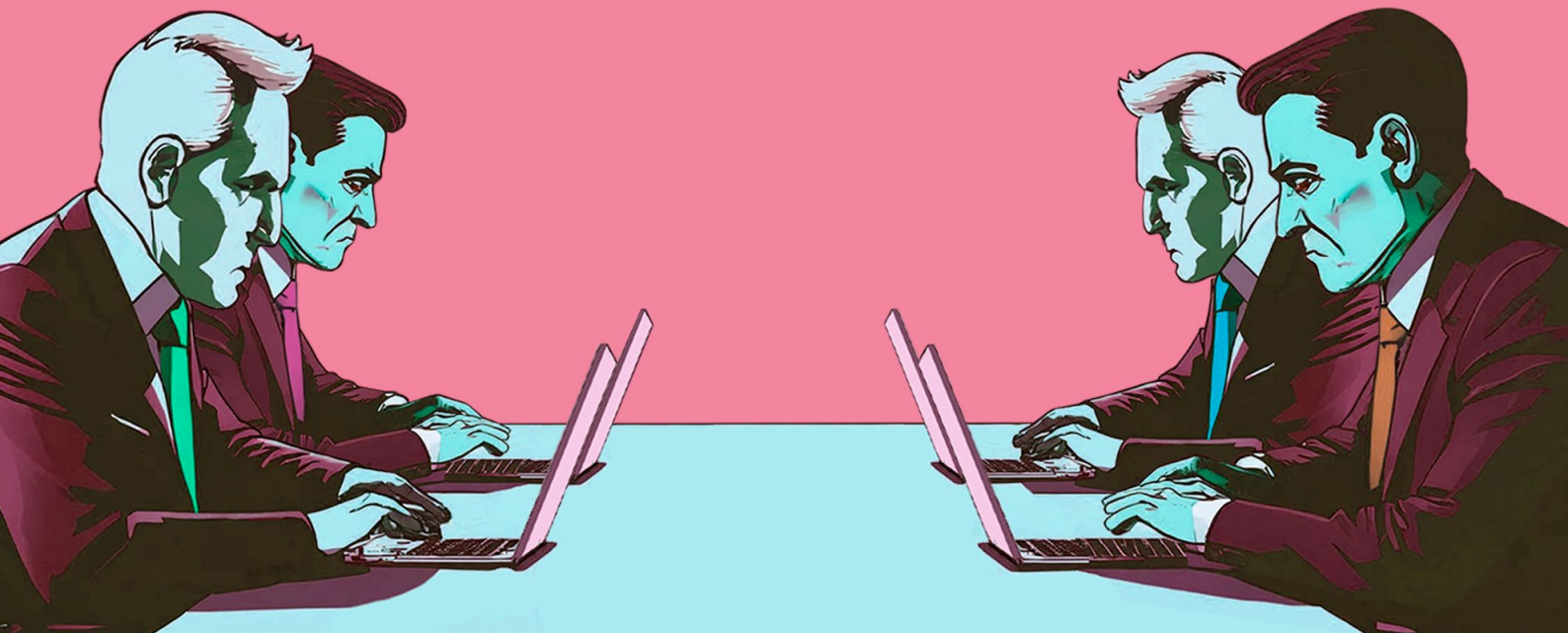


Elections Monitoring 2024: SPAIN

Electoral Integrity and Political Microtargeting in the European Parliament Elections: An Evidence-Based Analysis

November 2024



About the project

This research paper by *Xnet* was prepared as a contribution to the project ‘Electoral Integrity and Political Microtargeting: An Evidence-Based Analysis in Six EU Member States’, coordinated by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties).

The research project monitored online political advertising in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections in six EU countries: Bulgaria (BHC), France (VoxPublic), Germany (Reset Tech), Hungary (HCLU), Poland (PAF) and Spain (Xnet), supported by Who Targets Me (WTM) as technical partner. The project relied primarily on data collected during the European Parliamentary elections campaign from political advertisements promoted on Facebook by political entities. Researchers scrutinised whether political actors follow national campaigning rules and European data protection rules by examining data voluntarily donated by citizens through a privacy-friendly desktop browser extension.

The project was co-funded by Civitates and the Open Society Foundations.

Any views and opinions expressed by the author of this research paper are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views and opinions of Liberties or the co-funders.



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Executive Summary

- Ownership of major media outlets in Spain is largely concentrated in the hands of a few financial entities, which compromises media coverage. Some of these entities own media outlets that appeal to disparate political groups, producing content for both left- and right-leaning viewers.
- By law, the allocation of media time for political parties should be proportional to the results obtained from the previous election, but this guideline is often disregarded.
- In the 2024 European Parliament elections, the two largest national parties, the PSOE and PP, gained seats compared to previous elections. Meanwhile, far-right and far-left parties both lost seats.
- This investigation found:

The Who Targets Me extension was downloaded by 89 users, comprising mostly men.

Advertising data gathered using the Who Targets Me extension was stratified into two groups beyond political parties; left-wing influencers and right-wing influencers. Xnet monitored 2,873 political ads from the period of 16 May 2024 until 9 June 2024.

Campaigns spend a total of €778,127 on ads during the chosen period. The highest spending political party was PSOE,

while the highest spending political group overall was left-wing influencers, who funded ads separate from any official political party.

There is a high probability that ideological targeting was used by political groups who bought online political ads.

I. Political and electoral landscape in Spain

The Duverger Law, which posits that a country's electoral system influences its party system, is manifested in Spain in a nuanced way. Although Spain's proportional system should theoretically favour a multiparty landscape, in practice, it presents certain 'traps' that lead to an imperfect bipartisanship. Traditionally, this system has been dominated by two main parties on the left-right axis: the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) on the left and the People's Party (PP) on the right, each supported by what could be called 'crutch parties': two smaller parties that can tilt the balance in government formation processes. Additionally, the situation is complicated by the country's second political axis, which contrasts centralist nationalism with peripheral nationalism. This axis has led to distinct party subsystems in various regions, such as Catalonia and the Basque Country, and significant parties in other regions.

Media landscape in Spain

The existence of diverse and pluralistic media coverage does not necessarily mean Spain's media landscape is balanced. It is quite common for a single media conglomerate to have both a left-wing and a right-wing TV channel to cover all audiences, creating both a left-wing or a right-wing bubble and then tailoring the news and advertisements to their political view. The outlook is even more grave given that, following the financial crisis, the ownership of media outlets is concentrated in the hands of a few large financial entities - mainly the banks, corporations or high-wealth individuals to which the outlets owed money. As a result, their independence is compromised in some areas, such as their financial management:

- Group Prisa - El País is partly owned by Banco Santander and HSBC
- Group Vocento - Abc is partly owned by Banco Santander and BBVA
- Group Unidad Editorial - ElMundo is partly owned by Intesa Sanpaolo
- Group La Razón - Atresmedia is partly owned by Banco Sabadell
- Group Godó - La Vanguardia is partly owned by Caixabank
- Group Zeta - El Periódico is partly owned by Caixabank

In light of these acquisitions, it is alarming that the journalistic code of ethics is merely a guideline and not an obligation.

By law, the allocation of media time for political parties during the electoral campaign is proportional to the results obtained in the previous equivalent election, in this case, European Parliament elections. Xnet frequently denounces private television's disregard of this rule.

Results of European elections 2024 in Spain

In Spain, elections to the European Parliament are held in a single constituency, meaning the entire country is considered a single electoral district. As a result, the outcomes cannot be reliably extrapolated to general elections.

The two major national parties on the left-right axis, PSOE and PP, emerged strengthened. The former weathered the wear and tear better than expected after five years of minority government, and the latter significantly improved its previous results, being the most voted party by four points percentage. Regarding the two crutch parties, on the left, Sumar, the splinter group of Podemos, suffered a severe electoral punishment, which cannot be solely attributed to the vote split between Sumar and its former parent Podemos. On the right, VOX, the party to the right of the PP, also suffered, albeit to a lesser extent. It has also been affected by a new political actor, Alvisé Pérez, who is defined by the press as an ultra-agitator. Alvisé's platform was only his own Telegram channel.

Election integrity in Spain

Xnet¹ has been observing elections since 2013 and has collaborated with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on many occasions. Some of the most recurring deficits of the Spanish electoral system that Xnet has denounced are the biased behaviour of the media, the short time frames in which the ballots are kept after the recount, voting by mail, the financing of electoral campaigns or the violation of the secret vote.

In our direct monitoring experience, 80% of the incidents we recorded were related to the unequal distribution of ballots at the polling stations or their absence, since the ballots of the emerging parties are often not found in the polling station. Following the scrutiny, we discovered that 100% of the incidents were related to very worrying errors in the vote counting, stemming from the ignorance of the election workers that led to confusion between parties concerning the attribution of votes. This is then reproduced at various points of communication, creating misunderstanding. We were able to verify the loss of up to 10,000 votes for every 100,000 received by minority parties, which were attributed wrongly to more well-known parties. This year, appearances suggest that the mismanagement of the ballots has continued. There was a notorious scandal regarding the distribution of the votes of a Catalan independence party that was running alone

(Junts). At least 16,000 votes were recorded as being cast outside Catalonia, which is unlikely.

A further issue that Xnet has been reporting on since 2018 is the practise in many countries in the EU, including Spain, of permitting political parties to send their political program to everybody. To facilitate this, the electoral census is given to all political parties (which contains the private addresses of the whole constituency, including activists, journalists, lawyers, etc.). This massive transfer of data, which has been happening since 1985, poses a danger to privacy and personal safety and could easily be prohibited. Unfortunately, the General Data Protection Regulation does not give any protection in this scenario, leaving this decision in the hands of the State.²

II. Data analysed

Xnet analysed data obtained through the Who Targets Me browser extension from 16 May 2024 till 9 June 2024, the date of the elections. We started with 16 May because, prior to then, there were other national elections that interfered with the data. In addition to the political parties, we also tracked political advertising not reported as being party-funded. We classified them into two groups: 'Left Wing Influencers' and 'Right Wing Influencers'. The WTM extension monitored 2,873 advertisements

1 Xnet (2014), [A Journey Into the Guts of teh Electoral System](#), 11 June 2014.

2 Xnet (2015), [Report and Legislative Proposals on Institutionalised Abuses in Privacy and Data Protection](#), 24 November 2015.

categorised as political out of a total of 45,443 paid advertisements we were able to capture on Facebook displayed in Spain.

The sum of the expenditure of all groups in the chosen period amounted to €778,127. The sum of the spending of all groups in the last week of the campaign totalled €375,625. Therefore, the sums spent in the last week alone amounted to approximately half of the expenditure during the month before the elections.

Focusing only on the parties, the highest spender was the PSOE, the party currently in government, with Podemos in second place. However, their strategies were very different. The PSOE has 55 active pages with an average expenditure of €4,261, while Podemos has only 2 active pages with an average expenditure of €23,832. In third place was the Popular Party, which adopted a strategy similar to that of the PSOE.

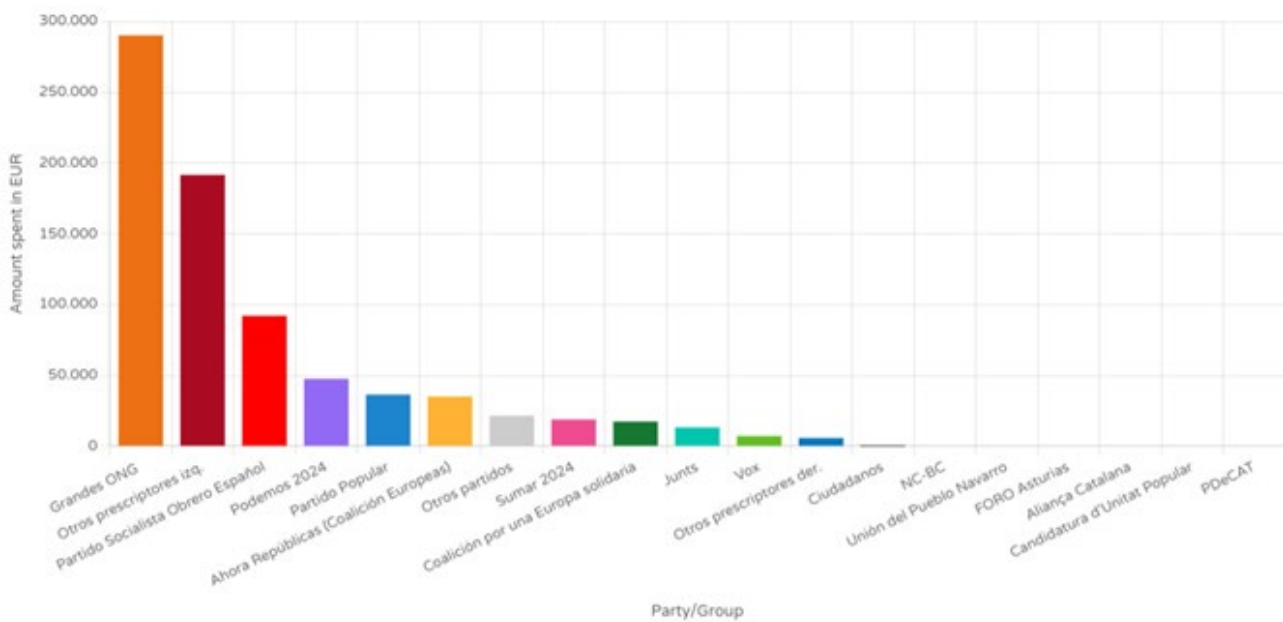


Chart by Who Targets Me © 2024. Reproduction only with express permission
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Political party and other relevant actors spending between 16 May 16 and 9 June

However, the most interesting finding is the revelation that the true highest spender was left-wing influencers (not politicians or political parties), who spent more than twice as much as the PSOE. It can be derived from the data collected that the left is supported on Facebook by other organisations, who invest more than the political parties themselves during the electoral campaign. While we don't have our own data to confirm as such, it is known that the right, in particular the far-right, tends to employ this methodology more on Twitter (X), YouTube and Telegram. On Facebook, accounts such as 'Hope' or 'Spanish Revolution', increased their advertising activity on social networks during electoral periods, with some indicating which parties to vote for. These practices are a clear example of 'astroturfing', which aims to give a grassroots movement approach to a campaign related to political parties.³

Analysis based on the sample provided by users who installed the #whotargetsme (#dequiensoyblanco9j) extension in Spain (Data Analysis by Irene Ball)

The objective of the research is to determine whether there is profiling based on ideological opinions, a targeting allowed/done using sensitive personal data in the products Facebook sells and the parties purchase, which would be

illegal under new European legislation, particularly the Digital Service Act (DSA).

Number of people who have downloaded the extension and seen any type of advertising in Spain: 89. Total number of men: 65. Total number of women: 24. Categories: far-left/left/centre-left/centre/centre right/right/far-right.

In addition to the gender imbalance in the sample, it is noteworthy that there is no data available for 'centre-right' and 'right' groups (only for the far-right), which creates a gap in the results due to the lack of information regarding these two groups.

- Parties appearing in the figures

Sumar (Sum), Vox (VOX), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Podemos (POD), Coalición por una Europa Solidaria [Partido Nacionalista Vasco, Coalición Canaria, Atarabia Taldea Navarra, Geroa Sozialverdes Navarra, El Pi - Proposta per les Illes Balears] (CEUS: our sample only includes data for Partido Nacionalista Vasco), Partido Popular (PP), Ciudadanos (CS), Ahora Repúblicas [Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, Euskal Herria Bildu País Vasco-Navarra, Bloque Nacionalista Galego, Andecha Astur, Puyalón Aragón, Unidad del Pueblo Canarias, Alternativa Nacionalista Canaria] (Arep: our sample only includes data for Esquerra Republicana Catalunya), Others (Otros).

³ See also Levi, Simona et al. (2019-2024) Fake You - An Activist's Guide to Defeating Disinformation - Don't blame the people; don't blame the Internet; blame the power - Governments, political parties, mass media, large corporations and fortunes: the monopolies of information manipulation and the threats to freedom of expression.

- Parties not appearing in the charts because our sample has no data about them

Aliança Catalana (AC), Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG), Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), Ara més (Més), Coalición Canaria (CCa), EH Bildu (EHB), FORO Asturias (FORO), Junts (Jun), NC-BC (NC-BC), PDeCAT (PDeCAT), Unión del Pueblo Navarro (UPN).

- Influencers

Left Wing (LW), Right Wing (RW).

- **Large NGOs** (excluded after the first figure because they are uniform during the year and their spending nearly doubles that of the other categories).

III. Sociopolitical advertising target analysis

We define sociopolitical advertising recipients as those who have received advertising from Spanish state political parties, left-wing influencers, and/or right-wing influencers. We kept the influencers because, even though they are not parties, they participate in partisan advertising.

Number of sociopolitical advertising recipients from a sample of 89: 25. Total number of men: 22. Total number of women: 3. Entities after filtering: ['Sum' 'LW' 'RW' 'VOX'

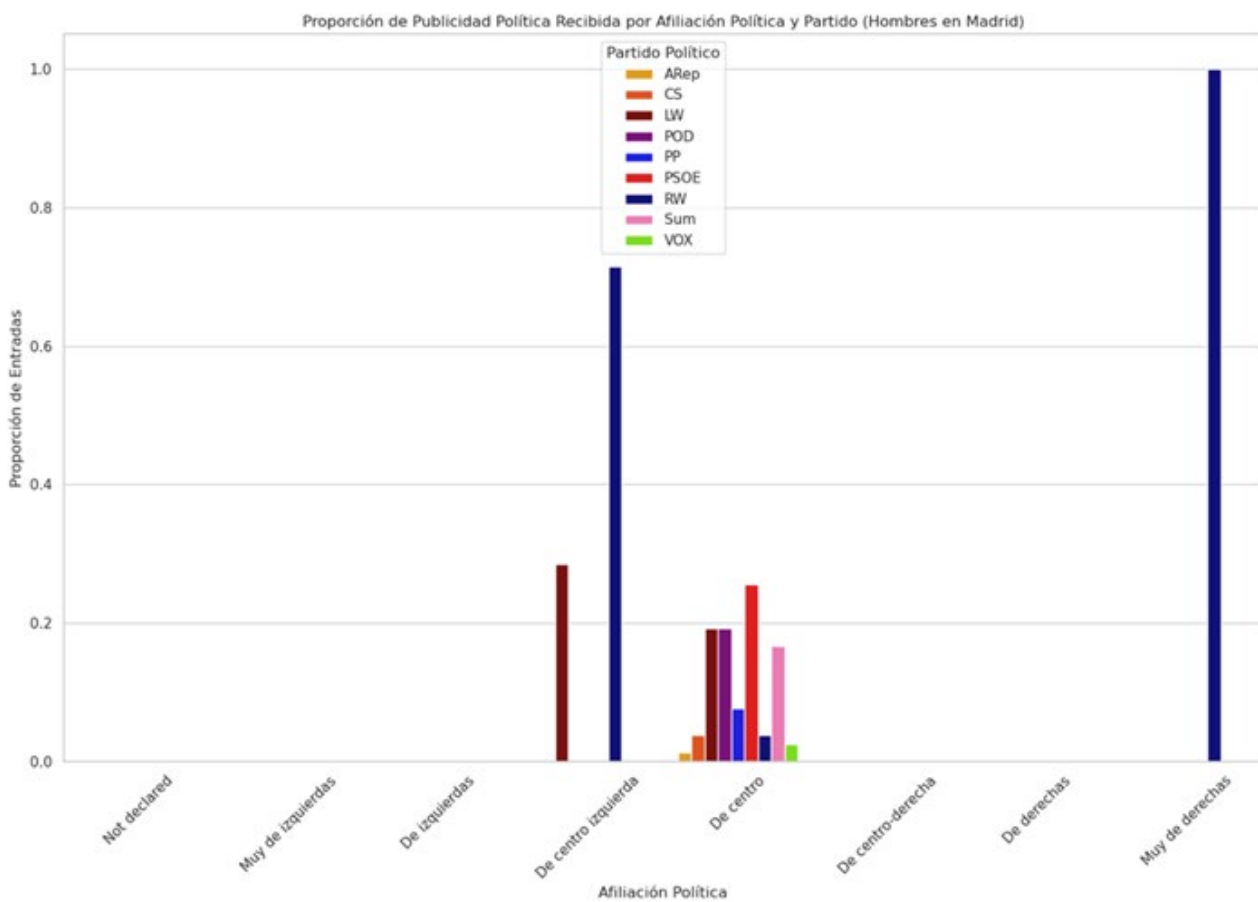
'PSOE' 'POD' 'CEUS/EAJ-PNV' 'Otros' 'PP' 'CS' 'Arep/ERC']

As the sample is very small, we believe that to determine if there are ideological biases, we need to ensure that there are no other biases, such as territorial bias. Therefore, we conducted a more extensive demographic exploration by age group, autonomous community, and ideological affinity to see if the perceived bias could be influenced by legal territorial segmentation rather than ideological segmentation. In some instances, such as recipients of information from parties with regional priorities, this was the case.

To avoid other biases that the WTM tool does not give information about and that could be relevant in such a small sample, we selected the sample that most likely groups the targets that parties and influencers would choose: the city of Madrid, being the capital and the city with the highest concentration of people. Additionally, for the Autonomous Community 'Madrid', we only have data on men, which eliminates one more variability factor.

Proportion of Political Advertising Received by Units (Men, Madrid)

As indicated throughout the report, despite the impossibility of drawing significant conclusions due to the sample size, we can affirm that there are high possibilities of ideological bias. For example, the only users with a centrist political affiliation see ads from all political parties. However, these observations only establish a starting point for a hypothesis. Higher quality data would be needed to conclude that there is bias due to illegal profiling.



Contacts

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Xnet, Institute for Democratic Digitalisation, is a network of specialists and activists that proposes advanced solutions in different fields related to digital rights and updating democracy to the 21st century. Since 2008, for a free Internet and a real democracy.

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Civil Liberties Union for Europe

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a Berlin-based civil liberties group with 22 member organisations across the EU campaigning on human and digital rights issues including the rule of law, media freedom, SLAPPs, privacy, targeted political advertising, AI, and mass surveillance.

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Key visual by Xnet