Disinformative trends during the German Federal Election

EU DisinfoLab’s Annual Conference #DISINFO2021
“Understanding Disinformation Across Europe”
Raquel Miguel Serrano, External Researcher at EU DisinfoLab
Table of contents

1. Methodology
2. Disinformation and the evolution of electoral polls
3. Examples of disinformation targeting political parties
4. Disinformation on the election day
5. Foreign influence vs. hoaxes “made in Germany”
6. The battle against electoral disinformation: actors, initiatives and tools
1. **METHODOLOGY**

1. **Time frame:** April-September (monitoring ongoing)
2. **Basis of our monitoring:** debunking by German fact-checkers
3. **EU DisinfoLab own methodology:** individual analysis of disinformative items
4. **A broad scope** of disinformation monitoring: beyond the elections

---

**COVID19 AND ELECTIONS’ RELATED NARRATIVES IN THE GERMAN DISINFORMATIVE LANDSCAPE (April-September 2021)**

*Source: Elaborated by EU DisinfoLab*
2. DISINFORMATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE ELECTORAL POLLS

GERMAN PARTIES TARGETED BY DISINFORMATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>AfD</th>
<th>SPD</th>
<th>CDU</th>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>AFD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ELECTORAL SURVEYS LEADING UP TO THE FEDERAL ELECTION 2021
Evolution of the polls during the 12 months before the election

*Source: Elaborated by EU DisinfoLab.
Data source: Monitored fact-checked hoaxes from April to September 2021

*Monthly averages of all surveys of each month
Numbers on the right-hand side: average values in the current month (to 25 September 2021)
The federal election took place on the 26th of September 2021
3. EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION TARGETING A POLITICAL PARTY: 
THE GREEN PARTY & ANNALENA BAERBOCK

- Gendered and political disinformation narratives:
  ✓ Deliberate sexualisation: e.g. the alleged leak of Annalena Baerbock’s fake nude pictures
  ✓ Questioning Baerbock’s abilities: e.g. claims that she did not complete her studies and deserved to be in a mental institution
  ✓ Misrepresenting Baerbock’s political agenda: e.g. accusation that she called for legalisation in support of paedophilia

- Conspiracy narratives calling Baerbock a “puppet” of George Soros

- Anti-Green party narratives fostering nationalism, racism, and xenophobia: e.g. claims that the Green party wants to destroy Germany, and benefit refugees at the expense of nationals.

- False claims were used to present the Green party as authoritarian and wanting to ban everything (barbecues, pets, cruises...)

- Disinformation also appeared offline:
  ✓ Disinformative political ads published in the main German newspapers: Annalena Baerbock portrayed as Moses with the 10 commandments
  ✓ The “Grüner Mist” campaign: ad-posters in 50 cities (and social media content) containing false claims
3. EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION TARGETING A POLITICAL PARTY: THE CDU/CSU AND ARMIN LASCHET

Disinformation targeted CDU/CSU candidate Armin Laschet following the floods in Germany

- False claims that Laschet did a TV interview from a fake stage rather than from the scene of the floods
- Some of Laschet’s answers during several TV appearances were misrepresented
- A cropped picture was used to suggest falsely that an umbrella was held out for Armin Laschet, while a flood victim stood under the rain.
- Unproven accusations were made that donations for flood victims would be used to fund Laschet’s electoral campaign.

Disinformation also appeared offline:

- Satirical fake campaign posters were used by an activist group to target the CDU.
4. DISINFORMATION DURING THE ELECTION DAY

Some facts used to fuel disinformation: historical increase in postal votes, irregularities and loopholes during the election in Berlin, Armin Laschet’s voting blunder on election day.

Main disinformation narratives during election day:
• Political polarisation
• Accusations of voter suppression, e.g. hoax that only people vaccinated for or recovered from COVID-19 would be allowed in the polling stations
• Allegations of voter fraud, e.g. strategies to manipulate the postal vote, invalidate votes, and prevent an AfD victory
• Sowing distrust in the electoral system, e.g. claims that ballot papers, ballot boxes, and the IT systems were untrustworthy
• Conspiracy theory that electoral results were pre-determined (as electoral projections mistakenly appeared as subtitles during a public TV broadcast)
5. FOREIGN INFLUENCE vs. HOAXES “MADE IN GERMANY”

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

• Russia was often accused of conducting disinformation campaigns in Germany:
  • EU’s disinformation watchdog: “Germany is the main target of Russian disinformation” (March 2021)
  • Germany denounced attempts to steal data from German lawmakers using phishing emails and attributed “to
cyber-actors of the Russian state and, specifically, Russia’s GRU military intelligence service” and urged Moscow to
  end these cyberattacks. (September 2021)
  • Russian media in Germany include RT (Russia Today), SNA (Sputnik) and News Front
  • Disinformative Austrian outlets.
  • QAnon. Inspired by US voter fraud claims (very active on Telegram)

DOMESTIC ACTORS

• German Minister for Home Affairs Horst Seehofer emphasised the threats from inside the country.
  ✓ AfD politicians’ accounts and regional Facebook pages.
  ✓ Ad hoc Facebook groups (e.g. against the Green Party, or COVID-19 vaccines)
  ✓ Far-right groups and “influencers”.
  ✓ The COVID-19 denialist “Querdenker” movement, which contested elections with the party Die Basis.
EU DisinfoLab compiled a list of the initiatives that were set up to counter disinformation, as well as cyberthreats and foreign interference attempts, during the German elections (held on September 26).

A plurality of actors joined forces:
- Government institutions prioritised cybersecurity;
- Political parties focused on raising awareness and partisan debunking;
- Media, social media platforms, and fact-checkers debunked hoaxes;
- Academic institutions researched the proliferation of disinformative content around the elections.

Some experts called for a large-scale media literacy strategy in Germany so that civil society can play a greater role in tackling disinformation and avoid contributing to its dissemination.

Overall, initiatives to combat disinformation and foreign influence should not be limited to the election period but designed for the long term.
THANK YOU

EU DisinfoLab’s Annual Conference #DISINFO2021

Raquel Miguel Serrano
rms@disinfo.eu

@RaquelMiguel6

@RachelMiguel