Annex 11- Some flagrant cases of political interference through social media and AI

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How researchers measure algorithmic bias and shadowbanning on political content

Researchers measure algorithmic bias and shadowbanning through a combination of large-scale computational audits, statistical modeling, and qualitative analysis of platform outputs. Because tech companies treat recommendation algorithms and content moderation rules as proprietary "black boxes," researchers must test the systems externally to infer how political content is treated.

Algorithmic Auditing Researchers deploy automated scripts and web services to query platforms and monitor specific political accounts. By systematically checking accounts from neutral, unlogged-in IP addresses, they can detect "search suggestion bans" (the account fails to auto-populate in search bars) or "reply downtiering" (replies are hidden behind a "show more" button).

Statistical Modeling Using massive datasets—such as social media data firehoses—researchers extract features using Natural Language Processing (NLP) to categorize content offensiveness, political hashtags, and bot-like behavior. They apply statistical methods like ridge regression to calculate the exact probability that specific variables trigger algorithmic suppression.

Engagement Disparity Tracking Analysts cross-reference expected reach with actual performance by examining retweet-to-like ratios and impression caps. They also cross-reference the URLs shared by shadowbanned accounts against established media credibility labels to track if platforms are systematically demoting controversial political news.

Digital Ethnography Mixed-methods approaches analyze user-generated "experiments" where political communities deliberately test platform limits, manually coding these interactions to understand how users experience and attempt to bypass algorithmic filtering.

How do social media platforms justify using shadowbans instead of outright deleting content?

Social media platforms generally avoid the term "shadowbanning," preferring terms like "downranking," "visibility reduction," or "de-amplification." When defending these practices over outright content deletion, platforms and moderation researchers point to several strategic and operational justifications:

- **Preventing Ban Evasion:** The original use-case for shadowbanning was to manage spammers, bots, and trolls. If a platform explicitly deletes a malicious user's account, the user will immediately realize it, create a new account, and resume their behavior. By restricting their visibility without notifying them, the platform keeps the bad actor wasting their time posting to an invisible audience, thereby delaying their return.

- **Managing "Borderline" Content:** Platforms frequently deal with content that is "awful but lawful"—it does not strictly violate the Terms of Service (meaning deletion isn't technically justified), but it is highly toxic, repetitive, or misleading. Downranking allows platforms to reduce the reach of clickbait, spam, or extreme views without outright censoring users who technically followed the rules.
- **Reducing Appeals and Backlash:** Explicitly deleting content or banning users generates friction. Users demand explanations, file appeals, or launch public campaigns against the platform. Because shadowbanned users are unaware that their content is being hidden, they do not submit appeals, allowing the platform to shape the community environment with less administrative overhead and public blowback.
- **Algorithmic User Experience:** Platforms argue that visibility reduction is not a punishment, but rather a feature of a healthy recommendation algorithm. They justify suppressing certain posts by claiming their goal is to surface the most engaging, high-quality content to the majority of users. Under this logic, limiting the reach of unpopular or low-quality content maximizes overall user satisfaction and platform revenue.

- ow do platforms like X, Instagram, and YouTube officially define downranking in their Terms of Service?
- Social media platforms universally avoid the term "shadowbanning" in their official Terms of Service, instead framing these mechanisms as "visibility reduction" or algorithm management. They define these actions not as covert penalties, but as safety and recommendation features designed to manage content that toes the line of their rules.

- **X (formerly Twitter)** X explicitly refers to this practice as **Visibility Filtering**. The platform operates under the official policy of "Freedom of Speech, not Freedom of Reach." X's rules state they will restrict the reach of tweets that violate their policies—such as hateful conduct or abusive behavior—by excluding them from search results, trends, and the "For You" timeline, and downranking them in replies.

- **Instagram (Meta)** Instagram governs visibility through its **Content Recommendation Guidelines**. Meta's official policy is to "demote" or remove content from Explore and Reels if it qualifies as "borderline content". This includes sexually suggestive posts, engagement bait, or sensationalist claims that do not strictly violate the broader Community Guidelines. Instagram provides an "Account Status" tool allowing users to officially check if their content is currently ineligible for recommendation to non-followers.

- **YouTube** YouTube officially manages visibility by restricting **Borderline Content**. The platform's algorithmic policy is designed to "reduce recommendations" of borderline videos and borderline misinformation. When YouTube flags a video under this category, it remains accessible on the creator's channel but is deliberately removed from the homepage and the "Up Next" sidebar, neutralizing its organic algorithmic growth.

Because modern AI platforms use a mechanism called Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) to scrape the live web for context, campaigns can manipulate what the AI "learns" in real-time. During the 2026 midterms, a new class of political consultants emerged to execute these specific tactics:

1. **Multi-Engine Prompt Auditing Campaigns run continuous, automated tests across various AI engines using the exact prompts persuadable voters type, such as, "Where does [Candidate] stand on healthcare?" or "I care about working families, who should I vote for?". Consultants grade the AI's responses—noting whether the AI highlights** a candidate's strengths, confuses them with a namesake, or cites an opponent's attack ad.
2. **Building "AI-Bait" Issue Pages** AI models struggle to parse vague political rhetoric or long-winded speeches. They are programmed to extract explicit facts, statistics, and highly structured data. To capitalize on this, campaigns build dedicated "Where [Candidate] stands on..." pages formatted specifically for machines. These pages use clear headings, short paragraphs, bullet points, schema markup (hidden code that feeds facts directly to the AI), and cited statistics. This makes it effortless for the chatbot's extraction tools to pull the campaign's preferred talking points.
3. **Dominating "Entity Authority" (Third-Party Profiles)**AI engines are trained to prioritize high-trust, neutral sources over partisan websites. Recognizing this, campaigns focus heavily on updating and expanding their candidate's presence on platforms the AI already trusts, such as Ballotpedia, Wikipedia, Vote Smart, and digital voter guides. By seeding these neutral profiles with campaign-approved facts and disambiguation data, they provide a verified, authoritative well for the AI to draw from.
4. **Technical Bot Clearances**Many standard websites accidentally block AI crawlers (like OpenAI's scraper) in their robots.txt files, or they bury critical text under heavy JavaScript that text-based AI scrapers cannot read. Campaigns conduct technical audits to ensure nothing prevents generative engines from instantly crawling, reading, and ingesting their policy platforms.

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)—sometimes called Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)—is the strategic practice of formatting web content so that Artificial Intelligence models find, trust, and cite it when synthesizing answers for users.

Instead of trying to rank as a single blue link on a traditional search engine results page, political campaigns use GEO to ensure their candidate's narrative is embedded directly inside the conversational responses generated by chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Perplexity.

Ultimately, GEO operates on a simple premise: AI engines do not browse the web like humans; they hunt for clearly structured, easily verifiable data blocks. By feeding the machines exactly what they are programmed to look for, campaigns successfully turn neutral chatbots into vectors for their own messaging.

The Spanish elections November 2026 and the train disaster

As of November 1 2026.

The tragic high-speed train crash in Urda, Toledo, on October 28, 2026, occurred just a month ahead of the Spanish general elections scheduled for November 29, triggering an immediate and massive wave of disinformation across social media.

The spread of misinformation during this politically sensitive window manifested in several organized ways:

- **Electoral Conspiracy Theories:** Unverified narratives immediately linked the tragedy to the upcoming elections, with viral messages baselessly describing the crash as a "ritual sacrifice 33 days before the elections".
- **Foreign Sabotage Claims:** False theories circulated claiming the crash was a cyberattack or deliberate sabotage orchestrated by foreign intelligence, specifically the United States or Israel. This included a manipulated video of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu supposedly threatening Spain's railway network. Authorities clarified the crash was linked to a communication failure in the LZB control computers, not a hack.
- **AI and Out-of-Context Media:** Platforms like X, TikTok, and Facebook were flooded with AI-generated images of the wreckage and ambulances. Users also recycled photographs from previous train accidents in Adamuz and Ricla, presenting them as live footage from Urda.
- **Impersonation Scams:** In the most severe deception, scammers impersonated the Guardia Civil via SMS and WhatsApp, contacting the desperate families of passengers with false claims about the identification of their loved ones.

This coordinated spread of hoaxes highlights how digital platforms and artificial intelligence are rapidly weaponized to sow confusion and exploit public anxiety during high-stakes electoral periods.

Authorities are combating the SMS scams targeting families of the Urda train crash victims through a combination of rapid public debunking, protocol clarification, and secure communication channels:

- **Public Alerts and Denials:** The Data Integration Centre (CID), the High Court of Justice of Castilla-La Mancha (TSJCLM), and the Guardia Civil immediately issued official warnings urging families to ignore the fraudulent messages. The Guardia Civil used its official social media accounts, including X, to explicitly deny sending out any victim identification alerts.

- **Clarification of Official Protocol:** To protect vulnerable families from the deception, authorities have heavily emphasized that the Guardia Civil never communicates the identification of deceased victims via SMS, WhatsApp, or phone calls. Official notifications are strictly delivered in person.
- **Secure Information Lines:** To bypass the disinformation spread by scammers, official rail operators activated direct assistance hotlines. Renfe established a dedicated number through its Victim Assistance Plan, and Iryo set up a similar line to provide families with verified updates and support.
- **Fact-Checking Partnerships:** State broadcasters like RTVE and independent fact-checkers such as Newtral are actively amplifying the Guardia Civil's warnings to intercept the spread of these scams across social networks.
-



Arriba, de izquierda a derecha: 1. Podemos propone una lista de Spotify en su cuenta de TikTok. 2. La influencer artificial Carmen Pullas. 3. Intervención de Rufián en la cuenta de Instagram de ERC. 4. El vídeo hecho con IA que compartió el PP en sus redes y que usaba la imagen de Begoña Gómez. Debajo: 5. Pantallazo de un vídeo difundido en las cuentas de Vox. 6. Pedro Sánchez recomienda 'La bola negra' en TikTok. 7. Ada Colau en la cuenta de Instagram del Frente Amplio. 8. Feijóo en las cuentas del PP.

-

Fake SMS alert to relatives of Urda victims (https://www.youtube.com/shorts/-iLyv3nLBUs) This short clip details the Guardia Civil's official warning regarding the fraudulent text messages sent to families following the Urda train accident.

The October 28, 2026 train crash in Urda fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Spanish general elections scheduled for November 29, shifting the national conversation away from the ruling party's preferred talking points and plunging the government into a defensive posture.

Immediate Campaign Suspension In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, both the ruling left-wing Socialist Party (PSOE) and the conservative opposition Popular Party (PP) suspended their pre-campaign agendas out of respect for the victims. The sudden halt interrupted the momentum of the campaign just a month before voters were set to go to the polls.

Shift in Political Narrative Prior to the crash, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE had sought to focus the election on Spain's housing crisis and a message of economic optimism. The disaster immediately forced the narrative toward issues of public security, infrastructure management, and railway maintenance. Because this was the second fatal high-speed train accident in roughly ten months—following an earlier tragedy in Adamuz—public debate rapidly centered on whether railway liberalization and a lack of oversight were to blame.

Pressure on the Government The crisis sidelined Transport Minister Óscar Puente, who had been acting as the PSOE's primary political attack dog against the opposition. Instead, Puente and the government became the target of intense scrutiny, with the political right demanding accountability and some analysts suggesting he might be forced to resign to protect the party's electoral chances. The disaster threatens to overshadow Sánchez's attempts to defend his administrative record.

Opposition Capitalization and Polling The opposition parties have seized upon the tragedy to criticize the government's competence. The far-right Vox party has been particularly aggressive, with its leadership accusing Sánchez's administration of a "criminal handling of affairs". The political fallout has made the PSOE's electoral battle significantly more difficult; polls in late October showed the PSOE trailing at 26.7%, behind the PP at 31.5% and Vox at 19.1%. Political analysts note that the compounding effect of the Urda and Adamuz crashes could solidify a right-wing majority requiring a coalition between the PP and Vox.

1. Fake material fills the gap left by missing information

Maldita’s running log for Urda shows the usual pattern after a disaster. Photos from Adamuz and from a train fire in Ricla (Zaragoza) ten days earlier were passed off as Urda. An AI-altered image of Netanyahu and a video often reused to suggest Israel had threatened Spain were linked to the crash. Posts claimed hacking or sabotage by the US or Israel, and others cited unnamed “intelligence sources” about a cyberattack, though no official body has said anything of the kind. maldita (https://maldita.es/desinfo/20261028/bulos-desinformaciones-accidente-tren-urda-yebenes-toledo/)

January followed the same script. A sabotage theory appeared within hours of Adamuz and spread across social media in several languages, fed by the absence of official information. It reached at least 11 languages and blamed Russian hybrid warfare, by analogy with the 2025 rail attack in Poland. Investigators ruled out sabotage and concentrated on a fractured rail joint. Newsletter Newsletters Events Events Podcasts Videos Africanews +2 (https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/01/26/sabotage-and-misplaced-funds-misleading-claims-spread-over-spains-train-crashes)

What stands out is that the “foreign saboteur” story stays the same while the villain changes: Russia in January, Israel or the US in October. The story’s structure comes first, and the culprit is picked to suit whoever is sharing it. Two other points:

- **AI chatbots are now part of the picture.** Grok told various users that the sabotage theory had no support from official sources. edmo (https://edmo.eu/publications/the-unproven-theory-of-sabotage-and-russian-explosives-in-the-adamuz-accident-in-spain-which-has-been-shared-in-at-least-11-languages)
- **Mainstream media made mistakes too.** Some outlets published AI-generated images of the Adamuz crash, and Cadena SER withdrew one and apologized publicly. sapo (https://24noticias.sapo.pt/resumo/2026-01-19)

2. “Bulo” (hoax) is used as an accusation by both sides

The fake photos matter less than the fight over who is responsible, and there the label “misinformation” is itself disputed.

In January, the transport minister accused the conservative opposition of spreading false claims and causing public confusion. The PP accused Puente of lying about the track having been fully renewed. Puente called that a hoax and posted the serial number of the damaged rail, made in 2023. The facts were more mixed than either side said: the break was at a weld joining 2023 rails to rails from 1989. Neither “the track was new” nor “the track was neglected” was accurate. Half-true claims like these are hard to label true or false, which is why the word “bulo” becomes a weapon rather than a verdict. Madrid, Jan 29, 2026 (AFP) - Spain minister says opposition spreading false train crash claims +2 (https://www.nampa.org/text/22845304)

With Urda the same dispute has started. Puente blamed the Adif control centre for letting the AVE continue after an IT problem took down the LZB automatic train-control system, while the Iryo was stopped at a red signal. Iryo disputes part of his account. The Guardia Civil is questioning the operator who gave the order. So even the government’s first explanation is contested before any official finding exists. puente dice decision reanudar ave centro control inexplicable amp +2 (https://www.diaridetarragona.com/sucesos/274260/puente-dice-decision-reanudar-ave-centro-control-inexplicable_amp.html)

3. Politicians’ own social media accounts can work against them

Puente’s combative style on X matters here. His first post came almost two hours after the crash. It drew thousands of critical replies, including from footballers such as Llorente and Courtois. A week earlier he had joked about Renfe’s problems in a TV promo with Marc Giró. Maldita also checked a widely shared clip of him arriving at an infrastructure forum that morning. He left before speaking and went to the Adif control centre. The footage was real; the way it was presented was misleading. vozpopuli (https://www.vozpopuli.com/dolcevita/llorente-cayetano-martinez-de-irujo-y-otros-famosos-cargan-contra-puente-tras-el-accidente-de-tren-en-toledo-twitter-no-es-tu-trabajo-es-el-transporte-y-la-seguridad-has-sido-un-puto-desastre.html)maldita (https://maldita.es/desinfo/20261028/bulos-desinformaciones-accidente-tren-urda-yebenes-toledo/)

4. How the parties reacted

Every party except Vox suspended campaigning:

- **PP:** posted a short "enough" message on X, and Feijóo called for both a government and a judicial investigation.
- **Sumar-led Broad Front:** asked for an independent audit of the network and for political responsibility to be taken.
- **Vox:** Abascal called the government a criminal organization on X, and the party filed a lawsuit.
- **Sánchez:** said two accidents in one year was unacceptable. ara (https://en.ara.cat/politics/all-parties-stop-the-pre-campaign-due-to-the-train-accident-in-toledo-except-vox_1_5892889.html)

People read this in two ways. The opposition and its supporters argue that two mass-casualty crashes on one line in nine months is exactly what voters should judge, and that waiting for slow inquiries protects the government. The government's defenders argue that assigning blame before the investigators report is a kind of misinformation in itself, and that the two crashes had different causes. Both are positions open to argument, not hoaxes.

5. The wider campaign context

The Blocus youth riots in Barcelona are happening at the same time. According to Spanish intelligence as reported by ABC, Kremlin-linked accounts boosted the Barcelona calls to mobilize on TikTok. They amplified something that already existed rather than creating it. Sánchez said the riots show why social networks need regulating, which will probably become a campaign issue of its own. ara (https://en.ara.cat/international/is-russia-behind-the-protests-of-the-young-people-in-european-cities_1_5896109.html)diaridetarragona (https://www.diaridetarragona.com/espana/274211/sanchez-dice-disturbios-barcelona-gestaron-grupos-creados-anunciar-conciertos.html)

6. The timing problem

The Adamuz investigation still isn't closed, and the Senate committee on the rail network reached no conclusions. The rail accident investigation commission (CIAF) works over months; the vote is in four weeks. Voters will judge Urda before any authoritative explanation exists. That favours whoever frames the story first and loudest. Fact-checkers can debunk a recycled photo, but they cannot settle who was responsible. ara (https://en.ara.cat/politics/all-parties-stop-the-pre-campaign-due-to-the-train-accident-in-toledo-except-vox_1_5892889.html)

Over the next four weeks, expect a return of electoral-fraud ("pucherazo") stories. Hoaxes about postal and overseas voting circulated in 2023, and similar ones in 2019 and 2021. AI-generated content around the day of reflection before the vote is also likely.

Transport Minister Óscar Puente's political background and why was he so central to the PSOE's campaign strategy?

Óscar Puente is a veteran of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) whose political brand was built on a highly combative, direct, and often polarizing style of communication. This made him a highly effective political shield for the government, but it has now turned him into a significant liability ahead of the November 2026 elections.

Political Background and RiseA lawyer by trade, Puente served as the Mayor of Valladolid from 2015 until 2023. He was a prominent figure within the PSOE, serving as the party's federal spokesperson from 2017 to 2021. After losing the Valladolid mayoralty to a right-wing coalition in the 2023 local elections, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez brought him to the national stage. Puente cemented his reputation in September 2023 when Sánchez unexpectedly chose him to deliver the PSOE's aggressive rebuttal against Popular Party (PP) leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo during Feijóo's failed investiture debate. Shortly after, Sánchez rewarded him with the Ministry of Transport.
Wikipedia

Role in the PSOE Strategy Puente was central to the PSOE's strategy because he acted as the administration's primary "attack dog" and political firewall. By taking on the role of aggressively confronting the opposition, launching ironic counterattacks, and dominating the media cycle, Puente absorbed political heat. This division of labor allowed Prime Minister Sánchez to maintain a more elevated, presidential profile while Puente handled the trench warfare of daily partisan politics.

The Current Backlash Following the fatal high-speed rail disasters in Adamuz (January 2026) and Urda (October 2026), Puente's highly political profile has completely backfired.

- **Management vs. Politics:** Critics point out that Puente prioritized political loyalty over technical expertise, noting heavy turnover in the management of railway infrastructure companies under his tenure. Crucial safety upgrades, such as replacing the LZB system with the modern ERTMS on the rail lines, were delayed.
- **Tone and Insensitivity:** Puente's casual and confrontational tone has sparked outrage. Just days before the Urda crash, he participated in a lighthearted TV segment, which the opposition and victims' families contrasted sharply with the gravity of the ongoing railway crises.

As a result, the opposition is no longer just attacking Puente; they are tying his continuity directly to Sánchez, demanding accountability and threatening to derail the PSOE's campaign entirely.

What specific management changes did Óscar Puente make at Adif and Renfe that critics claim weakened technical oversight?
Critics of Transport Minister Óscar Puente argue that he systematically replaced experienced railway technicians and civil engineers with political loyalists and former colleagues from his time as mayor of Valladolid, fostering a culture of mismanagement that compromised safety.

The specific management changes highlighted by critics include:

- **Appointing Bus Executives to Rail Leadership:** Puente placed individuals whose primary experience was in municipal bus networks at the highest levels of national rail infrastructure. The president of Renfe previously ran Auvasa, Valladolid's municipal bus network, between 2019 and 2023.
- **Promoting Political Allies:** José Alfonso Gálvez, an environmental science graduate who served as traffic manager at Auvasa under Puente, was appointed as Renfe's second-in-command. According to reports, Gálvez was the only candidate admitted out of 28 applicants for his initial post.
  Todo Alicante
- **Adif Leadership Changes:** Similar changes occurred at Adif, which is now headed by Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña. Critics claim the overhaul at Adif mirrored the strategy at Renfe, prioritizing political alignment over technical rail expertise.
  todoalicante.es
- **Recycling Scandal-Tainted Executives:** Puente found new roles for executives implicated in recent procurement scandals. This includes former Adif president Ángel Contreras, who was named by the Civil Guard's Central Operational Unit in the "Koldo case" corruption probe.
  Todo Alicante

According to rail sector sources, these personnel overhauls tore apart experienced technical teams, replacing them with PR advisers and loyalists. Critics argue this directly led to a deterioration of services—with fewer than half of high-speed and long-distance trains arriving on time by early 2026—and created a reckless administrative environment leading up to the fatal crashes in Adamuz, Gelida, and Urda.

The midterm elections November 2026 in USA

As of November 6 2026

The elections represented a success of the democratic candidates.

The Democratic success in the 2026 midterm elections was due to a combination of economic frustration, a strong voter backlash against the incumbent administration's policies, and effective strategic messaging by Democratic candidates. Rather than a single factor, the outcome was shaped by a convergence of public sentiment and campaign tactics.



The "MAGA" Factor and Dislike of Trump A dominant driver of the election results was a widespread rebuke of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement. Polls indicated that nearly eight in ten voters experienced moderate to severe financial hardship due to inflation, fostering a general feeling that the country was on the wrong track. Beyond the economy, voters expressed deep frustration over the administration's impulsive war with Iran, mass deportation efforts by ICE, and perceptions of government corruption. Many voters felt the administration was out of touch with everyday realities and prioritized personal or corporate interests over the public.

Campaign Tactics: Rallies, TV, and Messaging

- **Rallies:** While Donald Trump embarked on an intensive, near-daily campaign tour in the final month to energize Republican strongholds, political strategists noted the effort came too late to reverse the widespread political damage and stop the Democratic surge.
- **TV and Campaign Messaging:** Democrats successfully leveraged messaging that tied everyday frustrations to actionable policies. A key example was their use of "green populism"—turning affordability and cost-of-living concerns into a winning message by arguing that clean energy investments would directly lower utility bills for rate-payers.
- **Social Media:** Social media was less of a direct boon for Democrats and more of a volatile battleground. The weeks leading up to the election were awash in an unprecedented flood of AI-driven disinformation. Campaigns across the country had to scramble to combat rapidly spreading online falsehoods, meaning social media acted as a challenging environment rather than a distinct advantage.

Ultimately, the sweeping victory—which handed Democrats control of both the House and the Senate—was fueled by an electorate exhausted by the incumbent's controversies and motivated by a desire for a different approach to governance.

Rather than just a tool for anonymous foreign operatives, AI was aggressively adopted by domestic campaigns and political actors to influence specific voting blocs.

Here is how AI disinformation specifically impacted local and state races:

Targeted Demographic Deepfakes (California) In the California gubernatorial race, an AI-generated Spanish-language ad from Republican Steve Hilton's campaign fabricated audio of Democratic opponent Xavier Becerra. The deepfake put words in Becerra's mouth regarding transgender student sports laws—statements he never actually made. This highlighted a dangerous new trend: deploying AI to produce hyper-targeted disinformation for specific minority communities, such as Spanish-speaking voters, who are statistically less likely to encounter mainstream, English-language fact-checks correcting the fake content.

Fabricated Candidate Statements (Georgia) The cost and technical barriers to creating deepfakes plummeted by 2026, allowing synthetic media to permeate even localized races. In Georgia, a localized AI-generated video was circulated that falsely depicted a political candidate making statements they had never uttered, demonstrating how easily localized deepfakes could be weaponized to smear opponents.

The Normalization of Undisclosed AI AdsAI-generated political ads became a standard campaign tool rather than an anomaly. Ahead of the November elections, an estimated $137 million was spent on over 220 videos utilizing AI-generated content. Crucially, researchers estimated that roughly 70% of these videos contained no disclosure alerting voters that they were watching synthetic media.

The "Liar's Dividend" Researchers tracking the 2026 election cycle noted that the most significant harm of this technology was not necessarily voters being actively tricked by a specific fake video, but rather the creation of an environment where citizens no longer trusted genuine evidence. The sheer volume of AI content allowed politicians caught in real scandals to claim that genuine, damaging audio or video was simply an "AI fake".

AI Chatbots Exacerbating the Information Void While social media was flooded with AI disinformation, the AI platforms voters used to try and find the truth frequently failed them. A study of ChatGPT and Google AI during the 2026 primaries and midterms found that these systems struggled to provide accurate, up-to-date information on local candidate listings due to constantly shifting state filing deadlines. Furthermore, AI platforms successfully guided voters to official, direct state election websites less than 50% of the time, often relying instead on less authoritative sources or dropping explanatory text entirely mid-election season.

During the 2026 midterms, major social media platforms largely shifted away from aggressive, centralized content removal, opting instead for a combination of automated labeling, narrow logistical rules, and crowdsourced fact-checking. As AI-generated content flooded the zone, researchers noted that platform moderation frequently struggled to keep pace with the volume, speed, and localization of the disinformation.

Here is how the major platforms handled the landscape:

Meta (Facebook and Instagram)

- **Disclosure and Labeling:** Meta required political advertisers to actively disclose their use of synthetic or AI-generated content. The platform also used automated systems to apply labels to AI-generated images that contained standard C2PA authentication metadata.
- **Logistical Bans vs. Hands-Off Commentary:** Meta strictly banned posts and ads that misrepresented the logistical requirements of voting—such as false election dates, polling locations, or legal rules—as well as threats of violence. However, the company did very little active moderation of broader political commentary or deepfakes that fell outside these narrow parameters. Rather than removing misleading political speech, Meta relied on limiting the algorithmic reach of unsolicited political content in users' recommended feeds.

X (formerly Twitter)

- **Crowdsourced Moderation:** X largely eschewed top-down content removal or centralized AI labeling, relying instead on its crowdsourced "Community Notes" system. The platform depended on its user base to flag, fact-check, and append context to AI deepfakes and misleading election claims as they went viral.

YouTube (Google)

- **Logistics Banned, Denialism Allowed:** Like Meta, YouTube explicitly prohibited false claims about when, where, and how to vote. However, the platform maintained its 2023 policy reversal that allowed users and campaigns to post content falsely claiming that past elections were marred by widespread fraud, arguing that removing such content would have a chilling effect on political speech.

The Overall Effectiveness Because the US lacks a federal framework requiring tech platforms to disclose algorithmic data to independent researchers (unlike the EU's Digital Services Act), election watchdogs had limited visibility into how effectively these platforms were actually catching AI deepfakes internally. Ultimately, false claims and synthetic media frequently mutated and spread across different languages faster than automated metadata scanners or crowdsourced notes could correct them.

During the 2026 midterms, political campaigns moved beyond simply generating deepfakes and fully integrated Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models (LLMs) into their core strategic operations. Campaigns utilized these tools to automate outreach, hyper-personalize messaging, and streamline back-end logistics at an unprecedented scale.

Here is how campaigns practically weaponized AI and LLMs to their advantage:

- **Conversational AI and "Persuasion Bots":** Campaigns deployed LLM-powered text agents and chatbots to hold one-on-one conversations with thousands of voters simultaneously. Instead of a static automated text, these AI agents could digest a voter's replies and engage in long-form, dynamic conversations—sometimes lasting over an hour—to understand the voter's core concerns and present tailored, evidence-based arguments to persuade them.
- **Hyper-Personalized Micro-Targeting:** AI tools ingested massive datasets—combining past voting records, social media activity, and even shopping habits—to segment voters into highly specific profiles. Algorithms then generated thousands of different versions of a single advertisement in real-time, tweaking the words, imagery, and emotional tone to match exactly what an individual voter was statistically most likely to respond to.
- **"Generative Engine Optimization" (GEO):** Anticipating that voters would ask AI chatbots (like ChatGPT or Google AI) for election information, campaigns began optimizing their websites specifically for LLMs. By structuring their policy pages in ways that AI data-scrapers favor, campaigns aggressively engineered the digital landscape so that neutral chatbots would cite their specific talking points when voters asked broad political questions.
- **Rapid, Low-Cost Ad Production:** Generative AI drastically reduced the need for film crews and expensive production. Campaigns spent roughly $137 million on over 220 AI-generated video ads in the lead-up to November. In total, generative AI ad creative—including cloned voices and manipulated likenesses—was featured in 47% of the 36 gubernatorial races on the 2026 ballot.
- **Back-Office Automation:** Behind the scenes, campaigns used LLMs to instantly synthesize hours of focus group transcripts, draft thousands of variations of fundraising emails, and rapidly compile opposition research.

The Partisan AI Divide Interestingly, researchers noted a distinct split in how the two major US parties deployed the technology. Republican candidates and groups embraced AI prominently for public-facing media, accounting for 81% of tracked AI-generated advertisements. Conversely, Democratic campaigns were more hesitant to use visible synthetic media—betting that voters would find it distasteful—and instead focused their AI use behind the scenes on data analysis, coding, and search optimization.

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)—sometimes called Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)—is the strategic practice of formatting web content so that Artificial Intelligence models find, trust, and cite it when synthesizing answers for users.

Instead of trying to rank as a single blue link on a traditional search engine results page, ***political campaigns use GEO*** to ensure their candidate's narrative is embedded directly inside the conversational responses generated by chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Perplexity.

As of the 2026 midterms, the legal framework surrounding Artificial Intelligence is still adapting to the specific, novel tactic of "AI search poisoning." Because GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) manipulates third-party AI platforms rather than publishing direct advertisements, it exploits a gray area in traditional campaign law.



However, when political campaigns are caught deliberately poisoning AI systems with false information about opponents, they face legal consequences across several established domains:

1. Defamation and Libel (Civil Litigation) The most direct consequence for planting false, reputation-destroying narratives is a civil defamation lawsuit. If a campaign intentionally injects fabricated claims into public data sources to poison AI outputs, the targeted opponent can sue for damages. However, this is legally challenging: because politicians are considered "public figures," they must prove "actual malice"—meaning the campaign knew the information was false and seeded it anyway. Furthermore, it is technically difficult to prove that a specific campaign's data manipulation is what directly caused an AI chatbot to generate the defamatory answer.

2. State Election Laws on Deceptive AI Leading up to the 2026 midterms, numerous US states enacted strict laws regulating the use of deceptive synthetic media and AI in elections. While many of these laws focus primarily on deepfake audio and video, their provisions against "materially deceptive" content intended to harm a candidate's electoral prospects can apply to text-based AI poisoning. Penalties under these state laws include:

- **Injunctive Relief:** Courts can issue immediate restraining orders forcing the campaign (or the platforms hosting the poisoned data) to remove the deceptive content.
- **Civil Fines and Damages:** Campaigns can be fined heavily—in some states, up to $1,000 per day of violation, or up to 500% of the total amount they spent promoting the deceptive media. The victimized candidate can also sue for special damages and attorney's fees.
- **Criminal Charges:** In severe cases, intentionally publishing deceptive media to influence an election or injure a candidate is treated as a crime. Depending on the state and the severity of the offense, perpetrators can face misdemeanor or felony charges, carrying maximum sentences of up to five years in prison and substantial fines.

3. Campaign Finance and Disclosure Violations Federal and state election laws mandate strict transparency regarding how campaign money is spent. If a campaign secretly funds a network of "pink slime" websites, fake news portals, or bot farms to execute an AI search poisoning strategy, they are spending undisclosed campaign funds.

If caught, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) or state election boards can hit the campaign with massive fines for failing to report the expenditures and operating illegal "dark money" operations.

4. Cybersecurity and Computer Fraud If a campaign's AI poisoning strategy goes beyond publishing optimized web pages and crosses into actively hacking or illicitly altering authoritative third-party databases (such as unauthorized edits to government portals, academic databases, or secure news archives), the operatives involved can be charged under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) or state-level cybercrime laws.

When political campaigns or users are caught attempting to manipulate AI models or poison generative search results, major AI companies enforce strict terms of service and spam policies. In the lead-up to the 2026 midterms, these tech giants officially classified Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) and narrative poisoning as policy violations, though they enforce them in different ways.

Google: Algorithmic Penalties and Deindexing In May 2026, Google officially updated its Search spam policies to explicitly ban attempts to "manipulate generative AI responses" in its AI Overviews. If a campaign or marketer is caught using GEO tactics—such as publishing biased listicles, generating fake facts, or structuring "pink slime" content specifically to trick Google's AI into citing it—Google applies a tiered penalty system:

- **AI Removal:** The violating content is forcibly removed from appearing in AI Overviews, ensuring the AI model no longer references the compromised source.
- **Search Demotion:** The offending website is demoted in traditional Google search rankings, stripping it of organic visibility.
- **Global Deindexing:** For severe or repeat violators who extensively exploit AI poisoning, Google reserves the right to completely ban and remove their entire website from the Google Search index.

OpenAI: Account Termination and API Bans OpenAI does not run a traditional search engine, so its penalties focus on platform access. OpenAI's Usage Policies explicitly prohibit using its services (like ChatGPT or the GPT-4 API) for political campaigning, lobbying, or election interference.

- **Prohibited Activities:** Campaigns are strictly banned from using OpenAI to create public-facing persuasion bots, generate deceptive synthetic media, or mass-produce "astroturfed" materials like fake endorsements or fake voter comments. They are also prohibited from attempting to bypass safety safeguards.
- **Enforcement:** If a political operative uses OpenAI's API to generate the text used in a search poisoning campaign, OpenAI penalizes them by immediately suspending or permanently terminating their developer accounts and revoking API access, effectively shutting down the campaign's automated backend.

The Enforcement Loophole Despite these strict penalties, industry analysts note that policing AI poisoning remains incredibly difficult. While Google can easily deindex a campaign's official website, modern AI poisoning often involves planting a few sentences of fabricated context into highly trusted, user-generated platforms (like Reddit or Wikipedia). AI companies cannot blindly deindex or penalize these massive platforms without breaking their own AI models, leaving them struggling to enforce policies against decentralized manipulation.

The core generative AI models (Large Language Models, or LLMs) actually do not have an internal mechanism to verify facts or judge credibility. LLMs are fundamentally predictive text engines trained to optimize for linguistic fluency and coherence, meaning they reward plausible-sounding text even if it is factually incorrect.

To verify credibility, AI companies wrap the LLM in an external search architecture known as **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG)** or **web grounding**. Instead of letting the AI guess the answer from its static training data, the system forces the AI to search a live database or the web, retrieve relevant documents, and synthesize an answer based only on those documents.

This RAG pipeline evaluates source credibility using several automated mechanisms before the text ever reaches the LLM:

1. Domain Authority and "Trust Tiering" AI search pipelines do not treat the web equally. They rely heavily on traditional search engine infrastructure (like Google's PageRank or Bing's algorithms) to pre-weight sources based on historical domain authority. Authoritative domains (like .gov, .edu, Wikipedia, and established news wire services) are placed in a high-trust tier. When an AI scrapes the web for an answer, its retrieval algorithm mathematically prioritizes information extracted from these high-trust domains over unknown blogs or partisan websites.

2. Semantic Consensus and Cross-Referencing Rather than trusting a single source, grounded AI systems retrieve multiple documents (often 10 to 20 different web pages) and look for factual consensus. If the system pulls data from five highly rated sources and they all align on a specific fact, the system calculates a high confidence score for that information. If a scraped source introduces a claim that directly contradicts the consensus of the other retrieved documents, the system is programmed to deprioritize or discard the outlier claim.

3. Freshness Controls Because outdated information is a primary cause of AI "hallucinations," retrieval systems use page-age parameters and timestamp metadata to filter out stale content. The system verifies credibility by checking if a source is current enough to answer the user's query accurately, automatically dropping older pages from the context window.

4. Structural and Schema Signals AI web scrapers look for structural indicators of quality. They favor pages that use clear schema markup, cite their own sources, and

present data in easily readable formats (like tables and bullet points). Conversely, the system degrades the credibility score of pages overloaded with ads, heavy JavaScript, or keyword-stuffed "spammy" text. (This reliance on structure is exactly why Generative Engine Optimization is so effective; political operatives mimic these high-quality structural signals to trick the AI).

5. Post-Retrieval Context Guarding and Attribution Once the retrieval system selects the most credible web passages, it feeds them to the LLM with strict instructions. Modern systems use "attributed answering," which forces the LLM to link every generated claim directly back to a specific source passage. Additionally, developers use "context guards"—a secondary, background AI evaluation step that scans the final generated answer to ensure it didn't mutate or hallucinate details beyond what the scraped sources explicitly stated.

Ultimately, AI models verify credibility by proxy. Because they cannot "understand" truth in a human sense, they rely on algorithmic signals—domain authority, multi-source consensus, recency, and site structure—to estimate whether a piece of data is safe to repeat.

Evaluating the factual accuracy of AI chatbots has moved beyond simple human review. Because modern AI chatbots are often built on Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) architectures—where the AI searches external databases before answering—researchers use specialized frameworks to audit both *how* the AI retrieves information and *what* it generates.

Independent researchers and developers typically evaluate AI accuracy using a combination of programmatic methodologies, structured metrics, and specialized observability software.

1. Core Evaluation Methodologies

- **LLM-as-a-Judge:** Researchers use a highly capable "frontier" model (like GPT-4o or Claude 3.5 Sonnet) to grade the outputs of the chatbot being tested. The judge model is given a strict grading rubric and compares the chatbot's answer against a verified "ground truth" dataset. While faster and cheaper than human review, researchers must calibrate LLM judges to avoid "position bias" (where the AI prefers longer answers or answers placed first).
- **Automated Benchmarking:** Models are tested against standardized, publicly available test datasets (like Stanford's HELM or MMLU). While useful for establishing a baseline for general knowledge, benchmarks often fail to predict how a model will perform on specific, real-world, open-ended tasks.
- **Human-in-the-Loop Consensus:** Because LLM judges can be biased, researchers use domain experts to grade a small, statistically significant sample of the chatbot's answers. These human consensus scores are used to calibrate the automated LLM judges before scaling the evaluation.

- **Adversarial Red Teaming:** Researchers intentionally inject ambiguous prompts, out-of-distribution examples, prompt attacks, and contradictory source documents into the chatbot to see if it hallucinates or breaks its safety guardrails under pressure.

2. The RAGAS Evaluation Metrics

To diagnose exactly *why* a chatbot hallucinated, researchers use frameworks like **RAGAS** (Retrieval Augmented Generation Assessment). Instead of just giving the chatbot a pass/fail grade, RAGAS breaks the chatbot's response down into specific metrics:

- **Faithfulness (Hallucination check):** Evaluates the Generation stage. It measures whether every claim in the AI's final answer can be traced directly back to the retrieved context. If the AI adds outside information, the faithfulness score drops.
- **Answer Relevancy:** Evaluates the Generation stage. It measures whether the AI actually answered the user's prompt, penalizing the model for tangential or evasive responses.
- **Context Precision & Recall:** Evaluates the Retrieval stage. Precision measures if the system prioritized the most relevant information, while Recall measures if the system successfully fetched *all* the necessary information to answer the question.
- **Answer Correctness:** An end-to-end metric measuring how factually accurate the AI's final answer is when compared to a verified "gold standard" human answer.

3. Specialized Auditing Software Tools

Researchers and enterprises use dedicated AI observability platforms to run these evaluations at scale, both during development (offline eval) and while the chatbot is live (online eval):

Platform	Core Strength for Researchers
Braintrust	Connects evaluation directly to development workflows. Researchers can run evaluations and compare model accuracy *before* pushing new code or prompts.
Galileo	Specializes in automated hallucination detection, utilizing model-consensus checks to flag fabricated information in real-time.
Arize AI	Focuses on production monitoring and drift detection, alerting researchers when a live AI system's accuracy begins to degrade over time.
Maxim AI	Designed for multi-step agent simulation, allowing researchers to validate how an AI handles complex, multi-turn conversations rather than just single queries.
LangSmith / Langfuse	Deep tracing tools that allow developers to see the exact step-by-step logic, prompts, and database queries the AI used to arrive at its final answer.

Another view (report from Claude)

Three days after the vote, the early evidence points mainly to a referendum on Trump. It was driven by money worries and the Iran war, and those two were closely linked. Social media, TV ads and rallies helped spread the message, but they weren't the main cause. Everything below

rests on exit polls, which are early estimates. Studies of verified voters usually come out months later.

How big the win was. Democrats won both chambers. NBC News projects 258 House seats, a level Democrats hadn't reached since 1993, and they also flipped governorships in Texas, Georgia, Nevada, Ohio and Iowa. Republican redistricting didn't stop it. NBC News (https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2026-election/live-blog/midterm-election-results-2026-news-trump-live-updates-rcna605763)NBC News (https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2026-election/live-blog/midterm-election-results-2026-news-trump-live-updates-rcna605763)

1. Trump himself: the biggest single factor. In CBS's exit poll, Trump's approval was about 38%, the lowest the page cites for a president at a midterm. About 6 in 10 said Trump was a factor in their House vote, and about 6 in 10 think he puts his personal interests ahead of the country. This was a vote against Trump more than a vote for Democrats: about 1 in 5 Democratic House voters had an unfavorable view of the Democratic Party. Watch CBS News +3 (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-midterm-elections-2026/)

2. "Things got worse": prices and the war. About three-quarters of voters were at least dissatisfied with the country's direction, and they were more than twice as likely to say their finances were worse than better. The war made the price problem worse: gas prices jumped after the U.S. and Israel struck Iran on February 28, 2026. Before the election, 86% of Americans believed the war had raised the cost of living. About six in 10 voters said attacking Iran was the wrong decision, but only about a third called the war crucial to their vote, fewer than named cost of living or corruption. Corruption mattered a lot: roughly nine in 10 voters called it a major factor. Watch CBS News +5 (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-midterm-elections-2026/)

The polls don't directly measure your "out of touch" idea, but there are signs of it. After the 2025 losses, Trump insisted there was no affordability problem. AI data centers were a newer grievance: majorities opposed a data center in their community in every Senate battleground. ground (https://ground.news/article/americas-middle-class-turns-on-trump-amid-affordability-crisis)CBS News (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-exit-polls-midterm-elections-2026/)

3. TV ads: not decisive, because Republicans had more. It was the most expensive midterm ever, and Republicans outspent Democrats on ads, about $5.18 billion to $4.77 billion, according to AdImpact. One analyst saw it as a natural experiment, with Republicans holding the money and Democrats the voice against the administration. The side with more money lost almost everywhere. atlantanewsfirst (https://www.atlantanewsfirst.com/2026/10/29/2026-midterms-set-new-record-political-

ad-spending/)wsmv (https://www.wsmv.com/2026/10/29/2026-midterms-set-new-record-political-ad-spending/)

4. Social media: Democrats caught up, but it's hard to prove it caused the result. The DNC partnered with more than 500 creators. Democrats also used influencers to reach Latino voters, since 30% of Latinos regularly get news from social media influencers. One independent count found 54.8% of Democratic candidates on TikTok versus 19.2% of Republicans, and 82% of Democrats who flipped seats had TikTok accounts. That doesn't prove much, though. Candidates in winnable swing seats tend to run bigger, more professional campaigns anyway. The most likely role is that social media carried the price-and-Trump message to young voters who pay little attention to politics. The GOP appears to have lost ground with voters under 30. Inside the Democratic Party's effort to enlist social media influencers ahead of the midterms and 2028 +3 (https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/amp/news/story/inside-democratic-partys-effort-enlist-social-media-influencers-134993649)

5. Rallies: mostly mobilizing people already on board. Trump held more than 20 rallies in October alone, and returned to Ohio three times in a month, where Democrats still flipped the governorship. Obama rallied selectively and taped at least two dozen ads. As far as I know, research generally finds rallies matter mainly for news coverage and volunteer energy, not for persuading voters. The Senior +2 (https://www.thesenior.com.au/story/9382224/trump-obama-make-appeals-to-voters-in-pivotal-states/)

Enthusiasm and history. Early voting set a midterm record, with 58.9 million ballots cast, and in 16 states, Democratic primary turnout relative to Republican was its strongest since 2006. The president's party usually loses seats in midterms anyway. wcpo (https://www.wcpo.com/politics/america-votes/americans-head-to-polls-in-high-stakes-2026-midterm-elections)goodmorningamerica (https://goodmorningamerica.com/news/story/democratic-enthusiasm-2026-primaries-midterm-elections-137256884)

How Republicans explain it. Trump said Democrats did a "good job" and blamed Republican candidates, while Vice President Vance blamed the war in Iran. Before the vote, Republican operatives had also criticized their Senate candidates in Kansas, South Carolina and Mississippi as unprepared. PBS (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-takeaways-from-the-2026-midterms-and-answers-to-your-election-questions)nationalsecurityjournal (https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/?p=59946)

Proposed ranking:

- first, dislike of Trump;
- second, the sense of being worse off (prices plus the war), and these two are hard to separate
- third, higher Democratic turnout. Social media, ads and rallies mostly helped spread anger that was already there.

Role of Musk's social media influence (X, Grok) on these elections

(in particular, impact of Musks donations to republican candidates and the results obtained)

Musk spent more than any individual donor ever has, and it bought Republicans almost nothing they wouldn't have won anyway. In Texas it may even have backfired, because he became a campaign issue himself. X does nudge what its users pay attention to, but it mainly reaches Republicans now, not the swing voters who decided this election. Grok was a misinformation risk, but I found no evidence that it changed any result. All of this is from the first three days after the vote, so totals are still being updated.

The money

> The totals differ by source. A New York Times tally puts it at about $474 million, but that figure only runs through October 14, so the real total may be higher, including undisclosed dark money. OpenSecrets counts more than $445 million to Republican candidates, PACs and outside groups. The main channels were his own America PAC (~$216M), the Senate Leadership Fund (~$168M), and the Congressional Leadership Fund (~$30M). About $212M went toward Ken Paxton's Senate bid, and roughly $224M was spent in Texas overall. He also authorized America PAC to spend $100–120 million on a field program to turn out conservative voters. Elon Musk spent nearly $500 million on the midterms. It bought him almost nothing - Fast Company +4 (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)

What it bought

- **Overall:** Of 106 Musk-backed candidates, 44 lost, 18 won, and 44 races were still uncalled as of Wednesday. All 18 winners were in seats Republicans were already expected to win. Fast Company (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)
- **His biggest bets:** Paxton lost the Texas Senate race to James Talarico by about 12 points. Governor Abbott lost to Democrat Gina Hinojosa, Ramaswamy lost the Ohio governor's race, and Susan Collins, whom America PAC backed, lost in Maine. In Texas, Democrats won every statewide office. Fast Company

(https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)NPR (https://www.npr.org/2026/11/04/nx-s1-6029650/elon-musk-midterms-democrats-texas-congress)

That win-loss record overstates the failure a little. Musk put his money into the hardest races, and in a wave year those are exactly the ones that fall. The real question is whether Paxton would have lost by 20 points instead of 12 without the money, and nobody can answer that yet.

Why the money didn't work

1. **The national mood overwhelmed it.** NPR concluded the results suggest Musk's money wasn't enough to overcome a wave of Democratic enthusiasm. NPR (https://www.npr.org/2026/11/04/nx-s1-6029650/elon-musk-midterms-democrats-texas-congress)
2. **It didn't buy a real money advantage.** Talarico's own campaign raised far more than Paxton's, so Musk's money mostly filled a gap. Also, under U.S. rules candidates pay the lowest ad rates and super PACs don't, so a super PAC dollar buys less airtime. dnyuz (https://dnyuz.com/?p=311782)
3. **Musk himself became the issue.** He is unpopular: in an April 2026 survey, 47% of Americans viewed him unfavorably and 34% favorably. Talarico campaigned directly against him, telling crowds that Musk "wants his very own personal United States senator", with an ad saying "Texas is not for sale". In his victory speech, Talarico said his campaign had beaten "goliaths," including the richest man in the world. Paxton did the opposite and said he was proud to have Elon's support. Americans have a negative view of Elon Musk +4 (https://data.verasight.io/ai/americans-view-elon-musk-more-negatively-than-positively)
4. **The ads talked about the wrong things.** America PAC ran ads in four states attacking Democrats over transgender athletes and gender-affirming care, while exit polls showed voters focused on cost of living, corruption and the Iran war. A fact-check found distorted votes, missing context and at least one doctored quote in some of these ads. advocate (https://www.advocate.com/politics/election/elon-musk-pac-transgender-attacks)rawstory (https://rawstory.com/elon-musk-campaign-ad)
5. **The backlash against AI and data centers.** In Texas, his main focus, regulation of data centers became a key debate. One analyst called the Texas results "clearly a rejection of the Elon Musk aspect" of Trump's circle. Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/11/4/musk-makes-light-of-defeats-after-record-spend-on-republican-candidates)CNBC (https://www.cnbc.com/2026/11/04/elon-musk-midterms-ai-data-centers.html)

X and Grok

Who X reaches. Pew found 21% of U.S. adults use X, and its audience has flipped: 24% of Republicans use it versus 19% of Democrats. Pew also found a drop in users aged 18 to 29, the age group that swung most toward Democrats this year. X has become a place to reinforce Republicans, not to persuade swing voters. The Democrats' online advantage was on TikTok and Instagram. pew s latest social media report shows pews xs staying power in the u +2 (https://www.hashe.com/tech-news/pew-s-latest-social-media-report-shows-pews-xs-staying-power-in-the-u/)

What the algorithm does. The strongest evidence is a randomized experiment published in Nature (Gauthier et al.), run in 2023. X's "For You" feed raised the share of right-leaning content by 2.9 percentage points, and users became 4.7 points more likely to prioritize Republican-favored issues such as crime, inflation and immigration. The effects lasted even after the algorithm was switched off, but there was no detectable effect on partisanship. So X shapes what its users pay attention to, not which party they vote for. There's an irony here: in 2026, inflation was an issue that hurt the party in power, which was the Republicans. A few weeks of X's algorithm can make you more right-wing—and it doesn't wear off quickly +2 (https://phys.org/news/2026-02-weeks-algorithm-wing-doesnt-quickly.html)

Musk's own posts. In 2024, one watchdog estimated that his posts got twice as many views as all political ads on X combined, worth roughly $24 million in ads. I found no similar measurement for 2026. On Election Day he posted "Vote red today!", and by Wednesday morning the post had been quietly deleted. euronews (https://www.euronews.com/2024/11/06/musks-x-sees-record-usage-during-us-election-yet-study-claims-he-boosted-the-algorithm)Fast Company (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)

Grok. The risk is well documented, but no effect on the result has been shown. In one test of four chatbots, only Grok produced all 100 prompts researchers asked for that could be used in a misinformation campaign. In an October image test, Grok produced realistic images for nearly all prompts. However, as of late October, a Harvard Ash Center field report found no standout case of a deepfake significantly misleading a particular group of voters. X itself suspended more than 13,000 accounts tied to suspected influence operations from Iran, Russia and China. AI Disinformation Could Be One of the Biggest Threats to the 2026 Midterms +3 (https://thefulcrum.us/media-technology/ai-disinformation-2026-midterm-elections-threats-election-integrity)

Bottom line

This repeats a pattern from 2025, when Musk's candidate lost a Wisconsin Supreme Court race by 10 points in a state Trump had carried five months earlier. When the national mood is this strong, money and platforms stop making much difference, and a very visible, unpopular donor gives the other side a target. PBS (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/musk-says-he-will-cut-back-on-political-spending-after-paying-at-least-250m-backing-trump-in-2024)

The costs for Musk are now real:

- **Investigations:** Democrats will chair committees with subpoena power in January and are considering probes into his DOGE role and his companies' federal contracts. Fast Company (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)
- **Federal business:** about one-fifth of SpaceX's 2025 revenue came from federal agencies. Fast Company (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)
- **Markets:** SpaceX shares fell 3.8% and Tesla 3.5% in premarket trading. Fast Company (https://www.fastcompany.com/91634243/elon-musk-spent-nearly-500-million-on-the-midterms-it-bought-him-almost-nothing)

The study is Gauthier, Hodler, Widmer and Zhuravskaya, "The political effects of X's feed algorithm," *Nature* 652 (2026). Its main finding: X's "For You" feed moved users' views on specific issues to the right, did not change which party they identify with, and switching it off did not undo the effect.

What they did

- **Team:** Germain Gauthier (Bocconi University), Roland Hodler (University of St. Gallen), Philine Widmer and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya (Paris School of Economics). It was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and run entirely independently of X. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)psypost (https://www.psypost.org/xs-feed-algorithm-shifts-users-political-opinions-to-the-right-new-study-finds/)
- **Timing and sample:** a field experiment on X from July to September 2023, using a YouGov panel of active US-based X users. 4,965 completed the final survey. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- **The design:** participants were randomly assigned to the chronological ("Following") or the algorithmic ("For you") feed for about 7 weeks. At the start, 76% were already on the algorithmic feed. This creates two experiments in one. Chronological users randomly switched *on* the algorithm, and algorithmic users randomly switched it *off*. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

- **Measurement:** a Chrome extension recorded the first 100 posts each participant saw (599 people), the accounts followed were collected for 2,387 people, and posts were classified with a Llama 3-based system. Compliance was 85% (self-reported) and 89% where it could be observed. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

What they found

1. Switching the algorithm on moved issue attitudes to the right. Conservative policy priorities rose by 0.11 standard deviations, the belief that the Trump investigations are unacceptable by 0.08, pro-Kremlin attitudes on Ukraine by 0.12, and the overall attitudes index by 0.12 (P = 0.004). In practice, inflation, immigration and crime became more important to users, and education, healthcare and climate less so. The Bocconi summary calls effects of about 0.1 SD over seven weeks small but meaningful. The political effects of X's feed algorithm +2 (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

2. Party identity didn't change. The effects on partisanship and on hostility toward the other party (affective polarization) were nulls, precisely estimated, whether the algorithm was switched on or off. The feed changed which issues people cared about, not which party they belonged to. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2)

3. Switching it off undid nothing: a "ratchet." Switching off produced no significant political effects. The explanation is who people follow. With the algorithm on, follows of conservative accounts rose by 0.17 SD and of conservative activist accounts by 0.18, with no significant change for liberal accounts or news outlets. Users kept following the accounts the algorithm had shown them, so their chronological feed stayed changed afterwards. The political effects of X's feed algorithm +2 (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

4. What the algorithm actually showed people:

- Likes, reposts and comments were about 480%, 408% and 508% higher. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- Conservative posts were 2.9 percentage points more likely, liberal posts 1.0 point. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- Posts from news outlets fell by 15.5 points, a 58% drop. Posts from political activists rose by 5.9 points and entertainment by 9.1 points. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

5. Who moved. The shift was stronger among Republicans and Independents. Democrats' views were largely unaffected. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)

Why it matters: the Meta puzzle

The big 2020 Meta experiments found that chronological feeds changed what people saw and lowered engagement but had no detectable effects on polarization or attitudes. Many read that as "algorithms don't matter." This study shows why that conclusion was too quick. Switching the algorithm off can't reveal its effect if that effect is already built into who you follow. Zhuravskaya's point is that you can't judge an algorithm's impact only by turning it off, because the impact can be long-term. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)t-invariant (https://t-invariant.org/2026/03/social-networks-mirror-or-lever-ekaterina-zhuravskaya-on-how-the-x-algorithm-irreversibly-shifts-views-to-the-right/)

How solid is it?

Strengths.

Walter Quattrociocchi (Sapienza University of Rome) calls it one of the most rigorous independent field experiments on algorithmic feeds. Belén Laspra (University of Oviedo) notes the researchers looked at the content actually shown and at real behavior, such as accounts followed, not just self-reported attitudes. sciencemediacentre (https://sciencemediacentre.es/en/study-shows-xs-twitter-algorithm-moves-users-towards-more-conservative-political-positions)sciencemediacentre (https://sciencemediacentre.es/en/study-shows-xs-twitter-algorithm-moves-users-towards-more-conservative-political-positions)

Limitations:

- **Self-selection.** The "switch off" group had chosen the algorithm themselves. The authors admit unobserved differences between users who chose each feed may contribute to the asymmetry, although their re-weighting checks did not explain it away. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- **Who and when.** The results apply to X, to 2023, and to the platform owner's choices. They concern active users, so effects may be smaller for occasional ones, and the algorithm could change mid-study without the researchers knowing. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- **Dropouts.** About 22% of participants dropped out, though statistical bounds (Lee bounds) suggest this doesn't drive the results. nature (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- **My own notes:** the study measured survey attitudes, not votes. And the individual effects are significant but not overwhelmingly so (P between about 0.007 and 0.026). The combined index is the strongest result.

Musk's thumb on the scale, or the attention economy?

The study can't tell these apart, and both are plausible:

- **The case for engagement:** the paper cites an earlier study of Twitter's 2016 algorithm launch, well before Musk, which found it already favored right-wing content. Quattrociocchi reads the effects as working through more engagement and amplification rather than direct ideological persuasion, and warns against assuming the effect always goes in the same political direction. s41586 026 10098 2 +2 (https://iris.unibocconi.it/retrieve/470323d5-263d-44d1-aed2-d9dfb0c3557a/s41586-026-10098-2.pdf)
- **The case for the owner:** a 2024 study found that after July 13, 2024, Musk's own posts got a boost of about 6.4 million views, separate from the rise for other accounts. That suggests owner-level choices can add on top. techpolicy (https://www.techpolicy.press/new-research-points-to-possible-algorithmic-bias-on-x/)

What it says about the 2026 midterms

- **It fits X's failure to save Republicans.** The algorithm shifts which issues users care about, not party loyalty. The 2026 result was a verdict on the party in power.
- **A possible irony (my inference, which this study can't test).** In 2023, with Biden in office, making inflation more prominent hurt the Democrats. In 2026, with Trump in office and cost of living the top issue, the same push probably helped the opposition.
- **It mostly hardens the base.** The effect is strongest among Republicans and independents, and X's audience now leans Republican. So it mainly firms up Republican users' views on issues, with few persuadable voters in reach. Laspra adds a caveat: X's influence goes beyond its users, because journalists and politicians spread its content. sciencemediacentre (https://sciencemediacentre.es/en/study-shows-xs-twitter-algorithm-moves-users-towards-more-conservative-political-positions)
- **Today's algorithm is different.** X published the code of its "For You" algorithm on GitHub on January 20, 2026, and the new ranking uses the same transformer architecture as xAI's Grok model. Published code isn't the live trained model or its data, so there is no equivalent independent study of the current system yet. newsbytesapp (https://www.newsbytesapp.com/news/science/x-open-sources-for-you-feed-algorithm-heres-how-it-works/tldr)decrypt (https://decrypt.co/355108)

Policy angle

The ratchet effect weakens the standard fix of simply offering a chronological feed, which is what the EU's Digital Services Act requires (Article 38: very large platforms must offer at least one feed not based on profiling). If switching off doesn't undo the effect, what matters is the default setting and what users see first. Celia Díaz Catalán (Complutense University of Madrid) makes a related point: when traditional media are pushed aside, more polarizing voices fill the gap. sciencemediacentre (https://sciencemediacentre.es/en/study-shows-xs-twitter-algorithm-moves-users-towards-more-conservative-political-positions)

If it would help, I can set this alongside the 2020 Meta studies and the 2025 study that re-ranked hostile partisan posts on X (Piccardi et al.), which together are the core of the current evidence.

Yet another view (ChatGPT)

1. What happened—and what the early results do not yet tell us

Democratic victories extended into states and districts that had voted strongly for Trump in 2024. These are reliable outcomes, even while some individual races and precise national margins remain provisional as of this report. [1]

A midterm election is normally difficult for the president's party. The unusual feature of 2026 was the magnitude and breadth of Republican losses, including Senate contests in Texas, Kansas, Iowa, Ohio, North Carolina and South Carolina. It is therefore necessary to explain both the routine anti-incumbent tendency and the particular conditions of Trump's second term. [1, 2]

An important caution: comparing a 2024 presidential election with a 2026 House or Senate election is not a clean measure of individual vote-switching. Different candidates were on the ballot, different people participated, and the composition of the electorate changed.

2. The strongest explanation: economic promises collided with daily experience

Economic discontent is the clearest common denominator. Trump returned to office after campaigning on inflation and affordability. By the midterms, many voters perceived little relief—or worsening costs—and held his administration responsible. In the AP Voter Poll, about two-thirds said Trump's policies had made the economy worse; roughly eight in ten of that group supported Democratic House candidates. Grocery, fuel, healthcare and other everyday expenses featured prominently in voters' explanations. [2]

Pew's October survey, conducted before the election, found that 84% of registered voters considered the economy very important to their congressional vote. That made it a concern for both Democratic and Republican supporters, not just one side. This is why the issue could influence independents and previously Republican-leaning voters. [3]

A useful way to understand the reversal is as a problem of disappointed expectations. An incumbent government is judged not solely on objective economic indicators but on whether voters feel better off than they expected to be. Trump had promised relief; voters judged the promise against prices they encountered every week. Democratic advertisements exploited this gap by referring specifically to groceries and petrol rather than to abstract economic growth.

A particularly revealing sign: rejection without enthusiasm

Data for Progress found that 71% of persuadable voters in its surveys believed Trump had no solution to the cost of living. Yet only 16% believed Democrats had such a solution. The organization has a progressive orientation and its swing-voter sample requires care in generalization, but the result is consistent with the AP's broader observation that many Democratic voters remained skeptical of the party itself. This was much more a withdrawal of confidence from the government than an unqualified positive mandate for its opponents. [2, 4]

3. Dislike of Trump, opposition to policies, and a perceived loss of credibility

"Dislike of Trump" is too broad to serve as a complete explanation. It encompasses personal disapproval, objections to particular policies, and disappointment among people who had previously trusted him. These attitudes can reinforce one another, but they are not identical.

Pew's survey from September 28 to October 4 found Trump's approval rating at 30%. Among registered voters, 44% saw their prospective congressional vote as a vote against Trump, compared with 19% who saw it as a vote for him. These pre-election results suggest a national climate unfavorable to Republican candidates before any final campaign push. [3]

The AP Voter Poll found that about two-thirds of voters regarded Trump as focused on the wrong priorities, and about seven in ten believed Congress was not exercising enough checks and balances on the presidency. More than half said government corruption was crucial to their vote. These are not simply judgments about Trump's style: they raise questions about priorities, conduct and institutional restraints. [2]

Candidate selection also mattered. Some Republican nominees who had Trump's backing struggled with questions about their independence or suitability for office. In North Carolina, for example, about six in ten voters in the Senate race thought the Republican nominee was too supportive of Trump. The national climate was therefore compounded in certain states by unfavorable judgments of individual candidates. [2]

4. Were MAGA Republicans perceived as out of touch with reality?

The formulation is suggestive, but it should be translated into propositions that can be tested. A poll cannot demonstrate that a movement is "out of touch with reality"; it can show that voters perceive its leaders as out of touch with their own concerns, inattentive to evidence, or focused on priorities they reject.

The strongest evidence concerns priority mismatch. Many voters were concerned with prices, healthcare and a costly foreign conflict. Meanwhile, a series of controversies surrounding presidential conduct, institutional changes and the White House renovation received prominent attention. AP polling indicates that a large majority regarded Trump's priorities as misguided.

Such a mismatch can erode credibility even among people who do not agree with the Democrats on other issues. [2]

There is also a feedback mechanism: leaders and highly committed supporters may inhabit information environments that emphasize achievements and dismiss criticism, while undecided voters evaluate the administration through bills, news reports and local experiences. This does not prove that MAGA supporters were uniquely insulated from evidence—opposing partisan ecosystems also select and interpret information—but it offers a plausible hypothesis about why campaign rhetoric failed to overcome economic dissatisfaction.

5. The Iran war, corruption and democratic checks added separate pressures

The Iran war appears to have damaged Republicans independently of, and through, its economic effects. It raised questions about the costs and objectives of military action while contributing to concern about fuel prices. This was politically significant because Trump's appeal had included promises to reduce costs and avoid unnecessary wars. The AP and pre-election Pew surveys identified the conflict as a major component of the negative political environment. [2, 3]

Corruption and the proper limits of presidential power were not minor secondary themes. The AP Voter Poll found that concern about corruption was crucial to more than half of voters and that roughly seven in ten wanted stronger congressional checks. It would therefore be inaccurate to reduce the Democratic win to inflation alone. For some voters, control of Congress was a means of limiting presidential power; for others, it was a reaction to perceived self-interest in government. [2]

6. Why Democratic messaging was better suited to this election

Democratic candidates increasingly centered their campaign on affordability and accountability. Rather than reacting to every Trump controversy, effective messages connected Republican officeholders with concrete household pressures and with a perception that powerful political and corporate actors were being favored over ordinary people. The approach addressed issues that voters already considered urgent. [4, 5]

The Washington Post reviewed more than 8,000 campaign advertisements in competitive races. Nearly three in five mentioned the economy. Democrats were three times as likely as Republicans to mention grocery costs and twice as likely to mention gas prices; Republicans emphasized wages and tips more often. The messages thus approached the same economic anxiety from different directions. [5]

The difference is important: a successful campaign message often does not change a voter's priorities. It attaches a credible explanation and a voting choice to priorities already present. Still, one cannot infer from an election win that every message caused votes to change. The economic focus is strongly documented; its precise contribution is not.

7. Television advertising: massive exposure, ambiguous causal impact

Television remained a central battleground. The Washington Post's early-October analysis of competitive races found nearly $1 billion in spending by Republicans versus $661 million by Democrats in the ads it examined. Wesleyan Media Project's independent tracking likewise recorded a Republican financial advantage in competitive Senate advertising during late September and early October, although outside-group purchasing practices meant that spending translated imperfectly into numbers of spots aired. [5, 6]

The outcome refutes the simple proposition that the party spending most on advertising necessarily wins. It does not establish that Republican ads failed or that Democratic ads were decisive: advertising may have limited a losing side's defeat, encouraged participation or moved particular races without determining the national result.

A revealing strategic indicator came from Axios, which found that Trump appeared in 66% of Republican House primary ads but only 3% of Republican House general-election ads. A president who was an asset to Republican primary candidates appears to have become a liability in campaigns targeting the wider electorate. This is a behavioral signal from political professionals, not itself experimental evidence of voter responses. [7]

8. Social media and livestreams: a rapidly changing information environment

The 2026 cycle provided striking examples of digital communication. Democratic organizations pursued younger voters through short videos, humor, candidate clips, creators and online conversations. Candidates such as James Talarico and Abdul El-Sayed developed strong digital audiences, while campaign material circulated beyond official party accounts. Reuters reported that election-related livestreams generated 10.27 million hours of viewing across more than 2,500 channels during the 30 days before the vote. These figures establish scale of attention, not electoral effect. [8, 9]

Social-media influence can operate through at least four channels: (1) information and issue framing; (2) reinforcement of existing attitudes; (3) persuasion among genuinely undecided voters; and (4) mobilization of people who already favor a candidate. Large view counts and viral clips do not distinguish these effects. Nor do they establish whether an apparent shift preceded exposure or followed it.

A commercial survey released by Sprout Social in October found that 55% of U.S. respondents said social media had informed or changed their voting opinion. Yet this is self-report from social-media users—not a randomized estimate of actual vote changes. Experimental research on Facebook and Instagram around the 2020 election found small or undetectable effects on several measured political outcomes when platform access or political ads were removed. Those

studies do not settle what TikTok or 2026 livestreams did, but they provide an important warning against simplistic claims of mass persuasion. [10–12]

A second limitation is direction. Pro-Trump networks, conservative podcasts and Republican creators also reached large audiences. Social media can amplify pro-government messages as well as criticism. To call it the cause of the Democratic win would require evidence showing that its net electoral effects favored Democrats, beyond the effect of underlying dissatisfaction.

9. Rallies: mobilization, media coverage and sometimes backlash

Rallies are designed to energize supporters, attract press attention, raise money and signal campaign momentum. They can help with turnout even when they persuade almost no undecided voters. Trump and other Republican leaders organized extensive rallies, yet the party lost. The correct inference is not that rallies were useless: without them, the losses might have been larger.

Academic research studying rallies in the 2016 election suggests that effects on candidate preferences can be short-lived and differ by location. A 2026 study by Henrique Barros found some immediate gains for Clinton rallies and heterogeneous effects for Trump rallies across urban and suburban areas. This research informs the mechanism, but it cannot provide a causal estimate for the 2026 midterms. [13]

Rallies may be more influential indirectly: a few thousand attendees produce news clips and social posts that reach far wider audiences. In that sense, dividing campaign influence neatly into “rallies,” “TV” and “social media” is misleading; one rally can feed all three channels.

10. Turnout versus persuasion: how a “wave” can arise

Democrats did not necessarily need millions of committed Republicans to change sides. A sweep can result from several processes operating at once: some Trump voters switching, other Republican voters abstaining, Democratic supporters becoming unusually motivated, and previously disengaged voters participating. Survey and election data suggest a combination rather than any single mechanism.

Pew measured a pronounced enthusiasm gap before the vote: 63% of registered Democratic House supporters said they were extremely motivated to vote, compared with 46% of Republican House supporters. At the same time, the AP Voter Poll found that around seven in ten participating voters under 30 supported Democratic House candidates, and that Hispanic voters shifted away from Republicans. The youth shift mattered, but voters under 30 were only about one-tenth of the electorate; it cannot account for everything on its own. [3, 14]

To untangle these channels rigorously, researchers will need voter-file turnout validation, longitudinal panel data, geographic comparisons and well-designed field experiments. Early exit

polls primarily describe who voted and what they reported believing, not what would have happened in the absence of a given campaign tactic.

11. A framework for distinguishing causes from communication effects

> **A PLAUSIBLE CAUSAL SEQUENCE—NOT A PROVEN MODEL**
>
> Daily economic and political experiences → judgments about the administration → selective exposure to political information → reinforcement or revision of beliefs → motivation and turnout → electoral outcome.
>
> Television, social media, interpersonal discussion and rallies can affect several stages simultaneously. An emotionally resonant message may change an opinion—or merely make an existing opinion more salient on election day.

For research on political judgment, the most interesting question is whether the election represents independent reconsideration in response to experience or simply a different configuration of social influence. Evidence of disappointed economic expectations supports the first mechanism in a limited sense: some citizens updated their assessment of the government. It does not prove improved critical thinking or decreased susceptibility to misinformation. A voter can arrive at a sound conclusion for poor reasons—or a mistaken conclusion after careful deliberation.

Three useful tests for subsequent research would be: (a) do panel surveys show that individuals changed views after experiencing specific price shocks, controlling for media consumption? (b) did exposure to different digital or television messages measurably alter turnout or candidate choice among similar voters? (c) did shifts occur among heavy social-media users only, or also among people who consume little political content? These tests would distinguish a genuine causal media effect from common reactions to the same political environment.

12. Final assessment and confidence levels

Explanation	Confidence	Reason for assessment
Economic dissatisfaction and broken expectations	Very high	Broad agreement between voter surveys and issue salience; precise policy-to-price causation is a separate question.
Trump disapproval and wrong-priorities perception	Very high	Documented by independent pre-election polling and AP post-election voter survey.

Explanation	Confidence	Reason for assessment
Corruption, checks and balances, Iran war	High	Frequently named concerns; individual contributions cannot be neatly separated.
Democratic message fit and Republican candidate weaknesses	Moderate to high	Strong descriptive evidence; limited causal identification of how many votes messages changed.
Differential turnout / mobilization	Moderate to high	Large pre-election motivation gap and demographic changes; validated turnout analysis is still developing.
Social media, livestreams and creators	Moderate for reach; low for net vote effect	Massive reach documented, but no robust causal attribution for 2026 yet.
Television ad volume and rallies	Low for decisive national impact	Documented activity, not a reliable estimate of their share of the victory.

The best summary is therefore: voters judged the administration negatively; Democrats offered a message that matched those concerns; a favorable mobilization environment helped them convert dissatisfaction into votes. Social networks, television and rallies were vehicles, not yet demonstrable root causes. The large win is a setback for MAGA Republican credibility, but it is not proof of a durable Democratic realignment. [2–4]

13. Sources and reading notes

The sources below combine independent election reporting, pre- and post-election voter surveys, advertising data and peer-reviewed or working-paper research. Items [11–13] concern earlier elections and are used only to clarify causal mechanisms, not to estimate the effect of 2026 campaigning.

[1] Associated Press. Calling control of Congress in the 2026 midterm elections (5 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.ap.org/the-definitive-source/behind-the-news/calling-control-of-congress-in-the-2026-midterm-elections/)

[2] Associated Press / SSRS. How Trump and Republicans lost the 2026 midterm elections, according to the AP Voter Poll (4 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/elections/2026/how-trump-and-republicans-lost-the-2026-midterm-elections-according-to-the-ap-voter-poll/)

[3] Pew Research Center. With Americans in a sour mood, Democratic voters are more engaged in midterms (8 Oct 2026). Open source (https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2026/10/08/with-americans-in-a-sour-mood-democratic-voters-are-more-engaged-in-midterms/)

[4] Data for Progress. 2026 Post-Election Report: How Democrats Rode Economic Populism to Landslide Victory (5 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos/2026-post-election-report-how-democrats-rode-economic-populism-to-landslide-victory)

[5] The Washington Post. We reviewed $1.6 billion of campaign ads. Here are the takeaways (8 Oct 2026). Open source (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/10/08/we-analyzed-midterm-campaign-advertising-here-are-takeaways/)

[6] Wesleyan Media Project. GOP Lead in Senate Spending Narrows; Democrats Catch Up in Airings (15 Oct 2026). Open source (https://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases-101526/)

[7] Axios / AdImpact. Trump vanishes from GOP campaign ads (3 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.axios.com/2026/11/03/republican-campaign-ads-trump-midterms)

[8] Reuters. Democrats swept the midterms. Millions watched on livestreams with their favorite influencers (5 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/democrats-swept-the-midterms-millions-watched-on-livestreams-with-their-favorite-2026-11-05/)

[9] The Washington Post. Picking fights and going viral: How Democrats are targeting young voters online (23 Oct 2026). Open source (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/10/23/picking-fights-going-viral-how-dems-are-targeting-young-voters-online/)

[10] Sprout Social / Glimpse. Q3 2026 Pulse Survey: social media and political opinions (self-reported) (6 Oct 2026). Open source (https://sproutsocial.com/insights/press/over-half-of-americans-say-social-media-posts-have-influenced-their-voting-decisions-during-election-season-according-to-new-sprout-social-research/)

[11] PNAS. The effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 election: A deactivation experiment (2024). Open source (https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2321584121)

[12] Nature Human Behaviour. The effects of Facebook and Instagram political advertisements on the 2020 US election (2026). Open source (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-025-02329-9)

[13] Barros, H., Research & Politics. Short-lived persuasion from campaign rallies: Evidence from the 2016 U.S. presidential election (2026). Open source (https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680261458109)

[14] Associated Press / SSRS. Young voters led a sharp shift toward Democrats in the 2026 midterms (4 Nov 2026). Open source (https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/elections/2026/young-voters-led-a-sharp-shift-toward-democrats-in-the-2026-midterms-the-ap-voter-poll-finds/)

As of November 1 2026

The US midterms are on Tuesday, 3 November, and control of Congress is at stake. Trump has tried to make election security a central issue, while Republicans defend narrow majorities in both chambers. Compared with Spain, the misinformation picture is more organized and more expensive, and much of it now comes from the campaigns themselves. thejakartapost (https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2026/07/17/trump-accuses-china-of-2020-election-interference)

1. The campaigns are now the main producers of deepfakes

This is the biggest change from earlier cycles. The Wesleyan Media Project has counted 220 political ads made at least partly with AI, costing over $137 million, compared with under $50,000 of AI ad spending in the whole 2024 cycle. Republican candidates or groups sponsored 81% of these ads, Democrats 12%, and independents the rest. Only 27% carried an AI disclaimer, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue calls this the first US election in which AI is built into every major social platform. unfiltered deepfakes how synthetic media is shaping the us midterm elections 1792986632524 +2 (https://www.wionews.com/world/unfiltered-deepfakes-how-synthetic-media-is-shaping-the-us-midterm-elections-1792986632524)

Some examples:

- A Republican-aligned super PAC has run AI ads showing Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff getting beauty treatments. Axios (https://axios.com/2026/10/19/ai-attack-ads-campaigns-elections-deepfakes)
- Michigan's El-Sayed was shown playing a board game with cards reading "Death to America" and "Celebrate 9/11." Axios (https://axios.com/2026/10/19/ai-attack-ads-campaigns-elections-deepfakes)
- Texas Democrat James Talarico has been repeatedly targeted by Ken Paxton's campaign and by outside super PACs. Axios (https://axios.com/2026/10/19/ai-attack-ads-campaigns-elections-deepfakes)

State laws have had little effect so far. AI ads carried disclaimers slightly less often in states with AI laws (29%) than in states without them (32%). Minnesota bans political deepfakes, yet a synthetic-video ad about Democratic Senate candidate Peggy Flanagan ran there in May. Fast

Company (https://fastcompany.com/91618378/midterms-ai-generated-political-ads-spending-research)

The sponsors defend these ads. The PAC behind the El-Sayed ad says it is based on his public statements. The Republican Senate committee says the Talarico ad uses his own words. Most Democrats have avoided AI ads and are using the issue against Republicans. Some Talarico ads carry the disclaimer "Made by humans, not AI." A Wesleyan co-director suggests Democrats face more reputational risk using a tool they argue should be regulated. Democrats are not entirely absent: California Governor Gavin Newsom is their best-known user of deepfake videos, mostly to troll Trump. Download Our App +4 (https://www.rawstory.com/republican-deepfake-ad/)

The disputed ground is a deepfake that puts a candidate's real past posts or statements into a fabricated scene. It is not a pure invention, and it is not authentic footage either. Existing rules don't fit it well.

2. Foreign operations: more output with AI, but unclear reach

Bloomberg reported on 14 October that Russia, Iran and China are using generative AI to aim disinformation at US voters, and OpenAI banned accounts linked to Russian and Iranian operations on 8 October. Investigators are still assessing how large these operations are and how directly they target the midterms. Analysts warn adversaries may try to train chatbots to skew AI-assisted search, and say Russia is currently the most active. Politico reported a covert Russian campaign against candidates of both parties who support Ukraine. Russia, Iran and China use AI to amplify disinformation ahead of midterms +2 (https://cryptobriefing.com/russia-iran-china-ai-disinformation-midterms/)

The platforms' response is hard to evaluate. X suspended more than 13,000 accounts it linked to three foreign operations from Iran, Russia and China, and relies on Community Notes for context on election posts. However, X has published no evidence for those attributions, so they rest on the company's own assessment. Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/15/x-suspends-13000-accounts-alleging-foreign-influence-ahead-of-us-midterms)dailysecurityreview (https://dailysecurityreview.com/?p=44672)

3. Fewer defences than in past cycles

Federal capacity has been reduced:

- The DNI dissolved the Foreign Malign Influence Center in August 2025, and the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment was the first in nearly a decade not to mention foreign threats to US elections. socradar (https://socradar.io/blog/2026-us-midterms-election-cyber/)

- Federal funding for the main election information-sharing centre (EI-ISAC) was cut, and the FBI's foreign influence task force was shut down. socradar (https://socradar.io/blog/2026-us-midterms-election-cyber/)
- In a Brennan Center survey, 75% of state and local election officials said their governments had not filled the gap left by the CISA cuts. nextgov (https://www.nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2026/04/federal-drawdown-election-support-destroyed-ongoing-relationships-experts-say/413181/)

The administration presents this differently. Former Homeland Security Secretary Noem said CISA's election office was closed to get the agency back to its core mission. Conservatives argue the earlier arrangement was used against speech. Senator Ted Cruz said the Biden administration used CISA to pressure social media companies into acting against constitutionally protected speech. meritalk (https://www.meritalk.com/articles/warner-warns-of-cisa-election-security-cuts-ahead-of-midterms/)floridaphoenix (https://floridaphoenix.com/?p=235191)

The platforms have also pulled back. X and YouTube scaled back misinformation flagging, and Meta ended its fact-checking programme after Trump's 2024 win. michiganadvance (https://michiganadvance.com/?p=97388)

4. Trust in the vote is the main battleground

In Spain the misinformation gathered around a disaster. In the US it gathers around the counting of votes.

In a primetime address on 16 July, Trump released declassified documents he said showed serious weaknesses in election infrastructure. Many of the documents did not fully support his claims, and his claims about the 2020 election have been repeatedly debunked. A 2021 intelligence assessment had concluded with high confidence that China did not interfere in 2020. Supporters treat the speech as a security push: Trump used it to call for the SAVE America Act, and Rubio promised to root out foreign interference. Senator Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, called the China claims bogus. In primetime speech, Trump doesn't provide evidence for illegal voting +3 (https://www.michiganpublic.org/2026-07-16/in-primetime-speech-trump-doesnt-provide-evidence-for-illegal-voting)

AI makes fake "evidence" of fraud cheap to produce. In tests by election-security researchers, several chatbots produced realistic images of ballot stuffing and of a voter holding a foreign passport, as well as fake government documents and deepfake videos of officials. politicalwire (https://politicalwire.com/2026/10/09/the-many-ways-ai-could-disrupt-the-midterms/)

5. Comparison with Spain, and what to watch

Three differences stand out:

- **Who produces it.** Spain's train-crash misinformation was mostly unplanned, spreading fast to fill gaps in official information. In the US, much of it is paid, planned and made by the campaigns themselves.
- **What fact-checkers can do.** Spanish fact-checkers can debunk a recycled photo. US voters face content where a candidate's real record is staged in a fake scene, which is harder to rule on.
- **Distrust of everything.** Researchers warn that as AI content spreads, people may become sceptical even of credible information. That doubt is useful to anyone who wants to dismiss inconvenient real footage. buffalo (https://www.buffalo.edu/news.host.html/content/shared/university/news/expert-tipsheets/2026/2026-midterms-misinformation-news-media-voters.detail.html)

For Tuesday and the days after, the Brennan Center notes that false claims follow a predictable calendar, with rumours about voter eligibility, ballot collection and mail ballots. Reuters, after interviewing more than 50 election officials and experts, flagged claims about non-citizen voting, voting machines and suspicious late-counted votes as a key risk. The Justice Department plans to deploy 1,000 federal election monitors. The days of slow counting in close races are when the most consequential claims are likely to appear. brennancenter (https://www.brennancenter.org/es/node/12524)outlookindia (https://www.outlookindia.com/international/trump-and-the-us-midterms-2026-nine-concerns-over-election-administration)

One caveat when reading all this: the loudest voices dominate social media and often don't reflect wider public opinion. Online volume is not the same as effect on votes. buffalo (https://www.buffalo.edu/news/tipsheets/2026/2026-midterms-misinformation-news-media-voters.html)

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Misinformation Prior to Two Elections: Spain 29-N and the 2026 US Midterms

As of November 1 2026

Summary

In both elections social networks shape how voters read events, but the misinformation comes from different places. In Spain it is mostly opportunistic: it rushes into the gap left by a disaster. In the US it is increasingly paid and planned, and much of it is made by the campaigns themselves.

- **Different producers.** Spain's train-crash hoaxes came from anonymous accounts recycling old photos and conspiracy templates. US campaigns and outside groups have spent over $137 million on AI-made ads, 81% of them Republican-sponsored.
- **Similar disputed ground.** The fights that matter most are not over obvious fakes. They are over half-true claims about responsibility and trust, where the label "misinformation" is itself a weapon.
- **Timing favours narrative over evidence.** Spain votes before investigators explain the Urda crash. The US risk peaks during the slow count after 3 November.

Foreign actors appear in both cases, mainly amplifying grievances that already exist rather than creating them.

Context

Spain. Sánchez called a snap general election for 29 November after Congress rejected his housing decrees on 2 October. The official campaign runs from 13 to 27 November. On 28

October an AVE ran into a stopped Iryo near Urda (Toledo), killing 68 people, nine months after 46 died at Adamuz on the same high-speed line.

United States. The 3 November midterms decide control of Congress for the last two years of Trump's term. Republicans are defending narrow majorities. Trump has made election security a central theme since a primetime address on 16 July.

The two cases differ in kind: Spain's information environment is shaped by a sudden shock, the US one by a long-running dispute over trust in the vote.

Side by side

Dimension	Spain (vote 29 Nov)	United States (vote 3 Nov)
What drives it	A shock event: the Urda crash a month before the vote	A long-running dispute over trust in voting and counting
Main producers	Anonymous accounts and partisan influencers; some media errors	Campaigns, party committees and super PACs; influencers
Typical content	Recycled crash photos, AI-altered images, sabotage and hacking theories	AI attack ads with synthetic voices and scenes; rumours about mail ballots and the count
Role of AI	Supporting: altered images, an AI crash photo run by a broadcaster in January	Central: 220 AI ads, over $137 million, 27% labelled
Foreign actors	Amplifying: a sabotage theory in 11+ languages; Kremlin-linked TikTok boosting of riot calls	Industrial: Russia, Iran and China using generative AI; X removed 13,000+ accounts
Main channels	X for most debunked items; TikTok for riot mobilisation	Every major platform, plus TV ad airtime
Defences	Independent fact-checkers working in real time	States and platforms, after federal counter-influence units were cut
Contested label	Government and opposition each call the other's claims a "bulo"	Administration casts anti-misinformation work as censorship; critics say its fraud claims are misinformation
Riskiest window	The campaign, before investigators report	The days of counting after 3 November

Who produces it

In Spain misinformation fills a vacuum; in the US it is a budget line.

Spain: opportunistic and anonymous. Maldita.es's log for Urda (https://maldita.es/desinfo/20261028/bulos-desinformaciones-accidente-tren-urda-yebenes-toledo/) shows photos from Adamuz and from a train fire in Ricla (Zaragoza) passed off as the new crash. It also lists an AI-altered Netanyahu image, theories of US or Israeli sabotage, and posts citing unnamed "intelligence sources" about a cyberattack. In January, a sabotage theory

spread within hours and in several languages (https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/01/26/sabotage-and-misplaced-funds-misleading-claims-spread-over-spains-train-crashes). Mainstream media slipped too: Cadena SER published an AI-generated Adamuz image, then withdrew it and apologised.

United States: paid and campaign-made. The Wesleyan Media Project (https://www.wionews.com/world/unfiltered-deepfakes-how-synthetic-media-is-shaping-the-us-midterm-elections-1792986632524) counted 220 ads made at least partly with AI, costing over $137 million. That compares with under $50,000 in the whole 2024 cycle. Republican candidates or groups sponsored 81%, Democrats 12%. Examples (https://axios.com/2026/10/19/ai-attack-ads-campaigns-elections-deepfakes) include AI scenes of Senator Jon Ossoff at a beauty salon and of Michigan candidate Abdul El-Sayed with cards reading "Death to America".

Sponsors defend the ads as based on candidates' real words. Most Democrats avoid AI ads and attack Republicans for using them; some Talarico ads (https://www.inquirer.com/politics/ai-ads-political-campaigns-democrats-republicans-talarico-paxton-20261024.html) carry the line "Made by humans, not AI". California Governor Gavin Newsom is the best-known Democratic user of deepfake videos, mostly to troll Trump.

The role of AI

AI is a side tool in Spain's case and the main engine in the US one.

Spain. Most debunked items were real photos from other events, not AI creations. The AI items were an altered Netanyahu image, which Maldita traced through its SynthID watermark, and AI crash images in January. AI also appeared on the correcting side: X's chatbot Grok told users (https://edmo.eu/publications/the-unproven-theory-of-sabotage-and-russian-explosives-in-the-adamuz-accident-in-spain-which-has-been-shared-in-at-least-11-languages) the sabotage theory had no official support.

United States. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue calls this the first US election with AI built into every major social platform. Only 27% of AI ads carried a label. State laws made little difference: labels appeared on 29% of AI ads in states with laws and 32% in states without (https://fastcompany.com/91618378/midterms-ai-generated-political-ads-spending-research). In researchers' tests (https://politicalwire.com/2026/10/09/the-many-ways-ai-could-disrupt-the-midterms/), chatbots produced realistic images of ballot stuffing, fake government documents and deepfake videos of officials.

The new grey zone is a deepfake that puts a candidate's real past words into a fabricated scene. It is neither pure invention nor authentic footage, and current rules do not fit it.

Foreign influence

In both countries foreign actors mostly amplify existing grievances, and attributing their work is hard.

Spain. After Adamuz, a theory of Russian sabotage spread in at least 11 languages (https://maldita.es/investigaciones/20260121/theory-sabotage-adamuz-languages/); investigators later focused on a broken rail weld. After Urda, the imagined saboteur became the US or Israel. During the Blocus riots, Spanish intelligence reportedly found (https://en.ara.cat/international/is-russia-behind-the-protests-of-the-young-people-in-european-cities_1_5896109.html) Kremlin-linked accounts boosting Barcelona mobilisation calls on TikTok. They amplified a movement that already existed rather than creating it.

United States. Bloomberg reported on 14 October (https://cryptobriefing.com/russia-iran-china-ai-disinformation-midterms/) that Russia, Iran and China are using generative AI for fake videos, journalists and accounts; OpenAI banned Russian and Iranian accounts on 8 October. Politico reported (https://united24media.com/world/russia-targets-pro-ukraine-us-candidates-with-ai-driven-influence-campaign-ahead-of-midterms-23757) a Russian campaign against pro-Ukraine candidates of both parties. X suspended over 13,000 accounts (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/15/x-suspends-13000-accounts-alleging-foreign-influence-ahead-of-us-midterms) it linked to the three countries but published no evidence (https://www.gadgetreview.com/?p=420340) for the attributions.

Foreign interference is also a political claim in its own right. In the US, Trump's July claims about Chinese meddling in 2020 are disputed (see the next sections). Whether such campaigns ever change an outcome is, as the Council on Foreign Relations notes (https://www.cfr.org/articles/are-the-u-s-midterms-vulnerable-to-foreign-meddling), notoriously hard to establish.

Defences

Spain relies mainly on independent fact-checkers; the US now relies mainly on states and platforms.

Spain. Maldita.es updated its Urda log within hours, checking each viral image against its original source. Official accounts of Adif, Renfe, Iryo and the government on X served as reference points. The Catalan police asked for help to close accounts calling for riots, and Sánchez cited the riots to argue for regulating social networks, which is itself contested.

United States. Federal capacity has been cut (https://socradar.io/blog/2026-us-midterms-election-cyber/): the DNI dissolved the Foreign Malign Influence Center in August 2025, and the FBI's foreign influence task force was shut. EI-ISAC lost its federal funding, and the 2026 threat assessment omitted foreign election threats for the first time in nearly a decade. In a Brennan Center survey, 75% of election officials

(https://www.nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2026/04/federal-drawdown-election-support-destroyed-ongoing-relationships-experts-say/413181/) said the gap had not been filled. CISA published an election security plan on 24 September naming regional advisers.

The administration says CISA's election office was closed so the agency could get back on mission (https://www.meritalk.com/articles/warner-warns-of-cisa-election-security-cuts-ahead-of-midterms/). Senator Ted Cruz argued the previous administration used CISA to pressure platforms over protected speech (https://floridaphoenix.com/2025/10/19/repub/midterm-elections-will-likely-see-increased-effects-of-misinformation-reduced-federal-security-activity-experts-say/). Platforms have pulled back too: Meta ended fact-checking and X and YouTube scaled back flagging, leaving X to rely on Community Notes and civic-integrity reports.

The label as a weapon

In both countries the word "misinformation" ("bulo" in Spain) has become a partisan accusation, and the hardest claims to judge are the half-true ones.

Spain. After Adamuz, the PP accused Transport Minister Óscar Puente of lying about the track being fully renewed. Puente called that a hoax (https://www.eldiario.es/politica/pp-acusa-puente-mentir-renovacion-total-via-adamuz-exige-dimision_1_12933988.html) and posted the serial number of a 2023 rail. The facts were mixed: the break was at a weld joining 2023 rails to 1989 ones (https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20260121/causas-accidente-tren-adamuz-teorias/). The PP later turned the word back on Puente in the Senate. After Urda, Iryo disputes parts of his account (https://www.articulo14.es/sociedad/iryo-niega-las-afirmaciones-de-puente-su-tren-seguia-detenido-cuando-el-ave-lo-alcanzo-20261028.html), and real footage of him at a forum that morning circulated with a misleading framing.

United States. In his 16 July address, Trump released documents he said showed serious weaknesses in election infrastructure. NPR found (https://www.michiganpublic.org/2026-07-16/in-primetime-speech-trump-doesnt-provide-evidence-for-illegal-voting) many did not fully support his claims, and a 2021 intelligence assessment had found with high confidence that China did not interfere in 2020. Supporters treat the speech as a security push for the SAVE America Act; Senator Mark Warner called the China claims bogus. Sponsors of AI attack ads, for their part, say the ads are based on candidates' real statements.

Fact-checkers can settle whether a photo is real. They cannot settle who is responsible for a crash or whether a speech's framing is fair, and that is where most of the political fight takes place.

Timing

In both cases social networks move in hours while authoritative answers take weeks or months, and the vote falls in between.

Spain. The Adamuz investigation is still not closed (https://en.ara.cat/politics/all-parties-stop-the-pre-campaign-due-to-the-train-accident-in-toledo-except-vox_1_5892889.html) nine months on, and a Senate inquiry reached no conclusions. For Urda, the rail accident investigation commission (CIAF) and the Guardia Civil have only just begun. Voters will judge the crash on 29 November before any official explanation exists.

United States. The Brennan Center (https://www.brennancenter.org/es/node/12524) notes that false claims follow a predictable calendar: mail voting in October, in-person voting on Election Day, then the count. Election officials and experts interviewed by Reuters (https://www.outlookindia.com/international/trump-and-the-us-midterms-2026-nine-concerns-over-election-administration) flagged claims about suspicious late-counted votes as a key risk. The Justice Department plans to deploy 1,000 federal election monitors, nearly double 2024.

Whoever frames an event first and loudest has the advantage, because the evidence that could settle the question usually arrives after the vote.

Common patterns

Despite their differences, the two cases share six patterns.

1. **The story's shape comes before the facts.** Spain's "foreign saboteur" story stayed the same while the villain changed, from Russia in January to Israel or the US in October. In the US, the same fraud themes recur every cycle (https://www.brennancenter.org/es/node/12524).
2. **Gaps in information are the way in.** In Spain it was the first hours after each crash; in the US it will be the days of counting.
3. **The most effective misleading content starts from something real.** Examples are real footage of Puente given a misleading frame, and candidates' real words placed in fake AI scenes.
4. **Politicians' own accounts are both channel and liability.** Puente's combative posts on X turned against him after Urda; in the US, the president is himself a major source of disputed election claims.
5. **Online volume is not public opinion.** Researcher Yini Zhang (https://www.buffalo.edu/ubnow/stories/2026/01/zhang-social-media-midterms.html) warns that loud, extreme voices dominate platforms that are sorted by politics.
6. **Doubt spreads to everything.** As AI content spreads, people may distrust even credible information (https://www.buffalo.edu/news.host.html/content/shared/university/news/expert-tipsheets/2026/2026-midterms-misinformation-news-media-voters.detail.html), which helps anyone who wants to dismiss real evidence.

What to watch

The US count comes first and may preview tactics that reach Spain's campaign.

United States, from 3 November

- Claims about late-counted mail ballots in close races.
- AI-made "evidence" of fraud, such as ballot-stuffing images or fake official documents.
- Foreign amplification of any dispute over results.
- How X's labels and Community Notes cope with fast-moving claims.

Spain, to 29 November

- Whether early findings on Urda arrive before the vote, and how each side frames them.
- Recycled crash images reappearing during the campaign (13–27 November).
- Fraud ("pucherazo") claims about postal voting, a theme seen in 2019, 2021 and 2023 (https://www.periodicodeibiza.es/noticias/elecciones-23j/2023/07/20/1979795/pucherazo-bulos-desinformaciones-sobre-fraude-electoral-elecciones-del-j.html).
- Whether AI attack ads, now routine in the US, appear in Spanish campaigning.

Open question: no data yet shows whether either crash, or the misinformation around it, has moved Spanish voting intentions.

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The strange case of the Brazilian election October 2026

As of November 1 2026

In a run-off marked by serious irregularities in the actions of large platforms, President Lula da Silva has prevailed over Bolsonarismo with more than four million votes. However, although the will of the Brazilians expressed through the ballot box contravened the dictates of the techno-oligarchs this time, an increasingly interventionist behavior by technological power puts the future of democracy in Ibero-America at risk. Lula's victory brings to the table that it is possible to beat the masters of the algorithm at the polls, but also the need to put a stop to their assault on democracy.

During the dizzying campaign that allowed Lula to consolidate his turnaround, the Workers' Party faced a set of serious irregularities. The largest of these allegedly took place on Meta. The company that owns Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram not only declared an arbitrary suspension of his advertising account on Instagram in the middle of the campaign, but allegedly charged the former labor leader's candidacy between 33% and 43% more, according to an investigation by the NGO NetLab.

It also provided disproportionate amplification to the profile of Flávio Bolsonaro who, with 17.2% fewer followers, obtained almost three times as many interactions per post. This strange, systematic over-dimensioning of the Bolsonaristas' reach was shown even more starkly in the case of Bolsonarista influencers like Nikolas Ferreira, the great digital cyber-star of the ultra campaign. According to investigations by specialized entities like Ctrl+Z and Artigo 19, the propagandist surpassed global stars like Beyoncé, Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, or Kim Kardashian in number of views, despite having between 12 and 17 times fewer followers than them.

Some of Ferreira's videos reached more than 160 million views, an unattainable figure even for huge music or sports stars. Impossible to explain based on his number of followers or the existence of a pre-existing community of that size, the distortion of content recommendation systems on the electoral conversation becomes evident. A distortion that, taken into consideration alongside the damage caused by the rest of the platforms' arbitrary actions, makes it questionable to speak of social networks as a sphere where parties and representatives compete on equal terms.

The serious irregularities gave way to a feeling of indignation and impotence with strange drifts. Under the slogan 'let's break the algorithm', Brazilian social networks were flooded during the second round by an unusual tide of 'Lulista boob pics': a viral challenge that encouraged the PT candidate's female followers to share photos of their breasts alongside the slogan 'I am busty and I'm with Lula'. Also during this second half of the campaign, PT influencer and deputy Andre

Janones spearheaded a digital turnaround using the codes of the latest trends on the platforms to be even more viral than his adversaries. Shouting "Make it explode!", his WhatsApp channel *El exército de Lula* [Lula's Army], with more than 10 million followers, led the campaign's digital mobilization. But can structural inequalities be corrected through ingenious creative efforts? For how long?

Lula's campaign team asserts that the unilateral blocking of his electoral advertising on Instagram for 48 hours prevented his messages from reaching at least 1.3 million potential voters. Meta, despite its marked political alignment with President Trump, hides behind "technical errors". If Lula did not appear in Instagram searches, they tell us, it is because the candidate priority was designed for names of at least five characters and Lula has only four letters. If the block to prevent the fabrication of political propaganda with their AIs failed with 'Flavio', it is because it was a common name that was difficult to censor. However, internal messages from its workers leaked by the Brazilian press suggest that the company was indeed aware of the political damage they were causing.

Taken as an honest explanation, these statements would suggest that the American platform is unaware of the footprint its technologies have on the dynamics of public conversation. Understood as an excuse, it would entail a lack of respect for the millions of users who use their services day to day. Users who in practice are rather hostages of the digital markets they have captured by raising barriers, for example, to local competitors who would be willing to assume the responsibility of shaping mass-use technologies as delicate for public life as social networks.

In his victory speech, Lula spoke of an "interference" by the big platforms in the elections and called for them to be regulated. For the PT supporters, this asymmetrical treatment towards the two campaigns has only one explanation. Meta, aligned with the Trump administration, had wanted to punish not only Lula's steps towards the regulation of the platforms—such as his Digital Statute for Children or his regulation project against fake news—but also the free exercise of his sovereignty outside and inside the digital sphere. Taking this premise, Sunday's results were an endorsement of both by the Brazilian citizenry.

Iago Moreno is a specialist in digital platforms and a representative of the Future of Technology Institute in Spain. He was an international observer in the elections, invited by Lula's team.

Brazil's proposed regulation against fake news and how it affects social media platforms. Brazil’s original push to regulate social media, known as the "Fake News Bill" (PL 2630), aimed to establish strict liability for digital platforms but ultimately stalled in Congress after fierce lobbying by Big Tech. Originally passed by the Senate in 2020, the legislation would have required platforms to combat bot networks, remunerate professional journalism, and face massive fines for failing to remove illegal content. However, intense resistance from tech

companies and conservative lawmakers, who argued the bill risked censoring religious and political speech, effectively killed the legislation in the Lower House.
Agência Pública+ 2

Following this legislative gridlock, the Brazilian government enacted new executive decrees in May 2026 that impose stricter operational rules on social media platforms without relying on PL 2630. Under this updated framework, platforms are legally bound by a "duty of care" to mitigate systemic risks related to terrorism, attacks on the democratic rule of law, and online violence against women. The 2026 rules mandate a transparent "notice-and-action" system requiring platforms to officially justify whenever they remove or downrank user content. Furthermore, companies must now execute rapid two-hour takedowns for non-consensual intimate imagery and implement safeguards to block AI-generated deepfakes.
Tech companies deployed an unprecedented, multi-pronged lobbying campaign in Brazil, combining traditional political pressure with the direct weaponization of their own digital platforms.

Google's Platform Weaponization Google placed links and warnings directly on its Brazilian homepage claiming the bill would increase confusion about what is true or false, a move the Brazilian government characterized as an illegal "smear campaign". Researchers from the NetLab at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro also concluded that Google manipulated its own search environment by heavily promoting ads that boosted content criticizing the bill.

Meta's VIP Political Favors Meta, which employs the largest lobbying team among Big Tech in Brazil, used platform access as a bargaining chip. According to investigative reports, Meta lobbyists offered politicians expedited, VIP service to resolve account issues or restore suspended pages faster than regular users. This privileged technical support was used to build political goodwill and influence lawmakers directly.

Stoking the Evangelical Caucus To break the congressional majority initially favoring the bill, tech lobbyists specifically targeted Brazil's powerful Evangelical and conservative caucuses. They circulated narratives claiming the bill's hate speech provisions would result in "prior censorship" of religious freedom and could even lead to the deletion of Bible verses online. This strategy successfully set the Evangelical Caucus "on fire" and shifted dozens of votes against the legislation.

Direct User Mobilization Telegram bypassed traditional lobbying entirely by blasting a direct message to millions of its Brazilian users, calling the legislation an "attack on democracy". This unprecedented interference provoked Brazil's Supreme Court to threaten the app with a nationwide suspension unless it immediately sent a retraction.

Financial Pressure and PR Beyond platform manipulation, companies poured massive funds into traditional public relations. Google invested millions in advertising, including purchasing

full-page ads in major national newspapers like *Folha de S. Paulo*, to shape public opinion and pressure undecided deputies.

How has Brazil's Supreme Court, particularly Justice Alexandre de Moraes, stepped in to regulate platforms after the failure of PL 2630?
With the legislative failure of PL 2630 in Congress, Brazil's Supreme Federal Court (STF) effectively established a regulatory framework for social media through judicial precedent and aggressive enforcement, largely spearheaded by Justice Alexandre de Moraes.

The "Fake News Inquiry" (Inquiry 4781) Since 2019, Justice Moraes has presided over a broad, ongoing investigation into digital militias, the financing of disinformation networks, and threats against the Supreme Court. Utilizing this authority, Moraes has routinely ordered platforms to remove content, blocked accounts, authorized raids against influencers and politicians, and broken the banking secrecy of businesspeople suspected of funding anti-democratic propaganda.
Wikipedia+ 1

Platform Bans and Enforcement Moraes demonstrated the STF's willingness to use extreme enforcement measures when he ordered a nationwide ban on X (formerly Twitter) in August 2024. The suspension was triggered by the platform's refusal to block accounts spreading defamatory content and its failure to maintain a legal representative in the country. The platform remained offline for millions of Brazilians until October 2024, when it finally capitulated and complied with the court's orders.

The Landmark 2025 Article 19 Ruling The most structural shift in Brazilian tech regulation occurred in June 2025, when the STF reinterpreted Article 19 of the Marco Civil da Internet (Brazil's Internet Civil Rights Framework). Previously, platforms enjoyed "safe harbor" protections and were only liable for third-party content if they ignored a specific court order.

The Supreme Court ruled that tech companies now have a "presumed liability" and must proactively monitor and remove content involving severe offenses—including anti-democratic acts, terrorism, child exploitation, and misogynistic hate—without waiting for a judicial mandate. During this ruling, Justice Moraes specifically mandated that platforms implement algorithmic transparency measures, establish accessible user reporting systems, and provide due process mechanisms for users to appeal content restrictions.
The reactions to Justice Alexandre de Moraes’s sweeping judicial actions and the Supreme Court’s (STF) 2025 decision to overturn the safe harbor provisions of Article 19 have been highly critical, particularly among legal professionals and digital rights advocates who warn of a constitutional imbalance.

Legal Scholars and Constitutional Experts Many legal scholars argue that the STF has dangerously blurred the lines of the separation of powers. By redefining civil liability for tech companies and imposing new platform obligations from the bench, critics assert that the Judiciary is essentially legislating and formulating public policy—a role strictly reserved for Congress. While STF President Luís Roberto Barroso defended the ruling by stating the Judiciary has a "duty to rule" when the Legislature remains silent, scholars warn this sets a precedent of judicial overreach.

Civil Liberties and Digital Rights Groups Civil liberties organizations, such as the digital rights NGO *Artigo 19*, have strongly condemned the 2025 ruling. In detailed technical notes, they argue that removing the Marco Civil's protections and shifting to a "presumed liability" regime forces tech platforms to act as privatized judges. These groups warn that the threat of massive fines will encourage companies to preemptively remove lawful, borderline speech, effectively creating a regime of "prior censorship" that stifles political dissent and public debate. They maintain that any restrictions on freedom of expression must be explicitly codified by democratically elected lawmakers, not judges.

The Brazilian Bar Association (OAB) The OAB has grown increasingly alarmed by the procedural irregularities and the consolidation of power within the STF. While the Bar Association historically defended the Supreme Court against institutional attacks, it has recently pivoted to demanding strict adherence to due process. The OAB's national leadership has publicly called for rigorous transparency and impartial investigations into the court's conduct. Meanwhile, regional branches, such as the OAB in the Federal District (OAB-DF), have taken an even more aggressive stance, pushing for impeachment proceedings against Justice Moraes and demanding a return to constitutional orthodoxy.

To see the national president of the Brazilian Bar Association addressing the institutional crisis and demanding transparency regarding the Supreme Court's conduct, you can watch OAB President calls for STF transparency (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7zlhIURStk).

Final Remarks

Rejection of decree for public-service improvements



What the vote was. On 25 June the decree was defeated 176 to 173. Every other party, including UPN, Coalición Canaria and PNV, voted in favour. It wasn't a grant for train safety. It was a royal decree-law that let public bodies borrow more. These bodies normally get their debt limits in each year's budget, and because the budget has been rolled over they were stuck at 2023 limits. The decree covered: forbes (https://forbes.es/?p=964967)theobjective (https://theobjective.com/economia/2026-06-10/prorroga-presupuestaria-obliga-ampliar-capacidad-endeudamiento-renfe/)

- **Renfe:** up to €671M in extra credit, mainly for new rolling stock: trains for public-service routes, the commercial fleet, and freight locomotives, plus asset maintenance, stations and workshops democrata (https://www.democrata.es/economia/el-gobierno-permite-a-renfe-firmar-creditos-extra-de-hasta-671-millones-para-renovar-su-flota-de-trenes/)elespanol (https://www.elespanol.com/invertia/economia/20260914/puente-financia-compra-trenes-ampliacion-credito-real-decreto-derogado-congreso/1003744380447_0.html)
- **Other bodies:** €247.7M for Puertos del Estado, €16.87M for Salvamento Marítimo, and €40M for ICEX to buy a headquarters building forbes (https://forbes.es/?p=959282)

Why they voted no. PP and Vox argued that debt limits belong in a budget, not a decree. Vox called it a joke to treat buying an ICEX headquarters as urgent, and PP blamed the government's failure to pass budgets. Junts said the government can't count on it unless Sánchez steps aside. The government's position was that without the extra financing, Renfe's operating capacity would be seriously reduced. forbes (https://forbes.es/?p=964967)democrata

(https://www.democrata.es/economia/el-gobierno-permite-a-renfe-firmar-creditos-extra-de-hasta-671-millones-para-renovar-su-flota-de-trenes/)

What happened to the money. Early coverage said Renfe had lost the €671M authorization. But El Español reported in September that the decree was fully in force for about two weeks before the vote, and the money was transferred during that window. The repeal didn't require undoing anything or returning the funds, so it had no practical effect. Legal sources described this as legal and common when budgets are rolled over.

Why it's circulating now. It's probably resurfacing because of the Urda crash on 28 October, which killed 69 people, and the 29N election campaign. Early hypotheses point to human error in traffic management after a signalling fault. Signalling is Adif's infrastructure, not Renfe's fleet purchases, although the investigation is still ongoing. rtvc (https://rtvc.es/ultima-hora-accidente-trenes-ave-yryo-sevilla-madrid-toledo-directo-heridos-30-octubre-2026/)diaridetarragona (https://www.diaridetarragona.com/espana/274218/posible-error-centro-control-primera-hipotesis-choque-dos-trenes-toledo.html)

Sources:

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- El Español – Puente financia la compra de trenes con un decreto derogado (https://www.elespanol.com/invertia/economia/20260914/puente-financia-compra-trenes-ampliacion-credito-real-decreto-derogado-congreso/1003744380447_0.html)
- The Objective – La prórroga presupuestaria obliga a ampliar la deuda de Renfe (https://theobjective.com/economia/2026-06-10/prorroga-presupuestaria-obliga-ampliar-capacidad-endeudamiento-renfe/)
- Diari de Tarragona – Primera hipótesis del choque en Toledo (https://www.diaridetarragona.com/espana/274218/posible-error-centro-control-primera-hipotesis-choque-dos-trenes-toledo.html)

ADIF Structure and Organisation

Ultimos cambios desde el 4 Noviembre 2026

En comparecencia ante el Congreso, Oscar Puente explicó en detalle todo lo concerniente al accidente y seguidamente dimitió. Al dia siguiente, Carlos Cuerpo le sustituyo y Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña dimitió.

¿Quién mandaba en ADIF y quiénes eran sus responsables?

Situación hasta 3 de noviembre de 2026

La **dirección política y la presidencia de ADIF fueron nombradas durante el Gobierno de Pedro Sánchez**, aunque algunos directivos técnicos llevan muchos años trabajando en la entidad, incluso desde antes de 2018.

Hay que distinguir tres niveles de responsabilidad: el Gobierno y el Ministerio de Transportes, la presidencia de ADIF y sus directores generales.

1. ¿Quién está por encima de quién?

Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón

Presidente del Gobierno · desde junio de 2018

Óscar Puente Santiago

Ministro de Transportes desde noviembre de 2023

Secretaría de Estado de Transportes y Movilidad Sostenible

Dirección estratégica, evaluación y control de resultados de ADIF

Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña

Presidente de ADIF y ADIF Alta Velocidad, Nombrado el 17 de septiembre de 2024

Directores generales de ADIF

Construcción, mantenimiento, circulación, finanzas, personal y otras áreas

Este esquema representa la cadena de responsabilidad política y administrativa, no una subordinación jerárquica directa en todos sus escalones. ADIF es una entidad pública empresarial con órganos de gobierno propios, adscrita al Ministerio a través de la Secretaría de Estado.

2. Los dos responsables políticos principales



Óscar Puente Santiago

Ministro de Transportes y Movilidad Sostenible desde el 21 de noviembre de 2023.

Fue nombrado durante el actual Gobierno de Pedro Sánchez, sustituyendo a Raquel Sánchez Jiménez.

Es el responsable político del departamento al que está adscrito ADIF.



Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña

Presidente de ADIF y ADIF Alta Velocidad desde el 17 de septiembre de 2024.

Fue nombrado por el Consejo de Ministros a propuesta de Óscar Puente.

Anteriormente había sido viceconsejero de Infraestructuras y Transportes del Gobierno vasco entre 2020 y 2024. No ocupaba la presidencia de ADIF durante el Gobierno de Mariano Rajoy.

3. ¿Quiénes son los directores generales y desde cuándo ocupan sus cargos?

En marzo de 2025, ADIF reorganizó su dirección, reduciendo de nueve a seis las direcciones generales. Los cinco nuevos nombramientos fueron realizados por el presidente, Pedro Marco, tras procesos selectivos públicos.

Responsable	Funciones	Desde cuándo
Luis Llamas Martínez	Planificación, proyectos y construcción. También director general de ADIF Alta Velocidad	Marzo 2025
Raúl Míguez Bailo	Operaciones, circulación y mantenimiento de la red	Marzo 2025
Juan Pablo Villanueva Beltramini	Negocio, clientes, estaciones y patrimonio	Marzo 2025; ya era director general desde 2018

Concepción Casillas Martín	Personal, estrategia y seguridad	Marzo 2025; directora de Personal desde 2024
Manuel Martínez Cepeda	Finanzas, compras y sistemas	Marzo 2025; más de 30 años de trayectoria en ADIF/Renfe
Irene Bonet Tous	Secretaría General y asuntos jurídicos	Marzo 2024

Estas son las designaciones documentadas en la reorganización de 2025. No he encontrado evidencia de sustituciones posteriores, aunque ello no equivale a una certificación individual de permanencia de los seis cargos hasta hoy.

La distinción importante: ninguno de estos seis nombramientos en sus cargos actuales procede del Gobierno de Mariano Rajoy, pero varios de sus titulares ya trabajaban en ADIF o sus entidades predecesoras antes de 2018.

4. ¿Quiénes presidieron ADIF antes? Comparación histórica

Presidente de ADIF	Periodo	Gobierno que lo nombró
Juan Bravo Rivera	2016–2018	Mariano Rajoy (PP)
Isabel Pardo de Vera	2018–2021	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)
María Luisa Domínguez	2021–2023	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)
Ángel Contreras Marín	2023–2024	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)
Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña	Septiembre 2024–actualidad	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)

Por tanto, desde la llegada de Pedro Sánchez al Gobierno en junio de 2018, ADIF ha tenido cuatro presidentes distintos. Los tres relevos posteriores a 2018 se han producido dentro de gobiernos presididos por Sánchez.

5. ¿De qué responde cada nivel?

Conviene distinguir las responsabilidades porque ADIF no es lo mismo que Renfe.

- **Ministerio y Secretaría de Estado:** política ferroviaria, dirección estratégica, supervisión y evaluación de resultados.

- **Presidente y Consejo de Administración de ADIF:** gobierno y administración de la entidad, decisiones organizativas y competencias de gestión.
- **Dirección de Planificación, Proyectos y Construcción:** desarrollo de nuevas infraestructuras y obras.
- **Dirección de Operaciones y Explotación:** circulación ferroviaria, conservación, mantenimiento y gestión operativa de la red.
- **Renfe y otros operadores:** explotación de los trenes y prestación del servicio de transporte, no administración general de las vías.

Esta distribución importa especialmente cuando se trata de determinar responsabilidades por averías, retrasos, falta de mantenimiento o accidentes: **la responsabilidad política, la responsabilidad de gestión y la eventual responsabilidad jurídica no son necesariamente la misma cosa**.

Conclusión

La cúpula actual de ADIF se configuró durante el Gobierno de Pedro Sánchez, especialmente con el nombramiento de Pedro Marco en septiembre de 2024 y la reorganización de marzo de 2025. Sin embargo, existe continuidad profesional en numerosos puestos técnicos y directivos respecto de gobiernos anteriores.

Fuentes principales: ADIF: reorganización de la dirección en 2025 (https://www.adif.es/w/adif-finaliza-el-proceso-de-reestructuraci%C3%B3n-de-su-organigrama-con-el-nombramiento-de-cinco-direcciones-generales?utm_source=chatgpt.com), BOE: nombramiento de Pedro Marco (https://boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2024-18641&utm_source=chatgpt.com) y BOE: estructura y supervisión ministerial (https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2024-4865&utm_source=chatgpt.com).

Una cuestión adicional que merece examinarse es **quiénes han sido responsables concretamente del mantenimiento y la seguridad de las vías desde 2018**, porque esa cadena de responsabilidad puede ser distinta de la sucesión de presidentes de ADIF.

Responsables del mantenimiento y la seguridad ferroviaria en ADIF

Para identificar las responsabilidades hay que distinguir entre **el mantenimiento de las vías e instalaciones, la seguridad de la circulación y la supervisión independiente de la seguridad ferroviaria**.

Son funciones relacionadas, pero no idénticas. Además, es importante distinguir quién ocupa actualmente cada cargo y quién lo ocupaba cuando se tomaron decisiones anteriores.

En ADIF, la responsabilidad se distribuye en tres niveles:

1. **Responsabilidad política:** Ministerio de Transportes, encabezado por Óscar Puente desde noviembre de 2023.
2. **Responsabilidad ejecutiva:** Presidencia de ADIF, ocupada por Luis Pedro Marco de la Peña desde septiembre de 2024.
3. **Responsabilidad operativa:** Dirección General de Operaciones y Explotación, que incluye la conservación y mantenimiento de la infraestructura ferroviaria.

Por encima de la gestión de incidentes concretos, existe además una autoridad pública independiente de ADIF para la supervisión de la seguridad ferroviaria: la Agencia Estatal de Seguridad Ferroviaria (AESF).

1. Responsables directos del mantenimiento

La información actualizada revela un cambio importante en enero de 2026 que debo corregir respecto a mi respuesta anterior.

Responsable	Cargo y periodo
Ángel Contreras Marín	Director general de Conservación y Mantenimiento hasta diciembre de 2023
Eugenio Nasarre	Director general de Conservación y Mantenimiento desde diciembre de 2023, antes de la reorganización de 2025
Raúl Míguez Bailo	Director general de Operaciones y Explotación desde marzo de 2025 hasta su cese en enero de 2026
Ángel García de la Bandera	Director general de Operaciones y Explotación desde 2026, según la ficha oficial actual de ADIF

El **26 de enero de 2026**, el Ministerio anunció el cese de Raúl Míguez tras los problemas registrados en Rodalies de Cataluña. Fue una decisión comunicada por el secretario de Estado, José Antonio Santano, con conocimiento del ministro Óscar Puente.

Por tanto, **el máximo responsable ejecutivo actual del mantenimiento y la explotación de la red es Ángel García de la Bandera**, bajo la presidencia de Luis Pedro Marco.

2. Responsables de seguridad de la circulación

Aquí existe una distinción especialmente relevante:

- **David Gómez-Rey:** identificado como responsable de la Dirección de Seguridad en la Circulación de ADIF.
- **Concepción Casillas Martín:** directora general corporativa de Gestión de Personas, Estrategia y Seguridad desde marzo de 2025. Su área incluye competencias de protección y seguridad, que no deben confundirse automáticamente con la dirección técnica de seguridad de la circulación.
- **Francisco García Torres:** nombrado en septiembre de 2026 subdirector general de Administradores de Infraestructuras e Instalaciones Fijas en la AESF, organismo que supervisa externamente a administradores como ADIF.

La seguridad de la circulación tiene su propia organización técnica y su sistema de gestión de riesgos.

En febrero de 2026, ADIF declaró que su Dirección de Seguridad en la Circulación seguía existiendo, dirigida por la misma persona y vinculada a la Presidencia, aunque con coordinación desde el Gabinete.

3. Una controversia importante sobre la organización de la seguridad

El 30 de octubre de 2026, *The Objective* publicó una investigación que señala que **David Gómez-Rey, ingeniero y director técnico de Seguridad en la Circulación, depende orgánicamente de Salvador Almenar**, director del Gabinete de Presidencia, Comunicación y Relaciones Institucionales, cuya formación es periodística.

El periódico sostiene que la AESF cuestionó esta organización por motivos de independencia y capacitación técnica.

Sin embargo, ADIF había defendido públicamente en febrero de 2026 que la Dirección de Seguridad en la Circulación seguía dirigida por el mismo profesional técnico, que dependía de Presidencia y que el director de Gabinete solamente coordinaba.

Por tanto, hay que distinguir entre el responsable técnico efectivo y la dependencia administrativa. La documentación interna completa y las observaciones originales de la AESF serían necesarias para resolver definitivamente la controversia.

4. ¿Son responsables nombrados por el Gobierno actual o por el anterior?

La cronología muestra lo siguiente:

- **2018:** comienza el Gobierno de Pedro Sánchez. Algunos de los técnicos actuales ya trabajaban en ADIF.

- **2023:** Eugenio Nasarre asume Conservación y Mantenimiento.
- **2024:** Luis Pedro Marco llega a la presidencia.
- **2025:** se reorganiza la estructura de ADIF y se suprime la Dirección General de Seguridad, Procesos y Sistemas Corporativos como unidad independiente de primer nivel.
- **2026:** cesa Raúl Míguez y asume la dirección de Operaciones y Explotación Ángel García de la Bandera.

Los nombramientos de máxima responsabilidad citados se produjeron durante gobiernos de Pedro Sánchez, pero no significa que todos los responsables técnicos fueran incorporados a ADIF por esos gobiernos.

Conclusión sobre la estructura de responsabilidades:

para estudiar posibles fallos de mantenimiento o seguridad ferroviaria, los cargos especialmente relevantes son el director de Operaciones y Explotación, el responsable técnico de Seguridad en la Circulación, el presidente de ADIF y la AESF como autoridad supervisora.

Pero ocupar uno de esos cargos no demuestra, por sí solo, responsabilidad por un accidente determinado.

La cuestión especialmente importante es investigar ahora **si la reorganización de 2025 redujo la independencia de la Dirección de Seguridad en la Circulación respecto de quienes gestionan el mantenimiento**. Es un aspecto verificable mediante los organigramas anteriores y posteriores, las delegaciones de competencias y los informes de la AESF.

Railway Signalling, Protection and Safety SystemsT

Technical document of the Spanish Chamber of Telecommunication Engineers (COIT)

Railway traffic safety relies on a combination of technological systems, operating procedures, and human actions that make it possible to regulate train movements, transmit information between the infrastructure and the control center, monitor operating conditions, and take action when situations are detected that could compromise safety.

In this field, telecommunications and electronic systems play an essential role. Information transmission, signal processing, train-to-ground communications, supervision, and control technologies are fundamental components of modern railway signaling and protection systems.

Telecommunications engineers work alongside professionals from other disciplines in the design, development, integration, validation, and maintenance of these technologies. Their contribution extends from communications and data transmission systems to onboard electronics, control and supervision systems, and the platforms used to manage railway traffic.

In this context, the COIT, as a public-law professional body representing telecommunications engineers—specialists in the design of railway signaling, communications, and protection systems—believes it is necessary to place its independent technical expertise at the service of society and, in this instance, to explain the technical principles on which these systems are based.

The purpose of this document is to provide a technical yet accessible explanation of the main railway signaling, supervision, and protection systems used on the Spanish network, as well as their evolution towards the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS).

This document is exclusively technical and informational in nature. It does not seek to analyze any particular railway accident, formulate hypotheses about possible causes, or assign responsibility. The investigation and assessment of events of this kind are the responsibility of the competent authorities and bodies, in accordance with their respective powers and procedures.

1. Main railway signaling and protection systems

1.1. ASFA system (Signal Announcement and Automatic Braking)

Operating principle

ASFA is a point-based train protection system that transmits information via passive beacons installed on the track. When a train passes over a beacon, the beacon acts as a trackside information point, conveying to the train the state of the signaling and the route conditions at that location. The onboard equipment interprets this information and requires a response from

the driver or, in certain cases, monitors whether the train's speed remains within specified limits. If the required action is not taken or the monitored speed is exceeded, the system automatically commands emergency braking.

The most important ASFA functions include:

- Point-based monitoring of certain signals and operating conditions.
- Transmission of information via passive track-mounted beacons.
- Driver acknowledgement of certain indications.
- Speed monitoring associated with the conditions received.
- Automatic braking if the monitored conditions are not complied with.

Characteristics and scope of supervision

Because this is a point-based supervision system, information is received only at locations along the line fitted with the corresponding beacons.

Consequently:

- There is no continuous communication between the train and the infrastructure.
- Speed monitoring takes place at specific points rather than continuously.
- The system's ability to intervene depends on the beacon configuration and the information available on each section.

These characteristics reflect the design philosophy under which the system was conceived and the operational requirements for which it was installed. Any assessment should take account of the operating conditions and the specific configuration of each installation.

1.2. LZB system (continuous train control; German: Linienzugbeeinflussung)

Operating principle

LZB is a train protection and driver-assistance system that continuously supervises train movements. It was installed on the first high-speed railway line built in Spain (Madrid–Córdoba–Seville) and has been deployed in Germany and Austria since the late 1960s, although it is now being progressively replaced by the European ERTMS standard.

Unlike ASFA, LZB enables permanent communication between the train and the infrastructure through a transmission system installed along the track, based on a radiating cable or transmission loop and the associated control equipment.

This communication makes it possible to obtain information about the train's position and transmit the operating conditions it must observe, including:

- The permitted speed.

- Existing temporary or permanent restrictions.
- The target point towards which the train must proceed.
- The conditions governing the progression of train movements.

On the basis of this information, the onboard equipment continuously supervises train movements and calculates the corresponding braking curves. These curves determine how speed must change in order to comply with restrictions and reach target points under the prescribed conditions. When the system detects that the actual speed could jeopardize compliance with the monitored conditions, it warns the driver and, if necessary, automatically commands intervention by the braking system.

Operational characteristics

The principal characteristics of LZB include:

- Continuous monitoring of train speed.
- Greater precision in traffic control.
- The ability to operate at high speeds and optimize line capacity by reducing the safe separation distance between successive trains.
- Continuous information transmission between the infrastructure and rolling stock.
- Monitoring of braking curves.
- Reduced reliance solely on the observation of lineside signals.

From a functional standpoint, LZB incorporates degraded-mode operation mechanisms to ensure that a failure of continuous train–track communications, or of any subsystem involved in supervision, does not automatically lead to an unsafe situation.

If availability is lost, the system applies the fail-safe principle, initiating a controlled transition to a more restrictive operating mode supported by other installed protection systems (ASFA) and specific operating procedures. As a result, the level of automation and continuous train supervision is reduced, potentially requiring speed restrictions and greater driver involvement, while in all cases maintaining the safety conditions required for railway operation.

It is important to note that both systems have coexisted for decades on different railway lines, reflecting distinct operational needs and different stages in the network's technological development.

1.3. Lineside Signaling Block System (BSL)

The Lineside Signaling Block System **(BSL)** is a railway block system in which train separation is ensured by the indications of light signals situated alongside the track. These signals protect what are known as block sections—that is, stretches of track that, under normal conditions, may contain only one train.

On high-speed lines equipped with automatic control block systems (BCA), BSL is provided for as an operating regime when the automatic train protection system associated with BCA is not functioning normally, or when a train must operate without the corresponding equipment or with that equipment defective. Its use is subject to the conditions and procedures set out in the Railway Traffic Regulations.

BSL should be distinguished from onboard train protection systems such as ASFA or LZB: BSL establishes how separation between trains is maintained through lineside signaling, whereas those onboard systems perform specific train protection and movement supervision functions.

2. Safety principles of railway systems

Railway signaling and protection systems are designed and developed in accordance with specific safety requirements. Their purpose is to supervise operating conditions and help prevent hazardous situations through detection, control, and intervention mechanisms.

To understand how they work, it is useful to distinguish three related but non-equivalent concepts:

Functional safety

Functional safety refers to a system's ability to carry out its assigned safety functions correctly and respond in a controlled manner to certain failures. During design, requirements, detection mechanisms, and protective measures are established to reduce the risk of a failure developing into a hazardous situation.

In this context, the fail-safe principle is applied, whereby certain failures must lead to a safe state or a more restrictive operating condition, in accordance with the system's function and architecture.

Reliability and availability

Reliability describes a system's ability to perform its function without failure over a specified period and under defined conditions. Availability refers to whether the system is operational when needed.

Both concepts are particularly important in railways, where systems must maintain their performance over long periods of operation and under demanding environmental and operational conditions.

Operational safety

Operational safety concerns the safety of railway operations as a whole. It depends not only on technological equipment but also on infrastructure, rolling stock, operating procedures, maintenance, organization, and human actions.

Railway safety is therefore the result of interaction between technical systems and the human and organizational elements involved in operations.

3. Technological evolution: the European ERTMS system

The development of railway signaling and protection systems is moving towards greater interoperability between networks, more advanced traffic supervision, and progressive technological harmonization across Europe.

In this context, ERTMS (European Rail Traffic Management System) was developed to facilitate railway interoperability through a common framework for traffic management and control.

ERTMS integrates two main components:

- ETCS (European Train Control System): the European train control and protection system responsible for supervising operating conditions and speed restrictions.
- GSM-R (Global System for Mobile Communications – Railway): a railway mobile communications system used to exchange information (voice and data) between trains and control centers in configurations that require it.

ETCS operates through interaction between onboard equipment and infrastructure elements. The latter include Eurobalises, which transmit information to trains, and, in certain configurations, Radio Block Centres (RBCs), which provide movement-related information through train-to-ground communications over GSM-R.

The precise architecture depends on the ERTMS level and configuration implemented on each line. ERTMS should therefore not be understood as a single, identical technological solution in every installation, but rather as a European system with different implementation arrangements, known as levels, depending on the line's operational needs.

The transition towards ERTMS represents progress in harmonizing railway control and protection systems by facilitating interoperability between networks and reducing dependence on specific national solutions.

From a telecommunications perspective, this evolution creates new challenges in train-to-ground communications, data transmission, systems integration, availability, reliability, cybersecurity, and technological life-cycle management.

The evolution of railway mobile communications towards higher-capacity, higher-performance solutions is also an important area for the future development of railways. These technologies must meet the specific safety, availability, resilience, and interoperability requirements characteristic of railway communications. Indeed, FRMCS (Future Railway Mobile Communication System), the successor to GSM-R, will enable greater transmission capacity,

very low latency, and a wider range of services and capabilities to support both functional and operational safety and the passenger experience.

4. Technical considerations for analysing railway incidents

The technical analysis of a railway incident or accident requires examination of how the various elements involved in train operations function together. It is a multidisciplinary process that must be based on objective evidence, technical records, and verified documentation.

Examining a single piece of equipment or one system in isolation is not sufficient. The complete architecture, operating conditions, and interactions among infrastructure, rolling stock, protection systems, communications, and operating procedures must be considered.

The principal areas that may be examined include the following:

Infrastructure and system configuration

This includes the condition of the railway infrastructure and the configuration of the signaling, interlocking, protection, and supervision systems installed on the section concerned. It also includes analysis of interfaces between subsystems and whether they correspond to the configuration intended for operation.

Onboard equipment

The equipment installed on trains must be examined, including its functions, configuration, and the information it exchanges with the infrastructure. Operating logs, alarms, and incidents detected by onboard systems may also be relevant.

Communications and information exchange

Railway communications transmit information essential to operations and traffic supervision. Their analysis may include link availability, the integrity of exchanged information, communication records, and the timing relationships between messages and system actions.

Supervision and protection systems

Examination of these systems should consider their assigned functions, activation conditions, the restrictions they supervise, and the automatic actions they can perform. Interactions between the different available protection systems must also be analyzed.

Operating procedures and degraded-mode operation

When systems operate in a degraded state, it is necessary to consider the established procedures, applicable restrictions, instructions transmitted, and coordination mechanisms between traffic controllers and train drivers.

Reliability, maintenance, and life cycle

The analysis may include maintenance records, previous incidents, functional tests, modifications made, and equipment configuration at the time of the event. These elements provide context for the technical condition of the systems and how they have evolved over time.

Human and organizational factors

Railway operations require coordination among different professionals and organizations. The analysis may therefore cover working procedures, available information, communications, operating conditions, and the actions of the people involved in train movements.

4.1. The importance of technical records and the legal event recorder

Railway vehicles incorporate event-recording systems, commonly referred to in Spanish railway practice as *registradores jurídicos* (legal event recorders), whose function is to store information relating to train driving and operation in a secure and traceable manner.

Their role is comparable, allowing for technological and operational differences, to that of flight recorders used in aviation.

Depending on the equipment available, the recorded information may include operating parameters, speed, actions taken by the driver, interventions by protection systems, alarms, and faults or incidents involving onboard equipment.

These data are a particularly valuable source of information for reconstructing the timeline of events. However, their analysis must be complemented by records from the infrastructure, signaling and control systems, railway communications, and technical inspections.

Temporal correlation of the different information sources is essential for reconstructing the sequence of events and understanding interactions between the various subsystems.

The presence of a particular protection system does not, by itself, justify conclusions about the causal sequence of an accident. Likewise, the absence of more advanced technology does not constitute sufficient evidence to assign responsibility or identify causes.

Interpreting the records, determining the factors that may have contributed, and formulating conclusions are tasks for the bodies competent to carry out the technical investigation.

5. Final considerations

Signaling, communications, supervision, and protection systems are an essential part of the safety and efficiency of railway transport. Their technological evolution has increased traffic-control capabilities, improved interoperability, and enabled the development of increasingly advanced solutions for operating railway networks.

Throughout this process, telecommunications engineering plays an essential role in the design, development, integration, validation, and maintenance of the technologies that make today's and tomorrow's railway systems possible.

The progressive introduction of ERTMS and the evolution of railway communications towards FRMCS open up new opportunities for more interoperable, efficient, and technologically integrated networks. These advances must continue to be guided by the safety, reliability, availability, and resilience requirements specific to railway transport.

The Spanish Chamber of Telecommunication Engineers (COIT)considers it valuable to contribute to public awareness and understanding of these technologies, highlighting the contribution of telecommunications engineering to railway development. It also makes its resources available to public administrations, businesses, and society in general, particularly in a context in which independent, responsible technical expertise is indispensable—something the Spanish Chamber of Telecommunication Engineers (COIT), as a public-law body, guarantees in all its activities.