analysis of South
African Elections coverage
(April 2019)

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Edited by Thandi Smith
On behalf of Media Monitoring Africa

May 2019

INTERIM MEDIA ANALYSIS

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01

INTRODUCTION

On 8 May 2019, South Africans cast their vote in the 6th democratic National and Provincial Election (NPE). The challenge of ensuring a democratic, robust and free election is not just about preparing a suitable number of voting stations or publishing the right number of ballot papers. It also lies in ensuring that the information that the electorate receive boasts integrity, credibility and quality. Without accurate, insightful and balanced news, the ability of voters to cast their ballot with the level of knowledge for the task at hand hangs in the balance. Media therefore has a key role to play in facilitating the type of informed decision-making required for every potential voter to mark their ballot, as they see fit.

To hold the media accountable to these high level principles, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has monitored every single democratic election in South Africa.

The results from our monitoring are used to highlight both the successes of media houses, but also to identify the blindspots that journalists might miss in their everyday reporting. What follows is the second in a series of reports that unpacks the quality of media coverage in the 2019 elections period. While the focus on this report is specifically on the quality of reporting in April, we also chose to deep-dive into how the much contested issue of land reform has been captured in these elections. This land-specific analysis forms the last chapter of this report.

A final report analysing media coverage for the whole elections period (March - May) will be released in early June in 2019.

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HOW WE CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH

This report analyses the elections coverage from 61 South African news media, including online, radio and television, from 1 April – 30 April 2019¹. For radio, we monitored three bulletins a day for each station (one in the morning - 6am, one at 12 noon and one in the evening - 6pm). For television, we monitored one prime-time news bulletin in the evening. We also monitored SABC 2's Morning Live and SABC 3's Democracy Gauge, as a full-length news programme and an elections-specific programme respectively. For digital media, we analysed all stories on online news websites. Within each bulletin or programme and on each website, we identified all stories related to the 2019 National and Provincial Elections in South Africa.

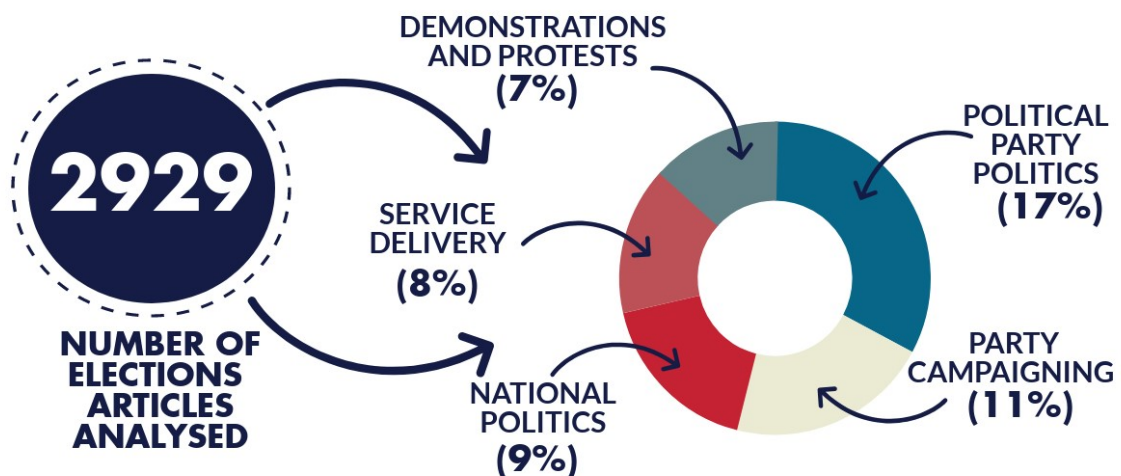
Information from each elections story was checked and recorded by specially trained monitors at Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and the data was captured in MMA's specialized online software, *Dexter*. This included: (1) name, type and origin of publication, (2) headline and summary, (3) main topics of the story, (4) the identities of all sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation) and (5) whether any type of bias is present. The results below are an analysis of the 2929 stories that form part of the dataset in this 30-day period.

WHAT WE FOUND

1 WHAT WERE THE STORIES ABOUT?

For this section, we identified major themes in each news item. This process helps to provide insights into the types of stories that garnered the most media attention in the period, and indeed, highlights those stories that failed to make it onto the media agenda at all. The main subject of each news story was identified from an extensive pre-existing list. For example, the story “Motlanthe: ANC should expect tough general elections” (*EWN*, 1 April 2019²) was identified as “Political Party Politics” item as veteran leaders, including Kgalema Motlanthe, share their views on how issues such as factionalism mean that the ruling party might not fare as well on 8 May. On the other hand, a story such as “One thousand new homes earmarked for Masiphumelele” (*GroundUp*, 1 April 2019³) was identified as an item about “Housing”. This story reported on how lengthy discussions between City of Cape Town and local Masiphumelele residents had finally been concluded and temporary houses on a large unoccupied property in the township would be erected towards the end of this year.

Figure 1. Top 5 topics across elections coverage in April 2019.



Of 2929 stories analysed in this period, political stories secured the most media interest. Stories that covered issues of party politics, political party campaigning and national politics, when combined, made up 37% of all items monitored. It is often anticipated that political coverage is even higher in an elections period and the dominance of political-oriented items in this case is therefore not unusual⁴. Importantly, though, we see a staggering 15% of all stories looking at issues of service delivery and community protests. This is in stark contrast to MMA's interim findings from March 2019⁵, where these types of citizen-centred issues did not even make it to the top 5 overall topics.

Upon deeper analysis, we see that the bulk of these service delivery and community protest stories focused on the #AlexShutdown, an intense series of protests in the Gauteng township, Alexandra, that took place in early April 2019. Angry residents took to the streets because of inadequate housing and poor refuse removal, among other service delivery issues. Protests turned violent at various stages over the course of the protest. While it is reassuring that these types of stories secured prominence in local media coverage, we argue that the reason the story gained so much traction was because they were used as a political campaign tool by the competing parties, most especially by the ANC and DA. In such a highly contested area, both parties took the opportunity to use the poor service delivery as motivation for political backbiting, mud-slinging and finger-pointing, instead of actually addressing the residents' concerns.

Importantly, while these results, no doubt, reveal positive steps in the diversity of topics covered in the period, the reporting still remains heavily events-based. At any one time, there are a number of citizen-driven protests happening around the country, but it seems that only when politicians climb on board do the media give those issues the attention they deserve.

**"THE REPORTING
REMAINS HEAVILY
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WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR?

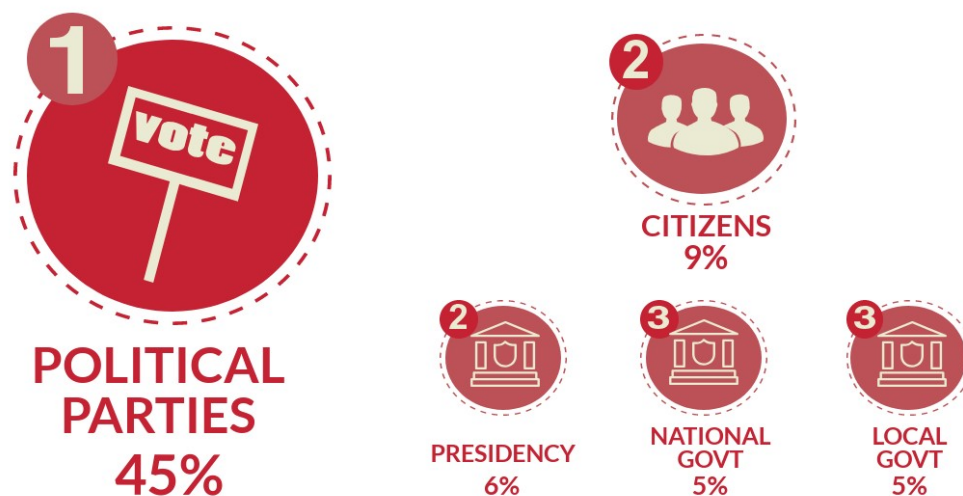
In order to understand how media framed these elections, an important element for analysis is how much access was given to particular groups, parties or individuals. By seeing who was chosen to speak on which issue, we can begin to track patterns as to whose views and opinions are deemed important and whose are not. For our purposes, we define sources as any individual who is accessed or mentioned in a news story.

As a starting point, a total of 10 920 sources were recorded in the monitoring period. This results in an average of 3.7 sources per item. This is significantly above the average sources we found in media in general reporting⁶ and suggests media made clear effort to ensure greater diversity and fairness of accessing sources.

Which groups are accessed?

What is immediately clear from the graph below is that political parties dwarf any other types of sources accessed in the period. In this case, almost half of all sources represent political contestants or their representatives. On the other hand, other critical partners in the elections project such as researchers, civil society and the Electoral Commission itself each comprise less than 2% of all sources. This skewed over-representation of political voices remains a recurring challenge in the media industry where a purely political agenda is allowed to take centre stage at a time when in-depth interrogation of socio-economic issues is required.

Figure 2. The most frequently accessed groups in elections coverage in April 2019



In an encouraging step, however, citizen’s voices sit at an all-time high and constitute 9% of all sources. This follows the upward trend from MMA’s March monitoring report⁵. Previous elections research shows how citizen voices are often heavily marginalised to open up more space for political voices. In this case, though, we see the voices of voters being prioritised even over the Presidency.

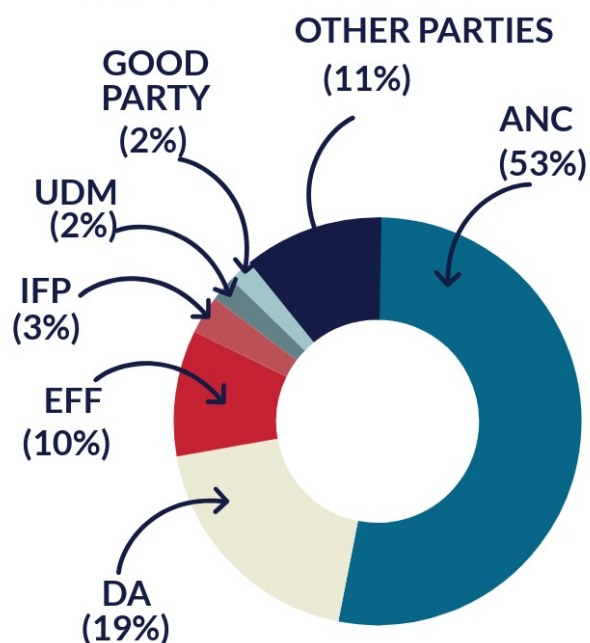
While work is still needed to level the playing field between citizens and politicians, accessing citizens, as is seen here, is a sure-fire way to ensure that citizen-centred narratives, voices and issues are published and that the interests of the voters are seen and heard. This is not only important from an ethical perspective, but should also be encouraged from a sustainability perspective where stories of those on-the-ground helps to reconnect the media with their readers, which builds into the media’s credibility and trust.

▶ How did political parties fare?

With political parties making up the loudest voice in the coverage, we decided to delve deeper to see which parties in particular were making the most noise.

It is noteworthy that out of the top three political parties, both the ANC (53%) and the DA (19%) received less coverage in proportion to their numbers in the National Assembly at 62% and 22% respectively. On the other hand, the EFF (10%) received more coverage than its 6% National Assembly representation. This is partly due to many of the headline grabbing statements that the EFF’s leader, Julius Malema, is known for making, including “the ANC is in an extremely bad state and there’s no one who can rescue it, not even Mama [Winnie Madikizela-Mandela]” (2 April 2019 ⁷). Another contributor to the high coverage of South Africa’s 3rd highest political party were accusations of mismanagement of party finances and the subsequent legal action against the apparent whistleblower, Thembinkosi Rawula, by Malema and Floyd Shivambu. These events meant that the EFF remained firmly in the media spotlight over the period analysed.

Figure 3. Political party coverage



Bearing in mind that 27 parties have never contested on South Africa's national ballot before, it is interesting that the top 3 parties made up 82% of all political party sources. This means that the rest of the parties had to share the remaining 18% of coverage. Although more parties were sourced in the April (32) than in March (19), the challenges of covering so many parties in a manner that does all their issues and manifestos justice is a mammoth one. That they received less coverage does not mean media were not equitable in their coverage of the parties. Considering how many new and untested parties there were in this election, it is unreasonable to expect media to offer the same coverage to all parties. What is important, though, is that if the voting public consume the news that they should be informed of how many parties are contesting and should be able to get more information on the parties less covered. At the same time, the media need to ensure that they offer in-depth insight and analysis required for the electorate to fully understand the suite of party options on offer.



What was the race and gender breakdown of voices?

A recurring challenge for media across the globe is the accurate representation of gender and race of sources. Time and again, we see how media continue to dramatically favour the voices of certain groups over others, and this often reflects historical power dynamics and/or forms of ongoing discrimination.

In terms of both race and gender, our findings here closely reflect those seen in MMA's March analysis. In the first case, the racial breakdown of sources reveals gradual improvements to the levels of access afforded to Black and White individuals. The former at 76% more closely reflect their 81.5% proportion of the South African population, while the latter at 14% more closely match their 8% South African constituency⁸. While these levels are in no way perfect, they indicate an initial positive trend towards true representation than what was seen in March. This is also seen in how Indian sources have decreased and now more appropriately mirror their 2.5% population demographic than previously. The only group that continues to experience ongoing marginalisation and exclusion are Coloured sources. Their voices remain persistently lower than their 8% proportion of the population. Importantly, too, of the 532 Coloured sources identified in the April coverage, only 9% of those were citizens, residents or members of community associations. This means that Coloured political voices take up most of the spotlight and the general Coloured community are even more excluded from conversations about issues that affect them.

In terms of gender, ongoing inequality is clearly the order of the day as men outweigh women in the coverage four-fold. This means that for every woman sourced in a story, there are typically at least four men sourced elsewhere. This is astonishing considering that women make up more than half of South Africa's population⁹ and that there are 2 million more registered female voters than their male counterparts¹⁰.

Figure 4. Breakdown of sources by race

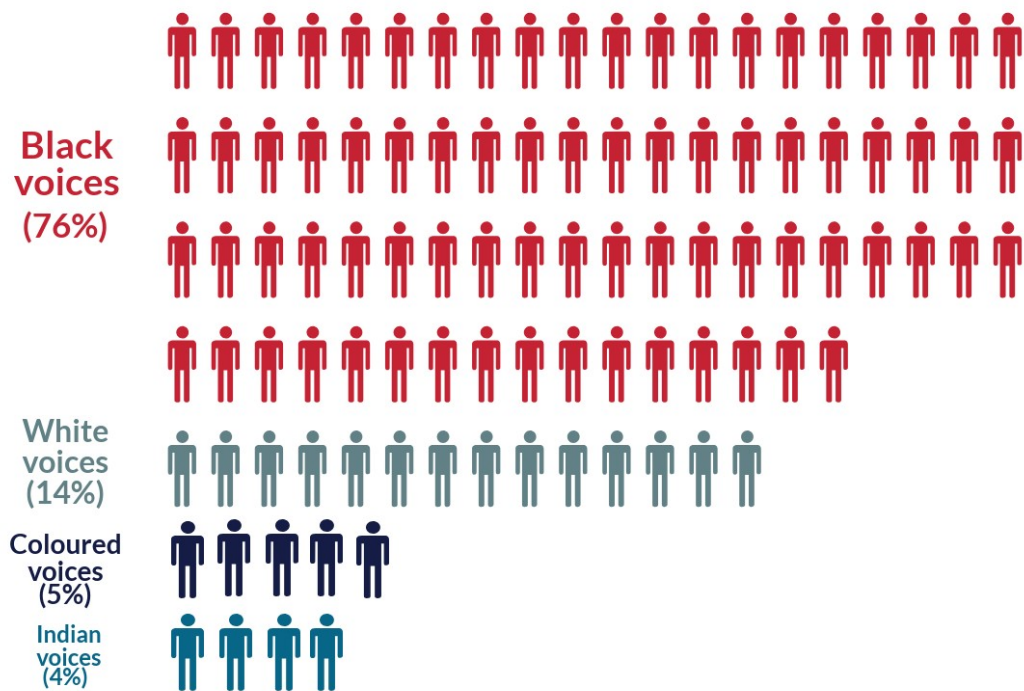
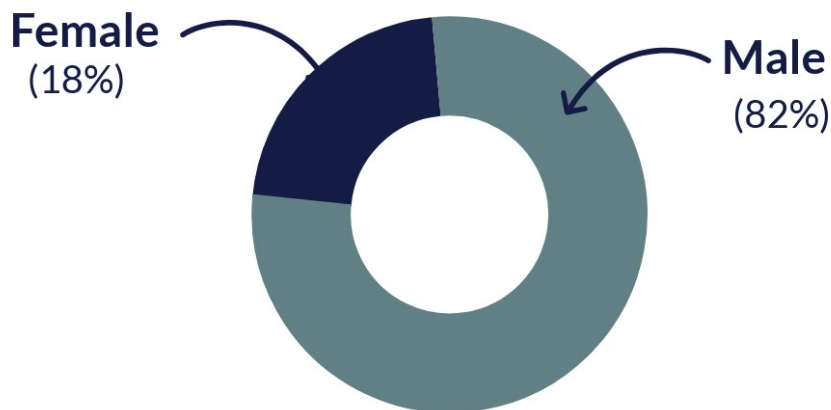


Figure 5. Breakdown of all sources by gender



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HOW FAIR IS THE COVERAGE?

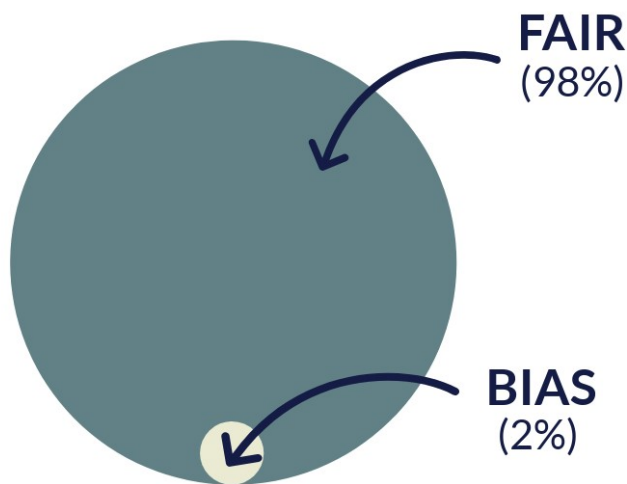
One of the fundamental roles of media is to provide fair and balanced reporting. This is achieved not only by ensuring that political parties receive equitable coverage in terms of airtime and story count, but also that each story, issue and candidate is appropriately interrogated, evaluated and considered without fear or favour. Given how coverage can make or break a party when it comes to the polls, it is pivotal that all steps are taken to ensure that any biases – subconscious or otherwise – are precluded from news.

In terms of our monitoring process, MMA’s default position is one of fairness. i.e. the assumption is that all news stories are balanced and impartial until bias is clearly identifiable. We looked at bias specifically by asking the following questions:

- Does the item exaggerate/overstate a particular event or party?
- Does it generalise an issue or party by using vague language or by perpetuating stereotypes?
- Does it trivialise or dismiss a particular party
- Does the news bulletin or newspaper, when taken together, present a particular party in a favourable light?
- Were all necessary parties allowed the right of reply to allegations about them?

Bearing these questions in mind, our results show that only 2% of all stories indicated some level of bias. In half of these cases, the bias stemmed from a failure to access a party when a serious claim or issue was raised about them.

Figure 6. Percentage of stories that were fair vs biased



Importantly, these interim findings demonstrate significant positive inroads to balanced and fair reporting when compared to previous elections. For example, in 2009 only 84% of South African elections coverage was deemed fair¹¹ while in 2014, 87% of items were fair¹². These improvements across all media demonstrate a clear commitment across the board to fair elections reporting.

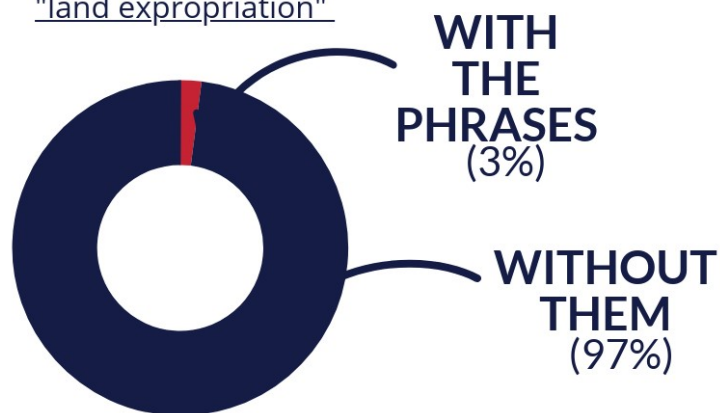
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NOW, LET'S TALK ABOUT LAND

Given that land reform has been a key political tool over the last two years, we decided to deep dive into how land reform was covered in the April elections coverage. We analysed all media for the phrases "land reform" and/or "land expropriation" and the following is an analysis of those news items.

Despite the issue of land reform being used as a key campaign issue in the last several years, there were only 80 stories across 26 media that mentioned "land reform" or "land expropriation" in April 2019. This means that of all the April elections items, just under 3% included these phrases. This is staggering when one considers that between 1 October 2017 and 30 September 2018, there were almost 4000 stories about land reform published¹³. This averages roughly 10 stories a day. While land is clearly a much more complex issue that can be encapsulated in a variety of different ways, we would argue that mainstream narratives and campaigns consistently mention these terms and it is therefore incredibly eye-opening that so few stories include them.

Figure 7. Percentage of stories that had the phrases "land reform" or "land expropriation"

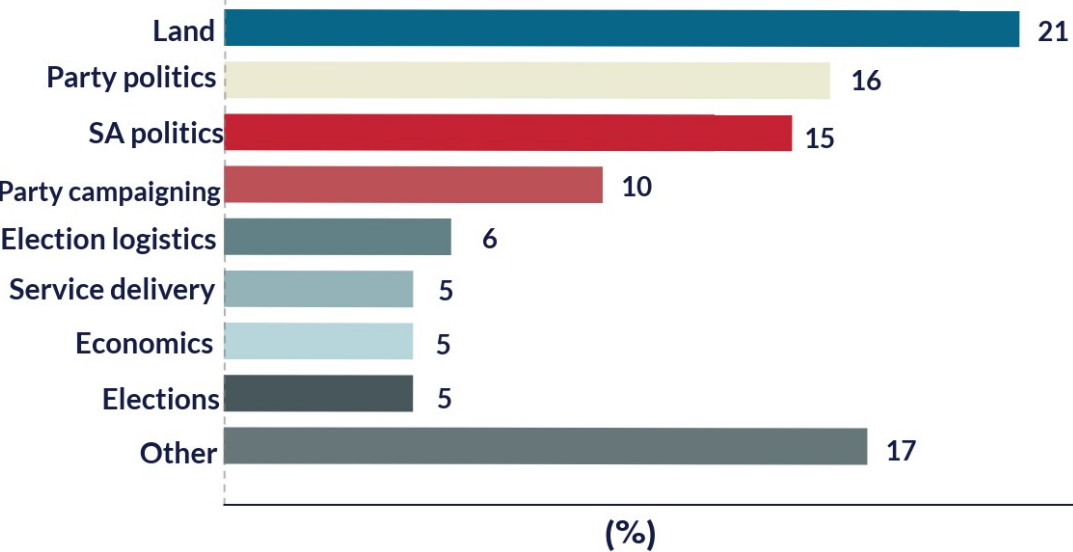


What were the stories about?

The following chart shows a breakdown of stories that contained the words "land expropriation" and or land reform in them, and these have then be spread across our standard list of topics codes referred to above. Following our full monthly analysis above, the stories here follow strong political themes. For example, many of the items that were clustered under the main theme of "Land" referred primarily to President Ramaphosa's statements at a briefing with white farmers in the Western Cape where he emphasised that there will be no land grabs in South Africa and that tenure security was for everyone¹⁴.

Therefore although the primary issue at hand was around land reform, much of what was discussed centred on the President’s reassuring part of the farming constituency. In addition to these, the next 41% of items focused on different political party’s stance on land reform. Importantly, most of these either refer to previously stated manifestos and campaigns where the issue of land is not actually stated outright, or is in response to other issues such as service delivery and housing.

Figure 8. Percentage of stories that had the phrases "land reform" or "land expropriation"



Whose voices do we hear in land coverage?

As is to be expected, the conversation around land reform remains highly politicised in the analysed period. Critically, though, we see large contributions emanating from the research, academic and university quarters. This is most certainly a positive step. We argue that incisive expert opinion into complex issues such as land is a much-needed perspective. These evidence-based insights bring nuance and moves us away from the emotive electioneering tactics of politicians. These are important voices for important robust national debate.

Within these voices, President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke the most often (39 times) followed by Julius Malema (20 times). All other voices spoke fewer than ten times in these stories.

What about political party coverage in land stories?

Of the 137 political party sources, only 12 different political parties were represented. Unsurprisingly, the ANC (39%) dominated the source list followed by EFF (26%) and DA (12%). This is to be expected as both the ANC and EFF fought tooth-and-nail to have Section 25 of the Constitution to allow for land to be expropriated without compensation. While many other political parties included solutions for land reform in their manifestos, it is interesting how few other parties mentioned this critical issue in April.

Figure 9. The most frequently accessed groups in land coverage in April 2019

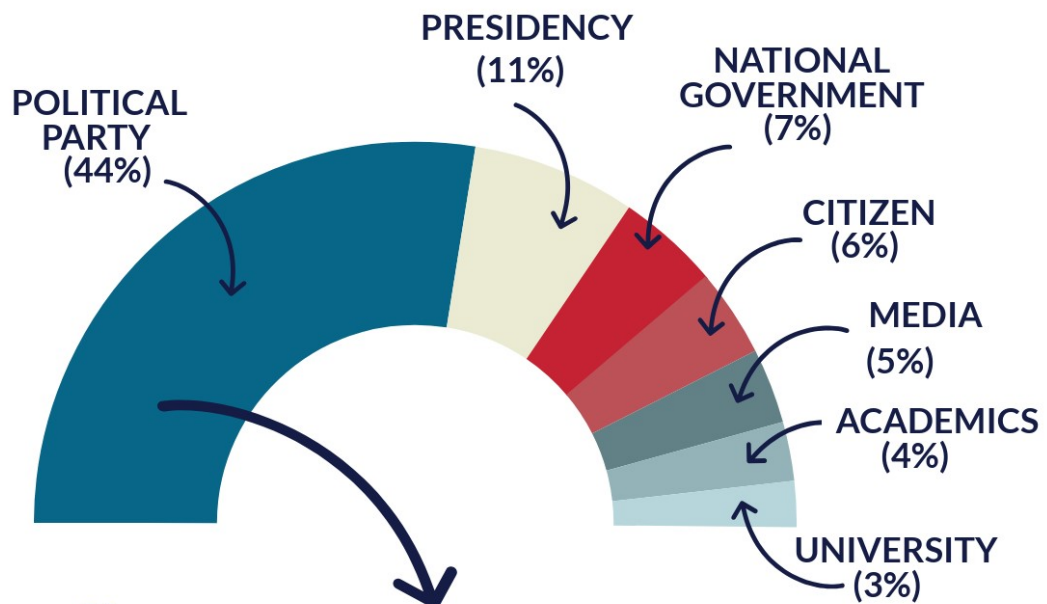
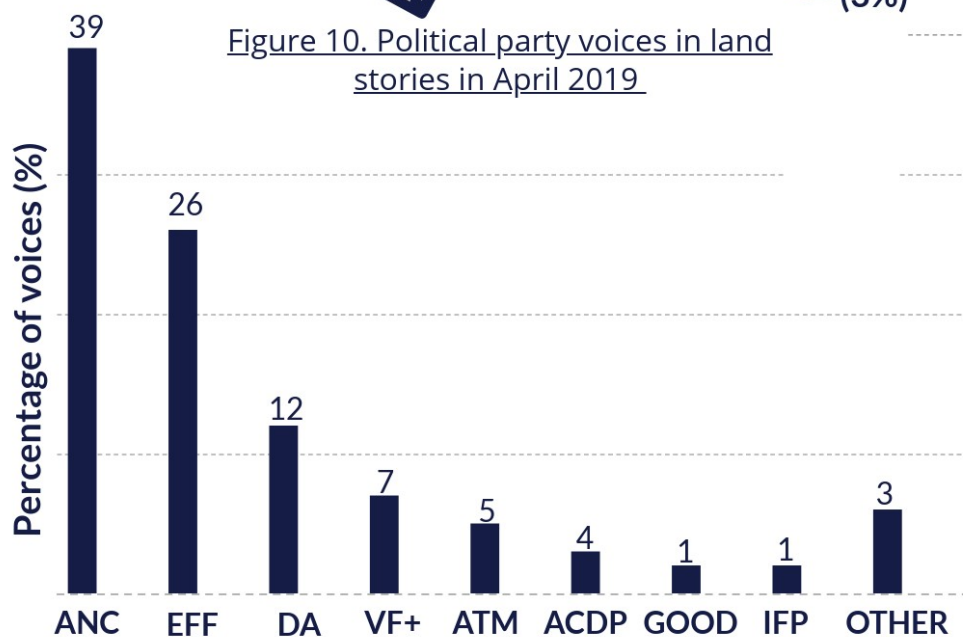


Figure 10. Political party voices in land stories in April 2019



What is the race and gender breakdown?

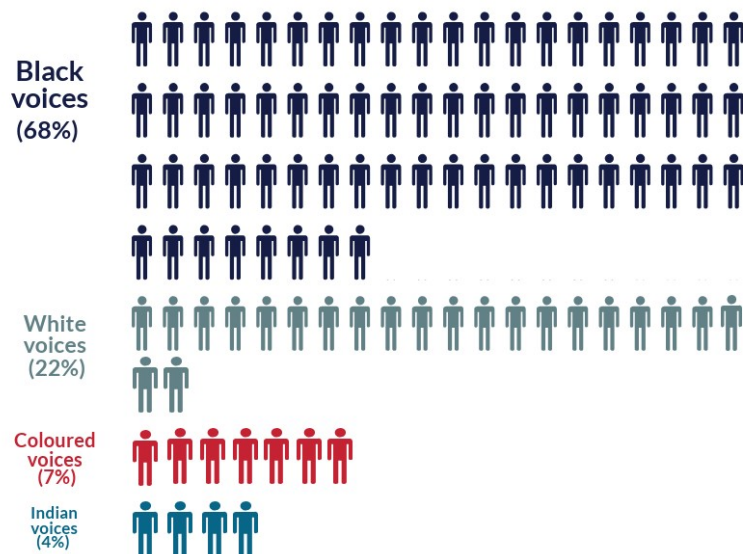
Unsurprisingly we see the same patterns around who speaks between woman and men. What is really concerning is that there are fewer female voices, than in other elections coverage monitored thus far. Given that the burden of work on land often rest at the feet of women, and given the disempowerment and historical marginalization of women on land issues, far more significant efforts need to be made to ensure that women's voices and critical gender perspectives on the land issues are addressed.

Across the land stories analysed here, too, racial representation of voices was heavily skewed in favour of one group: White voices. Given how sources can act as an indicator of authority or expertise of different groups on a particular issue, these figures show how White interests are disproportionately seen and heard in land coverage. This may stem from the large number of stories focusing on white farmers and their concerns about possible land grabs. Importantly, South Africa's history of land dispossession affected all population groups and in order to ensure that robust solutions-oriented debates on this complex issue are maintained and deepened, voices from all affected groups need to be seen and heard.

Figure 12. Breakdown of sources in land stories by race



Figure 13. Breakdown of sources in land stories by race



04

CONCLUSIONS

The results here closely follow the findings of other elections analyses, including those in our interim March report. Significantly, though, there do appear to be some positive trends developing. For example, although coverage remained dominated by politics in April, massive inroads have been taken to access citizens and to share their stories. While this is primarily in relation to community protests, and on #AlexShutdown in particular, this is an encouraging finding as it shows the makings of a potential citizens' agenda in an elections period. In the same way, only a handful of stories monitored here had any indication of bias and this is a tremendously positive step compared to previous elections. Importantly, though, much work still needs to be done to ensure that gender and race representation are more accurately and fairly presented across all newsrooms.

AND LAND?

While many of the parties covered here discuss the issue of land at length in their manifestos and have used the issue as a key campaign tool in recent years, only a few stories discussed this issue at all. It therefore appears as if land reform and land expropriation have fallen completely off the political and media agenda. Nevertheless, the small set of stories analysed here show how narratives around land remain strongly steered by political parties and politicians. Importantly, this means that much of the national debate is therefore steeped in electioneering rhetoric and this fails to make the issue accessible and understandable to the general public. Given how infrequently the issue was raised in the month before the elections, this begs the question: what/who has shifted the agenda and who stands to gain if land reform is no longer a point of national focus?

REFERENCES

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[3] Accessed here: <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/one-thousand-new-homes-earmarked-masiphumelele/>

[4] Manganyi, N., Findlay S. and Smith, T. 2018. 15 years of reporting South African elections: Same same but different. Media Monitoring Africa. pp. 15. Accessible here: https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/Research_Reports/15-years-of-reporting-South-African-elections_-Same-same-but-different-.pdf

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[6] Smith, T. and Bird, W. 2019. Infographic: Media Trends for World Press Freedom Day, 2019. Accessible here: www.mediamonitoringafrica.org

[7] As reported by: <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-04-02-anc-in-extremely-bad-state-not-even-mama-winnie-can-sav-it-malema/>

<https://ewn.co.za/2019/04/03/malema-anc-is-failing-winnie-madikizela-mandela>

[8] Statistics SA, 2011. South African census.

[9] Approximately 51% of the population is female (StatsSA, 2018).

[10] According to the Electoral Commission of South Africa, the total number of registered voters in 26 741 021 with women leading with a total of 14 708 219 compared to men's total of 12 032 802.

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Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) was established in 1993 in Johannesburg, South Africa and, since then, has evolved from a pure monitoring-based project to an innovative organisation which implements successful media strategies for change. We use technology, social media and data tools to make our work more efficient and effective. MMA acts as a watchdog, taking on a role to promote ethical and fair journalism which supports human rights. We promote democracy and a culture where the media and the powerful respect human rights to encourage a just and fair society.