From Hashtags to Votes:

Social Media Patterns in Spain's 2023 Parliamentary Elections

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About Maldita.es

Maldita.es is a Spanish non-profit foundation and media outlet that fights disinformation and promotes transparency, through fact-checking, education, and data journalism. Its mission is to provide citizens with tools and information to make informed decisions. As a founder of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network, it is committed to the highest methodological and transparency standards in journalism.

About Democracy Reporting International

DRI is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. Our work centres on analysis, reporting, and capacity-building. For this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law. Headquartered in Berlin, DRI has offices in Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

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1. Executive Summary

The campaign for the snap general election in Spain on 23 July 2023 produced a contentious online discussion, where the presence of disinformation and hate speech was significant, sometimes amplified by senior political figures, who contributed to the dissemination of harmful narratives.

For this research, we developed two databases during the observation period, from 24 June to 23 July 2023. The first database catalogued the online political discourse of influential figures, by gathering 142,000 posts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube by 641 relevant political actors in Spanish politics. The second database is a collection of 741 posts containing the main disinformation claims previously debunked by the Spanish fact-checking organisation *Maldita.es*, and later analysed these to determine whether they also promoted hate speech.

The main findings were the following:

- Influential politicians shared posts on hoaxes or other misleading information favorable to their political agendas during the electoral campaign, increasing the reach and boosting the credibility of those claims.

- One out of four posts containing disinformation targeted the electoral process, promoting unsubstantiated claims of widespread election fraud.

- Voting by mail was the target of the majority of the disinformation content regarding election integrity.

- Seventy-eight per cent of the disinformation content identified also contained hate speech that reinforced racist narratives and targeted people of colour and migrants in Spain.

- The volume of posts by the selected group of political figures increased throughout the campaign, and even more so during the televised electoral debates. X (formerly Twitter) was the preferred platform in our sample, while "national identity and regional differences", "social rights", and "equality" were the most common topics.

- Disinformation impacted the monitored political online discussion in terms of the negative sentiment of the posts on specific topics, and the volume of posts in reaction to hoaxes.

While research helps shed light on how disinformation, hate speech, and political speech interact during electoral processes, such research is most beneficial when it leads to effective policies and solutions. Online platforms must improve to meet their obligations under the EU Digital Services

Act, including by implementing their terms and conditions in a more consistent manner, and by investing in solutions that provide better information and empower users to be more resilient when facing disinformation. At the same time, governments must invest in electoral and media literacy, in order to prevent disinformation targeting electoral integrity from taking root and to ensure that those holding public positions are held accountable for promoting harmful disinformation.

Jump to full findings

a. Context

The calling of the 23 July 2023 snap general election in Spain came as a surprise to most. After a leftist coalition government came to power following the general election of November 2019, according to the law, the latest the next election could happen was 10 December 2023. Instead of serving his full term and exhausting the mandate to the last days as Spanish presidents have traditionally done, however, President Pedro Sánchez announced the early general election a day after the regional and local elections in May 2023, in which his political party, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), obtained poor results in contrast to those of the main opposition party, Partido Popular (PP).

Besides seemingly being an emergency maneuver by the PSOE, a number of factors made this election one to follow closely. First, the campaign overlapped with the formation of local and regional governments, which required negotiations between parties to constitute coalition governments. In particular, the agreements between the traditional right (PP) and the far right (Vox) drew much attention and raised concern. Second was the emergence of Sumar, a new leftist coalition under the leadership of Minister of Labor Yolanda Díaz, which included Podemos, the current partner of PSOE in government. Sumar appeared on the ballot for the first time, while the liberal party Ciudadanos, with a total of 10 deputies in 2019, decided not to stand in the election. Finally, there was anticipation that Vox would perform well in the elections, given the current pan-European context of far-right party performance in countries such as Finland, Italy, and Sweden.

From a European Union perspective, the general election coincided with the early days of the Spanish presidency of the Council, and could also be seen as a drill for the upcoming elections in Slovakia and Poland, not only in terms of the political results, but also for looking into the political conversation occurring on online platforms.

The EU Digital Services Act (DSA) entered into force in November 2022. Services designated as "Very Large Online Platforms or Search Engines" will need to comply with their full set of obligations under the Act by August 25th, to address "actual or foreseeable negative effects on democratic

processes, civic discourse and electoral processes", including disinformation, a phenomenon that has impacted developments related to and the outcomes of elections. As electoral disinformation is considered a systemic risk under the DSA, online platforms are obliged to demonstrate the implementation of prevention efforts. Moreover, most of the online platforms considered in this investigation are signatories of the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, under which they agreed to specific commitments during elections (or crises).

b. Methodology

For this study, data was collected for two different databases – one dedicated to posts by political figures, and a second comprising disinformation content. Both were gathered from public online content, and only accessible to the project's team for the sake of this investigation. The time frame selected for the compilation of relevant data lasted 30 days, running from 24 June to the general election day on 23 July.

i. Political online conversation

An automated tool collected data from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, from a selected group of 641 actors, including:

- 422 active political figures, including candidates, regional officials, or spokespersons;

- 53 relevant and influential figures (e.g., retired politicians); and

- 166 political party-linked accounts, including official party accounts, region-focused accounts, and youth branches.

A total of 142,000 posts (including re-shares) from the four social media platforms monitored. The breakdown was:

Twitter	**Facebook**	**Instagram**	**YouTube**
123,976	**9,938**	**6,257**	**1,680**

Engagement statistics were automatically registered on a daily basis. Using a list of keywords reflecting the Spanish political landscape, we classified the publications based on their topics.

Further, we measured sentiment with an AI-powered tool that analyses not only words used, but also the tone, structure, and possible sarcasm or irony, plus the use of emojis and other ways to communicate particular sentiments.

ii. Disinformation and Hate Speech

We analysed **760 online posts** during the election campaign that included disinformation. Disinformation is not confined to the original platform on which it is posted, but spreads freely across platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter. We also considered disinformation disseminated through WhatsApp. Despite being encrypted end-to-end, we were able to collect disinformation instances through our WhatsApp chatbot service. Community members send queries through the WhatsApp chat and, if Maldita has a publication related to the query, the user receives an automated response, with the debunking link.

The chatbot allows us to catalogue community disinformation claims. The sample studied in this report corresponds to more than **70 distinct hoaxes, misleading narratives, and claims** previously debunked by Maldita.es' fact-checking team, many of which have been in circulation since before the start of the official campaign. Maldita.es' methodology follows a careful process of **selection, verification, and publication**.

When identifying the posts containing disinformation, Maldita's team looked on the different platforms for those replicating claims that had been already debunked. Some tools, such as Crowdtangle, were used to assist in this detection, along with manual and automated searches. Links were then registered, including an archived version of the post or video, along with the dates of original publication and detection. At that time, they were also classified according to certain parameters, such as the topic and narrative pursued.

In addition to this methodology, Maldita.es has a corrections policy and a neutrality policy. The work of this non-profit follows the standards of and is independently assessed by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network and the International Fact-Checking Network.

From this dataset of posts sharing debunked content, an assessment was conducted to categorise which disinformation narratives were also promoting hate speech. For this, the following standard adopted by the United Nations was used: "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor."
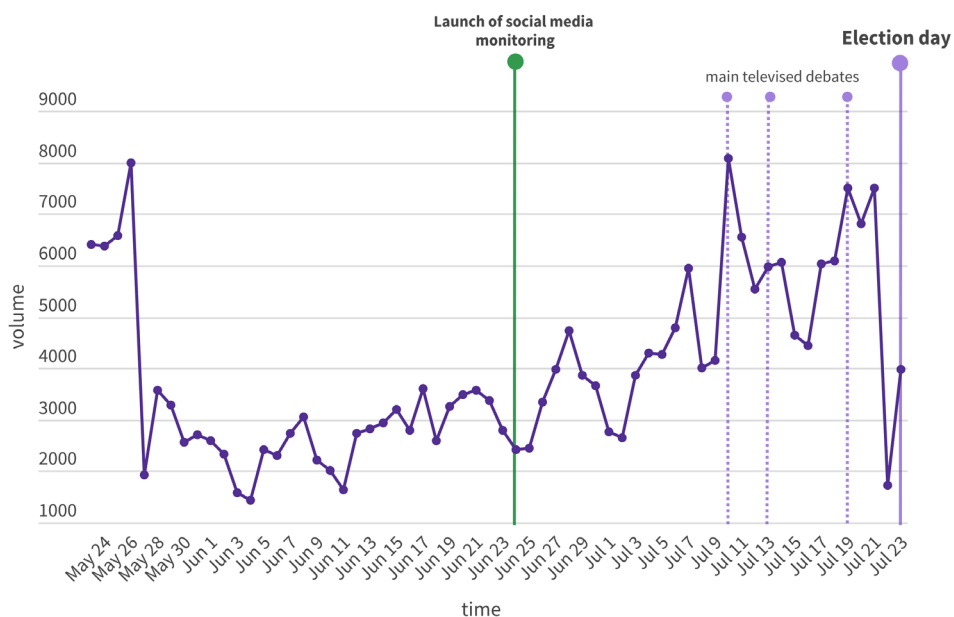
2. Content

Political figures: In analysing the trends in our study of online political discourse surrounding the 2023 Spanish snap elections, we found the following:

❚ Highlights per platform:

Only 5 per cent of those in the monitored group did not have a profile on Twitter.	**Facebook had the largest increase (167 per cent) in total posts when compared to the previous period.**	**Instagram gathered the highest percentage of posts among the platforms categorised as positive sentiment.**	**The highest volume of publications on YouTube came at the end of the official campaign, on 21 July.**

Evolution

Volume of publications

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Possibly as a result of the overnight announcement of the snap general election and the length of the lawful campaigning period in Spain, the usage of social media platforms only began to increase about 20 days before election day. There was a gradual increase in posts towards the

late stage of the campaign. The average reach of the 142,000 posts in the sample also increased over the campaign, gaining, on average, 32 per cent more impressions than posts in the previous month. While only 21 per cent of the posts were classified as expressing a negative sentiment, this represents an increase in negative sentiment (by 48 per cent) when compared to the previous time period.

Only 1,727 posts were posted on 22 July (campaigning activities are prohibited on the day before the election). Major peaks in the monitored group's online activity correlated with key events in Spanish news and politics. Aside from the expected high volume of posts at the beginning and end of the official campaigning period (7-22 July), the days of the three televised election debates cumulatively can be correlated with a spike in social media posts, garnering 15 per cent of the total posts during the observation period. This reflects the interactivity of the televised debate and the online discourse, where the debate was amplified, and continued even after it had ended.

In particular, the day of the only debate between the leaders of the top two parties – Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) and Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP) – was the date with the highest number of posts (8,065 posts, 46 per cent of all posts collected), from the start of the debate at 10 pm and onwards. The hashtag for the debate (#caraacaraatresmedia) was used in 32 per cent of all posts by the selected group on 10 July.

By party

Number of posts by political parties
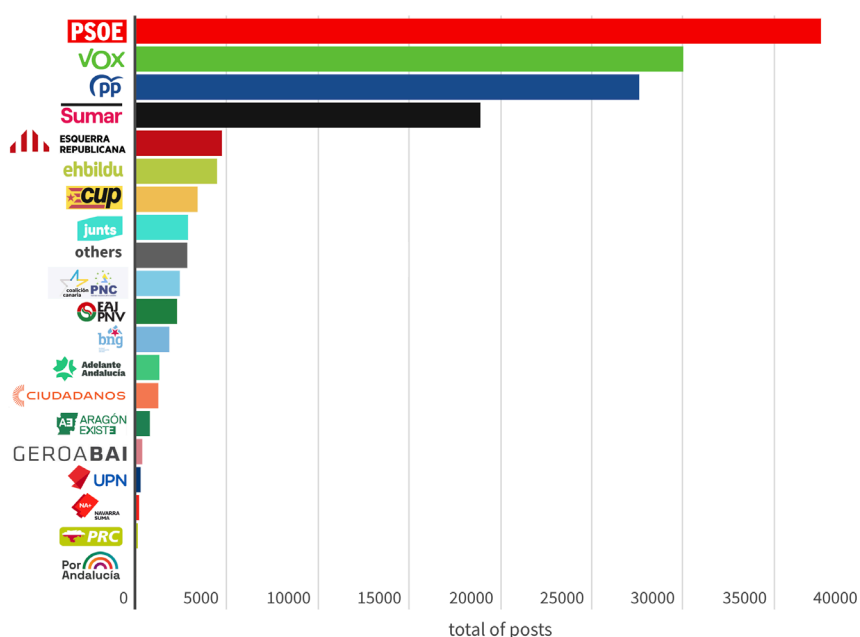
In terms of cumulative reach, PSOE (1,38B) held the top position, while Sumar (1,32B) came immediately after, followed by Vox (1,15B).

Political parties that usually receive less coverage in traditional media were, however, more active on their online platforms. A higher volume of publications per account was registered for profiles linked to the regional parties CUP-PR (419 posts/account), BNG (301 posts/account), and EH Bildu (294 posts/account). Vox (275 posts/account) came fourth, which demonstrates the weight online campaigning carries for this political party.
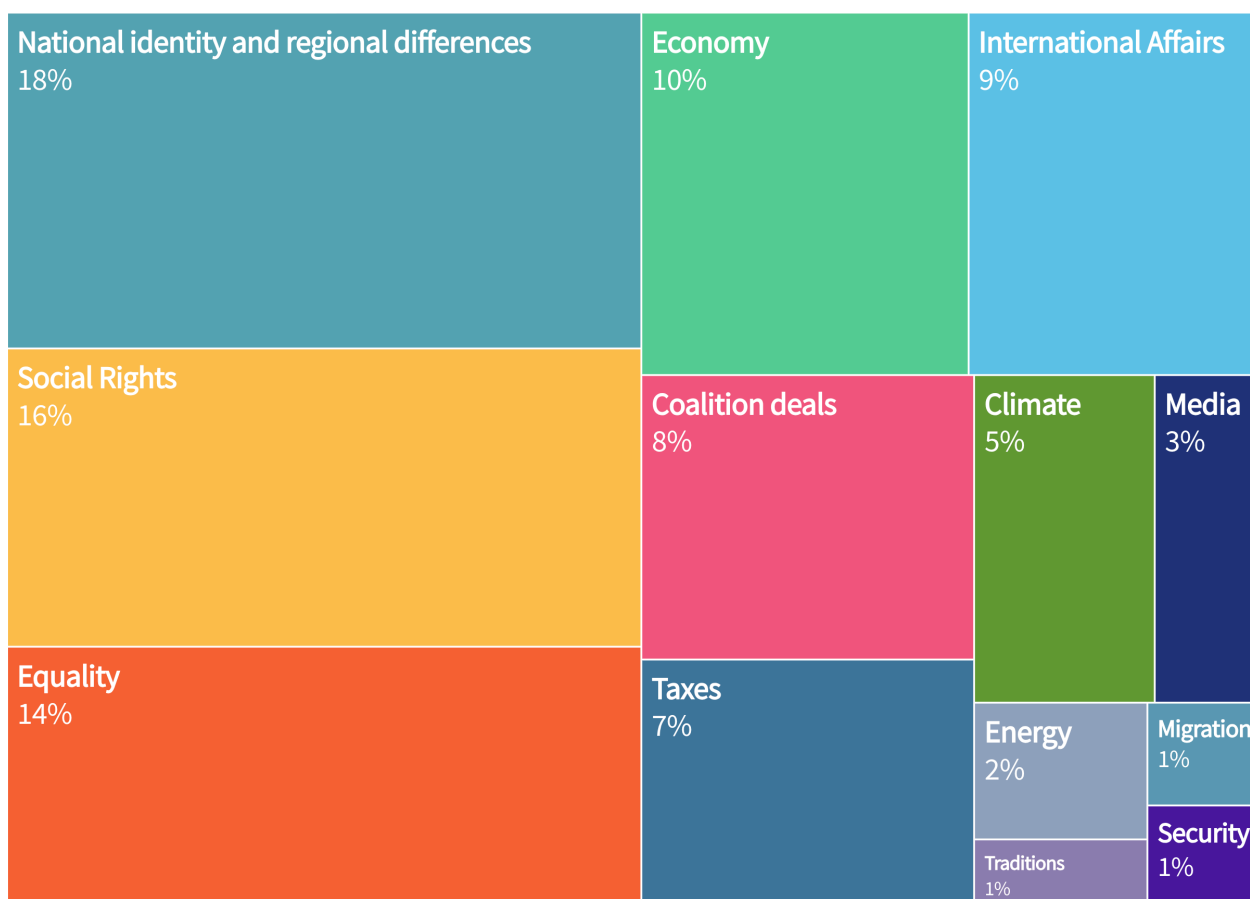
Topics

Half (50 per cent) of the posts by members of the monitored group during the observation period were explicitly related to the election campaign, using the official hashtags of each political party or referencing the elections.

Aside from this, the most addressed topics were:

1. **National identity and regional differences:** The debate over regional autonomy, centralism, and regional differences was at the centre of online discussion, with over 15,433 posts (or 63 per cent of all posts), including those of the centre-right (PP). Regional differences peaked on 12 July, marking the anniversary of the murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, who was assassinated by the pro-independence Basque terrorist group ETA in 1997, as the publications commemorating the date gained the highest number of impressions of the campaign.

2. **Social rights:** The PSOE (socialists) and Sumar (left) referenced social rights the most. *Reforma laboral* (the labour reform) – which was approved at the end of 2021 – *derechos y libertades* (rights and freedoms), and *sanidad pública* (public health) were repeatedly mentioned phrases in the posts.

3. **Equality:** Posts in this category had the highest aggregated reach, and related mostly to gender and LGBTQ+ rights issues, including gender-based violence and violence against LGBTQ persons, as well to recent controversial policies. Eleven per cent of the "equality" posts – and 28 per cent of the total posts by the monitored group on this date – were shared on 28 June, International LGBTQ+ Pride Day.

4. **Economy:** Recent polls show that "economic problems" and "unemployment" are the two biggest concerns for Spanish citizens. "Employment" itself was mentioned in 24 per cent of the posts.

5. **International affairs:** The beginning of the Spanish presidency of the Council of the EU, on 1 July, along with Pedro Sánchez's visit to Ukraine, resulted in the highest daily volume in this category. "International Affairs" was the topic mentioned most by Vox (far-right), which repeatedly cited the Natural Restoration Law recently approved in the European Parliament and Agenda 2030 (a global plan of action for seeking a better and more sustainable future), or mentioned "Brussels bureaucrats" in speaking of representatives of EU institutions.

Most discussed topics

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National identity and regional differences 18%	Economy 10%	International Affairs 9%	
Social Rights 16%	Coalition deals 8%	Climate 5%	Media 3%
Equality 14%	Taxes 7%	Energy 2% / Traditions 1%	Migration 1% / Security 1%

What worked – posts with highest engagement

Political communication adapts to the medium used, and the posts with higher engagement reflect the political communications strategy of the monitored group.

Two posts by Pedro Sánchez and one by the PSOE achieved the highest number of likes on Twitter. The first two wished users a happy World Dog Day, by sharing a meme (126.8k likes) and a picture of Sánchez with his two dogs (95.9k likes), mocking a derogatory nickname applied for him – "Perro Sanxe" ("perro" is dog in Spanish) – popularised by those who have criticised his leadership. The third post (68,5k likes) came after his unexpected participation in the podcast show "La Pija y la Quinqui", which is very popular among Gen-Z in Spain.

The two posts on World Dog Day were also the first (34,6 retweets) and third (15,4k retweets) most retweeted posts, respectively. A meme posted by Vox's official account, with a picture of Vox leader Santiago Abascal next to Pedro Sánchez with the caption "Every 300 retweets, Pedro Sánchez shrinks", came second, with over 20.1k retweets.

a. Disinformation narratives during the campaign

Election integrity

Spain has a long history of disinformation targeting election integrity. Many of these narratives and allegations of electoral fraud have been documented by Maldita.es, going back as far as 2017. These are comparable to claims made in the United States or Brazil that were later used to justify political violence (such as the Capitol Siege in the Washington in 2021, or the attack on the Brazilian parliament in 2023). Though not new, many of these claims intensified during the 2023 election campaign.

In our selected sample of posts containing debunked disinformation, 24 per cent of the posts in the observation period referenced the integrity of the election process. Then, as a percent of the total publications in the week of the election (17-23 July), the category represented 40 per cent of those posts, growing to 74 per cent of those posted on election day. This trend illustrates an increased attempt to dissuade voters from trusting the elections as the day grew closer.

One key focus of the disinformation campaign was to undermine the credibility of forms of absentee voting – mail-in ballots and voting through the CERA registry of expatriate Spanish voters. The disinformation most commonly cited by malicious actors focused incidents of irregularities with mail-in ballots during the 2023 municipal elections. Seventeen cities registered complaints with accusations of plots to buy votes.

Despite changes in the voting protocols, 65 per cent of all disinformation posts regarding electoral integrity published during this period were about mail-in or CERA voting. The range of this disinformation was diverse, including false information about mail-in voters not receiving ballots for all the parties, or ballots that had gone missing and had not been delivered to those that registered for mail-in voting.

As mentioned, of the posts on election day Maldita.es flagged as containing disinformation, 74 per cent were determined to be aimed at undermining public confidence in a free and fair election. Leaving the mail-in vote aside, the single most shared claim on the 23 July was that the government had engineered a series of incidents in a tunnel in order to stop train traffic between Madrid and Valencia, so as to "block" voters from coming back to their cities to vote. An alternative road was immediately made available for travelers between those cities, however.

Tweet ✅

23 de julio a las 12:28 · 🌐

Pucherazo Español 🔴 Ola de incidencias graves en la jornada electoral:

🚊 1. RENFE suspende los trenes Valencia-Madrid: Las bombas de achique de agua del tunel de Joaquin Sorolla han aparecido estropeadas, y ya son seis los trenes detenidos en Valencia, Madrid y Cuenca mientras Adif trata de restablecer el tráfico. Miles de personas volvían hoy en tren desde la playa para votar en Madrid.

Translation

July 23, 12:28

Spanish Fraud. A wave of grave incidents on Election Day. RENFE suspends the trains between Madrid and Valencia. The pumps to drain water from the tunnel at Joaquin Sorolla are broken and there are now six trains stopped at Valencia, Madrid, and Cuenca as ADIF tries to reestablish circulation. Thousands were coming back today from the beach to vote in Madrid.
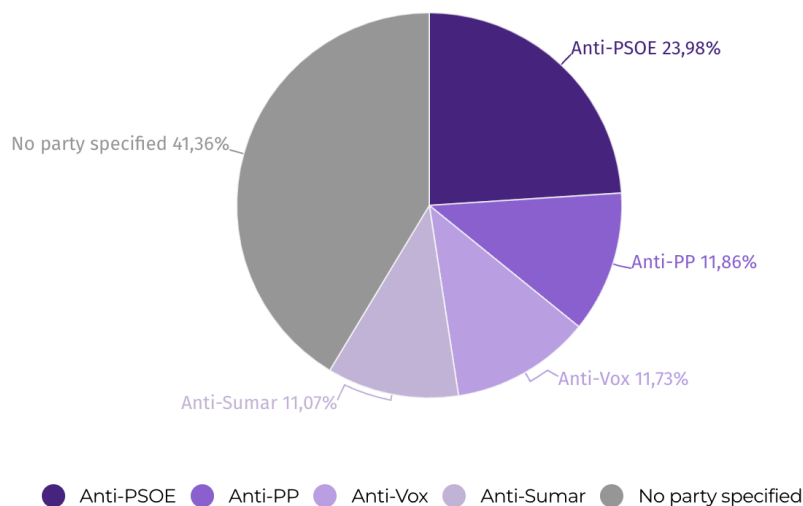
This viral claim on election day is one example of many that gained widespread dissemination and attention. Its aim was to discredit the fairness of the election, and could potentially have led thousands of people not to recognise its integrity. Most claims were aimed at PSOE, but some also claimed foul play on the part of the opposition Partido Popular.

Political disinformation: Hoaxes related to parties and candidates

More than half (58.63 per cent) of the posts sharing disinformation targeted at least one of the four main political parties. It is common for the political party in power to be the focus of disinformation narratives, and this election was no different, with anti-PSOE disinformation posts at twice the volume of anti-PP disinformation publications.

Political disinformation: Hoaxes on parties and candidates

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Anti-PSOE 23,98%

Anti-PP 11,86%

Anti-Vox 11,73%

Anti-Sumar 11,07%

No party specified 41,36%

● Anti-PSOE ● Anti-PP ● Anti-Vox ● Anti-Sumar ● No party specified

- **PSOE:** Eight of the 13 most viral anti-PSOE disinformation claims were related to election integrity. Although the electoral administration is independent from the government in power, PSOE was seen by the general public as the administrator of this electoral process, so disinformation about allegedly rigged elections was related to the Socialists.

- **PP:** The most-shared anti-PP content, a manipulated image and a photo shared with an inaccurate caption, largely related to a narrative linking members of PP to well-known Spanish drug traffickers.

- **Vox:** Over 50 instances with anti-Vox content shared false claims (as opposed to manipulated or misattributed content) about the political party. One example was the claim that a well-known bishop was joining the party to head a public office in charge of classifying films according to their morality, or a hoax about the origin of the party's name being a wink to "an illustrated fascist propaganda magazine" in Spain during "Nazi Germany".

- **Sumar:** Fifty-seven per cent of the publications sharing debunked disinformation content targeting Sumar were related to supposed electoral promises made by the party that would allegedly benefit from undocumented immigrants arriving in Spain. For instance, it was falsely claimed that the party had announced it would remove the borders in Ceuta and Melilla, two autonomous Spanish cities in North Africa.

Beyond Spain:

The debunked hoax with the highest volume of posts in our database targeted the Minister for Ecological Transition, Teresa Ribera. She was accused of supposedly arriving in a government jet to a Climate Summit that took place 200 km from Madrid, paired with a photo of her riding a bicycle to the location of the Summit (the claim was debunked).

Nonetheless, this false claim reached non-Spanish accounts, which reshared this hoax with their networks, and contributing to it going viral outside of Spain. Accounts with sizeable followings (around 400k), often linked to the alt-right or that had been previously suspended for their activities, shared the content in English, expanding its reach. In some cases, the content gathered up to 16.2M in impressions for a single post.

This viral claim on election day is one example of many that gained widespread dissemination and attention. Its aim was to discredit the fairness of the election, and could potentially have led thousands of people not to recognise its integrity. Most claims were aimed at PSOE, but some also claimed foul play on the part of the opposition Partido Popular.

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Tweet ✔

> This is so surreal. The socialist Spanish minister uses a private jet to attend a climate conference. 100 metres before the venue she gets out off the limo and takes a bicycle. The security cars follow her.
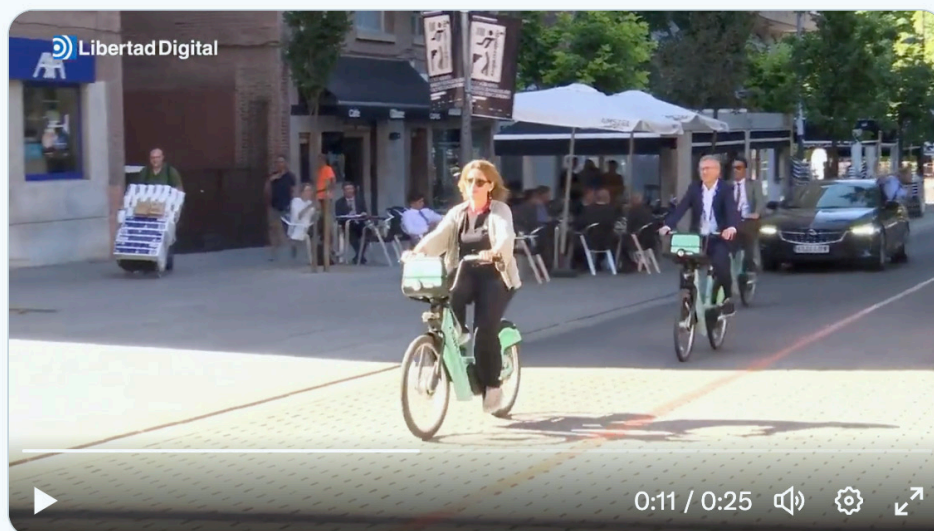
From **Froilán I de España** 🇪🇸 ✔

Some disinformation was international in nature. In one instance, two different pieces of disinformation claimed that the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had interfered in the election by campaigning on behalf of the PSOE. One of these came in the form of an alleged quote from Von der Leyen declaring that PP's leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, had come "without ideas, only to dismantle the government of his country". The quote was published by the Spanish newspaper El Pais, and then retracted after the EU Commission denied the claim.

b. When disinformation is exploited to promote hate

Disinformation has the power not only to polarise public opinion, but also to boost hate speech. From the posts containing disinformation in the database, 32 per cent contained hate speech, defined as speech designed to promote violence or negative stereotypes about some groups because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or other inherent characteristics, including posts that promote fascism or military rule.

Contents identified as hate by type

other 1%
Anti-LGBT+ 5%
Pro-fascist 16%
Racism or Xenophobia 78%

● Racism or Xenophobia ● Pro-fascist ● Anti-LGBT+ ● other
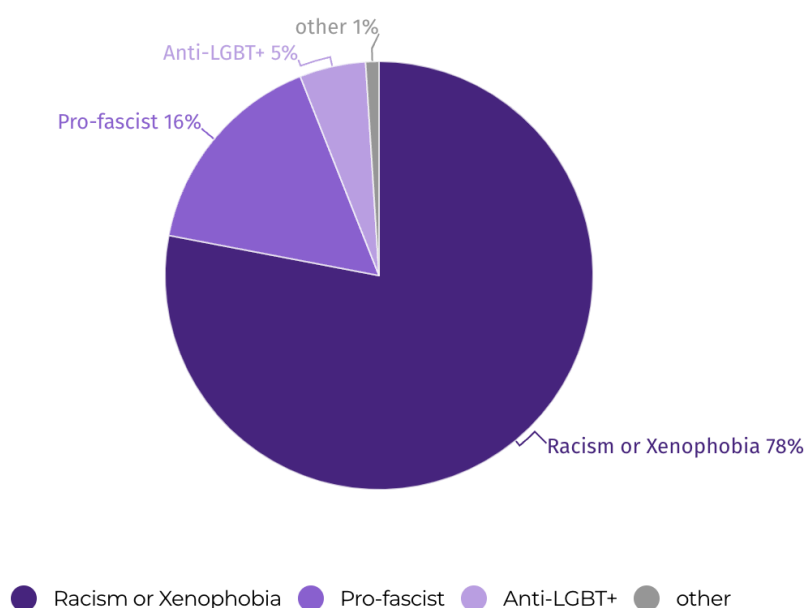
Racist content was the most common form of hate speech in the database, reflecting long-standing narratives that associate migrants and people of colour with crime, or accusing them of abusing public welfare or of imposing their own views on society on the basis of religious beliefs.

Racist narratives by type

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other 1%

Imposition of Religious or cultural views 6%

Glorifying Violence 9%

Public Welfare 27%

Criminalization 57%

- Criminalization
- Public Welfare
- Glorifying Violence
- Imposition of Religious or cultural views
- other
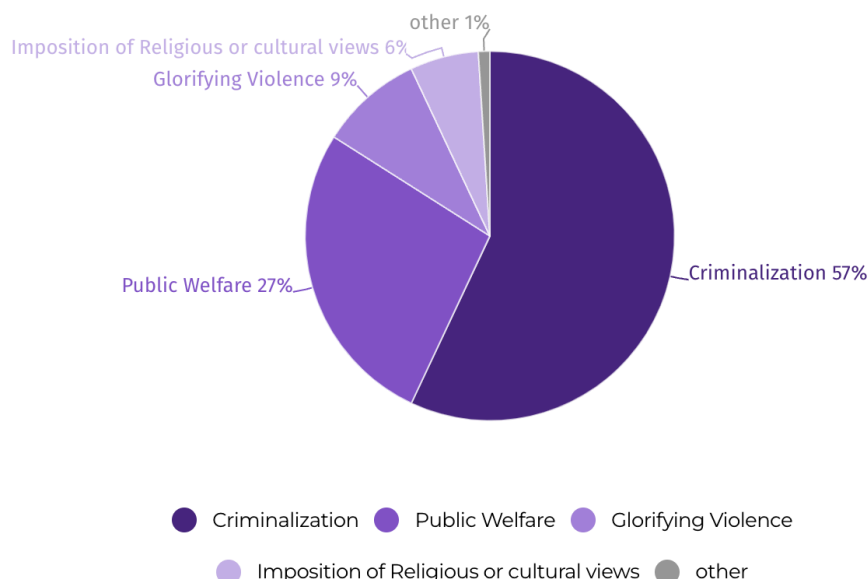
For instance, two different false claims regarding the alleged imposition of such views were that the CUP, an opposition party in the town of Ripoll, had demanded in the town hall that the authorities "withdraw pork food from the festivals of Catalonia out of respect for Muslims", or that the mayor of the town of Hervás had denied a petition made by Muslim parents to ban ham and Iberian sausages in school canteens.

Around 60 per cent of the content Maldita.es labeled as containing racist narratives also contained verifiably false information related to the early summer civil unrest in France. For instance, false claims regarding the military that warned they would take over the state in 48 hours were used to glorify violence as the only way to control the situation. These posts were often accompanied by "cautionary messages'' that riots might lie in Spain's future if immigration was not curtailed.

A prevalent line of disinformation targeting the immigrant community in Spain relates to public aid and subsidies directed to them. For instance, certain publications falsely claimed that 80 per cent of Muslims from Morocco live off social benefits in Catalonia. Furthermore, a debunked claim stated that the Sumar leader, Yolanda Díaz, had announced a "universal inheritance" of €20,000 for "North-Africans and illegal immigrants". This hoax was shared in different viral posts in the database.

Linking the immigrant community with various forms of crime was the most widespread racist disinformation narrative in this period. Aside from over 90 posts sharing the above narratives, a high-profile crime received widespread coverage online and fed into common disinformation narratives. When a woman was murdered in broad daylight in Madrid, a very uncommon event, the murder was widely – and falsely – blamed on immigrants. There was at least one coordinated effort to place the blame on a "North African" person. After police statements contradicted this false claim (the individuals arrested were Spanish), the disinformation campaign shifted, by arguing that the attackers were "of Moroccan origin". Now in prison, both attackers are native-born and have traditional Spanish-sounding names.

Tweet ✔

… Un magrebí mata a puñaladas a Concha, dueña de una tienda en el centro de Madrid, después de robarle… Este asesinato no abrirá telediarios, no se considerará machista porque ha sido un moro… España está a punto de parecer Francia, seguir con el buenismo…

10:06 p. m. · 3 jul. 2023 · **151,5 mil** Reproducciones

2.087 Retweets   **63** Citas   **2.810** Me gusta   **24** Elementos guardados

Translation

"A North African stabs Concha to death, the owner of a shop in Madrids's downtown, after robbing her… This murder will not open newcasts, will not be considered sexist because a moor did it… Spain is about to look like France, continue the do-goodism".

Tweet ✔️

> Además de la estadística y de las declaraciones de los testigos, sabemos que el asesino de Tirso de Molina es un magrebí por la insistencia de la prensa en informarnos de su "nacionalidad española" mientras nos oculta su nombre de pila.
>
> 7:59 a. m. · 5 jul. 2023 · **35,6 mil** Reproducciones
>
> **216** Retweets   **14** Citas   **427** Me gusta   **11** Elementos guardados

Translation

"Beyond statistics and statements from witnesses, we know the murderer of Tirso de Molina is a North African because the press insists on telling us about his "Spanish citizenship" while concealing his given name.

c. The intersection between political online speech, disinformation, and hate

Most disinformation followed organic patterns of resharing (copy-and-pasting across online platforms). Nevertheless, there were actors who seemed to pursue strategic objectives when sharing certain disinformation narratives: An official party account and a regional vice-president shared the hoax about Minister for Ecological Transition Ribera supposedly arriving by private jet to the Climate Summit; a party spokesperson spread the conspiracy theory that the government had engineered a fire in a tunnel on election day to suspend trains running between Madrid and Valencia, in order to prevent travelers from voting; a senator raised suspicions over a very isolated and quickly rectified mistake in ballots from a few consulates for CERA voters; and a member of Congress posted a manipulated video altering the words of a speech by one of the candidates.

Several pieces of disinformation from the database were amplified by political figures as a tactic to advance their political interests. This not only caused an increase in the reach of disinformation content, but also provided such content with a heightened appearance of credibility, given the increased influence such disinformation can play in the period preceding general elections. Here are a few relevant examples of content, debunked by Maldita.es, that was replicated by the main parties' candidates:

- The PSOE candidate and current prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, tweeted a graph painting a rosy – but misleading – financial outlook for the public pension system. This generated 7.5 million impressions.

- The opposition leader and PP candidate, Alberto Núñez Feijoo, repeatedly claimed during the campaign that his party had "always" raised public pensions in line with the official cost of living index, which was false. In this tweet, seen by 3.9 million, he obfuscated his past statements on the matter to mask this lie.

- The leader of the far-right party Vox, Santiago Abascal, shared a post, which garnered over 5.5 million views, supporting the aforementioned hoax that a North-African immigrant was responsible for the murder of a woman in Madrid shortly before the campaign. Again, the two suspects were of Spanish nationality and born in Spain. The hate crimes prosecutor is reported to be investigating this specific hoax.

- Yolanda Díaz, leader of Sumar, also echoed a viral hoax through a tweet that reached 1.9M impressions, with the headline: "VOX proposes to kill the dogs that nobody adopts". The origin of the content was in a proposal from a Zaragoza city councilor at a council meeting in 2019, which was never adopted, and the proposal is not mentioned in the party's program.

Not only did political figures influence the potential impact of disinformation, but the effect appears also to have worked the other way around, as disinformation seemed to shape the online conversation of these actors, as reflected in the monitoring tool. For instance, there was a high volume of publications under the category of "social rights" following Feijóo's 17 July false claim about his party having always raised public pensions according to the Consumer Price Index. "Pensions" (460 posts), "PP" (359 posts), "Feijóo" (244 posts), and "IPC" (Consumer Price Index – 215 posts) were the most mentioned keywords on that day, as other political figures employed social media platforms to counter this claim. On a different note, a high volume of posts on the topic "international affairs" came on 18 July, the date of publication of the article including alleged declarations about the PP leader by EU Commission President Von Der Leyen (the most repeated phrase in posts shared that day).

Further signs of the correlation between disinformation, hate speech and the political conversation online were reflected in the negative sentiment of the posts of the political actors' group. When scanned automatically for a sentiment check, the posts in the categories of "security", "migration", and "equality" registered the highest percentages of negativity.

Sentiment analysis for topics
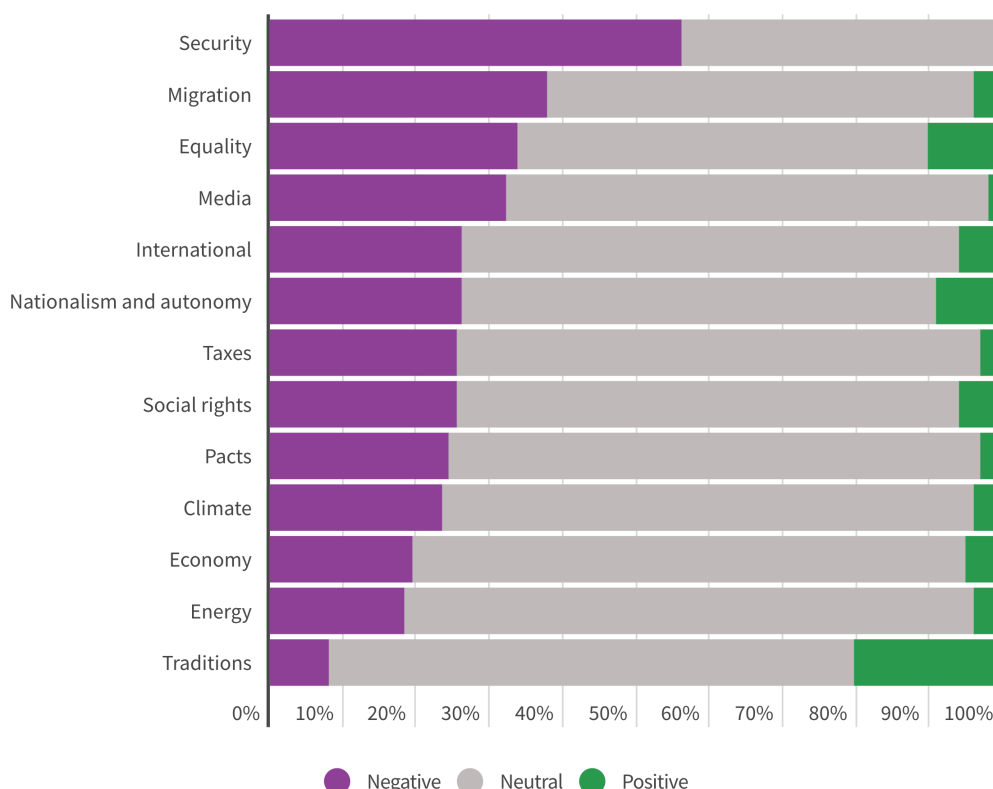
Upon further examination of the "migration" category, phrases like "illegal immigration", "illegal immigrants", and "mass immigration policy" were those most repeated in the posts authored by the monitored group, very much in line with the racist narratives being spread through disinformation. The phrase "what is occurring in France" was also among the most mentioned. Specifically, Vox accounted for 70 per cent of the posts in the monitored group that contained the keyword "France", which might demonstrate how relevant the French riots and protests were for those in Spain pushing an anti-immigrant agenda.

Regarding disinformation and narratives related to mail-in voting, 21 per cent of the posts by political actors mentioning voting by mail carried a negative sentiment, either because the posts replicated narratives containing disinformation or they accused others of promoting suspicions of electoral fraud. The day with the greatest volume of posts related to mail-in voting coincided with the communication that 450,000 citizens had not received their ballots after requesting to vote by mail, opening the way for disinformation narratives. In reality, the 23 July elections had the highest ratio of requested mail-in ballots actually cast (94.2 per cent).

3. Policy Recommendations

a. Government and Political Parties

1. **Enforce the laws:** Online disinformation was an enormous problem during this election campaign, undermining confidence in the integrity and fairness of the electoral process, a fundamental keystone of democracy, for millions of voters. In EU Member States, the Digital Services Act will impose obligations for online platforms to address this very serious risk – obligations that were clearly not in place this time. While the new law is a step in the right direction, its successful implementation will be the final test of how successful the regulatory framework is in addressing the problem. For that, the European Commission and national authorities must ensure that resources, expertise, and political will are up to the task at hand.

2. **Ensure transparency from platforms:** During this investigation, the effective monitoring of some platforms (particularly video-based platforms) was an enormous challenge. Special attention should be paid to the enforcement of transparency requirements for Very Large Online Platforms under the Code of Practice on Disinformation and the DSA. Under Article 40, these services have an obligation to provide relevant data to vetted researchers, which is key for conducting useful and complete investigations of the content on online platforms.

3. **Do not produce or disseminate disinformation:** Members of political parties and government institutions, given their influence in society, should abstain – in all cases – from sharing and amplifying disinformation. Party internal protocols need to be reinforced, or a voluntary code of conduct for political figures should be established to that end. Those promoting harmful disinformation narratives should be held accountable by, for instance, having to issue a public correction in some cases. Fighting against disinformation should be a commitment for all political organisations.

4. **Listen to the experts:** Those in positions of power must take into account expert opinions from academia and civil society, and particularly advice on how to improve protocols and procedures to address disinformation campaigns around electoral processes, such as the reports by the European Commission High Level Expert Group on Disinformation, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and – for the particular Spanish context – the Grupo de Expertos de la Sociedad Civil en Desinformación.

5. **Invest in media and electoral literacy:** Citizens should be educated in how to assess information for its trustworthiness and analyse online claims with critical thinking. Moreover, an important part of the disinformation spread during electoral processes has to do with institutions and the system itself. Authorities should engage with and promote the work of credible and non-political messengers who can explain in simple terms the safeguards in the electoral system and prebunk those disinformation narratives targeting the integrity of the process that resurface during every election campaign.

6. **Promote transparency and accountability by institutions:** Public and party information has to be as transparent and accessible as possible, in order to positively impact citizens' trust. Responding to transparency petitions would certainly dissuade some narratives from prevailing.

b. Tech Platforms

1. **Improve policies and terms and conditions:** While many online platforms do have policies in their terms and conditions specifically to tackle disinformation in their services related to electoral processes, many of the posts in our database were completely ignored and, hence, generated thousands – or even millions – of impressions.

2. **If at all possible, do not delete:** A portion of the content flagged as disinformation was deleted by the online platforms. This practice is not recommended by the fact-checking community, except in cases when not doing it creates an immediate physical danger. It is often more useful to attach a clear warning to that content with a link to the debunking information, so people can actually understand why it was problematic in the first place. Alerting citizens about false information does not jeopardise freedom of speech, but deleting can be perceived as censorship. This practice should be reserved for illegal content. For instance, the Very Large Online Platforms that have systems in place to provide users with third-party fact-checking labels and other contextual information have experienced much less engagement in disinformation content. Independent fact-checking works, and it needs to be incorporated in those platforms that do not yet provide it for their users.

3. **Great power (and audiences) come with great responsibility:** Especially during electoral processes, the enforcement of community guidelines on content posted by major politicians needs to be ensured. The influence of these accounts grows even greater during these periods, with a corresponding increase in the impact of their posts.

4. **Campaigns are permanent now:** Initiatives to prevent disinformation should not be time-bound to the few weeks around election days. Many of the disinformation narratives had already been debunked in the past, and yet were spreading through different online platforms even before the announcement of the snap election. Moreover, some accounts in the disinformation database had systematically shared false claims on different topics in the past, and were still permitted to generate high engagement numbers during this period.

5. **Look for help:** Collaboration between online platforms and civil society and academia needs to be fostered. Better cooperation involves better access to information from online platforms. Meaningful research and advice can only be provided if data is shared through adequate interfaces.

c. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

1. **Reach out:** Collaboration between organisations and researchers brings greater value to projects, and could solve problems associated with overlapping investigations. This provides the opportunity for the exchange of recommendations and good practices to be more impactful.

2. **Speak up:** CSOs should play the role of watchdogs for online platforms, governments, and political parties, but without missing opportunities to engage with them for public benefit. Early detection communications, media literacy campaigns, and flagging disinformation are some possible areas for collaboration.

3. **Find an audience:** Given the value of CSOs in terms of their independence, they should find different ways and formats in which to engage with the public, in order to promote general trust.

4. Social Media Monitoring Recommendations

1. Every social media monitoring analysis being conducted in a specific context needs to count on local expertise that knows about relevant local characteristics that can affect the research.

2. While every occasion and collaboration may bring different insights to a project, there should always be some level of standardisation that allows for comparison between countries or between electoral processes. Some of the factors that may vary are the selection of services to take into account, as usage is different among different communities.

3. Given the increasing volume of disinformation targeting election integrity, it is necessary to monitor social media during the days following election day. This allows for a comparison between narratives spreading prior to and after the election date, as well as their impact.

4. When preparing the methodology for the monitoring, there should be consideration of how to minimise the impact that unforeseen events during the timeframe have on the collection of data. Some degree of flexibility is also needed in order to reflect on the real developments in the election campaign.

5. Further projects should aim to create specific technological tools that are useful for social media monitoring initiatives across time, by combining natural language processing with human review.

5. Annex

Maldita.es' methodology follows a careful process of **selection, verification, and publication**.

1. Two variables are taken into account in deciding whether a claim or a piece of content is investigated or not: **virality and danger**. The number of times a post is sent to the WhatsApp chatbot, the number of re-shares on an online platform, or the number of followers of the account spreading the content are some of the measurements used to assess virality. A post with barely any engagement will not be chosen to be investigated for a debunk, in order to avoid amplification. Regarding the second variable, danger, there is harmful disinformation that appears in especially delicate crisis situations, such as attacks or natural catastrophes, those that affect public health or social coexistence, which are addressed from the first moment of detection, even if they are not yet viral, in order to prevent physical harm. Moreover, only facts and data are considered verifiable and can thus be investigated, as opposed to mere opinions.

2. A journalist starts the verification process by contacting first-hand sources, origins, or official databases, or by employing technological tools that assess manipulation. Every piece of evidence is documented in the debunk publication. All sources are identified and cited, whether they are a natural person, some other private entity, or an official body. At least two sources must be cited in the verification, unless there is only one possible relevant source. When quoting experts, the position and experience that supports their expertise will be indicated, so that it is clear why that person's assessment is relevant to verifying the content.

   Maldita.es counts two different categories of debunking: "Hoax" or "Without evidence". The former refers to disinformation that is possible to independently verify as false and that is being spread as real. The latter is used for content for which there is no proof of its veracity, as it constitutes disinformation where no one presents verifiable evidence of its existence. A third format, "What we know", is used to provide context, when needed, to prevent disinformation, and there is no conclusive answer.

3. When the journalist finishes the investigation and writes the article, editors review it to make sure everything is clear and nothing is missing. Any article needs to be reviewed by at least four of the ten editors before it can be published, and can be vetoed by any single editor. After this process is complete, the debunk is published on Maldita's website, and can be adapted into other formats.