

## **Voter suppression campaigns in Spain: No contéis conmigo #Yonovoto (Don't count on me #Idon'tvote)**

*Written on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019*

Voter suppression – which consists of discouraging citizens from voting in order to reduce support for a particular candidate – was the goal of an investment of tens of thousands of Euros, as was recently revealed in two investigations by the Spanish newspapers [El País](#) and [eldiario.es](#) ([here](#) too).

Pictures of some candidates with messages calling for abstention appeared on posters in some Spanish cities and in advertisements placed on a series of fake Facebook pages – one of sites was even accused by one candidate of trying to supplant his identity.

In the ads, many parties are criticised, such as the socialist party PSOE, left-wing Unidas Podemos, centre-right Ciudadanos, and the far-right VOX party. Although the investigations carried out by El País and eldiario.es led to the right-wing Popular Party (the only one that was not criticised or attacked), it was not possible to directly attribute the campaigns to them. The party has also denied its involvement.

Since the press investigations, Facebook has closed most of these pages and the ads are already inactive. However, the Spanish Central Electoral Authority rejected a complaint considering that the electoral law had not been violated and that the Popular Party's involvement could not be proven.

### **Ten fake Facebook pages, Facebook ads and posters on the streets**

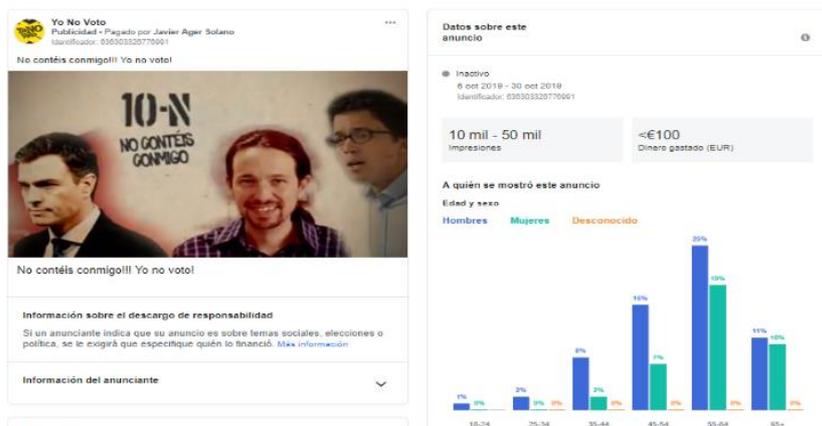
The newspaper El País speaks of a network of nine Facebook pages<sup>1</sup> that invested up to 40,000 Euros<sup>2</sup> in political advertising. The ads criticised PSOE, Ciudadanos, Vox, and Unidas Podemos, and in some cases, pretended to support those parties in order to promote abstention. Their actions date back to before the official start of the campaign on 1st November, with 59 ads that had approximately nine million views in total.

One of them goes back as far as 2010 and the rest were already active in May's municipal elections in Spain. The ads were especially critical of the caretaker Prime Minister and socialist leader Pedro Sánchez and the leader of Ciudadanos – Albert Rivera. The pages included fake appeals to abstention by Ciudadanos, PSOE, Unidas Podemos, and Más País.

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<sup>1</sup> Contrapoder, Recuperar el PSOE, Yo No Voto, La Naranja, Con Rivera No, Unidos por el Mar Menor, Murcia al Día, No volveré a comer pulpo si España gana el Mundial, Asociación para la Defensa de los Intereses de España.

<sup>2</sup> See annex for a methodology explanation

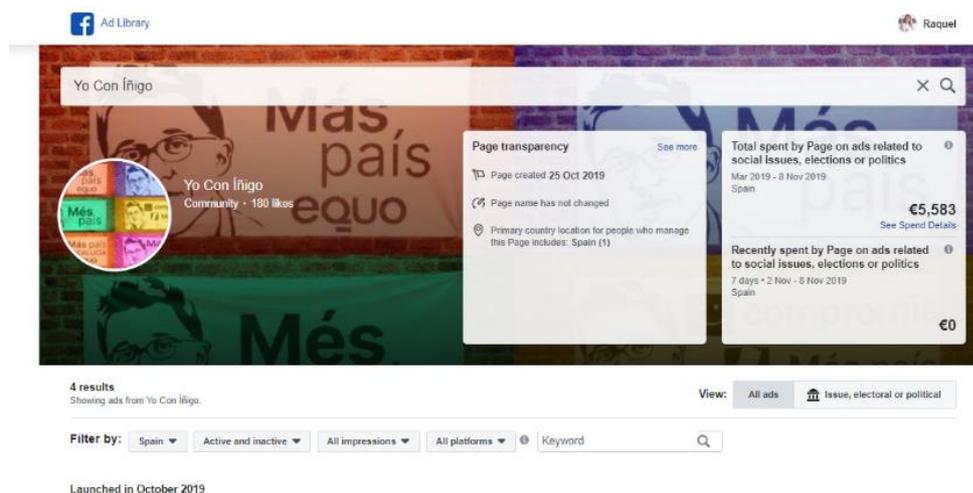


A pro-abstention ad in the FB page Yo no voto

More recent is another suspicious page uncovered by eldiario.es. *Yo con Íñigo* was created on 25<sup>th</sup> October and was active until the electoral day. With 228 followers, the administrator [invested €5,583](#) in advertisements promoting the abstention of two candidates: the caretaker PM Pedro Sánchez and the leader of Unidas Podemos – Pablo Iglesias.

The name of the FB page refers to Íñigo Errejón – candidate of the left-wing party Más País – a party which split from United Podemos due to internal disagreements with Iglesias. Errejón denied his relationship to the page and denounced the attempt to supplant his identity, which was considered as [a “dirty game of the PP”](#).

EU DisinfoLab has collected its own data based on the total expenses registered [on Facebook’s Ads Library](#), and it computed that the total expenses of the different advertisement campaigns was €28,687<sup>3</sup>.



Yo con Iñigo FB page

Another part of the campaign consisted of putting up election posters in some streets of Madrid, Murcia, and cities in Andalusia at the end of October, which are places where left-

<sup>3</sup> See annex for a methodology explanation

wing parties usually win. They carried the same message “10-N. Don't count on me #yonovoto”, with the same font type as the FB ads, and also encompassed images of Pedro Sánchez and Pablo Iglesias. Stickers were also distributed.



Campaign posters appeared in some cities

### The tracks lead to the Popular Party

But who was behind these campaigns? The investigations of El País and eldiario.es point directly to the Popular Party candidate Pablo Casado.

The administrator of “Yo con Íñigo” and financier of the advertising campaign is Josep Lanuza. He assured that his campaign was a private initiative, affirming that the money came from his own pocket, as he’s a true fan of Íñigo Errejón. However, as eldiario.es published, Lanuza works for Aleix Sanmartín – a political advisor who has worked with a range of parties in Spain and Latin America, but who was part of the PP's electoral advisers’ team for the November elections. [Sanmartín – however – reassured](#) that everything was a private initiative of his employee Lanuza, all while the PP denied any connection.

In relation to the electoral posters, eldiario.es pointed out [here](#) and [here](#) that the order came from Córdoba – the city where Sanmartín’s company is based.

The other eight pages were administrated by Javier Ager Solano – a young man from Murcia described by the PP as a simple sympathiser. However, [eldiario.es assured](#) that he is a militant in PP’s Nuevas Generaciones (the young section), and that he was in charge of the PP’s social media in Murcia, participating in meetings with the top officials of the party, including Pablo Casado. All his pages have been suspended by Facebook.

Another person who appears to be a financier of the ads is Javier Francisco Barralo Vicente. His name does not appear on the Internet, but El País linked his email to the domain of another FB page that also belongs to the network of fake pages – Asociación para la Defensa de los Intereses de España (Adies). The advertisements of his page included messages mainly from PP and one from Vox; they were critical of Ciudadanos, PSOE, and pro-independence parties. Some of their messages were also distributed by Instagram, which is owned by Facebook.

[El País contacted](#) Adies, which claimed to be a society with no ties to any party, whose members had paid for ads privately. He confirmed that Barralos is a member but chose not to comment on the relationship with Javier Ager Solano. The PP denied any connection to those responsible for these campaigns.

### **Separate initiatives or a joint framework?**

Journalistic research has not been able to confirm the links between the different administrators, but many of the ads on the different pages use the same strategy, the same message (“10-N don't count on me”, “I don't vote”), and the same logo. They also undeniably have stylistic similarities. What's more is that the videos are also similar: a hand appears spraying pro-abstention messages complete with the same background music – the partisan song “Bella ciao”. In addition, on *Contrapoder* FB page, there are ads paid for by Ager Solano and Barralo Vicente.

### **Precedents**

According to El País, some of these pages also carried out dubious practices during the May elections, publishing – for example – a misleading video. In addition, eldiario.es pointed to Sanmartin's involvement in another campaign to discourage people voting for PSOE in the last regional elections in Andalusia by using another false website *Socialists for Change*. This campaign encouraged confrontation between Pedro Sanchez and the socialist ex-Andalusian regional president Susana Diaz, in order to promote boredom and abstention among socialist voters. Sanmartín also worked on the PP's regional campaign for that election but denied his involvement in any smear campaign.

Last September, FB suspended 100 Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to PP that had amplified certain content and criticised opponents. Twitter also suspended 259 accounts operated by PP, accusing the party of artificially boosting public opinion in Spain through spam or retweets with these false profiles.

### **Reactions in Spain**

The journalistic denunciations appeared in the Spanish press on the 30<sup>th</sup> October – two days before the start of the electoral campaign. The investigations unleashed accusations of dirty campaign tactics by the PP, yet these investigations have not had much reach.

Íñigo Errejón from the Más País party resorted to asking the Central Electoral Authority to denounce *Yo con Iñigo*-campaign but this attempt was proven unsuccessful. The authority ruled that the campaign for a candidate's vote and that the campaign could not be concretely attributed to PP. In addition, it considered that citizens as individuals are exempt from the prohibition of campaigning outside the official electoral timelines, arguing that their actions are protected by the right to freedom of expression. There was no mention about supplanting Íñigo Errejón's identity.

## ANNEX: Data collected by EU DisinfoLab and gap with El País' data

FACEBOOK PAGE	TOTAL SPEND ON ADS RELATED TO SOCIAL ISSUES, ELECTIONS OR POLITICS €	SOURCE	PAGE ACTIVITY	AD CAMPAIGN
Asociación para la defensa de los intereses de España	2.101	ADI	Inactive	Inactive
Yo con Íñigo	5583	Josep Lanuza	Inactive	Inactive
Recuperar el PSOE	1168	Javier Francisco Barralo Vicente Javier Ager Solano y Javier Francisco	Active	Inactive
Contrapoder	1400	Barralo Vicente	Inactive	Inactive
Yo No Voto	124	Javier Ager Solano	Inactive	Inactive
La Naranja	265	Javier Ager Solano	Inactive	Inactive
Con Rivera No	607	Javier Ager Solano	Inactive	Inactive
Unidos por el Mar Menor	100	Javier Ager Solano	Active	Inactive
Murcia al Día	100	Javier Ager Solano	Active	Inactive
No volveré a comer pulpo si España gana el mundial	17.239	Javier Ager Solano	Inactive	Inactive
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>€28.687 **</b>			

### FACEBOOK AD LIBRARY LINKS:

- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=Asociaci%C3%B3n%20para%20la%20Defensa%20de%20los%20Intereses%20de%20Espa%C3%B1a](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=Asociaci%C3%B3n%20para%20la%20Defensa%20de%20los%20Intereses%20de%20Espa%C3%B1a)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=Yo%20con%20I%C3%B1igo](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=Yo%20con%20I%C3%B1igo)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&view\\_all\\_page\\_id=2397964407127830](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&view_all_page_id=2397964407127830)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&disclaimer\\_texts\[0\]=Javier%20Francisco%20Barralo%20Vicente&q=Contrapoder](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&disclaimer_texts[0]=Javier%20Francisco%20Barralo%20Vicente&q=Contrapoder)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=Yo%20No%20Voto](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=Yo%20No%20Voto)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=La%20Naranja](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=La%20Naranja)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=Con%20Rivera%20no](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=Con%20Rivera%20no)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&view\\_all\\_page\\_id=103875484378528](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&view_all_page_id=103875484378528)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&view\\_all\\_page\\_id=103875484378528](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&view_all_page_id=103875484378528)
- [https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=political\\_and\\_issue\\_ads&country=ES&impression\\_search\\_field=has\\_impressions\\_lifetime&q=No%20volver%C3%A9%20a%20comer%20pulpo%20si%20Espa%C3%B1a%20gana%20el%20mundial](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ES&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&q=No%20volver%C3%A9%20a%20comer%20pulpo%20si%20Espa%C3%B1a%20gana%20el%20mundial)

\*\* The gap between El País and EU DisinfoLab is due to the methodology used for collecting data. The newspaper was based on the data provided by the Facebook API (instead of the app), which offers a maximum and a minimum range of spending value. In addition, the values are in constant variation when the pages are active. All the ads on the network at the end of October, when the websites remained active, summed a maximum expenditure of €54,000. The newspaper decided to use €40,000 as an approximate median value. However, the authors point to the lack of total transparency of these data and the lack of explanations from Facebook about the great disparity between the minimum and maximum offered values. The data collected by EU DisinfoLab is the fixed total value offered by FB in its Ads Library with all ad-campaigns already finished and inactive.