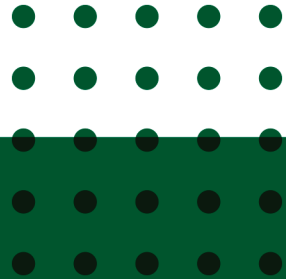




# CECOE

**Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society  
Organizations for Elections**



# CECOE Policy Brief

**Ethiopian Media Accessibility Laws and  
the Electoral Stakeholders' Access to  
Media During Elections**

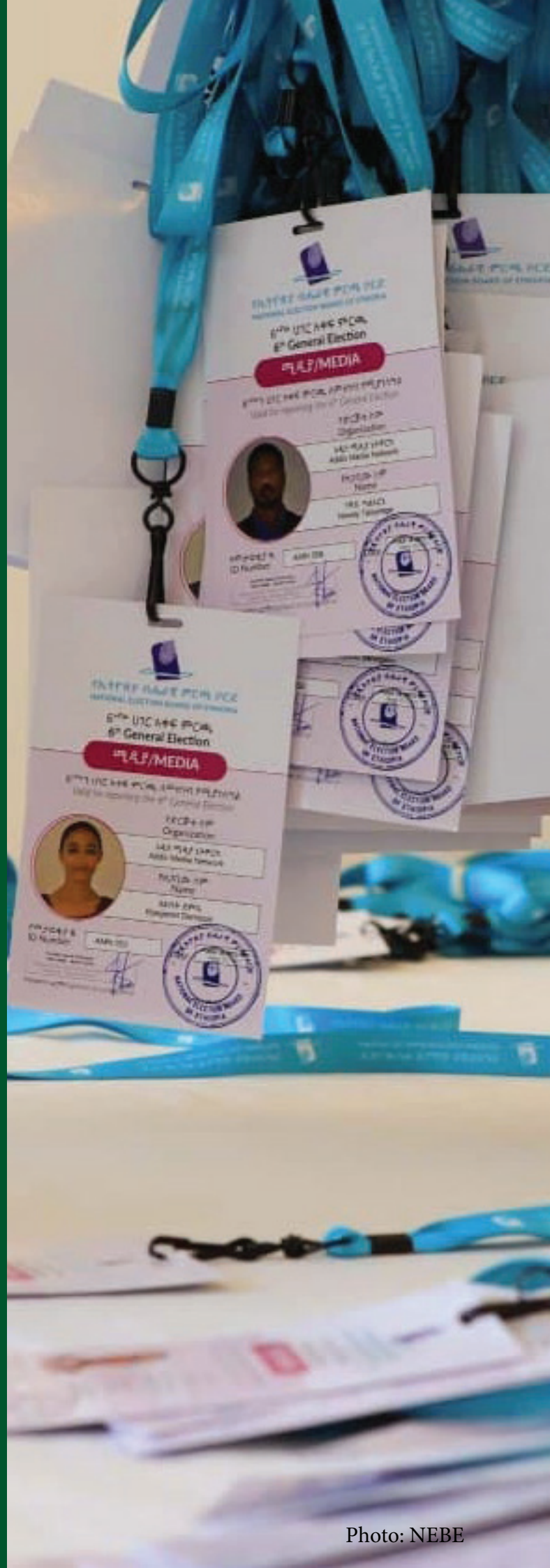
**May 2023**



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# Executive Summary



Considering the importance of the relationship between the Media and Elections, this policy brief examines the challenges, implications, and prospects in the context of the 6th elections of Ethiopia and media access to various electoral stakeholders. Furthermore, it highlights the need for media outlets to adhere to ethical and journalistic standards and provide balanced coverage of the electoral process. It also underscores the importance of increasing media coverage of voter education and ensuring that all stakeholders, including women are adequately represented in media coverage during election periods.

Based on CECO's Media Monitoring Unit report, during the period where the 6th general elections were held, election-related topics were often discussed in the media. However, the media coverage was dominated by other political issues (non-election related). While twelve political parties participated in the election debates, only 5 parties frequently participated in major debates. The degree of obeying journalistic ethics and code of conduct varied from one media outlet to another. Furthermore, most media outlets failed to cover the election campaign in a balanced manner contrary to the stipulations of the media laws and NEBE's directives. The ruling party, Prosperity Party, received the largest amount of coverage compared to other stakeholders. Additionally, media coverage about women was very scant.

In order to play its rightful role, the Ethiopian media sector must draw lessons from its success stories and work on areas that require improvement to have an increased role in the upcoming elections. Otherwise, its role will be curtailed and remain where it was during the previous election.

## Key Points

- Voter education received the least media attention during the 6th General Elections, with only a few ads aired during peak viewing times. Media outlets need to prioritize voter education in future elections, to ensure that citizens have access to information and are able to make informed decisions.
- One of the methods used to deliver voter education was an election debate. While 12 political parties participated in the debates, the Prosperity Party had a dominant presence, even though it was absent in at least 4 debates. This imbalance in political party participation and representation undermines the democratic process and the need for media outlets to ensure fair and equal representation of all political parties.
- The tone used to cover political and electoral issues by the Media was generally non-biased. However, some media, specifically Addis TV, Amhara TV and Walta TV, had a higher percentage of one-sided coverage. The Prosperity Party enjoyed the highest airtime and favorable coverage in comparison to other political parties. This indicates a clear bias in the political and electoral reporting during the 6th general elections.
- The media coverage about women was very scant, with less than 20% of panelists in election debates being women. The underrepresentation of women and people with disabilities in the political process undermines their rights and the needs of marginalized groups.



# Introduction

Media access refers to the ability of citizens to access digital, web, newspaper, and broadcast content, as well as cinema and the arts.<sup>1</sup> In a democracy, the media plays a critical role in the proper functioning of the electoral process. During elections, the media serves as a vehicle for electoral stakeholders to disseminate information to the public and consume each other's news. However, in Ethiopia, the media has been criticized for focusing more on the government's democratization process than on a watchdog function during general elections.<sup>2</sup>

Studies show that the commercial print media in Ethiopia paid significant attention to the 2005 elections. However, the government crackdown that followed the elections resulted in the shutdown of private press and the jailing of journalists. This crackdown led to a lack of media freedom in Ethiopia, with over 260 newspapers and magazines being closed between 2009 and 2019, mostly by the government.

For an election to be democratic and representative of the people's true wishes, all electoral stakeholders must have equal access to the media. Without a free press, it is challenging to achieve a democratic election. Therefore, monitoring and analyzing media coverage throughout the election process is critical. Media monitoring enables us to assess whether the media coverage of elections was independent, impartial, responsible, and equitable.

## Legal Frameworks for Media Coverage of Ethiopia's Elections

In Ethiopia, there are a number of legal instruments that regulate access to the media in the federal constitution, media-specific and election-specific

laws and regulations. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution, under Article 29, establishes freedom of speech and expression. In line with other international human rights principles, the Constitution stipulates a list of basic rights and limits on freedom of expression. It is worth noting that the media should operate in a way that takes the safety of individuals and the nation into consideration. As clearly stipulated in Article 29(6) of the Constitution, legal limitations can be laid down on the media in order to protect the well-being of the youth, and the honor and reputation of individuals. Any propaganda for war as well as the public expression of opinion intended to injure human dignity shall be prohibited by law.

In addition to the Constitutional provisions, various laws have been enacted to promote and protect freedom of expression and media freedom. In February 2021, the Ethiopian parliament passed a proclamation that is widely perceived as a step toward establishing a more liberal media environment. The proclamation contains a variety of regulations governing media activities during elections. Article 71 of the Proclamation states that "Any broadcasting service licensee shall ensure that political parties or private candidates registered in accordance with relevant laws get equitable coverage during election periods." The Ethiopian Electoral Proclamation Number 1162/2019, also known as the Electoral Law, contains provisions about how candidates and political parties can get access to the media. Similarly, the law entitles candidates to get free airtime on state owned mass media outlets.

The board is mandated to enact a code of conduct for the private media, state-owned mass media, and journalists covering elections. In this regard, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) issued Directive No. 02/2020. The purpose of this directive is to govern the rights, moral obligations, and responsibilities of journalists in order to ensure the success of the electoral process. It recognizes the crucial role the media plays in ensuring a fair, balanced, and credible election. To that end, the directive sets out procedural requirements such as acquiring a permit for media outlets seeking to cover election related content and highlight ethical standards that the media should have. Media and journalists with permits to cover elections during the election period which is one-month prior to the election are

1 WHAT IS MEDIA ACCESS? Media Access Australia  
2 Press and Election in Ethiopia. Yosef Girmay. 2005.

given the right to access to electoral information including the rights to cover voter registration, candidate registration, election campaign, voting, vote counting and announcement of results. These media have the responsibility to provide equal opportunity to all political parties and refrain from favoring or disfavoring any political party, candidate, political belief or opinion.

## CECOE's Media Monitoring Unit (MMU)

CECOE's media monitoring unit made an effort to produce a media monitoring report based on established, reliable, and observable facts about media coverage of events throughout the process of the 6th General Elections of Ethiopia. From March 2021 to October 2021, CECOE MMU employed nine media monitors to monitor nine selected broadcast media outlets based on territorial reach, estimated audience, and media ownership. CECOE used both qualitative and quantitative data analysis to evaluate media coverage during the election process.

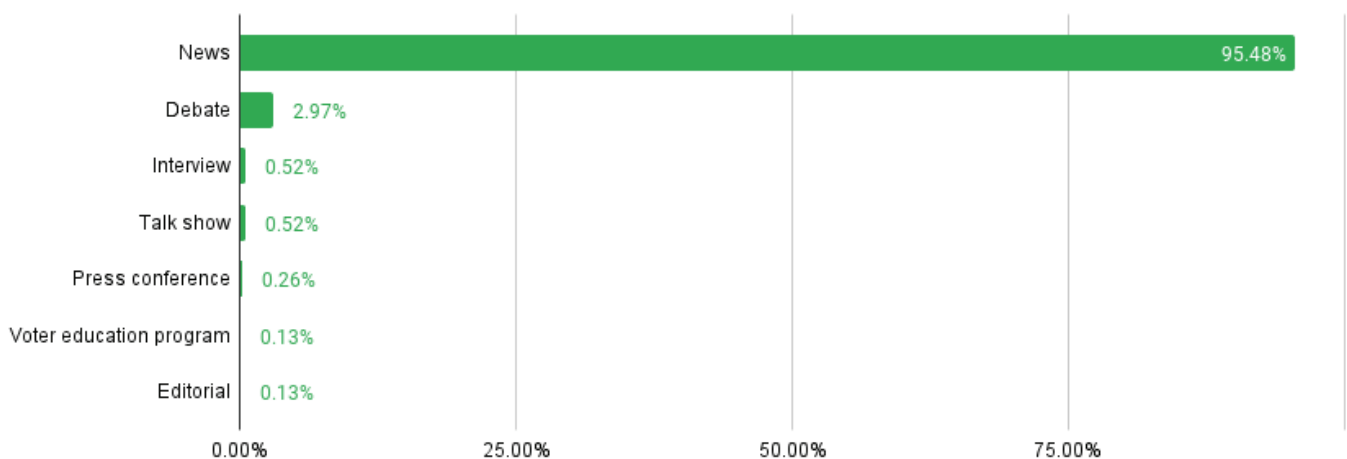
1. **Quantitative Analysis:** CECOE MMU used quantitative analysis to measure the total amount of space and time devoted to selected subjects and topics by media. The analysis also evaluated whether the information about the selected subject was positive, negative, or neutral in its content. This analysis helped to establish a clear understanding of the extent and nature of media coverage during the election process.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** The unit also used qualitative analysis to assess elements of the coverage that cannot be fully observed through quantitative methods. This analysis aimed at assessing elements such as journalistic style, formats of the coverage used to cover the elections, women's representation, voter education, and coverage of election administration. This helped to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the quality and impartiality of media coverage during the election process.

## Media Access to electoral stakeholders during the 6th general elections

### Media coverage given to voter education

Voter education was one of the topics that received the least media attention. The findings revealed that only a few ads with voter education content were aired during prime-time slots, which aimed to encourage people to vote.

Media coverage given to voter education

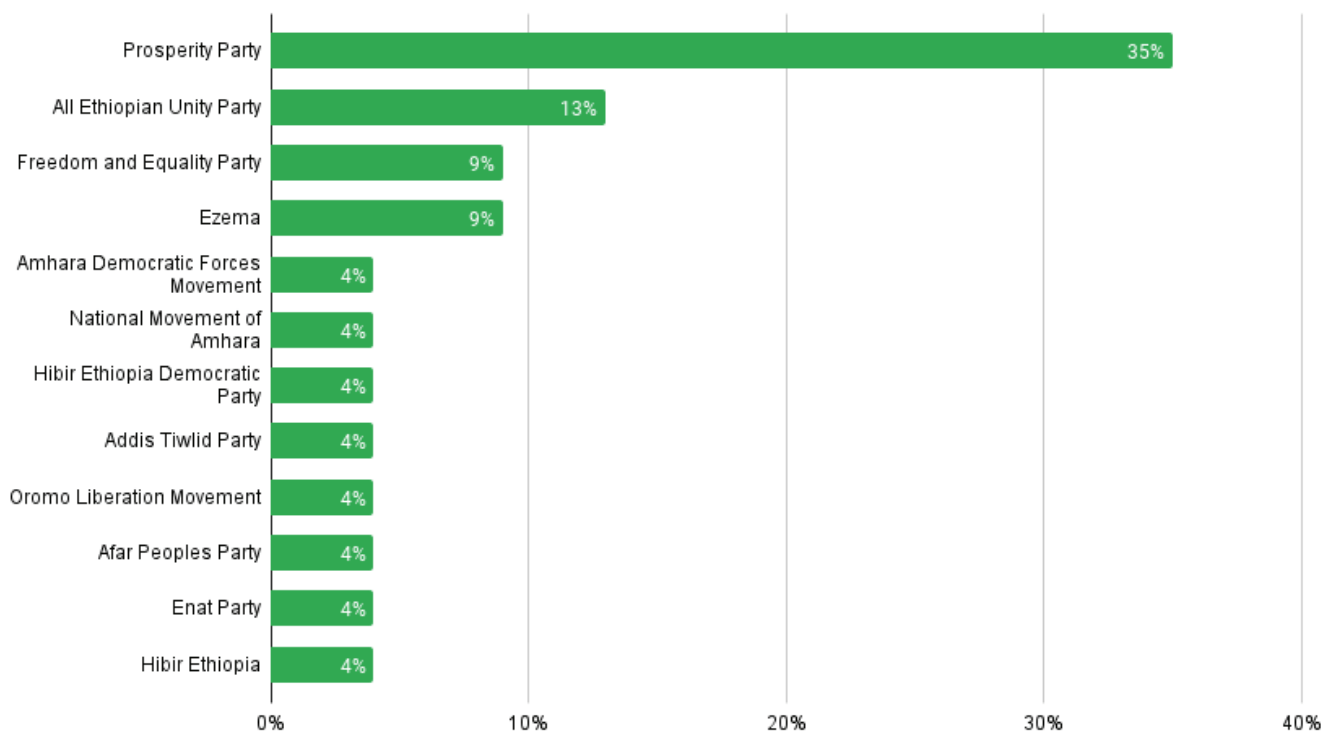




## Political parties in the debates

12 political parties participated in the debates organized by TV channels. However, there was an imbalance in political party participation and representation, with the Prosperity Party having the lion's share in the debates. Even though the party was absent in at least 4 debates, it still had a dominant presence in the debates.

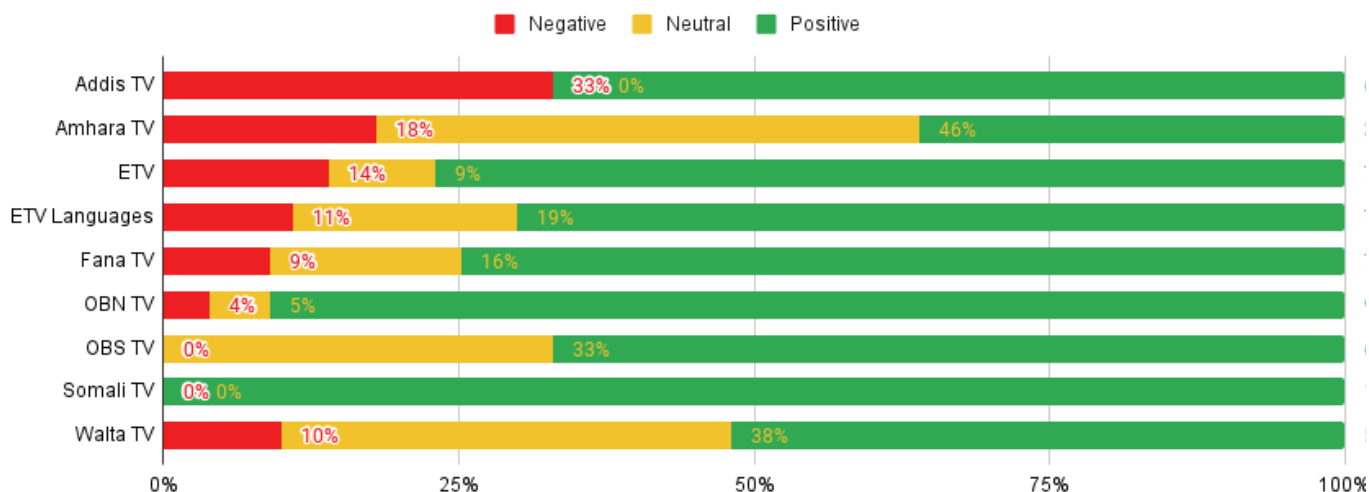
Political parties in the debates



## Tone of the coverage

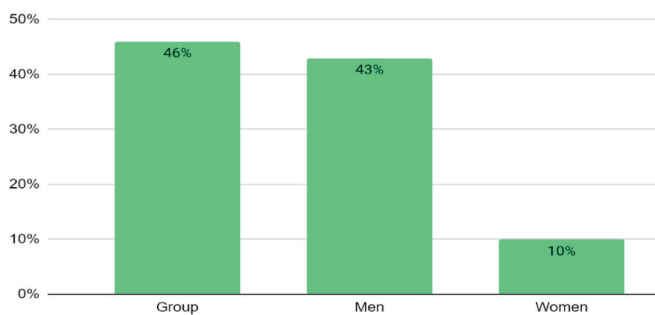
The tone used to cover political and electoral issues by the Media was generally non-biased. However, some media, specifically Addis TV, Amhara TV and Walta TV, had a higher percentage of one-sided coverage. The Prosperity Party enjoyed the highest airtime and favorable coverage in comparison to other political parties. This indicates a clear bias in the political and electoral reporting during the 6th general elections.

Tone of the coverage



## Media coverage given to women

During the election campaign, the media coverage about women was very scant. Out of more than 130 panelists who participated in 27 rounds of election debates, only 25 (less than 20%) of them were women panelists. The women panelists were mostly from the Prosperity Party, the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party, and Freedom and Equality Party.



## Conclusion

The media has a responsibility to provide fair and impartial coverage of elections and ensure the representation of all political parties and marginalized groups as per the electoral and media laws of Ethiopia. The media coverage of the 6th Ethiopian general elections had some positive aspects, but there were also some concerning trends. Voter education received very little media attention, and the disproportionate coverage of the Prosperity Party in the debates has given it an unfair advantage. The lack of media coverage about women is a serious concern, as it could have contributed to their underrepresentation in the political process.

## Recommendations:

### Recommendations for Media and Journalists:

1. Prioritize voter education by dedicating more airtime and resources to programs that educate the public on the importance of voting and how to vote.

2. Ensure fair and equal representation of all political parties in election debates by offering them equal airtime and opportunities to participate.
3. Adopt a balanced and unbiased approach in reporting on politics and elections, avoiding any expression of personal opinions or beliefs.

### Recommendations for Government and Media Authorities:

1. Enforce regulations that require media outlets to provide fair and impartial coverage of elections and to ensure equal representation of all political parties.
2. Encourage media outlets to promote diversity and inclusivity.

### Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations and Journalists' Unions:

1. Advocate for the enactment of laws and policies that promote diversity and inclusivity and ensure equal representation of all political parties in election debates.
2. Provide training and support for journalists to improve their skills in reporting on politics and elections in an unbiased and balanced manner.

### Recommendations for Political Parties:

1. Demand fair and equal representation in election debates and prioritize the representation of marginalized groups.
2. Promote diversity and inclusivity within their own parties and encourage the recruitment and advancement of women in leadership positions.



The National Democratic Institute (NDI)-Ethiopia provided technical assistance and a sub-ward for CECOIE's citizen's election observation activities for the Ethiopian 2021 general elections. The publication of this policy brief is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.



The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOIE) Develops Policy Briefs to advocate for a conducive environment for policy, legal, and institutional reform in Ethiopia. By utilizing the evidence-based and policy-focused analysis and recommendations provided in these publications, CECOIE promotes specific recommendations for improving the legal framework for electoral processes and advancing policy reforms.

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