DOI: 10.51480/compress.2025.9-1.1119

Patrycja Kłyś
UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID
patrycjaklys425@gmail.com

# Computational Propaganda and Electoral Manipulation: Thematic Divergence in Disinformation Across Spanish General and Catalan Regional Elections (2018–2024)

## Propaganda komputacyjna a manipulacja wyborcza. Tematyczne rozbieżności w dezinformacji w hiszpańskich wyborach ogólnokrajowych i katalońskich wyborach regionalnych (2018–2024)

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the phenomenon of computational propaganda and disinformation within the context of a selected autonomous community – Catalonia – and situates it within the broader political-media landscape of contemporary Spain. The hypothesis states that disinformation campaigns conducted during regional elections in Catalonia are characterized by a heightened degree of identity-based polarization and rely on specific pro-independence narratives, whereas disinformation strategies used during Spanish general elections tend to concentrate on socioeconomic and general political issues. This divergence produces a fragmentation of truth perception operating at two distinct levels of political discourse. The author seeks to address the following questions: in what ways does Catalonia's political specificity shape distinct disinformation strategies in regional elections, and what are the consequences of these asymmetries for the cohesion of Spanish society and for public trust in both governmental institutions and media outlets? The methodology draws upon subject-matter literature, official state reports, data from Spanish fact-checking organizations, and systematic analyses of disinformation strategies employed in both electoral contexts during the period 2018–2024.

**KEYWORDS: COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA, SPAIN, CATALONIA, DISINFORMATION, INFORMATION SOCIETY**

**STRESZCZENIE**

Artykuł zajmuje się fenomenem propagandy komputacyjnej i dezinformacji w kontekście wybranej wspólnoty autonomicznej Hiszpanii, jaką jest Katalonia. Sytuacja tego regionu analizowana jest w szerszym kontekście polityczno-medialnym Hiszpanii. Hipoteza artykułu stanowi, że kampanie dezinformacyjne przeprowadzane w trakcie regionalnych wyborów w Katalonii charakteryzują się wyższym stopniem polaryzacji tożsamościowej i wykorzystują narracje niepodległościowe, podczas gdy dezinformacja w trakcie wyborów generalnych koncentruje się na kwestiach socjoekonomicznych i ogólnopolitycznych, co sprawia, że percepcja prawdy ulega fragmentacji na dwóch poziomach dyskursu politycznego. Pytanie badawcze artykułu miało na celu sprawdzenie, w jaki sposób specyfika polityczna Katalonii determinuje odmienne strategie dezinformacyjne w wyborach regionalnych w porównaniu z wyborami ogólnokrajowymi oraz jakie są konsekwencje tych różnic dla spójności społeczeństwa hiszpańskiego i jego zaufania do rządu oraz mediów. Metodologia wykorzystana w artykule opiera się na analizie literatury przedmiotu, raportów państwowych, danych z hiszpańskich organizacji fact-checkingowych oraz strategii dezinformacyjnych, które zostały zastosowane w trakcie wyborów regionalnych i generalnych.

Kłyś, P., (2026), Computational Propaganda and Electoral Manipulation: Thematic Divergence in Disinformation Across Spanish General and Catalan Regional Elections (2018–2024), ***com.press***, 9(1), s. 22–39. DOI: 10.51480/compress.2026.9-1.1119
www.compress.edu.pl

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: PROPAGANDA KOMPUTACYJNA, HISZPANIA, KATALONIA, DEZINFORMACJA, SPOŁECZEŃSTWO INFORMACYJNE**

## INTRODUCTION

Today, countries must face new mechanisms of shaping public opinion and political discourse. Over the years, digital technologies have advanced significantly, and the main reason for this development has been to enable better access to information and strengthen civic participation in social and political life. Nevertheless, this change has produced new phenomena that have brought chaos to political discourse and deepened social polarization. One of the most important factors shaping today's political and media landscape is computational propaganda. As stated by Philip Howard (2023), "computational propaganda is the use of algorithms to distribute information that has been shaped in the service of ideology." This mechanism is rooted in the tradition of propaganda. It draws on comparable psychological mechanisms, targeting users' emotions and biases to suppress rational deliberation and promote specific ideas of certain creators of political campaigns. However, unlike traditional propaganda, computational propaganda employs a broader array of digital information tools and may operate on a larger scale. In addition, modern manipulation techniques can alter information and tailor it to specific segments of society. Countries characterized by deep internal divisions, in which each region has its own well-developed cultural identity, constitute a particular case for research on the impact of computational propaganda on social and political polarization. Spain is a state composed of 2 autonomous cities and 17 autonomous communities, each distinguished by its own regional culture and distinct language (Babczuk and Marczak, 2011), which is the reason why this country represents an adequate example for examining computational propaganda.

Patrycja Kłyś
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

# THE ROLE OF COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

The era of electronic media brought about a gradual democratization of propaganda tools. Radio and television, initially controlled by states, became increasingly accessible to a wider range of social and political actors, and political parties progressively lost their monopoly on political messaging. The emergence of the Internet and social media further reorganised social structures (Ziółkowski, 2012). Since the Internet's inception in the 1960s, users could – for the first time in history – become message senders themselves. Social media in the twenty-first century deepened this shift, replacing the traditional sender-receiver model with one in which multiple senders transmit content to global audiences.

The rapid development of computational propaganda has reshaped contemporary democratic reality. Platforms originally intended to democratise information have become arenas of competition for users' attention. Algorithms tend to favour controversial and extreme content due to its higher engagement, contributing to societal polarization and the formation of 'information bubbles' in which different groups inhabit separate realities. Social media has also become a primary space for political dispute and ideological manipulation – particularly significant given its influence on younger generations, who increasingly construct their political identities through those platforms (Nielsen and Fletcher, 2020).

Manipulation is now largely driven by bots and automated accounts, which enable the rapid, mass dissemination of selected content and shape users' perception of reality. The significance of these propaganda tools and the strength of their impact on the political landscape of democratic societies were already observed during the 2016 United States elections, in the course of which the involvement of Russian computational propaganda instruments was recorded and confirmed (Woolley, 2020). It was demonstrated that the Russian government, acting in conjunction with the Internet Research Agency (IRA), employed computer bots to spread disinformation and amplify polarization during the 2016 US presidential election.

Recent years, marked by the rapid advancement of technology, have also ensured that computational propaganda and its tools – including bots and automated accounts – manipulate public opinion and influence political discourse within societies in ways that are increasingly difficult to detect. This situation gives rise to a growing need not only for the development

of tools to combat computational propaganda but also for raising citizens' awareness of digital threats and fostering the capacity for critical evaluation of online content.

## POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE MEDIATIZED SOCIETY OF SPAIN AND THE CATALAN REGION

The mediatization of politics in regional information dissemination has evolved significantly over recent decades. In the digital era, with social media and numerous communication channels, political discourse has become more fragmented, personalized, and vulnerable to manipulation. Politicians, journalists, and citizens now operate within a media environment where distinguishing truth from falsehood is increasingly difficult, and opinions often blur with facts. Additionally, rapidly advancing computational propaganda impacts public trust, leaving citizens feeling manipulated and disoriented in a media landscape that has lost its unquestioned credibility as a primary information source. Spain offers a useful example to explore these phenomena, especially considering its cultural and linguistic diversity. In particular, Catalonia – one of Spain's 17 autonomous communities with a strong cultural identity – has long been at the center of debates over autonomy and its tense relationship with Madrid, shaping media narratives and citizen perceptions.

Public media are confined primarily to large audiovisual corporations operating at the national and regional levels. A particularly problematic issue in Spain concerns the management of public media and the policy governing their subsidization, as numerous national and regional institutions are accused of interference in editorial lines and of bias in the allocation of support to private media outlets. This landscape, in which large and small private communications companies coexist alongside public corporations, is consistent with the polarized pluralist media system characteristic of Mediterranean countries, as described by Hallin and Mancini (2007).

Certain features of the model described by these scholars are also present in Spain. These include, among others, a relatively low newspaper circulation – a trend further deepened by the dynamic development of the Internet – weak professionalization, and strong state intervention in the media. This

last phenomenon is further intensified by the country's administrative structure, as beyond the national audiovisual entity, as many as 12 of the 17 autonomous regions possess their own audiovisual corporation, controlled by their respective regional governments.[1]

A significant issue is that of media policy, particularly at the regional level, which has undergone considerable transformation in recent years. The media policy of the autonomous communities has been subject to reforms driven by the digitization of contemporary reality and the growing importance of the Internet in everyday life. The question of new media appeared in the legal documents of autonomous communities as early as the mid-1990s (Głuszek-Szafraniec, 2018). The Language Policy Act of 1998 clearly identified the need for financial support for new technologies intended to promote the Catalan language. In 2005, a separate subsidy system for digital media was introduced, and the second decade of the twenty-first century marked a period of support for online initiatives. The substantial funding directed toward this media sector indicates that regional governments are well aware of its power to influence society. As Dagmara Głuszek-Szafraniec observes in her article, the development of new media contributes to the reinforcement of the idea of sovereignty. Furthermore, both regional governments and social or political organizations are able to interact directly with their audiences, which has significantly amplified their capacity for influence.

The rapidly evolving situation of Catalan political parties, combined with the relatively well-developed media policy of the region, presents a picture of a society in which a strong regional identity is deeply rooted and externally reinforced. Such a situation carries many positive aspects, among which the strengthening of the historical and cultural heritage of autonomous communities can certainly be counted. However, it is worth noting that in the hands of regional governments lie tools that enable them not so much to disseminate regional tradition as to instill a certain narrative of a nationalist character, which may be exploited for their own political ends. The current reality, in which the proliferation of disinformation has become commonplace – combined with media that are heavily dependent on both regional and national authorities – may result in citizens of a given state, in this case Spain and its diverse regions, becoming increasingly distrustful of the media.

1 Media Landscapes – Expert Analyses of the State of Media, Spain. Accessed October 14, 2026. https://medialandscapes.org/country/spain

## METHODOLOGY

The study is a comparative, descriptive case study of disinformation in two electoral arenas of one country: Catalan regional elections (14 February 2021 and 12 May 2024) and Spanish general elections (28 April 2019 and 23 July 2023). Two methods are combined. The first is content analysis, understood as a systematic, category-based description of the content of messages, applied to fact-checked disinformation items. The second is desk research, the systematic re-analysis of secondary data, applied to two sets of data: published classifications of disinformation items in the 2023 general and 2024 Catalan elections (Cetina-Presuel and Gaete-Salgado, 2025; Democracy Reporting International, 2023); Twitter data on the language used by party communities during the 2021 Catalan election (Broto Cervera, Pérez-Solà and Batlle, 2024). An integral component of the categorization key is a compilation of the most prevalent fake news items circulating during both the regional elections in Catalonia and the general elections in Spain across the studied period. The corpus of selected fake news consists of 42 items: ten for the 2021 Catalan election, ten for 2024, eleven for the general election of 28 April 2019, and eleven for 2023. The items were taken from election round-ups published by Spanish fact-checking organisations: Verifica RTVE (2021), Maldita.es (2019 and 2024) and InfoVeritas (2023). Maldita.es is the main reference source because it collects one of the largest bodies of data on circulating disinformation in Spain and publishes its verification methodology. According to that methodology, items are selected for verification based on their virality and the harm their spread may cause (Maldita.es, methodology in force from December 2020 to June 2025; the earlier methodology, in force from November 2016 to May 2020, applies to the 2019 items). Inclusion in a round-up is thus evidence of virality as assessed by fact-checkers. Relying on these sources ensured that the analysed items reflect disinformation that reached a substantial audience, rather than isolated or marginal cases.

The analysis is organized around several thematic areas selected for their capacity to yield meaningful conclusions regarding the functioning of computational propaganda techniques at the intersection of regions with strong cultural identities and the broader national landscape of Spain. Each item was assigned to one primary category according to the claim it advanced, not according to the fact-checker's verdict. The scheme has six categories (Table 1), defined based on the thematic areas that recur in the fact-checkers' reports; it is deliberately small so that each item fits one category and the

counts remain interpretable. Coding was carried out by a single coder. The code assigned to every item is shown in Appendix A.

**Table 1.** Coding scheme for the fact-checked items.

| Code | Category | Definition and example |
|---|---|---|
| C1 | Electoral process and integrity | Claims about how voting, counting, postal voting or electoral bodies work, including alleged fraud (e.g. postal voting as a way of rigging results). |
| C2 | Candidate – or party-targeted fabrications | Forged documents, screenshots or associations concerning a named candidate or party, other than their policy positions (e.g. a forged medical report attributed to Salvador Illa). |
| C3 | Immigration and Muslim minorities | Claims about migrants, such as benefits, health or cultural change (e.g. benefits allegedly paid to Moroccan families). |
| C4 | Party positions and programmes | Claims about how parties voted or what they propose (e.g. EH Bildu allegedly supporting a labour reform). |
| C5 | Socioeconomic and legal facts | Statistics or legal and judicial claims (e.g. youth unemployment, femicide figures, a court case). |
| C6 | Catalan-Spanish identity and independence | Claims that set Catalans against Spaniards or discredit independence figures through alleged historical links (e.g. a company allegedly hiring "Catalans and foreigners, never Spaniards"). |

*Source: own elaboration*

The chosen timeframe is strongly related to the 2017 secession crisis, when the Catalan question became the central axis of political conflict in Spain, and covers the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019 general election was the first after the 2017 crisis; a second general election was held on 10 November 2019, but the fact-checked items refer to April. The 2021 Catalan election took place under COVID-19 restrictions (limited numbers in polling stations, special voting hours for infected voters, the possibility of postal voting) and was the first since 2017; Vox[2] entered the Parliament with 11 seats, in a chamber of eight groups (Maldita.es, 2021; El País, 2021). In 2023, a new left-wing coalition, Sumar, was registered on 31 May, and televised leaders' debates were the origin of several contested claims. The 2024 Catalan election was called early by the regional president, Pere Aragonés (Maldita.es, 2024); ERC lost 13 seats, the PSC won 42, and Aliança Catalana entered with 2 (El País, 2024). Party labels are explained in a note.[3]

2 Vox: far-right, national-conservative party that opposes Catalan independence and favours reducing the powers of the autonomous communities. It entered the Catalan Parliament for the first time in 2021, with 11 seats.

3 Party labels follow common usage. PSOE: centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; PSC: Catalan socialists, federated with the PSOE and opposed to independence; PP: centre-right, unionist; Cs: liberal-centrist, unionist; Vox: far right (see note 2); ERC: left-wing, pro-independence; Junts (JxCat): centre-right, pro-independence; CUP: far-left, pro-independence; Comuns/Sumar: left-wing, not pro-independence; Aliança Catalana: far-right, pro-independence; EH Bildu: see note 4.

The coded corpus is small, purposive and coded by one person, and the published datasets differ in their definitions and in the number of items classified, so comparisons between elections are indicative. Closed messaging services, above all WhatsApp, are largely invisible to fact-checkers, so the distribution of channels underestimates their role.

## FINDINGS

The analyses of disinformation activities and computational propaganda tools conducted across both regional elections in Catalonia and general elections in Spain during the research period of 2018–2024 clearly demonstrate that disinformation and its increasingly sophisticated methods exert a tangible influence on the socio-political situation in this Iberian Peninsula state.

The study's central research question examined how Catalonia's political specificity shapes differentiated disinformation strategies in regional elections compared with general elections, and what consequences these differences have for the cohesion of Spanish society and its trust in government and media institutions.

Table 2 presents the result of the content analysis of the 42 items (Appendix A). In the 2021 Catalan election, nine of the ten items concerned the electoral process: the hashtags #pucherazo and #rompetuvoto, claims about the vote count, postal voting and a forged Generalitat document on voting. The tenth was a forged medical report attributed to the PSC candidate, Salvador Illa. In the 2019 general election, all eleven items concerned alleged fraud, such as videos claiming a 99.9% probability of manipulation, 1.5 million "missing" votes and claims about the counting systems. In 2024, six of ten items concerned migrants or Muslim minorities (for instance benefits allegedly paid to Moroccan families, and an alleged scabies epidemic blamed on immigration), three targeted parties or politicians, and two were independence-related (a company slogan against Spaniards and a photograph linking Carles Puigdemont's grandfather to the Falange). In 2023, five items concerned the positions or programmes of parties (for instance EH Bildu[4] on a labour

4 EH Bildu: left-wing Basque pro-independence coalition, generally regarded as one of the most radical forces in the Basque Country. Support for a labour reform backed by the central government would therefore be unexpected from the standpoint of its electorate.

reform, or the PP on pensions) and six concerned socioeconomic or legal facts (unemployment data, femicide figures, the transgender law, a court case). Several originated in statements by party leaders.

**Table 2.** Coded fact-checked items by election.

| Election | C1 | C2 | C3 | C4 | C5 | C6 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catalan 2021 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Catalan 2024 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10 |
| General 2019 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| General 2023 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 11 |
| Total | 20 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 42 |

*Source: own coding of the items in Appendix A. C1 electoral process; C2 party – or candidate-targeted fabrication; C3 immigration and Muslim minorities; C4 party positions; C5 socioeconomic and legal facts; C6 Catalan–Spanish identity and independence.*

Electoral-integrity claims (C1) account for 20 of the 42 items and occur in both arenas, so the regional and general elections are not separated by this theme. What differs is the context: the pandemic arrangements in 2021, migration and social benefits in 2024, and the televised debates in 2023. Party-position and socioeconomic claims (C4 and C5) make up all eleven items for 2023 and none for the other elections. Explicit independence-related claims (C6) are rare: two of the 42 items.

Across all elections analyzed – both regional and general – the primary objectives of disinformation were the misleading of audiences and the generation of informational chaos (Cetina-Presuel, Gaete-Salgado, 2025). Twitter and WhatsApp emerged as the principal platforms through which fake news was disseminated. The particular role of WhatsApp was especially pronounced during the 2023 general elections, though it is important to acknowledge that its significance in earlier electoral cycles may have been equally substantial yet more difficult to measure, given that the application facilitates information-sharing within closed groups, rendering fact-checking and verification considerably more challenging.

The main research hypothesis – that disinformation campaigns during Catalan regional elections are characterized by a higher degree of identity-based polarization and utilize specific pro-independence narratives, while disinformation in general elections concentrates more on socioeconomic and broadly political issues – was partially confirmed. Disinformation content in regional elections primarily targeted major pro-independence political actors, supporting the conclusion that disinformation campaigns in regional elections do, in fact, exploit independence-related narratives. Nevertheless,

it was not supported concerning the content of the disinformation, since explicit independence narratives were rare (in 2024, the dominant themes were immigration and social benefits).

A subsidiary hypothesis posited that social media algorithms in Catalonia generate stronger information bubbles during regional elections due to linguistic segmentation. This was partially confirmed by data on tweets from communities clustered around individual parties during the 2024 Catalan regional elections, which revealed that the Catalan language is predominantly employed by users associated with pro-independence parties such as JxCat, CUP, and ERC (Broto Cervera, Pérez-Solà and Batlle, 2024). It exceeded 91% in the communities of the pro-independence parties JxCat (91.45%), CUP (91.29%) and ERC (94.34%), whereas it was marginal in the Vox (0.76%) and PP (2.31%) communities and low in Cs (9.75%); the PSC (29.59%) and Comuns (46.99%) communities were mixed (ibid.). This phenomenon risks deepening the internal divisions of an already highly polarized society, producing a subset of citizens particularly vulnerable to disinformation attacks tailored to their political views – in this case, regarding Catalan independence. However, the assumption that extensive references to the independence cause would characterize disinformation in Catalonia was not confirmed by the data. This does not contradict the partial confirmation above: the information bubbles exist along linguistic and party lines, but the disinformation circulating in them was mostly about other issues, such as immigration. Fake news and computational propaganda activity during the analyzed electoral cycles contained relatively few direct references to Catalan independence, suggesting that secessionist aspirations may no longer occupy as central a position in Catalan political discourse as they once did. This trend is further corroborated by the results of the 2024 Catalan elections, in which the PSC (Partido de los Socialistas de Cataluña) – broadly aligned with the central government in Madrid, as it is the regional branch of the PSOE, the party currently in power – secured the most seats.

Trust indicators provide a general background for these results. Distrust of political institutions and of the media is high in Spain and has not eased in recent years: around 90% of Spaniards distrust political parties, and more than 70% distrust the government, and distrust of social media content rose between the first two surveys (Eurobarómetro Standard 94, 96 and 98). In Catalonia, 70% of respondents say that democracy is not at its best level and 80% are dissatisfied with the actions of politicians (Casanovas, 2024), and only a minority express greater trust in local (32%) or national (22%) media (Barroso, 2023). Persistently high distrust is compatible with the

reading that fraud narratives and attacks on parties find a receptive audience, and with the possibility that disinformation reinforces existing distrust over time. However, the series are short, contain no pre-pandemic baseline, and did not move in step with the elections analysed, so they cannot show that disinformation caused this distrust or that it is growing because of it.

The findings presented above illustrate how computational propaganda tools are increasingly shaping contemporary reality and influencing the political arena of every state. Although persistently low trust in institutions and media provides fertile ground for such narratives, the data do not show that disinformation changed election outcomes or caused this distrust, which makes a larger corpus and direct evidence of audience reach and automated amplification the priorities for future research. It was noted that algorithmic curation profoundly affects citizens' perceptions and their capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood, reinforcing the formation of information bubbles that strengthen social polarization. As the majority of political life migrates to social media platforms with vast user bases, the role of algorithms is intensifying.

## APPENDIX A. FACT-CHECKED ITEMS AND ASSIGNED CODES

The items are listed as published in the fact-checkers' round-ups. The last column shows the primary category assigned in the content analysis (Table 2). The round-ups from which the items were taken are listed in the bibliography.

**Table A1.** Most Common Fake News from the Catalan Regional Elections of 2021.

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Hashtags #rompertuvoto #pucherazo and their connection to the VOX party | The hashtags were published either by organizations opposing the current political system or by far-right supporters aiming to destabilize order during the elections. However, none of the hashtags were in any way linked to the VOX party. | C1 |
| Junta Electoral and vote counting | A tweet appeared online suggesting that the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalan autonomous police) had informed the regional electoral commission (Junta Electoral) of a new order that would prevent VOX party representatives from participating in the vote count. The Junta Electoral issued a regulation stating that due to sanitary restrictions, the number of persons in polling stations had to be limited and some could be removed – but this had no connection whatsoever to the VOX party. | C1 |

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| A Barcelona resident unable to cast their vote | A resident was initially unable to vote due to a data entry error at the polling station, but the situation was quickly resolved, and the individual was invited to cast their vote, also receiving a document confirming that they had done so. Following this incident, tweets about alleged electoral fraud began to circulate. | C1 |
| Oriol Junqueras | Tweets appeared in the media reporting that the politician associated with the pro-independence party, Oriol Junqueras, had appeared at a polling station, which according to information circulated in the media constituted a violation of the law by Junqueras and the commission that allowed him to enter the premises. However, Oriol Junqueras was serving a third-degree sentence, which permitted him to spend weekends outside of prison – therefore his appearance at the polling station was not a criminal offence, as the fake news implied. | C1 |
| Salvador Illa and a falsified medical document | A photo of an alleged medical report was circulated on social media suggesting that Salvador Illa, former Minister of Health and PSC candidate, had tested positive for PCR (detecting numerous infectious diseases, etc.). The document was confirmed as fake by the institution itself, which noted that the laboratory number on the document contained too many digits and therefore could not be attributed to their facility. The falsity of the document was also confirmed by the Illa party. | C2 |
| Blank, invalid votes or abstention from voting | False information misleading voters about the types of valid votes. | C1 |
| Voting by persons with Covid-19 | Misleading information – special hours were established at polling stations for persons infected with Covid-19, yet the information provided no context for this arrangement. | C1 |
| Postal voting | Tweets spreading the claim that postal voting was a method of manipulating election results. | C1 |
| Indra company and vote counting | Indra holds the exclusive right to transmit data from polling stations but is not responsible for counting votes, which may only be carried out by electoral commission members. | C1 |
| Falsified Generalitat de Catalunya document on voting | A falsified Generalitat document stating that one may "vote once per person per polling station." This was a fake document. | C1 |

*Source: own compilation based on information published by fact-checking portal Verifica RTVE from the Catalan elections in 2021*

**Table A2.** Most Common Fake News from the Catalan Regional Elections of 2024.

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| *Bienvenido al Emirato Islámico de Cataluña* signs (Spanish: Welcome to the Islamic Emirate of Catalonia) | Fake news showed signs allegedly placed by Muslim minorities in regions of Catalonia, but they were part of a campaign against the "Islamization" of the region, created by the Frente Obrero party, in connection with the regional elections. | C3 |
| Financial aid from the Catalan government for Moroccan families | False information concerning financial support from the Catalan government – an incorrect name of the institution and an incorrect benefit amount. The fake news additionally emphasized that support was available exclusively to Muslim families – a negatively charged implication. | C3 |
| Financial support of 7.5 million euros for the introduction of Arabic as an official language in Catalan schools | No official data confirms such actions. The disinformation is based on a misunderstanding arising from an agreement concluded by the Catalan government with the ALECSO organization, which aims to strengthen ties between the Arab world and the Catalan region. | C3 |
| PSC party financial advisor offers money in exchange for votes | Screenshots from WhatsApp circulated online in which a supposed PSC financial advisor allegedly offers money in exchange for votes – this fake news had already functioned during the 2023 local elections. | C2 |

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Announcement of ERC party candidates for parliament: the selection of journalist Jordi Évole | False information – unconfirmed by the journalist himself; no trace of the article was found on the website of La Vanguardia newspaper – additionally, the appearance of the article screenshot differed visually from the official ones. | C2 |
| Audio material – Moroccan man and social benefit | A recording in which a Spanish man, while queuing at a La Caixa bank, comments on a situation where he hears another man of Moroccan origin boasting that he does not need to work and receives welfare from PIRMI (social assistance in Catalonia). PIRMI no longer exists, and furthermore the audio again contains false financial figures for such benefits. | C3 |
| Casa Tarradellas slogan – hiring only Catalans and foreigners, never Spaniards | The slogan of the Catalan company Casa Tarradellas appeared online, suggesting that the company hires everyone but is "exclusively" for Catalans and foreigners, never Spaniards. The company's owners denied these words. | C6 |
| Moroccans of Moroccan origin live on 80% benefits, and 7,000 do not even reside in Catalonia | Audio recording – no evidence exists, and there are no registries that would confirm such a situation. It should also be noted that to receive benefits in Spain, one must reside in the territory, making the second part of the fake news equally implausible. | C3 |
| *Scabies and ringworm are attacking Catalonia* | This information appeared in media circulation, and the cause of an alleged epidemic was claimed to be illegal mass immigration. The regional health service denied such data and added that cases of ringworm should certainly not be associated with immigrant reception centers. | C3 |
| *Grandfather Puigdemont* | A military photograph allegedly depicting the grandfather of Carles Puigdemont, former President of the Generalitat de Catalunya, whose government in 2017 posed the risk of secession of the region from Spain and caused significant public unrest. The photograph depicted a soldier, a member of the Francoist Falange, Gregorio Martín Mariscala. | C6 |

Source: own compilation based on information published by fact-checking portal Maldita.es from the Catalan elections in 2024

**Table A3.** Most Common Fake News from the 2019 Spanish General Elections (28 April).

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Video materials claiming a 99.9% probability of electoral fraud | Maldita.es proved that these videos conveyed false information, and none of them provided any mathematical confirmation of such a probability. | C1 |
| The existence of a mysterious algorithm proving manipulation in electoral districts (*pucherazo*) | False information, debunked by Conrado Miguel Manuel García from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, who stated that all calculations purportedly composing the alleged algorithm were incorrect and did not reflect the actual electoral situation. | C1 |
| The disappearance of over 1,500,000 votes from the system | Untrue – all data matched. The "missing" votes were those cast by Spaniards abroad, which are not included in the official voter turnout percentage figures. | C1 |
| Use of a vote-counting system previously used for electoral fraud in Venezuela | A claim circulated online that Spain used the same vote-counting system (Smartmatic) that had been used to rig elections in Venezuela. This was false – in Spain, votes are counted by electoral commission members, and the only company involved in elections is Indra, which is solely responsible for distributing and delivering electoral data. | C1 |
| Electoral fraud – video showing a left-wing representative with a stack of postal voting applications | False information – the video did not originate from these elections and had no connection to the left wing. The footage was from 2015 and was related to the PP. | C1 |
| Catalan company Scytl and its alleged counting of electoral votes | Fake news – the Catalan company was allegedly counting votes and was additionally linked to Hungarian investor Soros, around whom numerous conspiracy theories had emerged. As already clarified in the context of other fake news items, only electoral commission members count the votes. | C1 |
| Video purportedly confirming electoral fraud without accounting for a 2-million-voter increase in turnout. | The video attempted to prove, based on vote counts, that postal voting had been manipulated. This was false, as the author of the recording did not account for the change in turnout between 2016 and 2019 – there were over 2 million more voters, which the author failed to include in his calculations. | C1 |

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| An increase in invalid votes as a sign of electoral fraud | A conclusion based on the recorded number of invalid votes – Maldita.es, upon analyzing the issue, found that the percentage of invalid votes was lower than in previous elections and showed no indication of electoral fraud. | C1 |
| Electoral fraud at a polling station in Santander | Photos circulated online of a voting record from that province which had not been included in the overall results, because the number of votes exceeded the number of registered voters in that district, and were therefore declared invalid. No electoral fraud had occurred. | C1 |
| Electoral fraud caused by postal voters appearing on in-person voting lists. | Reports emerged of alleged electoral fraud because individuals who had applied for postal voting also appeared on the in-person voting lists. No fraud occurred – people who vote by post do appear on the in-person voting lists, but their entries are marked with the letter *C* for identification purposes, thereby eliminating the possibility of casting a vote twice | C1 |
| Barcelona voting records – more votes than voters | This was not electoral fraud, as these records pertained to Senate elections, where each voter may cast votes for up to three candidates, hence the higher number of votes recorded than voters. | C1 |

Source: own compilation based on information published by fact-checking portal Maldita.es from the Spanish elections in 2019

**Table A4.** Most Common Fake News from the 2023 Spanish General Elections.

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| The EH Bildu party supports labour law reform | False information regarding EH Bildu's support for labour law reform. According to official data from the Congress of Deputies, 5 EH Bildu deputies voted against the bill. | C4 |
| The number of workers in the agricultural sector | False data was provided by Yolanda Díaz, leader of Sumar, who stated that more people are currently employed in this sector than ever before, which is not true (compared to the Zapatero government in 2008, when the number was significantly higher). | C5 |
| Youth unemployment rate | A claim circulated that youth unemployment is currently at its lowest level, which is not true – the lowest level was recorded in 2016 at 16.90%, compared to the current rate of nearly 30%. | C5 |
| Vox party against raising the minimum wage | Decisions of this kind are never made by the Congress of Deputies, so the Vox party had no opportunity to vote either for or against the level of the minimum wage. | C4 |
| The number of femicide cases since 2004 | Vox leader Santiago Abascal claimed that the gender-based violence law had not contributed to a reduction in the number of femicides. This is false – in 2004, when the law was introduced, the number of cases stood at 72, whereas by the time of the 2023 elections it had fallen to just 28, meaning the law did indeed contribute to a reduction in femicide rates. | C5 |
| The state transgender law and gender-based violence convictions | A claim emerged that the transgender law enables individuals to evade criminal liability in cases of gender-based violence. This is untrue. | C5 |
| The Vox party's electoral programme and a ban on strikes | This claim circulated in the media and was put forward by Yolanda Díaz; however, it is not true. | C4 |
| The PP party and its support for pension increases | Contrary to what Feijóo assured during the Atresmedia debate, the PP did not vote in favour of pension indexation. This is demonstrated by various votes in the Congress of Deputies. The 2023 state budget also included a pension increase in line with the CPI. Support came from the following parties: PSOE, Unidas Podemos, ERC, PNV, Bildu, PDeCAT, Más País, Coalición Canaria, Compromís, and PRC. Votes against were cast by PP, Vox, and Ciudadanos. | C4 |
| PP and its proposal to raise the retirement age to 74 | Partial truth – such an extension would be voluntary, and according to the PP's programme, this option would be available to specialists in family medicine and pediatrics. | C4 |

| Fake News Topic | Brief Explanation | Code |
|---|---|---|
| President Rajoy and the number of pardons granted | A spokesperson for the EH Bildu group stated that former President Mariano Rajoy had granted more pardons than any other leader in Spanish history, which is not true. | C5 |
| The Pegasus case dropped due to lack of cooperation from Pedro Sánchez | During the electoral debate, Feijóo claimed that the Pegasus case was dropped due to a lack of cooperation from Pedro Sánchez. This is false – Judge José Luis Calama dropped the case due to a lack of legal cooperation from Israel. | C5 |

*Source: own compilation based on information published by fact-checking portal InfoVeritas from the Spanish elections in 2023*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Babczuk, A., Marczak, R. (2011). *Ustrój i gospodarka samorządu terytorialnego w Hiszpanii*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu.

Barroso, S. (2023). Los catalanes se fían más de los medios de proximidad que de los estatales. ElMon. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://elmon.cat/es/comunicacion/catalanes-medios-proximidad-estatales-encuesta-611115/

Broto Cervera, R., Pérez-Solà, C., Batlle, A. (2024). Overview of the Twitter conversation around #14F 2021 Catalonia regional Election: an analysis of echo chambers and the presence of social bots. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, *14*, article 96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-024-01251-8

Casanovas, E. (2024). Para conocer los puntos clave del Barómetro de Opinión Política (3a ola 2024) del CEO. Converses a Catalunya. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://conversesacatalunya.cat/es/barometre-dopinio-politica-3a-onada-2024/

Cetina-Presuel, R., Gaete-Salgado, C. (2025). Análisis FIMI de la desinformación en las elecciones españolas de 2023: objetivos, canales y narrativas para dañar la confianza en el sistema electoral. *Derecom. Revista Internacional de Derecho de la Comunicación y de las Nuevas Tecnologías*, *38*(1), 29–44. https://doi.org/10.5209/dere.99490

Democracy Reporting International (2023). From Hashtags to Votes: Social Media Patterns in Spain's 2023 Parliamentary Elections. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://wordpress.democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/From-Hashtags-to-Votes-Social-Media-Patterns-in-Spain.pdf

El País (2021). Elecciones Catalanas 2021. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2021/autonomicas/09/index.html

El País (2023). Elecciones Generales 2023. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://elpais.com/espana/elecciones/generales/

El País (2024). Elecciones Catalanas 2024. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://elpais.com/espana/elecciones/autonomicas/09/

Eurobarómetro Standard 94, Invierno 2020–2021, Opinión Pública en la Unión Europea – Informe Nacional: España. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://spain.representation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-06/eb94_clean_finalfinal.pdf

Eurobarómetro Standard 96, Invierno 2021–2022, Opinión Pública en la Unión Europea – Informe Nacional: España. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://spain.representation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-04/EB%2096%20National%20Report%20-%20ES_0.pdf

Eurobarómetro Standard 98, Invierno 2022–2023, Opinión Pública en la Unión Europea – Informe Nacional: España. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://spain.representation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/Standard%20Eurobarometer%2098%20–%20Winter%202022-2023%20–%20Public%20Opinion%20in%20the%20European%20Union%20–%20Spain.pdf

Głuszek-Szafraniec, D. (2018). Regiony autonomiczne Hiszpanii wobec nowych mediów. Przypadek Katalonii i Kraju Basków. In S. Michalczyk, K. Brzoza (Ed.), *Komunikowanie lokalno-regionalne w dobie społeczeństwa medialnego. Tom 1. Problemy teoretyczno-praktyczne* (pp. 259–268). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.

Hallin, D. C., Mancini, P. (2007). Systemy medialne: Trzy modele mediów i polityki w ujęciu porównawczym, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Howard, P., Lin, F., Tuzov, V. (2023). Computational propaganda: Concepts, methods, and challenges. *Communication and the Public*, *8*(2), 47–53.

InfoVeritas, Especial Elecciones: los bulos más virales del 23J. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://info-veritas.com/especial-elecciones-los-bulos-mas-virales-del-23j/

Maldita.es, 14 bulos y desinformaciones sobre las elecciones autonómicas en Cataluña del 12 de mayo de 2024. Accessed October 14, 2026. https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240426/bulos-desinformaciones-elecciones-cataluna-12-mayo/

Maldita.es, 15 bulos sobre un pucherazo o fraude electoral en las Elecciones del 28A que te están intentando colar. Accessed October 14, 2026. https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20190518/11-bulos-sobre-un-pucherazo-o-fraude-electoral-en-las-elecciones-del-28a-que-te-estan-intentando-colar/

Maldita.es, Las Elecciones Catalanas en cinco claves. Accessed October 14, 2026. https://maldita.es/malditodato/20210215/elecciones-catalanas-claves/

Maldita.es, Metodologia de Maldito Bulo vigente entre diciembre de 2020 y junio de 2025. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://maldita.es/metodologia-de-maldito-bulo-entre-diciembre-2020-junio-2025/

Maldita.es, Metodologia de Maldito Bulo vigente entre noviembre de 2016 y mayo de 2020. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://maldita.es/metodologia-de-maldito-bulo-vigente-entre-noviembre-de-2016-y-mayo-de-2020/

Nielsen, R. K., Fletcher, R. (2020). Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing Media Landscape on Democracy. In N. Persily, J. A. Tucker, *Social Media and Democracy. The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform* (pp. 139–162). Cambridge University Press.

Woolley, S. C. (2020). Bots and Computational Propaganda: Automation for Communication and Control. In N. Persily, J. A. Tucker, Social Media and Democracy. The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform (pp. 89–110). Cambridge University Press.

Ziółkowski, J. (2012). Opinia publiczna jako obiekt zainteresowania propagandy politycznej. *Studia Politologiczne*, *25*, 125–140.