

CENTRE FOR  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Democracy in Africa Research Unit

**The possibilities of election campaigns as  
sites for political advocacy: South Africa in  
comparative perspective**

Wadim Schreiner  
Robert Mattes

CSSR Working Paper No. 293

April 2011

Wadim Schreiner is the Managing Director of Media Tenor South Africa and Marketing Director marketing for Media Tenor International.

Robert Mattes is co-founder and Senior Advisor of the Afrobarometer. He is also a Professor in the Department of Political Studies, Director of the Democracy In Africa Research Unit (DARU) at the Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town and Fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Studies.

Prepared for:

*Public Opinion and Interest Group Politics: South Africa's Missing Links*

Roland Henwood and Heather Thuynsma, Editors

# The possibilities of election campaigns as sites for political advocacy: South Africa in comparative perspective

How useful are election campaigns as a site for South African interest groups to advocate policy change, either on their own or through allied political parties? More broadly, we might ask how useful campaigns are as sites for political parties to attract new voters by taking positions on publicly salient issues of public policy. At first glance, the answer to both these questions might seem obvious. Our popular image of election campaigns sees them either very broadly as watershed national conversations about where the country has been and where it ought to go, or more narrowly as periodic national debates in which political parties, candidates, interest groups and news media try to persuade voters about “who did what” in the *past* five years and “with what consequences,” and “who might do what” in the *next* five years?

But this popular image rests on several assumptions about both political elites and ordinary voters. On its face, it assumes that voters come into each campaign with a completely open mind ready to hear contending partisan arguments and decide accordingly. It also assumes that all voters are able to follow, and are interested in following this national conversation through the news media, and that they in fact do so. Yet a great deal of research by comparative political scientists has demonstrated that voters do not make up their minds *tabula rasa* at each election. Furthermore, we know that political parties and candidates tend to focus primarily on mobilizing those voters who already agree with them, and only secondarily on persuading smaller groups of undecided, potential “swing” voters to change their vote from the last election.

Yet we have relatively little research on how well South Africa’s election campaigns function, even in this more limited sense.<sup>1</sup> The popular image might seem to be verified if one only looked at the emphasis given to the most recent national election in 2009 by the South African print news media, which in the six months leading up to the vote devoted 75 per cent of non-financial news coverage to that election. But this begs the question of whether ordinary voters

---

<sup>1</sup> For an exception, see Cherrel Africa, *The Impact of the 2004 Election Campaign on the Quality of Democracy in South Africa* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2009)

had access to, were interested in, or actually used this press content. It also begs the question of the quality of this election coverage.

This chapter, therefore, attempts to bring together a range of empirical data to lay some basic groundwork for the analysis of election campaigns in South Africa and focuses on the following questions. First, how many South Africans have *access* to the means to follow or join in the potential national conversation known as an election campaign? Second, how many South Africans are sufficiently interested in and attentive to the debates that occur during the campaign? Third, how well do news media communicate these debates to ordinary voters? And fourth, how well do South Africa's political parties communicate directly with the voters through face-to-face contacts or media advertising? In order to learn as much as we can about the possibilities and limits of election campaigns as sites for interest groups advocacy in South Africa, it is necessary to place the country in a broader comparative perspective. The United States provides the obvious point of comparison because it has perhaps the most media intensive electoral process in the world.

## **News media access and use**

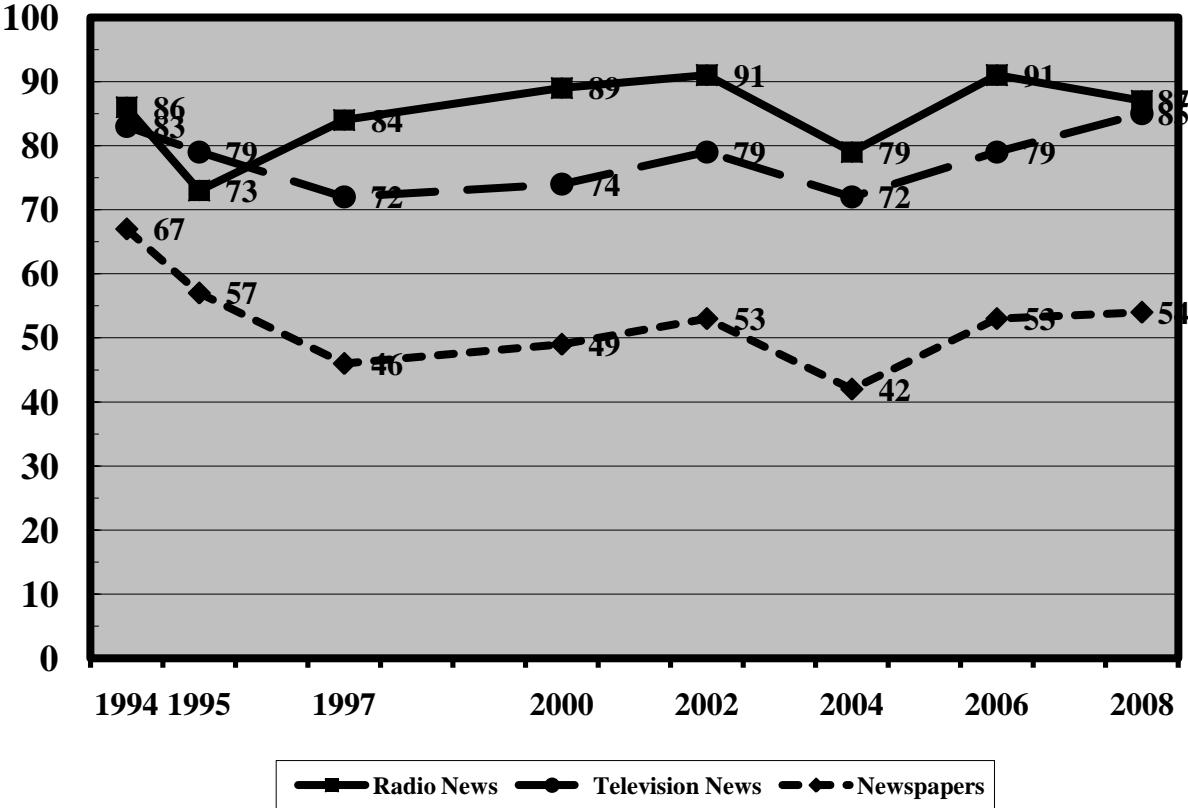
To return to the example set out above, while print news media devoted 75 percent of coverage to the 2009 election during the six months leading up to the vote, how many people actually had access to newspapers and other news media in South Africa, or were sufficiently literate to make use of a newspaper? Newspapers and television reception may simply not be available to many people in a country with as large a rural population as South Africa? Alternatively, purchasing a newspaper on a regular basis, or owning a television set might be beyond the means of people who live in poverty (although at least one national group, Caxton, distributes local community newspapers in small towns free of charge). And one out of ten South Africans (12 percent) are not literate.<sup>2</sup> While there appears to be no authoritative data on how many South Africans are unable to afford a newspaper or who live in areas where newspapers are not available, data from the 2008 Afrobarometer show that 80 percent of all South Africans say they read a newspaper at least once in the previous year, though only 54 percent did so regularly (defined as daily, or a few

---

<sup>2</sup> As of 2007, South Africa's over 15 literacy rate was estimated at 88 percent . *Human Development Report, 2010* (United Nations Development Program, 2010 (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/>)).

times a week)<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 1). Yet these national figures mask larger variations between the city and countryside. Fully 30 percent of people who live in rural areas never read a paper (compared to only 10 percent in urban areas), and just 34 percent read one regularly (as opposed to 66 percent in towns and cities).

Figure 1: News media use (% every day / few days a week)



While newspaper readership is low relative to other types of media, the structure of the South African print media industry does offer policy advocates the potential to run a cost effective political campaign amongst those readers. Through just three daily newspapers, political parties and interest groups could have access to about one-fifth to one-quarter of the total reading public: the tabloid *Daily Sun* (4.7 million readers, or 14 percent of all readers); *Sowetan* (with 1.5 million readers or a 5 percent market share); and the Nguni language newspaper *Isolezwe* (with 771,000 readers or a share of 2 percent).<sup>4</sup> And amongst the weekly newspapers, three titles dominate: *Sunday Times* (4.2 million, 13 percent), *Sunday Sun* (2.6 million, 8 per cent) and *City Press* (2.15

<sup>3</sup> The 2009 South African Advertisers Research Foundation’s All Media and Products Survey (AMPS) put it slightly lower, at 47 percent of all adults.

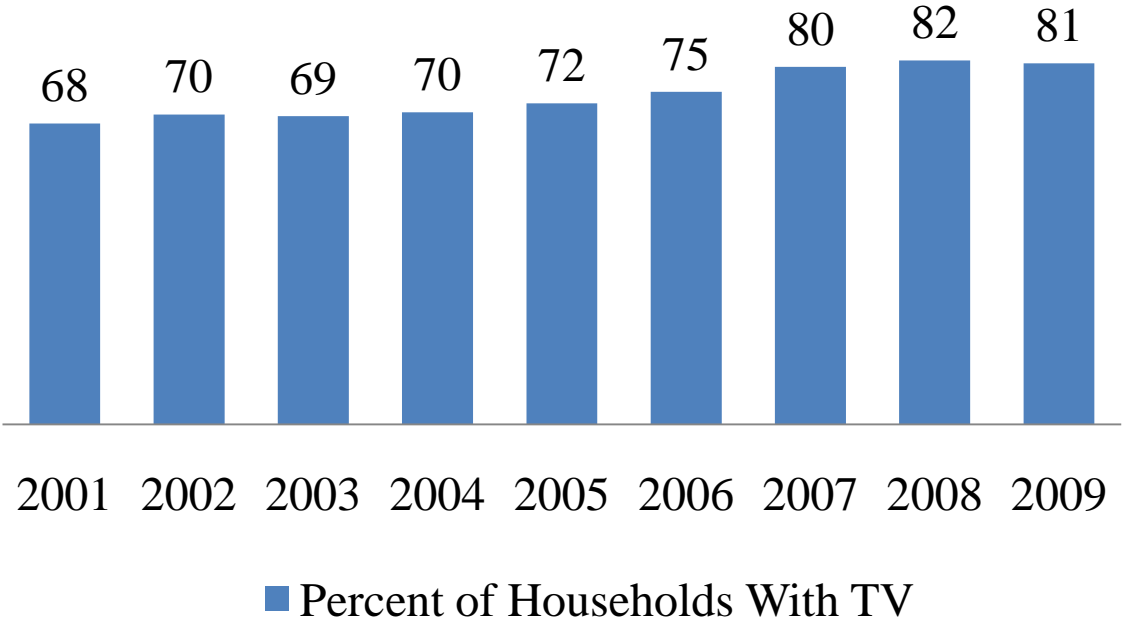
<sup>4</sup> South African Advertisers Research Foundations (SAARF) All Media and Products Survey (AMPS) 2009B.

million, 6 percent).

Physical access to television is much broader than for newspapers. As of 2008-2009, 18 to 19 percent of all households still did not have a television set though as can be seen in Figure 2 this has declined sharply from 32 percent in 2001.<sup>5</sup> But as with newspapers, people without a television can still watch the news in places other than their own homes. As of 2008, Afrobarometer found that 87 percent watched television news on a regular (daily or weekly) basis, a figure which has also risen from a low of 72 percent in 2004) (see Figure 1).

Television viewership is even more concentrated than newspaper use. Just three public channels (SABC TV1, 2 and 3) and one private television (eTV) channel control the entire broadcast environment, and are watched by between 80 to 86 percent of all television owners.<sup>6</sup> Narrowcast news via satellite television is far more restricted, reaching only 15 percent of the population (news programming by local satellite television was only legalized in 1995 and is still regulated by the state Independent Communications Authority (ICASA).

Figure 2: Percentage of South African households with television sets



<sup>5</sup> Futurefact. The 2008 Afrobarometer, however, found that 30 percent of all respondents said that their household did not own a television, with the figure as high as 45 percent amongst rural respondents compared to 20 percent of urban.

<sup>6</sup> TAMPS.

Physical access to radio is most widespread. As of 2008, only one-in-ten (13 percent) households did not own a radio. That year, 85 percent of respondents told Afrobarometer interviewers that they listened to radio news on a frequent basis. Furthermore, there is an even higher concentration of listenership amongst radio news providers than for print news. Through just three stations, political parties and interest groups can reach 47 percent of all radio listeners: Ukhozi FM (6 million listeners, 19 percent share), Metro FM (5.2 million, 16 percent) and Umhlobo Wenene (4.3 million, 14 percent). While a far larger number of stations operate at the community level, they are used collectively by just 24 percent of all listeners nationally.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, online media are still, by far, a junior partner in the South African news media picture. According to industry sources, there are 11.6 million unique users in South Africa.<sup>8</sup> Surveys, however, tend to report lower levels ranging from 17 percent (Futurefact, 2009) to 14 percent (WorldWide Worx, Afrobarometer, and Markinor). Mobile users of internet news currently stand at 3.1 million users.<sup>9</sup>

Not only do television and radio reach far larger shares of people than print, they also reach very different types of audiences. For radio and television (especially SABC 1 and SABC 2), the majority of viewers and listeners are at the lower ends of the economic spectrum (what the South Africa market research industry refer to as Living Standards Measures 1 through 5, which is basically one-half of the adult population). Newspapers, in contrast, reach people who are at the higher end of the spectrum (LSM's 5 through 10). Therefore, if a main dimension of election debates is, or ought to be about the provision of services to the underprivileged, electronic media (television and radio) not only dominate the audience, but they also get at the right audience. In contrast, print media reaches a much smaller audience, and speaks to those who already have much of what they need. This is a key message for opposition parties who tend to concentrate their campaign advertising in newspapers.

The consequences of these initial observations about media access and use become much more obvious if we compare South Africa to a place like the United States. In the US, there is almost universal access to newspapers and to television and radio broadcast news, increasingly close-to-universal access to cable or satellite television, and rapidly expanding access to internet media. Yet there are dozens of national cable or satellite news providers who compete with

---

<sup>7</sup> SAARF's RAMPS 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Digital Media and Marketing Association (previously Online Publishers Association), August 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Digital Media and Marketing Association (previously Online Publishers Association), August 2010.

the four national broadcast networks, around 20 national radio networks, over 1,000 local television stations, 6,000 cable television systems, over 1,600 daily newspapers, 7,500 weeklies, and 11,000 radio stations.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while universal access and blanket coverage dangles the tantalizing possibility of reaching very large audiences, hyper-market segmentation simultaneously makes this possibility extremely unlikely since, with the exception of a few major national events like the national football championship game (Super Bowl), only relatively small segments of the national audience are ever tuned into a particular station or read a particular paper. Consequently, one immediate lesson we can draw is that it would be relatively easier for an interest group to run a media-based advocacy campaign in South Africa that could reach large proportions of the public by advertising in a relatively small number of stations or titles than in the United States.

## **Voter interest in media election coverage**

To date, we have seen that physical access to and use of media for political news is fairly widespread, and that radio and television use, at least in urban South Africa, is high and probably not that much lower than in the United States. But are these levels of media use maintained during election campaigns? In South Africa's case, the data reveal a clear answer of "no." According to the Comparative National Election Project / South African National Election Study (CNEP / SANES) post election surveys of 2004 and 2009, only about one-half of all people told interviewers that they had been "very" or "somewhat interested" in those general elections. In striking contrast, 90 percent of all American respondents were similarly interested in the 1992 Presidential campaign between George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, and the 2004 contest between George W. Bush and John Kerry (see Table 1).

In fact, the data suggest that many South African news consumers systematically "tune out" election news. That is, while 85 percent regularly watch TV news, just 43 percent said they regularly followed the 2009 campaign on television and 47 percent said they paid a "great deal" or "some" attention to the election news that they did read. The proportion of regular radio news consumers fell from 87 percent in general to 27 percent for election news with just 35 percent paying attention to that news. And for newspapers, the corresponding proportions were 54 percent, 19 percent and 30 percent. Less than one in ten followed election

---

<sup>10</sup> William Patterson, "The United States: News In A Free Market Society," *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*, Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan, eds. Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 244 (241-265).



news on radio (9 percent) or television (6 percent) talk shows and just 1 percent followed through internet news sites or chat rooms (Table 1).

At the same time, most of these figures were significantly higher in 2009 than in 2004, which we would argue was a consequence of the increased competition to the African National Congress (ANC) presented by the Congress of the People (COPE) in 2009. While radio use decreased, both television news viewership and newspaper readership increased substantially (by 12 and 6 percentage points respectively). More importantly, attention to election news also increased substantially for television viewers (30 percent to 47 percent) and newspaper readers (19 percent to 30 percent). Whether or not these levels of “virtual engagement” with the electoral process continue to rise will depend on whether increasing numbers of voters, especially African voters, believe the election result is not a foregone conclusion and thus feel they have a reason to keep in touch with the actual campaign. Given the foibles of COPE since the 2009 election, we have little confidence that they will. But even with the increased levels of media use in 2009, South Africans are still far less likely than Americans to follow their campaigns through the mass media through television (43 percent to 71 percent), newspapers (19 percent to 37 percent) and internet (1 percent to 28 percent), though they maintain a slight edge in radio (37 percent to 27 percent) (Table 1).

*Table 1: Election campaign news media use in South Africa and United States*

	United States 1992	United States 2004	South Africa 2004	South Africa 2009
<b>Interest in Election Campaigns*</b>	90	90	48	51
<b>Election News Use**</b>				
Television	73	71	31	43
Radio	--	37	33	27
Newspapers	74	37	13	19
Radio Talk Shows	--	--		9
TV Talks Shows	--	--		6
Internet	--	28	1	1
<b>Election News Attention***</b>				
Television	71	--	30	47
Radio	--	--	33	35
Newspaper	66	--	19	30
Internet	--	--	1	1

Source: Comparative National Elections Project

\* Very / somewhat interested

\*\* Follow campaign daily / 3-4 times a week

\*\*\* Paid great deal / some attention

## The quality of media election coverage

One might speculate that South Africans' low levels of attention to campaign news are a function of their distrust of media in general. Yet since the requisite questions were first asked in 2000, Afrobarometer surveys have consistently found higher levels of popular trust in the SABC than for any other national institution, including the President and Parliament (Glenn and Mattes, forthcoming 2011). And while it is true that trust in the SABC (as well as in newspapers) eroded between the 2004 and 2009 campaigns (from 70 percent to 63 percent for the SABC, putting the SABC behind E-TV; and from 57 percent to 45 percent for newspapers), levels of media trust are still far more widespread than levels of actual campaign news use. As for its election coverage, very few South Africans thought, either in 2004 or 2009, that the media they used were biased toward any specific political party. In 2009, the figures were just 6 percent each for television, radio or newspapers, the vast majority of which detected bias towards the governing African National Congress rather than any opposition party (Table 2).

*Table 2: Attitudes to election news media in South Africa and United States*

	United States 1992	United States 2004	South Africa 2004	South Africa 2009
<b>Trust in News Media</b>				
SABC	--	--	70	63
E TV	--	--	67	67
Newspapers	--	--	57	45
<b>Perceived Bias</b>				
Television News	34	11	5	6
Radio News	--	18	9	6
Newspaper	45	32	6	6
Television Talk Show	--	14	2	3
Radio Talk show	--	18	4	2

Source: Comparative National Elections Project

Moreover, popular perceptions were quite accurate. Media Tenor's analyses of the 2004 and 2009 campaigns show that while the ANC received a greater volume of coverage than other parties, its overall share of coverage was far lower than its proportion of parliamentary representation would suggest, while most opposition parties received higher levels of coverage (which is, of course, only one criterion for judging bias). More importantly, there was no evidence that the ANC's coverage was significantly more favorable than it was for other

parties.<sup>11</sup>

For example, in 2004, while the ANC held over two-thirds of the seats in parliament, and controlled most provincial governments, it received only 39 percent of the total coverage of all political parties (compared to 20 percent for the Democratic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party 11 percent, and the New National Party 9 percent, and the remainder of coverage spread over 21 other political parties). By far, the typical news media statement about any of the major parties was neutral and no party received substantially more or less positive or negative reporting. This held true across radio, television and newspaper coverage. In 2009, the ANC did receive a substantially larger share of all coverage (52 percent) followed by COPE (18 percent), DA (12 percent) and IFP (6 percent). But, as in 2004, the average media statement about any party was still likely to be neutral, though the share of both positive and negative reporting rose for all parties. And coverage of the ANC and the IFP contained about 3 percentage points more negative than positive statements, roughly about the same balance as 2004. The number of positive statements about the two key opposition parties, the DA and COPE, however, outnumbered negative statements by a substantial margin (Table 3).

*Table 3: Perceptions of biased coverage of South African election campaigns*

		2004			2009				
		Share of All Party Coverage	Favourability of Coverage		Share of All Party Coverage	Favourability of Coverage			
			Neg	Neutral	Pos	Neg	Neutral	Pos	
African National Congress		39	16	72	12	52	29	45	26
Congress of the People		--	--	--	--	18	17	50	33
Democratic Alliance		20	15	75	10	12	11	60	29
Inkatha Freedom Party		11	14	78	9	6	26	52	23
New National Party		9	10	75	14	--	--	---	--

Source: Media Tenor

The larger significance of the otherwise trivial levels of perceived media bias in South Africa is clear only once we compare them to the United States where

<sup>11</sup> Separate media content analysis by Media Monitoring Africa concluded that 84 percent of all media items were free of bias free, with just 16 percent of items considered biased. They observed that “when the media did exhibit clear bias it was largely due to covering allegations without allowing for the party or person about whom the allegation was made to respond.”

high levels of news media access and use are compromised by the fact that significant proportions of all potential voters believe that the media they use are biased toward one or the other of the two main political parties. In 2004, the Republicans and Democrats received an almost equal share of coverage (49 percent versus 51 percent), but the Obama factor resulted in a decided Democratic edge in 2008 (56 percent) (Table 3).<sup>12</sup> Yet in 2004, 32 percent said that the newspaper they used most often for campaign news was biased, 18 percent for radio news, and 11 percent for television news). The U.S. data also offers at least one other important lesson. Popular perceptions of media bias in 2004 were substantially lower than those measured in the 1992 campaign. The reason for this is, ironically, the growing diversification and ideological nature of the American news media. Because more people can now find a news show which agrees with their own partisan preference, they are less likely to perceive a partisan bias than in 1992 when most viewers were restricted to watching one of the three main network news programs.

Yet in neither country do the news media depict the election as a contest of public policy or ideology. According to the Media Tenor analyses of media coverage, just 25 percent of all South African campaign coverage in 2004 focussed on the political parties' stances on issues of public policy, while 75 percent focussed on non-policy matters such as electioneering, internal party political issues, or leadership debates. In 2009, with the attendant controversy over Jacob Zuma's challenge to Thabo Mbeki and his corruption charges, as well as the resulting split in the ANC and the formation of COPE, the share of policy coverage declined even further to just 9 percent of all coverage. Policy coverage in the United States amounted to no more than 20 percent of all election coverage in either 2004 or 2008.<sup>13</sup>

Yet even when the South African news media focus specifically on a political party, policy still makes up a minority of coverage. Of the parties that won parliamentary seats, the small African Christian Democratic Party received the highest proportion of policy coverage in both 2004 and 2009 (with 45 percent, and 28 percent respectively). Therefore, election coverage in South Africa is largely *not* about public policy, but about people and personality. This is yet another piece of evidence which suggests that South African election campaigns are not propitious sites for policy advocacy campaigns.

To the extent that South African news media do focus on policy coverage, they tend get the balance of issues right, at least in terms of the issues that are salient

---

<sup>12</sup> "The 2008 US Election," Media Tenor International ([www.mediatenor.com](http://www.mediatenor.com)).

<sup>13</sup> "The 2008 US Election," Media Tenor International ([www.mediatenor.com](http://www.mediatenor.com)).

to voters. We compare the results of the Media Tenor media content analysis with responses to a CNEP / SANES question that asked respondents which issues were, at the time of the election, the most important ones that government should address (though these data should be compared with some caution: news media can decide to cover any issue, but respondents were only able to mention up to three issues). In 2004, the issues mentioned most frequently by citizens were jobs (25 percent of all “mentions”), social issues (like poverty and service delivery) (14 percent), crime (13 percent), health (11 percent) and housing (9 percent). With the exception of housing, these issues were all amongst the seven issues most frequently discussed by the news media. At the same time, the data suggest that the news media tended to under-emphasize social policy, crime and education in comparison to voter concerns, and over-emphasize economic and business policy (see Table 4).

Within the share of policy coverage, the relative balance of issues also matches up well with what South African political parties actually say (at least as reflected by their election manifestoes). For evidence, we turn to Media Tenor’s content analysis of the political parties’ 2009 campaign manifestos. Again, a comparison of the weight given to various issue by both party manifesto’s and news media campaign coverage reveals a broad overlap. At the same time, the data suggest that the political parties gave more emphasis to health issues than the media campaign coverage would imply, but so less to business, social issues, economic management, and education (see Table 5)

*Table 4: Comparing the media agenda and public agenda*

	2004		2009	
	Media	Citizens	Media	Citizens
Non Policy	75		91	
Policy	<u>25</u>		<u>9</u>	
	100		100	
Social Policy	12	14	21	17
-Poverty / Destitution		(8)		(8)
-Water		(6)		(6)
-Food Shortage / Famine		(<1)		(2)
-Orphans		(<1)		(1)
-Other Services		(1)		(<1)
Labour Policy	12	25	6	22
Health	12	11	6	8
Economic Policy / Management	8	2	15	6
Security / Crime	7	13	8	12
Justice / Prosecution	7	4	12	6
-Corruption		(4)		(6)
Foreign Affairs / Defence	6	<1	2	--
Culture	5	--	4	--
Minorities and Migration	5	1	1	1
Housing	5	9	2	8
Education	4	4	12	3
Business Issues / Policy	4	--	15	--
Gender / Family	2	<1	2	--
Budget	1	1	1	2
Land / Agriculture	1	1	4	3
Media / Media Policy	1	--	2	--
Energy	1	--	1	--
-Electricity		4		5
Tourism	1	--	<1	--
Transport / Roads	1	3	1	5
Environment	<1	--	1	--
International Trade	<1	--	2	--
Sport	<1	--	<1	--
Technology/Research	<1	--	<1	--
Mining	<1	--	<1	--
Other Domestic Policies	5	<1	3	1
-Communications		(<1)		(1)
	100		100	

Source: Media Tenor and Comparative National Elections Project

*Table 5: Comparing the media party and public agendas, 2009*

	<b>Political Parties</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Citizens</b>
Social Policy	11	21	17
Labour Policy / Employment	5	6	22
Health	12	6	8
Economic Policy / Management	5	15	6
Security / Crime	8	8	12
Justice / Prosecution	9	12	6
Foreign Affairs / Defence	3	2	--
Culture	3	4	--
Minorities and Migration	--	1	1
Housing	5	2	8
Education	8	12	3
Business Issues / Policy	2	15	--
Gender / Family	1	2	--
Budget	2	1	2
Land / Agriculture	5	4	3
Energy	--	1	5
Transport / Roads	--	1	5
Environment	5	1	--
Sport	1	<1	--
Infrastructure	6	--	1
Government and Constitution	7	--	--

Source: Media Tenor and Comparative National Elections Project

## **Direct face-to-face campaigning**

News media coverage is only one way that voters can hear and judge the arguments of contending parties, candidates and interest groups about the past performance of the governing party, or about all of the parties' policy positions, campaign promises and overall suitability to govern. Parties and candidates can also take their messages directly to the voters through mass rallies, personal contacts, or advertisements in the mass media.

We focus first on the effectiveness with which South Africa's parties take their messages directly to the voters through personal, face-to-face contacts. About one in four South Africans attended a campaign rally (23 percent) in 2004, increasing to almost a third (31 percent) in 2009 (Table 6). While these levels of mass interaction with political parties are substantially higher than in the United States (11 percent in 1992 and 6 percent in 2004), the vast majority of this engagement takes place between the voters and the ANC. While 25 percent attended an ANC rally in 2009, no other party managed to attract more than 3 percent to its events (Table 7).

*Table 6: Direct campaigning, South Africa versus United States*

	US 1992	US 2004	SA 2004	SA 2009
Attended Rally	11	6	23	31
Contacted by Party	69	71	23	23
In Person	--	10	20	20
Mail	--	44	1	<1
SMS	--	--	--	3
Telephone	--	46	2	1
E-Mail	--	13	<1	1

Source: Comparative National Elections Project

Yet American political parties contact far larger proportions of voters, and do so through a wider variety of methods. In 2004, almost three quarters of Americans said they were contacted by a party (71 percent) compared to just one-fifth (21 percent) of the South African electorate. And while US parties use a wide repertoire of methods (phone, mail, email and personal visits), South Africa parties employ household canvassing and personal visits almost solely. Again, voters were far more likely to be contacted by the ANC (19 percent) than any opposition party (COPE 7 percent, DA 6 percent), though almost all parties relied on personal visits compared to any other method.

*Table 7: Direct campaigning in South Africa, 2009*

	Total	ANC	COPE	DA	IFP	ID	UDM	ACDP	FF+
Attended Rally	31	25	3	3	2	0	1	0	0
of:									
Contacted by Party	23	19	7	6	2	2	1	1	<1
In Person	20	15	6	3	2	1	1	1	<1
SMS	3	1	1	2	<1	<1	0	<1	<1
Telephone	1	1	1	<1	0	<1	0	<1	0
E Mail	1	1	0	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Mail	<1	<1	0	0	0	<1	0	0	0

Source: Comparative National Elections Project

## Campaign mass advertising

Television is one of the quickest ways that an opposition party, particularly a new one, can reach a large number of voters and use its visual power to build a



distinctive image in voters' minds. Yet television advertising was not allowed in South Africa during the 1994, 1999 or 2004 elections (with the exception of very short "public election broadcasts" in 2004, allocated on the basis of existing legislative representation and the current number of candidates).<sup>14</sup> This left parties with the options of paying for advertisements on radio or in newspapers (with print being particularly expensive) and meant that many opposition parties did not have the financial means to run a sustained advertising campaign. But in late 2008, South Africa's Independent Communications Authority issued new regulations that required television networks to provide parties with free airtime. Television (and radio) broadcasting license holders were required to make available four two-minute time slots every day for election broadcasts during the designated campaign period. And in contrast to the formula for allocating multi-party funding, airtime would be allocated proportionally based on the current number of *candidates* fielded by a party (rather than by its number of currently elected legislative representatives). Perhaps as important, the new regulations also enabled political parties, for the first time, to purchase normal commercial time for partisan advertisements.

Therefore, as long as they were able to field a full slate of candidates, opposition parties were offered, for the first time, the possibility of reaching a national audience and cutting into some of the ANC's huge advantages in face-to-face campaigning that we have described above. For a variety of reasons, however, this potential was not fully realized. According to the SABC, 40 of the 84 allocated free two minute spots ultimately went unused.<sup>15</sup> One reason appears to be that smaller parties were either unfamiliar with the process of finding adequately skilled people to produce these spots and, or were unable to afford them. Another reason seems to be the "last-minute" nature of the process. The regulations were only promulgated in late 2008, and subsequently met heavy resistance from the financially strapped SABC which did not want to give away so much free advertising time. Ultimately, the air time was only allocated once the IEC verified each party's slate of candidates (since that was part of the allocation formula) which meant that the actual slots were only made available in time for the final three weeks of the campaign. And while several parties also purchased additional slots of normal commercial time, the total number of slots was insufficient to bring the party campaigns to a majority of voters.

---

<sup>14</sup> Gavin Davis, " " In ....Jessica Piombo & Lia Nijzink, eds (David Philip: Cape Town: 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Sheena Duncan, "Desperately Seeking Depth: The Media and the 2009 Elections," In *Zunami!: The 2009 South African Elections*, Roger Southall and John Daniel, eds. (Jacana: Auckland Park, 2009), p. 225.

According to Ornico Group, an organization specializing in monitoring South African advertising, 368 advertisements were aired on television between mid February and Election Day. Overall, just 42 percent of CNEP / SANES respondents recalled seeing any of these advertisements. Yet this still outpaced the reach of party advertising on radio (where 31 percent recalled hearing an ad) or in newspapers (where 30 percent remembered seeing one). As a result, the 2009 experiment in television advertising expanded the “reach” of the campaign to a larger slice of the electorate compared to previous strategies that relied only on radio and print. It also gave them greater access to “independent voters” -- that is respondents who said they did not feel close to any particular party, and were therefore not already wedded to one party or another (see Table 8).

*Table 8: Advertisement recall*

	Television	Radio	Newspapers
Any Ad (All Voters)	41	31	30
Any Ad (Partisan Identifiers)	43	38	32
Any Ad (Independents)	40	28	26
Specific Party Ads			
African National Congress	38	29	27
Democratic Alliance	23	12	16
Congress of the People	19	10	13
Independent Democrats	7	3	5
Inkatha Freedom Party	5	6	7
Freedom Front +	3	<1	1
United Democratic Movement	2	1	1
African Muslim Party	2	1	1
United Christian Democratic Party	1	<1	1
Minority Front	1	<1	<1
Azanian People’s Organization	1	1	1
Pan Africanist Congress	1	1	1
African Christian Democratic Party	1	<1	1
Afrikaner Unity Movement	1	<1	<1
Federal Alliance	--	1	--

Source: Comparative National Elections Project / South Africa National Elections Study

At the same time, the “reach” of the respective parties varied widely. According to Ornico, the total value of television ads (whether free or purchased) broadcast by the ANC came to R8.1 million and were seen by 38 percent of citizens, and for the DA, R4.1 million, which were seen by 23 percent. No other

party's total airtime came close to either of these. Yet while smaller opposition parties were only able to make use of much smaller amounts of time, they received far more “bang for the buck” given their limited investments. For instance, while COPE's total airtime use was worth about one-eighth of the DA, it reached almost as many voters (19 percent). The same type of disproportionate effect is true for the ID and especially the IFP (see Table 9).

While the data should be treated with some caution due to problems in recall and projection, the data in Table 9 also suggests that most parties achieved far more return on their adspend (at least in terms of sheer exposure) from television rather than radio (no data is available on print adspend). Indeed, there are some examples of gross “overspend” on radio, such as the IFP which spent R2million on radio ads that were heard by 6 percent when a mere R32,500 investment in a television spot got almost the same exposure! The FF+ and ACDP also spent relatively large fortunes to speak to similarly small audiences.

*Table 9: Citizen viewership of campaign advertising versus party adspend*

	Television			Radio		
	Total Ads	Total Airtime Value	Percent Who Saw Ad	Total Ads	Total Airtime Value	Percent Who Saw Ad
ANC	220	R8 126 916	38	3319	R9 736 050	29
DA	83	R4 056 588	23	1111	R5 729 422	12
COPE	27	R 537 500	19	14	R 54 884	10
ID	6	R 278 667	7	--	--	3
IFP	3	R 32 500	5	1493	R2 038 499	6
FF+	5	R 212 500	3	666	R2 715 421	<1
UDM	--	--	2	--	--	1
AMP*	2	R 279 000	2	28	R 123 038	1
UCDP**	7	R 243 000	1	--	--	<1
MF	--	--	1	--	--	<1
Azapo	3	R 86 250	1	97	R 189 612	1
PAC	3	R 48 750	1	45	R 376 275	1
ACDP	4	R 193 500	1	228	R1 200 773	<1
AUM	--	--	1	--	---	<1
FA	--	--	--	--	--0	1

Source: Comparative National Elections Project and Ornico

\* Ad time attributed to Al Jama AH

\*\* Ad time attributed to Christian Democratic Alliance

# The voting decision

A final factor that limits the potential of South African election campaigns as sites of policy debate and interest group advocacy is that that relatively few voters are available for persuasion. In both 2004 and 2009, just one in ten respondents told CNEP / SANES interviewers that they had made up their mind in the final few weeks of the campaign. In contrast, four-in-ten U.S. voters (46 percent) said they decided during either the early or late campaign period in 1992, declining to one-third (32 percent) in 2004 (Table 10). Yet in 2009, this was precisely when South Africa’s political parties spent most of their money on advertising, and when free television slots were finally made available. About 85 percent of all people either had made up their minds before the election or said they did not vote. In a sense, one could say that the entire campaign was run for the benefit of less than one in five voters.

*Table 10: Date of voter decision*

	United States 1992	United States 2004	South Africa 2004	South Africa 2009
On election day	NA	7	4	3
In the last few weeks before election	22	11	6	6
At least a month before the election	23	14	5	6
Before the campaign started	32	42	57	64
Did not vote	22	26	28	21

# Campaigns as sites for policy debate and policy advocacy

We return to the question we set out at the beginning of this chapter. How useful are election campaigns as a site for South African interest groups to advocate policy change, either on their own or through allied political parties? The evidence presented here strongly suggest that election campaigns, at least as presently structured and executed, are not good forums for interest groups to advocate for policy change.

First of all, we have seen that South African election campaigns enjoy fairly limited levels of public visibility. While South Africans enjoy fairly widespread levels of access to and use of news media in general, large proportions of voters, many of whom have either already decided who they will vote for, or already

concluded that no party represents their interests,<sup>16</sup> systematically “tune out” and ignore the campaign. Indeed, less than 60 percent of all eligible voters went to the polls in 2009. Second, the evidence suggests that at least part of the problem stems from the way the South African news media cover campaign. While they are generally balanced in both time and interpretation, news media overwhelmingly focus on things other than the parties’ policy positions or pronouncements. Third, evidence also suggests that South Africa’s political parties are also part of the problem. Besides mobilizing their niche support groups through door-to-door canvassing, party campaign strategies are relatively unimaginative in using other methods to attract the attention of voters and ultimately reach relatively limited parts of the electorate. At the same time, parties also hamstrung by the sheer cost of running nationally based face-to-face campaigns, or of reaching the national electorate through television advertising.

If election campaigns are to become more meaningful vehicles for national discussion of where South Africa has been, and where it is going, and which party is best placed to take it there, the country’s political parties need to become far better skilled at the production of television advertising, as well as other forms of directly contacting voters. The South African news media also need to do a better job covering the positions and campaign statements of political parties and candidates, not just the spectacle of campaign events, issues of personality, or horse-race assessments of who is ahead and who is behind. In turn, the Independent Electoral Commission needs to revisit its method and formula of distributing funds. If elections are to be contests of ideas and policies, larger proportions of funding need to be made available to all political parties on an equal (rather than proportional) basis. And both the IEC and ICASA need to develop ways to provide greater technical support to all political parties so they can make better use of the television and take their campaigns to larger numbers of voters. Finally, South Africa’s political parties need to become far better at the use of available platforms and media through the five year election cycle (such as local ward councillors or party representatives, as well as free media coverage of parliamentary activity) rather than waiting for the final six week election campaign. Accordingly, more public funds need to be made available throughout the five year election cycle, rather than only in the final campaign period.

---

<sup>16</sup> For evidence to this effect, see Robert Mattes, *The Election Book: Judgment and Choice in South Africa’s 1994 Election* (Cape Town: Idasa, 1995), and Karen Feree, *Framing the Race in South Africa: The Political Origins of Racial-Census Election* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

## References

(n.d.). Retrieved 09 22, 2010, from Federal Electoral Commission:  
<http://www.fec.gov/press/press2005/20050203pressum/20050203pressum.html>

(n.d.). Retrieved 09 23, 2010, from Open Secrets:  
<http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2008/10/us-election-will-cost-53-billi.html>

Group, O. M. (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.ornico.co.za](http://www.ornico.co.za)

*Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa.* (n.d.). Retrieved 09 23, 2010, from <http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

*Infoplease.* (n.d.). Retrieved 09 23, 2010, from  
<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html>