

Spreading False Content in Political Campaigns: Disinformation in the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Andreu Casero-Ripollés , Laura Alonso-Muñoz , and Diana Moret-Soler 

Department of Communication Sciences, Universitat Jaume I, Spain

Correspondence: Andreu Casero-Ripollés (casero@uji.es)

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Abstract

Electoral campaigns are one of the key moments of democracy. In recent times, the circulation of disinformation has increased during these periods. This phenomenon has serious consequences for democratic health since it can alter the behaviour and decisions of voters. This research aims to analyse the features of this phenomenon during the 2024 European Parliament elections in a comparative way. The applied methodology is based on quantitative content analysis. The sample ($N = 278$) comprises false information verified by 52 European fact-checking agencies about the campaign for the European elections in 20 EU countries. The analysis model includes variables such as time-period, country, propagator platform, topic, and the type of disinformation. The results show that the life cycle of electoral disinformation goes beyond the closing of the polls assuming a permanent nature. In addition, national environments condition the profiles of this question, which is more intense in Southern and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, although multiple channels are involved, digital platforms with weak ties are predominant in disseminating hoaxes. Finally, migration and electoral integrity are the predominant topics. This favours the circulation of an issue central to the far-right agenda and aims to discredit elections and their mechanisms to undermine democracy. These findings establish the profiles of this problem and generate knowledge to design public policies that combat electoral false content more effectively.

Keywords

disinformation; elections; electoral integrity; European Union; fact-checking; political campaign; social media

1. Introduction

Disinformation has become a crucial issue for modern societies due to its potential to endanger democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In this context, institutions such as the EU have been striving for years to curb this expanding phenomenon by implementing various initiatives (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). One of their main areas of action is elections. Based on the report of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the EU, in particular disinformation, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in June 2023 for the creation of a coordinated strategy to increase the EU's resilience to foreign interference and information manipulation to protect European elections. In addition, at the start of the European Parliament election campaign in 2024, EU authorities investigated Meta, owner of Instagram and Facebook, due to concerns that it was not doing enough to control the circulation of false content ("La UE contra," 2024). These actions prove the importance given to the fight against disinformation, which EU institutions consider a threat to democracy that needs to be solved.

Electoral campaigns are fundamental to a healthy democracy as they provide citizens with the necessary information to make voting decisions. However, in recent years, the spread of disinformation has intensified during these periods, posing a serious threat (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The increasing presence of false information can influence public opinion, alter voter behaviour, and ultimately undermine the legitimacy of electoral results. This phenomenon is particularly concerning in the context of the EU, where the diversity among countries allows narratives to be adapted to exploit local tensions and social divisions (Mudde, 2024). Its implications threaten the cohesion and stability of the EU by eroding public trust in its institutions and the democratic process itself (Cinelli et al., 2020).

The main objective of this research is to characterize the content of electoral disinformation circulated during the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections, aiming to identify when the peak of false content occurred, its origin, types, main topics, and the platforms from which these hoaxes were disseminated.

2. Literature Review: Characteristics of Electoral Disinformation Content

The use of disinformation in the context of electoral campaigns has been spreading in recent years across various parts of the world (Keller et al., 2020; López et al., 2023). Numerous countries have witnessed an increase in the circulation of this type of content in recent times. Although quantitatively fewer, false information disseminated during electoral periods tends to be more widely shared and, therefore, has a greater impact on the public (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Canavilhas et al., 2019).

The consequences of electoral disinformation are diverse, although most are associated with negative effects on democracy. For instance, in previous campaigns, such as the 2019 European Parliament elections, disinformation was used to destabilize the EU (Bendiek & Schulze, 2019). During the 2017 Kenyan elections (Mutahi & Kimari, 2020), it was used to undermine public credibility in the political and electoral system, as well as to increase polarization. In this context, disinformation aims to delegitimize and reduce trust in democratic institutions and processes (Bennett et al., 2010). Furthermore, it can also artificially and deliberately alter public perceptions, thereby influencing voting decisions (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2020). As a result, the EU has made combating this problem a priority, particularly to ensure the proper conduct of elections, preventing external interference and hybrid threats that could jeopardize them (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023).

Although electoral campaigns do not occupy a central place in disinformation research (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023), some previous studies have identified certain characteristics of this type of content. Initial evidence exists regarding the temporal distribution, geographic reach, typology, dissemination platforms, and topics of disinformation in recent electoral processes, among other factors.

Regarding temporal distribution, recent electoral campaigns have recorded an increase in the circulation of hoaxes (Baptista & Gradim, 2022). Additionally, political disinformation has one of the highest virality rates (Aral, 2021). It should be noted that false content travels up to 70% faster than true information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Previous research has identified two key moments for the spread of falsehoods during campaigns. The first is electoral debates, where a high volume of false content is concentrated (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Domalewska, 2021; Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021). Another critical point of increased dissemination of these deceptive messages is the polling day (Rosa, 2019). Some studies have shown that the circulation of hoaxes increases as the campaign progresses and approaches election day (Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021; Rosa, 2019). However, this effect was not observed in the 2020 US elections. In that campaign, disinformation volume did not substantially increase as polling day approached or during candidate debates, but rather when Donald Trump made a substantial change in his strategy of using false information (Pedriza, 2021).

On the other hand, some studies have shown that geographic context is a determining factor in electoral disinformation. National information environments shape this phenomenon, as each country's political and communicative context affects how false content spreads during elections (Humprecht, 2019). For instance, significant differences have been identified in the use of hoaxes during campaigns in Spain and Ecuador (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2021).

Previous studies have demonstrated that disinformation is a complex phenomenon that can take various forms. Such content can be false or partly false, and it can also rely on satire, loss of context, or even be generated by AI (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). There is little evidence regarding the presence of these modalities in campaigns. A recent study on the 2022 Colombian elections detected a significant presence of decontextualized information, where a truthful fact is taken out of context and distorted by mixing truth and falsehood (Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023).

Another aspect characterizing electoral disinformation relates to the platforms through which false content is spread. According to several studies, social media serve as one of the primary channels for disseminating hoaxes. In the 2019 elections in Uruguay, Facebook was the main distribution channel for this type of content (Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021). Similarly, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp were key platforms for spreading false information during the 2019 elections in Spain, with pseudo-media and party websites making a minimal contribution to this campaign (Rojano et al., 2020). Mobile instant messaging services, such as WhatsApp, have also played a significant role in spreading hoaxes in both Brazil (Canavilhas et al., 2019) and Spain (Escayola, 2022; Garrido et al., 2021).

Legacy media are also used for disinformation in an electoral context. Political candidates utilized these media types to disseminate false information during the 2020 US election campaign (Pedriza, 2021). Recent studies

indicate that trust in mainstream media reduces public misconceptions, while trust in social media information increases them (Vliegthart et al., 2024).

As for the topics of electoral disinformation, several previous studies indicate that immigration was a major theme. This issue was highly prominent in the 2019 elections in Spain and Ecuador on X (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2021) and in the same year's European elections in Italy (Pierri et al., 2020). However, immigration did not prominently feature among misleading content in the 2019 elections in Portugal (Baptista & Gradim, 2020).

Campaign events, especially electoral debates, are also a notable topic within electoral hoaxes. In the 2019 elections in India (Akbar et al., 2022) and Spain (Rojano et al., 2020), respectively, this issue took a prominent position. Similarly, electoral debates became one of the topics most linked to false information in the 2022 elections in Portugal (Baptista & Gradim, 2022).

Other studies have identified additional topics in electoral disinformation. In the 2019 elections in India, for instance, issues such as corruption, religion, nationalism, gender, and development also stood out (Akbar et al., 2022). In the 2019 European Parliament elections in Italy, key topics were national safety and nationalism, while issues related to Europe's global management had an insignificant presence in that campaign (Pierri et al., 2020). Satire emerged as a significant theme related to electoral falsehoods in the 2019 Bogotá (Colombia) mayoral campaign (Melo et al., 2023).

In their analysis of the electoral cycle from 2019 to 2022 in Spain, Lava-Santos et al. (2023) found that public and sectoral policy issues, with more than half of the total, and ideological-political issues were the most prominent among false content in campaigns. In contrast, campaign-related issues and politicians' private life issues played a secondary role.

Finally, another important topic related to campaign disinformation is electoral integrity. This concept refers to international standards and global norms governing the proper conduct of elections (Norris et al., 2014, p. 788). It includes electoral malpractices, which are first- and second-order violations of these global norms, exemplified by inaccurate voter registers, partisan gerrymandering, polling maladministration, vote-buying, clientelism, pro-government media, erroneous counts, cash-saturated campaigns, electoral fraud, and excessively high legal barriers to office (Norris, 2013).

Accusations of the violation of fair electoral procedures, particularly electoral fraud, are among the most significant topics in recent campaigns, especially following accusations by Donald Trump in the 2020 US election (Domínguez-García et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2021; Lewandowsky et al., 2023). In Nigeria, Kerry (2021) demonstrated the prevalence of this issue in electoral disinformation since the late 1990s. In the 2023 Spanish elections, false information questioning electoral integrity was one of the main topics (Casero-Ripollés & Alonso-Muñoz, 2024). Specifically, in this case, such content focused on the postal voting procedure. Since the elections took place near summer vacation dates, this issue became central to public debate, making it one of the main aspects of disinformation. Three hoaxes were spread on this topic: the feasibility of exercising this right, the security of the process, and the possibility of fraud through this system (Casero-Ripollés & Alonso-Muñoz, 2024). Finally, some research suggests that pseudo-media are one of the primary channels contributing to spreading content that questions the integrity of the electoral process (Fernández, 2020).

Despite this body of knowledge contributed by previous research, we still know relatively little about the characteristics of electoral disinformation content. Moreover, most literature on this issue focuses on single-case studies that examine a single country or electoral campaign. Therefore, new approaches to this subject are needed to better understand its distinctive features from a comparative perspective. This research aims to fill this gap in the existing literature.

3. Data and Method

The objectives of this research are:

O1: To determine the temporal distribution and peaks of activity in the spread of disinformation during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

O2: To identify the countries and European regions most affected by the circulation of false content during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

O3: To recognize the types of publications and disinformation most used during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

O4: To identify the topics of disinformation most prevalent during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

O5: To discover the platforms where false information appears and is disseminated during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The methodology is based on applying the quantitative content analysis technique. In this way, the content attributes of false information circulated during the 2024 European Parliament elections have been coded. Our study is descriptive, as it aims to obtain evidence to explore the phenomenon of electoral disinformation and its main characteristics, allowing us to understand accurately and systematically how it works. This approach is advisable for relatively new or understudied subjects like this one.

The 2024 European Parliament elections were held between June 6 and 9, 2024. To cover a sufficiently broad period, our analysis spans two full months, from May 1 to June 30, 2024. This allows us to study disinformation spread before the elections and the subsequent period following the vote.

This research adopts as a methodological strategy the use of content generated by fact-checkers as a reliable proxy for access to false information. The lack of veracity of these contents has been demonstrated as a result of a standardised journalistic verification process. Therefore, they can be considered as hoaxes and thus be assimilated to disinformation. Furthermore, previous research on political disinformation (Dourado & Salgado, 2021; Pedriza, 2021; Rosińska, 2021) has used the same strategy to construct the sample, a circumstance that lends validity and credibility to our methodological approach.

The units of analysis that make up our sample were obtained using verified false information from fact-checking agencies across different EU countries. For this purpose, we used the Elections24Check

database (<https://elections24.efcsn.com>), a joint project of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and its participating member organizations, supported by the Google News Initiative, which compiles and classifies electoral disinformation. Each fact-checker is part of the EFCSN and shares their election fact-checks from their own websites with the central Elections24Check database. EFCSN members apply the guidelines of the European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organizations (<https://efcsn.com/code-of-standards>), created in 2022, to ensure standards of independence, transparency, and journalistic quality. This homogenizes the fact-checking methods and avoids biases between partners from different countries.

The sample was accessed via the website <https://backoffice.elections24.efcsn.com>. The first step was to select the period to be analyzed. The results were then filtered by direct reference to the EU. In this way, false content directly related to the EU was selected, discarding those related to national or regional issues in a given country. Thus, we obtained a final sample of 278 hoaxes directly related to the 2024 European Parliament elections, covering 20 EU countries, which enables us to conduct cross-national comparisons.

The coding process combined a manual process for some variables with the use of pre-coded data from the Elections24Check platform. Two coders participated in the analysis. The intercoder reliability test showed a common understanding of the categories (Holsti's $CR \geq 0.8$).

Our analysis model is based on six variables to measure the different characteristics of disinformation related to the 2024 European Parliament elections. First, the publication date indicates the day the false information was published by a fact-checker. The country specifies the geographic location related to the fraudulent content published. Regarding the type of publication, we distinguish between: (a) debunking articles, referring to the process of fact-checking the accuracy of what a politician or an EU official claims as true; and (b) political fact-checks, referring to the process of fact-checking the accuracy of content that circulates on the internet and is replicated by people on one or more social platforms, media, and others.

Regarding the type of disinformation, six categories were established: (a) AI-generated, referring to content created using an AI tool or technique; (b) false, content that has no basis in fact; (c) partly false, content that has some factual inaccuracies; (d) missing context, content that implies a false claim without directly stating it; (e) satire, content that uses irony, exaggeration, or absurdity; and (f) true, content that contains no inaccurate or misleading information.

The topic variable was measured by distinguishing between the following categories: (a) politics related to the EU, (b) national or regional context issues, (c) legislation, (d) migration, (e) gender, (f) religion, (g) climate, (h) terrorism, (i) Ukraine war, (j) Israel–Gaza war, (k) EU funds, (l) election integrity, (m) EU institutions, (n) 2030 Agenda, (o) security and defence, (p) economy, (q) energy, (r) Covid-19, (s) politicians' private life issues, (t) health, and (u) others.

Finally, for the platform, we coded where the false content appears by distinguishing between: (a) Facebook; (b) Instagram; (c) X; (d) TikTok; (e) YouTube; (f) WhatsApp; (g) Telegram; (h) media, for well-known legacy and digital media; (i) pseudo-media, for platforms that disguise as media to spread false information, violate journalistic conventions, and serve radical political ideologies (Palau-Sampio, 2023), (j) website, understood as a general web page and related content identified by a common domain name; (k) party website, a webpage connected to a political party; and (l) other.

4. Results

4.1. Temporal and Geographic Distribution of Electoral Disinformation

During the analyzed period (from May 1 to June 30, 2024), a total of 278 pieces of false information related to the 2024 European Parliament elections were detected. This amounts to an average of 5.25 hoaxes per day across the 20 EU countries.

According to the frequency of publication, we observed that the daily average was exceeded on 19 occasions. However, six days stand out above the rest (Figure 1). May 29 saw the highest activity level, with 18 hoaxes, followed by May 28 (12 hoaxes), and June 4–7 (10, 14, 15, and 16, respectively). In this latter case, given that the elections were held between June 6 and 9, depending on the country, we detected an increase in disinformation activity on the days closest to polling day. However, after analyzing the headlines of major international media outlets, we could not identify any significant event that would explain the increase in activity on May 29.

Although the volume of content decreased after election day, the dissemination of false information continued. This indicates that electoral disinformation continues to operate and circulate beyond the closing of the polls, extending its influence into the aftermath (Figure 1).

It is noteworthy that none of the peaks in activity coincided with the debate among the frontrunners of the main party groups in the European Parliament, held during the Eurovision broadcast on May 23.

Considering the geographic distribution of false content (Table 1), half of the electoral disinformation originated in Spain (27.7%) and Poland (21.2%). These are two regions with a significant presence of the far

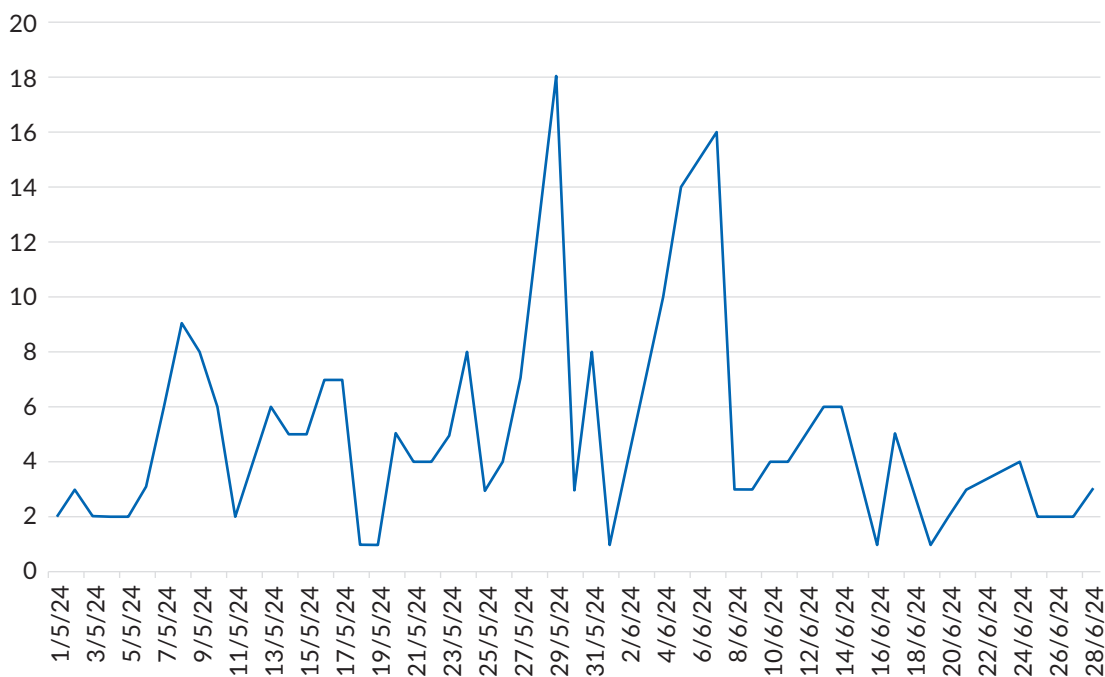


Figure 1. Daily distribution of false information related to the 2024 European Parliament elections.

right, particularly in Poland, where the Law and Justice Party (PiS, in its Polish acronym) held power until the 2023 parliamentary elections.

At a second level, with percentages between 5% and 10%, false information originating from Germany (9.7%), Belgium (7.6%), Portugal (7.2%), and France (6.1%) also stands out (Table 1). As in the previous case, these four countries have a significant presence of far-right parties, such as Alternative for Germany in Germany, Chega in Portugal, and the National Rally in France. During the 2024 European Parliament election campaign, these political formations were highly critical of the EU and the handling of issues like immigration and the economy (Mudde, 2024).

By region, Southern Europe accumulated the highest percentage of electoral disinformation, with 41.7%, followed by Eastern Europe with 31.4%. Finally, Western Europe accounted for 25.6%, and Northern Europe for only 1.4% (limited to cases in Denmark), ranking last.

Table 1. Distribution of false content by country of origin.

Country	N	%
Austria	4	1.4
Belgium	21	7.6
Bulgaria	6	2.2
Croatia	5	1.8
Czech Republic	5	1.8
Denmark	4	1.4
France	17	6.1
Germany	27	9.7
Greece	10	3.6
Hungary	1	0.4
Italy	9	3.2
Latvia	7	2.5
Lithuania	1	0.4
Luxemburg	1	0.4
Netherlands	1	0.4
Poland	59	21.2
Portugal	20	7.2
Romania	1	0.4
Slovenia	2	0.7
Spain	77	27.7
Total	278	100

4.2. Type of Publication and Typology of Disinformation

The analysis reveals that most publications were debunking articles during the 2024 European Parliament elections (68.3%). These publications verify the accuracy of content circulating on the internet and replicated on one or more social media platforms or through legacy media. Such false content can alter the quality of

the democratic process and jeopardize the functioning of the elections. Conversely, the remaining 31.7% pertains to political fact-checking, which involves verifying the accuracy of statements made by an EU official or political actor to assess whether their claims are true.

Regarding the type of disinformation, 59.4% refer to completely false content (Table 2), where pieces of information are designed and disseminated with the deliberate intention of deceiving the recipient. Secondly, 23.4% of the total is related to the lack of context (Table 2), in which the content is true but presented in a different context from where it originally occurred.

At this point, it is worth noting that content generated with AI, despite its rise, had almost no presence in the 2024 European Parliament elections, accounting for only 1.1% (Table 2).

Table 2. Typology of disinformation in the European Parliament elections.

Type of disinformation	%
AI-generated	1.1
False	59.4
Missing context	23.4
Partly false	5.4
Satire	0.4
True	10.4
Total	100

4.3. Topics of Electoral Disinformation

The topics of electoral disinformation in the 2024 European Parliament elections are characterized, first, by their diversity, as no single topic dominates (Table 3). Secondly, the two most recurrent topics were electoral integrity (20.5%) and migration (12.9%; see Table 3). In the first case, false content was directly related to the conduct of the European elections. False information on this topic originated particularly from Spain and Germany, where accusations of electoral fraud were made, claiming, for example, that votes cast for Vox (Spain) or Alternative for Germany (Germany) were not counted. In this context, some hoaxes falsely claimed the possibility of dual voting—marking percentages for more than one party on the same ballot, which invalidated the vote.

Regarding migration, electoral disinformation focused on asylum quotas established between countries and border control. Additionally, some hoaxes linked being an immigrant to receiving subsidies, which, according to their arguments, would encourage mass migration to Europe. In this context, false information called for the re-establishment of national borders and the restriction of free movement of people. Spain, Poland, and France were the countries where this topic was most frequently repeated. These are three countries where anti-immigration discourse has intensified over the last decade (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

Thirdly, issues related to climate change (7.9%) and legislation (7.6%) stand out (Table 3). In both cases, Poland was the country most affected by false information on these issues. Regarding climate change, most hoaxes referenced the use of new technologies to modify it and the adverse effects that 5G technology

Table 3. Topics of false information debunked during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Topic of disinformation	%
Politics related to the EU	3.6
National/regional context issues	3.2
Legislation	7.6
Migration	12.9
Gender	1.8
Religion	1.1
Climate	7.9
Terrorism	0.4
Ukraine war	5.8
Israel-Gaza war	3.6
EU funds	2.9
Electoral integrity	20.5
EU institutions	4.3
2030 Agenda	0.4
Security and defence	1.8
Economy	6.1
Energy	3.2
Covid-19	5.0
Politicians' private life issues	5.4
Health	1.8
Others	0.7
Total	100

could generate. It is surprising that, while climate has significant weight in electoral disinformation, the 2030 Agenda has an almost negligible presence (0.4%).

On the other hand, issues related to legislation referenced potential regulatory changes stemming from new directives approved by the European Parliament. Here, two strategies can be observed. The first refers to the perceived inability to legislate on key matters such as immigration. The second is related to the loss of sovereignty by member states, given that national legislation cannot contravene regulations approved by the European Parliament. In this regard, some hoaxes were related to the approval of a European directive to decriminalize child pornography, an increase in bureaucracy for exporting products, or a ban on animal farming.

A fourth group of topics includes false content accounting for 5% to 6% of the total. These hoaxes are related to the economy (6.1%), the Ukraine war (5.8%), politicians' private lives (5.4%), and Covid-19 (5%; see Table 3). Notably, despite the World Health Organization declaring an end to the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2023, this issue continued to appear in disinformation related to the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Finally, false content related to topics on EU policies, institutions, and funds reached low levels, ranging between 4.3% and 2.9% (Table 3). This reveals that, despite the rise in Eurosceptic discourse driven by

populism in recent years (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020), the EU and its institutions were not the central focus of disinformation during this electoral campaign.

Considering the topics of false content by origin, we also observe some relevant patterns. First, false content originating from Germany was concentrated in only five topics, while content from other countries showed a high thematic dispersion, especially in the case of Spain (Table 4).

Secondly, each country had a predominant topic. For example, in Belgium and France, false content related to migration was dominant (23.8% and 35.3%, respectively), while in Spain and Germany, hoaxes about electoral integrity stood out (81.5% and 29.9%, respectively), and in Poland, climate change was prominent (16.9%). The importance of these issues within each country's society explains the prevalence of these topics in the false content that went viral during the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Thirdly, it is noteworthy that false information about the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel–Gaza was present only in Spain and Germany (Table 4), but not in other EU countries. Despite the significance of both conflicts for the EU, they played a minor role in the electoral disinformation during the European Parliament campaign.

Table 4. Campaign's main topics of false information by country of origin (%).

Topic of disinformation	Belgium	Germany	Spain	France	Poland	Portugal
Politics related to the EU	–	3.7	1.3	–	6.8	5
National/regional context issues	–	–	9.1	5.9	–	5
Legislation	–	3.7	1.3	29.4	13.6	15
Migration	23.8	–	13	35.3	15.3	–
Gender	–	–	1.3	–	1.7	5
Religion	4.8	–	1.3	–	1.7	–
Climate	9.5	–	5.2	5.9	16.9	10
Terrorism	–	–	1.3	–	–	–
Ukraine war	–	7.4	5.2	5.9	–	5
Israel-Gaza war	–	–	7.8	5.9	–	–
EU funds	9.5	–	1.3	–	3.4	10
Electoral integrity	4.8	81.5	29.9	–	–	15
EU institutions	9.5	–	2.6	5.9	10.2	–
2030 Agenda	4.8	–	–	–	–	–
Security and defence	4.8	3.7	–	–	–	10
Economy	19.0	–	3.9	5.9	10.2	5
Energy	–	–	1.3	–	6.8	10
Covid-19	–	–	5.2	–	3.4	–
Politicians' private life issues	4.8	–	7.8	–	1.7	–
Health	–	–	1.3	–	6.8	–
Others	4.8	–	–	–	1.7	–
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Therefore, our results reveal that the national context determines the primary topic of false information. Thus, the relevance of electoral disinformation is determined by the importance of specific topics in the public debate and the political culture of each country.

4.4. Platforms for Electoral Disinformation

Regarding the platforms of origin of false content during the 2024 European Parliament elections, X (32.4%) and Facebook (21.9%) were the two main channels through which hoaxes were disseminated (Table 5). TikTok (9.7%) also stands out, a platform that has been recognized in the literature for its ability to viralise false content (Hidalgo-Cobo et al., 2025).

A notable percentage of false information was also spread through legacy media (13.3%; see Table 5). This type of content refers to statements by politicians in these media that are completely or partially false. In such cases, the spread of hoaxes falls on the political actors themselves, not journalists, who have no opportunity to verify information in real-time. In this context, political actors use legacy media strategically, turning them into unintentional amplifiers of electoral disinformation.

Table 5. Platforms of origin of false information.

Platform	%
Facebook	21.9
Instagram	3.6
Legacy media	13.3
Party website	2.5
Pseudo-media	2.9
Telegram	1.1
TikTok	9.7
Website	1.1
WhatsApp	0.4
X	32.4
YouTube	7.9
Other	3.2
Total	100

Although the literature suggests that, in contexts like Brazil (Canavilhas et al., 2019) or Spain (Garrido et al., 2021), mobile instant messaging services experience high circulation of false content during electoral periods, our findings show that both WhatsApp (0.4%) and Telegram (1.1%) played a minor role in spreading false content during the 2024 European Parliament elections (Table 5). Pseudo-media also had a minor presence in the dissemination of hoaxes (2.9%; see Table 5).

When analysing the most prevalent topics on each platform, several interesting findings emerge. First, platforms with a smaller role in distributing false content, such as pseudo-media, Telegram, or WhatsApp, showed greater thematic concentration (between three and six topics per platform). Conversely, platforms with a more significant role in circulating false information, such as X, Facebook, or TikTok, displayed high thematic fragmentation, with between 10 and 18 topics per platform (Table 6).

Table 6. Disinformation Topics by Platform.

	Facebook	Instagram	Legacy media	Other	Party Website	Pseudo-Media	Telegram	TikTok	Website	WhatsApp	X	YouTube	Total
Politics related to the EU	4.9	–	5.4	–	–	–	–	7.4	–	–	2.2	4.5	30.6
National/regional context issues	–	–	8.1	11.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	5.6	–	32
Legislation	3.3	40	–	–	57.1	12.5	–	11.1	33.3	–	4.4	9.1	76
Migration	4.9	–	24.3	33.3	–	–	–	7.4	–	–	13.3	31.8	129
Gender	1.6	–	5.4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	9.1	18
Religion	1.6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2.2	–	1.1
Climate	13.1	10	5.4	11.1	14.3	12.5	–	11.1	33.3	–	4.4	–	79
Terrorism	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.1	–	0.4
Ukraine war	11.5	–	2.7	–	–	50	33.3	3.7	–	–	2.2	–	58
Israel-Gaza war	4.9	20	2.7	–	14.3	–	–	–	–	–	3.3	–	36
EU funds	1.6	–	10.8	–	14.3	–	–	3.7	–	–	–	4.5	29
Election integrity	16.4	–	5.4	11.1	–	–	33.3	40.7	–	–	34.4	4.5	205
EU institutions	1.6	–	8.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	100	3.3	18.2	43
2030 Agenda	–	–	2.7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.4
Security and defence	–	–	5.4	–	–	12.5	33.3	–	–	–	1.1	–	18
Economy	8.2	–	5.4	22.2	–	12.5	–	–	33.3	–	3.3	13.6	61
Energy	3.3	–	8.1	–	–	–	–	7.4	–	–	1.1	4.5	32
Covid-19	9.8	10	–	–	–	–	–	3.7	–	–	6.7	–	5
Politicians' private issues	8.2	10	–	–	–	–	–	3.7	–	–	8.9	–	54
Health	3.3	10	–	11.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.1	–	18
Other	1.6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.1	–	0.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The second finding is that six topics were disseminated across six or more platforms: legislation, migration, climate, Ukraine war, electoral integrity, and economy (Table 6). The fact that these topics spread across such a variety of platforms increases their chances of going viral, thereby reaching a larger audience.

Thirdly, regarding the platforms that serve as the main origin for a larger number of false contents, on Facebook, disinformation about electoral integrity (16.4%), climate (13.1%), and the Ukraine war (11.5%) stood out. Additionally, it is noteworthy that 9.8% of the content spread on this platform, owned by Meta, was related to Covid-19 (Table 6). On X, 34.4% of the falsehoods were about issues related to electoral integrity, and 13.3% to migration (Table 6). On TikTok, alongside hoaxes about electoral integrity (40.7%), false content about climate (11.1%) and legislation (11.1%) was also spread.

Finally, in terms of disinformation disseminated by political actors through their appearances in legacy media, false information about immigration (24.3%) and EU funds (10.8%) were particularly notable. This latter finding reveals that political actors used disinformation strategies via legacy media to question and criticize EU institutions.

Our findings show that, depending on the topic, the platform used for spreading false content varies. Therefore, we can affirm that not all electoral disinformation circulates through the same channels.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Elections are a key period for democracy. They represent an essential moment for various political parties to deploy their communication strategies aimed at persuading citizens. Over the past decade, electoral campaigns have been characterized both by the consolidation of new digital platforms and by disinformation (Keller et al., 2020; López et al., 2023).

The findings from this research allow us to identify several relevant descriptive insights regarding the characteristics of electoral disinformation content in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

First, our findings indicate that, during this electoral campaign, an average of more than five false pieces of information were detected daily, signifying a notable presence of false content. According to previous studies (Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021; Rosa, 2019), polling day is a peak moment for the spread of hoaxes. However, in contrast to these prior findings (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Domalewska, 2021; Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021), electoral debates were not key moments for the dissemination of falsehoods in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Interestingly, we found that the spread of false content goes beyond the end of the elections. The closing of the polls does not mark the end of electoral disinformation. This highlights the ongoing nature of this phenomenon, whose life cycle extends over time.

Second, in geographical terms, Southern Europe first, and Eastern Europe second, recorded the highest number of false content pieces during the campaign, with Spain and Poland emerging as the countries most affected by this problem. This may be due to the significant presence of extreme right-wing parties that use false information and conspiracy theories in their communication strategies (Garrido et al., 2021; Rachwol, 2023). Additionally, our results indicate that a different topic gained prominence in each country, demonstrating that the national context determines the preferred topics of electoral disinformation.

Our findings demonstrate that national contexts influence the characteristics of this phenomenon (Humphrecht, 2019) and reveal significant territorial differences within the EU. Although electoral disinformation is a global problem, its geographic impact is uneven. Therefore, efforts and solutions to combat this phenomenon must combine a European perspective with approaches tailored to each national context.

A third relevant finding concerns the typology of electoral disinformation. Completely false and decontextualized content were predominant in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The notable presence of decontextualized and distorted messages aligns with findings from previous research in countries such as Colombia (Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023). Additionally, it is important to highlight that the presence of content created with AI during the campaign was minimal despite the growing

relevance of this technology nowadays. This might suggest that AI incorporation into electoral disinformation is, for now, underdeveloped and limited. Nevertheless, this could also indicate low current detection and verification capacity rather than low usage.

Fourth, regarding topics, two stand out: electoral integrity and migration. Regarding the first, false information about electoral procedures, such as dual voting and accusations of electoral fraud, were the main falsehoods. The prominence of this issue aligns with findings from previous research in countries such as the US, Spain, and Nigeria (Casero-Ripollés & Alonso-Muñoz, 2024; Domínguez-García et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2021; Kerry, 2021; Lewandowsky et al., 2023). The focus on electoral integrity reveals that one of the main objectives of disinformation was to discredit and delegitimize the elections and their mechanisms. In this regard, the dissemination of false content could be aligned with the promotion of anti-political and anti-democratic attitudes, making hoaxes about electoral integrity highly damaging and erosive to democratic health.

On the other hand, the prominence of migration in disinformation during the 2024 European Parliament elections supports the findings of previous research (Pierrri et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2021) and may reflect the communication strategy of the far-right in different European countries (Mudde, 2024). These parties have promoted an anti-immigration discourse in recent years (Magallón-Rosa, 2021; Narváez-Llinares & Pérez-Rufí, 2022). Our data reveal that this campaign could go a step further in leveraging this topic, incorporating it into electoral disinformation to place it at the centre of public debate and potentially generating political benefits for the extreme right wing.

Our findings also help to identify additional characteristics of topics associated with electoral disinformation. One is the persistence of certain issues within this phenomenon. This is the case with Covid-19, which, despite being largely behind us, still held some significance in the 2024 European Parliament elections. This reveals that the thematic agenda of electoral disinformation includes issues capable of persisting over time. Another relevant finding is that, despite the criticisms of the European project promoted in recent years (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020), neither the EU nor its institutions were at the core of disinformation during this electoral campaign. A possible explanation could be that this type of content was more focused on pushing one of the main topics of the extremist agenda (migration) and discrediting electoral processes to weaken democracy (electoral integrity) rather than disparaging the EU itself.

A fifth set of findings concerns the platforms through which false information circulated during the electoral campaign. Our results reveal that weak-tie platforms, especially X and Facebook, dominate in the spread of hoaxes. Moreover, a wider variety of topics circulate through these channels. In contrast, strong-tie platforms, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, have limited influence on the spread and concentrate on fewer issues. Although these data challenge some previous studies that have shown a high volume of falsehoods circulating through these channels during electoral processes (Canavilhas et al., 2019), it is worth noting that our results may be influenced by the greater challenges in applying fact-checking in these environments. This may be a limitation in detecting falsehoods in these media, potentially leading to underrepresentation.

Despite the prominence of social media, our findings reveal that the spread of false information in election campaigns involves a wide variety of platforms. This supports the notion that disinformation also exists within a hybrid communication environment that combines old and new media (Chadwick, 2017). In this sense, our

results show that legacy media also contribute significantly to the spread of falsehoods. These cases involve misleading soundbites and statements from political actors who use these media strategically to misinform. Thus, legacy media become unintentional amplifiers of false content. Finally, we found that the distribution platforms of electoral hoaxes vary by topic. In other words, not all falsehoods circulate through the same channels, demonstrating the complexity of this phenomenon. The fact that major digital platforms are affected by disinformation suggests that the mechanisms implemented by major tech companies to curb this problem still have room for improvement.

This research has some limitations. First, our approach is descriptive, as it aims to provide an initial systematic and accurate analysis of electoral disinformation content, a topic that has been under-researched from a comparative perspective. Despite this limitation, this study provides a solid foundation for future research that delves deeper into this phenomenon. A second limitation relates to using information verified by independent fact-checkers as a proxy for determining which content constitutes electoral disinformation. We acknowledge that this may introduce biases in the sample based on the methods, resources, and working dynamics employed by fact-checking agencies. However, numerous previous studies have used this approach (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023; Lava-Santos et al., 2023; Molina-Cañabate & Magallón-Rosa, 2021; Pedriza, 2021; Rojano et al., 2020; Rosa, 2019), demonstrating its relevance for scholars analyzing this topic.

Despite being a descriptive study, this research provides some relevant trends that help us understand the profiles of the disinformation phenomenon during a highly significant political event, such as the 2024 European Parliament elections. These results may be a hypothesis-generating way to foster new research on electoral disinformation. Moreover, they may have practical applications in designing public policies and actions aimed at more effectively combating this problem, which is highly detrimental to the health and future of democracy both in Europe and globally.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset is stored in: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14889259>

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About the Authors



Andreu Casero-Ripollés is full professor of journalism at the Universitat Jaume I de Castelló (Spain). He has been dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and is president of the Spanish Society of Journalism (SEP). His research focuses on digital political communication and disinformation in Europe.



Laura Alonso-Muñoz is associate professor of journalism at the Universitat Jaume I of Castelló (Spain). Her studies have focused on the analysis of disinformation, the use of social media by political actors, citizens, and the media, and the study of the populist phenomenon in the digital environment.



Diana Moret-Soler is a predoctoral researcher at Universitat Jaume I of Castelló (Spain). Her research focuses on the intersection of politics, digital platforms, and society within the context of the climate movement.