



**THE DISINFORMATION  
EDITION**

# **EUROPEAN PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

**DIGEST | MARCH 2024**





# TABLE OF CONTENT

EDITORIAL	01	INTRODUCTORY <b>EDITORIAL</b>
ARTICLES	02	<b>THE NEW CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY: DISINFORMATION AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE EU</b>
	05	<b>GLOBAL DISINFORMATION AND STRATEGIES FOR RESPONSE</b>
PUBLICATIONS	07	<b>PUBLIC AWARENESS AND TRUST IN EUROPEAN STATISTICS</b>
	08	SPECIAL PUBLICATION: <b>INFORMING EVIDENCE-BASED DEBT POLICY</b>
NEWS & EVENTS	09	MORE FROM IPSOS: <b>NEWS AND EVENTS</b>



# INTRODUCTORY EDITORIAL



## A warm welcome to the Ipsos European Public Affairs digest

This edition is devoted to one of the most pressing issues of our time: disinformation. In an era where information is so readily available and can be disseminated with a single click, the power of truth and the danger of falsehood have never been more apparent.

Whereas the term ‘misinformation’ can refer to the *unintentional* propagation of incorrect or misleading information (for example, through honest mistakes or misconceptions), disinformation is deliberately disseminated with the intent to mislead or manipulate. It is often part of a larger strategy or agenda, making it a far more dangerous, insidious, as well as potentially destabilising, problem.

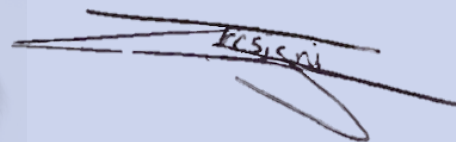
In this digest, we aim to cast a spotlight on different facets of disinformation, including its prevalence, impacts and attempts to combat it. [Our opening article](#) considers disinformation in the EU context specifically, and with an eye to the upcoming European Parliament elections. In [our second article](#) we broaden our perspective and hear from Ipsos’ global head of Public Affairs, Darrell Bricker, on what we know more generally about characteristics of disinformation in today’s world and how it might evolve in the future. Understanding disinformation is the first step towards combating it, so join us in exploring these critical questions.

Elsewhere in this edition, our regular publications section includes our [newly-released Eurobarometer Flash survey](#) on public awareness and trust in European statistics. Spoiler alert: the findings are very encouraging!

Putting together this edition of the newsletter made me feel prouder than ever to work for a company whose very raison d’être is to deliver objective, reliable information for a true understanding of society, markets and people. This commitment underpins everything we do and I hope that shines through in these pages.

As ever, I hope you enjoy reading the digest. Don’t hesitate to get in touch with your feedback, reflections or suggestions for future content.

### Contact the Author



**Christine Tresignie**

Managing Director  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
[christine.tresignie@ipsos.com](mailto:christine.tresignie@ipsos.com)



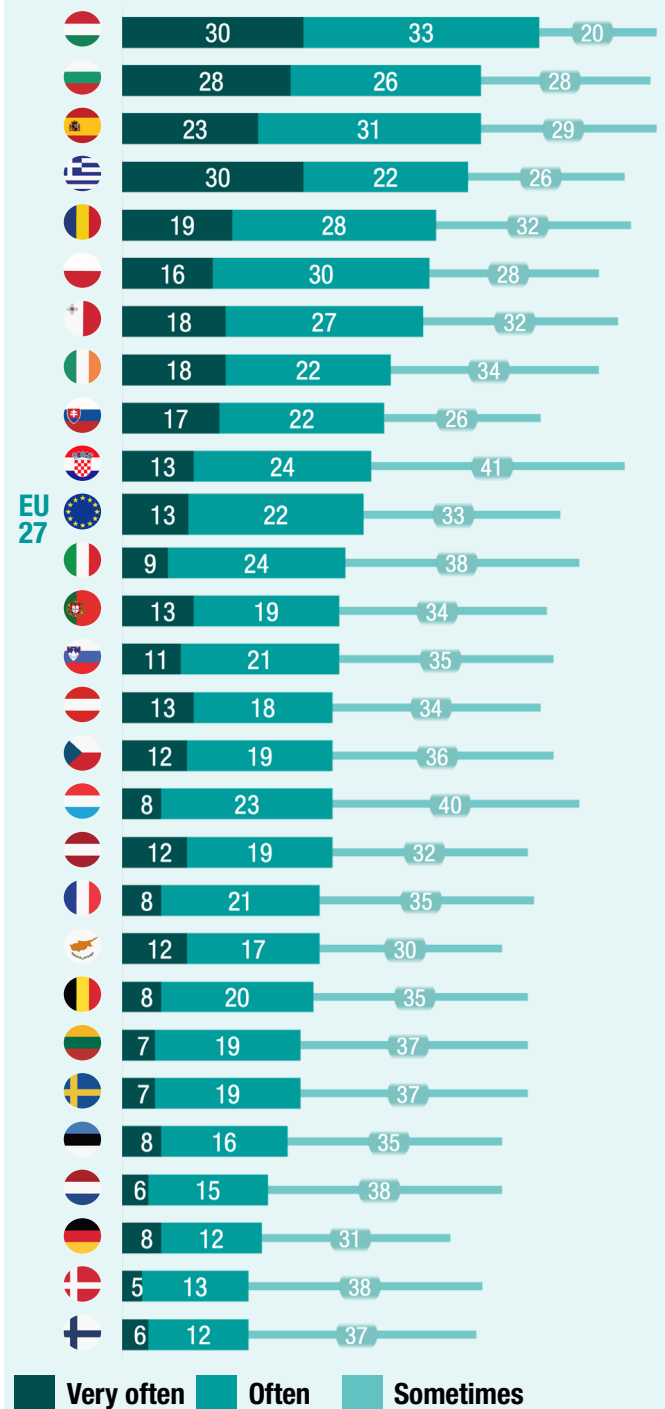
# THE NEW CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY: DISINFORMATION AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE EU

**2024 marks a historical year for elections, with approximately half of the global population across over 70 countries expected to take to the polls.**

In this context, the importance of voter access to reliable, trustworthy information has taken on renewed prominence, including among electorates themselves. In a recent [Flash Eurobarometer survey](#) we conducted on behalf of the European Commission, access to accurate information emerged as the number one factor that citizens felt defined free and fair elections. At the same time, the vast majority of [internet users tell us](#) they are worried about the impact disinformation may have on the upcoming elections in their country. This article aims to provide an overview of what Ipsos' recent research has uncovered about EU citizens' perceptions and experiences of disinformation, along with their views on how the problem might be tackled.

[Although the spread of disinformation is not a novel phenomenon](#), the growth of digital information and internet usage served to amplify it, bringing new challenges for democracies and generating uncertainty – on a large scale – about the reliability of information being consumed. A [recent study](#) conducted by UNESCO and Ipsos across 16 countries where general elections will be held in 2024 found that an almost universal share of people (97%) felt they had been misled or influenced by disinformation in the media or on social media in the past, including 78% who felt this had happened to them “often”. In the EU specifically, our research finds that 68% of citizens believe they have encountered disinformation and fake news in the past seven days – with the figure rising to 80% or higher in some countries, notably Hungary, Bulgaria and Estonia. Age-based variation is also apparent in the results, with younger people aged 15-24 significantly more likely than their elders to feel they have been exposed to disinformation.

How often do you think that you have been personally exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past 7 days? (%)



Source: Flash Eurobarometer 522 - Democracy | Fieldwork: 20/03-31/03/2023 (%) | Base: n=25 600 - All respondents

[A majority of EU citizens \(64%\)](#) believe they are most likely to encounter disinformation or fake news on online social networks. In spite of this, about two in five rely on online media platforms, like video platforms, online social media, messaging apps, podcasts, and blogs, as their primary source of information. This begs the question of how they go about evaluating information and distinguishing the reliable from the less so; a topic that Ipsos is currently actively investigating. That young people aged 15-24 are twice as likely as older groups to use social media platforms as their primary source of information may partly explain their higher self-assessed exposure to disinformation. It may also, by extension, suggest that they are among the most in need of support when it comes to identifying accurate, reliable information, including in the context of elections.

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is projected to significantly amplify exposure to disinformation. Indeed there have already been several well-publicised [cases of AI-generated ‘deepfakes’](#) contributing to the spread of false rumours about politicians and public officials. Our research suggests that citizens are reasonably aware of risks associated with the use of AI. Globally, [three-quarters of them agree that AI is making it easier to generate very realistic fake news stories](#) and images, while about half predict AI will intensify the problem of disinformation in the future. It remains uncertain how the instrumental use of AI to spread

disinformation may be mediated, particularly during elections campaigns when it could undermine voters’ abilities to make fact-based and well-informed political choices.

[Experts and policymakers](#) have already cautioned about the potential threat that the spread of false information can pose to democracies. [Our data](#) suggests that these anxieties are shared by the public: Globally, 87% of citizens think that disinformation and ‘fake news’ have already had a major impact on political life in their respective countries. Similarly, in the EU, we have uncovered a [high level of concern](#) among citizens about the possibility of people basing their voting decisions on disinformation. Indeed, a [recent study by Ipsos](#) in France revealed that 61% of citizens feared that disinformation in the context of the forthcoming EU elections could spark violent protest movements after the elections, and 55% worried it might lead to the election results being questioned. In the run up to the European elections there has been widespread discussion of changing electoral dynamics and the rise of anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties in Member States like France, Germany, Austria, Hungary and the Netherlands. [Political disinformation has been highlighted as an important factor driving support for such parties](#) and one that may ultimately enable them to influence the European Commission’s agenda. Now, more than ever, therefore, the question of how to tackle the disinformation crisis is at the forefront of the political, media and public discourse.



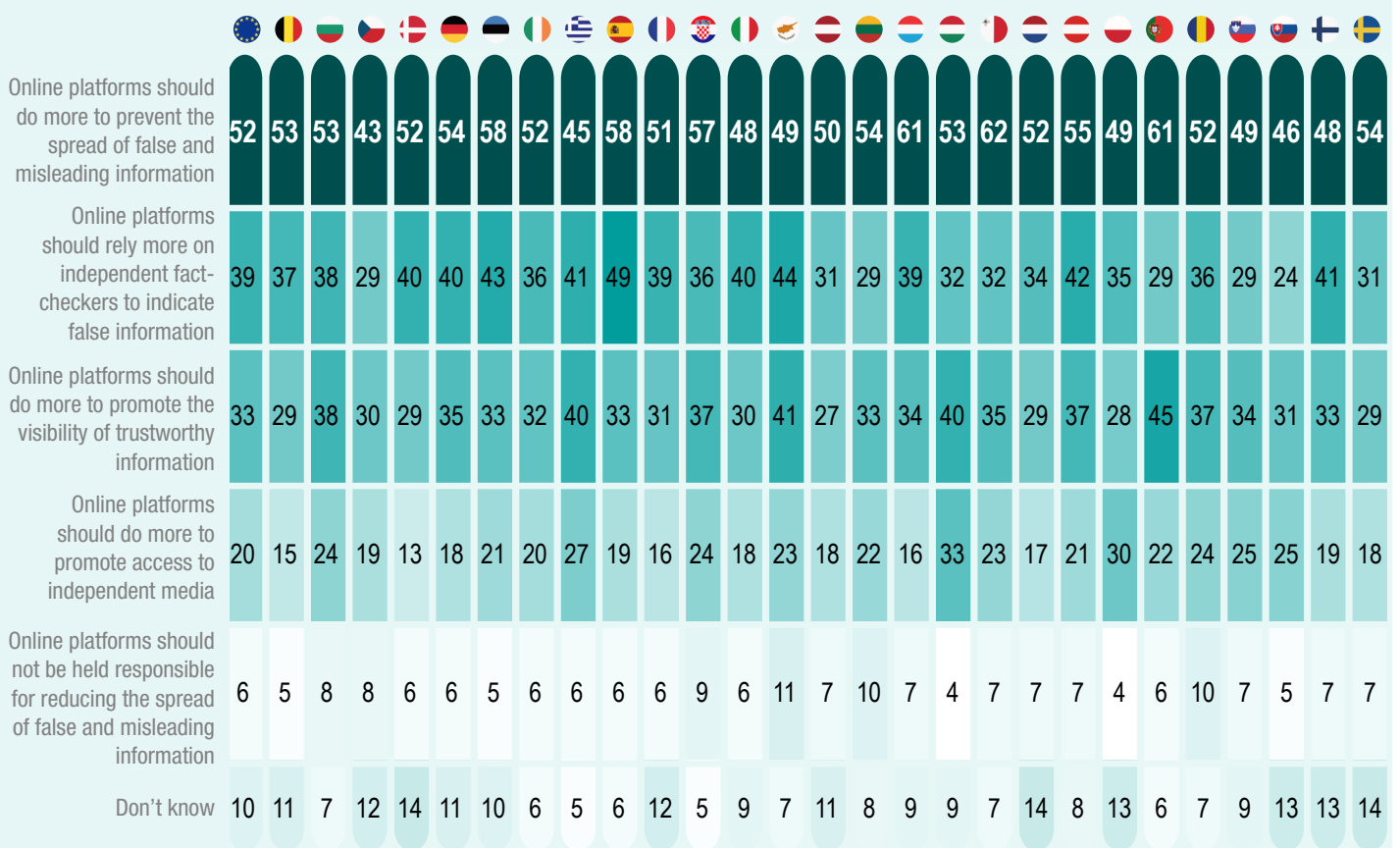


Globally, there seems to be a consensus among internet users that governments and regulators should enforce trust and safety measures on social media platforms during election campaigns. Similar findings have emerged in the EU context, where almost three-quarters of citizens are in favour of online platforms either relying more on independent fact-checkers to indicate false information, or doing more to promote the visibility of trustworthy information. Just 6% feel that online platforms should bear no responsibility for reducing the spread of false and misleading information.

Yet, any potential efforts to tackle disinformation must be carefully balanced with the need to uphold freedom

of expression and avoid censorship, thus raising complex ethical and legal challenges for policy and decision makers. The European Union (EU) is rising to this challenge and actively seeking to address the disinformation crisis through a raft of measures. These include a self-regulatory code of practice involving online platforms, social networks, and advertisers; an emphasis on media literacy and critical thinking in education; and support for fact-checkers and researchers. The upcoming EU elections will provide a first crucial test of the effectiveness of such efforts and their likely success in the future.

**When it comes to disinformation and the manipulation of information on online platforms (social networks, search engines, etc.), which of the following statements are closest to your view? (Multiple answers | %)**



**Most frequent answer**

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 522 - Democracy | Fieldwork: 20/03-31/03/2023 | Base: n=25 600 - All respondents

**Contact Authors**



**Sharon Belli**  
Senior Research Expert  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
Sharon.Belli@ipsos.com



**Christophe Leclerc**  
Senior Research Expert  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
christophe.leclerc@ipsos.com



# GLOBAL DISINFORMATION AND STRATEGIES FOR RESPONSE

Disinformation is a truly global challenge and one that is being researched by Ipsos' teams all over the world. With this in mind, we sat down with the company's Global CEO of Public Affairs, Darrell Bricker, to get his perspective on the topic and a helicopter view of latest insights.



**Darrell Bricker**  
Global CEO, Ipsos  
Public Affairs

**Darrell, in the coming year, about half of the world's population will have the chance to vote in free elections, including the US presidential election and the European Parliament elections. Should we be worried about the influence of disinformation on election outcomes?**

The first thing worth emphasising is that disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Politicians and other political actors have always been in conflict with each other, employing every trick in the book to gain the upper hand. But the way they are doing this is changing, with modern technology making it easier than ever to spread falsehoods. Communication platforms like social media facilitate the rapid spread of disinformation globally, which in turn means that electoral processes are increasingly susceptible to not only disinformation on the part of domestic actors, but outside interference. Outside forces may regard the information they disseminate as accurate but the fact that their agenda is driven by their country's needs rather than those of the country in whose processes they are intervening is disturbing. On top of all of this, as generative AI tools grow more and more sophisticated, political actors are able to deploy the technology to further amplify disinformation – for example, by creating hyper-realistic deep fakes of real life events or speeches. So, yes, all things considered we should definitely be worried about the influence of disinformation on upcoming election outcomes.

**What do we know about the prevalence and reach of online disinformation in democratic societies? Are there differences between countries or parts of the world – so say, Europe versus North America, versus other parts of the World?**

Disinformation is a prevalent feature in political systems worldwide, not something that is associated only with established democracies or advanced technological societies. In places where the relevant technology exists and individuals are able to disseminate information through these tools, disinformation inevitably arises. The increasingly widespread availability of social media platforms has essentially lowered the barriers to such behaviour, reducing, if not removing, the cost to spreading disinformation.

## Have you encountered any patterns suggesting that certain types of voters are more susceptible than others to disinformation?

Among some political actors, but especially centrist liberal parties, there is an unfortunate tendency to associate difficulties identifying disinformation with low levels of education or intelligence on the part of some voters. This can serve as an excuse for poor electoral performance or electoral defeat – after all, it is easier to blame a lost election on voter limitations, than it is to acknowledge that the electoral campaign perhaps failed to resonate with the target audience. In fact, the research conducted to date largely debunks the notion that certain individuals are more susceptible to disinformation than others. For example, I have personally conducted experiments in which a cross-section of citizens have been given several news articles and asked to identify the fake one. There is generally no correlation between their ability to do so and their educational level. Highly educated, more affluent males are more likely than other groups to *think* that they are able to detect disinformation, but in fact their performance is no better than that of the average person.

## Would you say that disinformation has the ability to actually change people's minds?

Well to take a step back, it's first worth noting that disinformation can be categorised into two types. The first, and most prevalent type seeks to whip up a frenzy among groups that are already somewhat aligned with the perspective being advanced. Rather than seeking to alter beliefs, the primary objective of this form of disinformation is to mobilise constituencies and entrench or solidify pre-existing views. The second form of disinformation aims to change people's mind and this task is considerably more challenging. Do people genuinely alter their perspectives based on the disinformation they encounter? It is quite likely that they do – particularly in response to disinformation that is more emotive, more visual and so more memorable. But it is really difficult to parse this out and accurately evaluate what truly has an impact and what does not. This is something Ipsos is interested in and we will certainly be doing research about.

## Are there specific countermeasures that have proven to be particularly promising for tackling online disinformation, especially in the context of elections?

In considering this question we need to bear in mind that there is a difference between matters of interpretation and actual disinformation. Election campaigns have always, and will always, contain varying 'truths', with one person's truth being another person's nonsense. But this is often about interpretation, not necessarily disinformation, and it can be difficult to regulate that without skirting the borders of free speech. Whenever you suppress the ability to effectively

communicate during an election, you are probably infringing freedom of speech. Disinformation though, consists of blatant lies. It is making a claim about something that is absolutely manufactured – for example, creating a speech that never happened. The most effective approach to tackling this in my opinion is to call it out right away. That can be challenging of course, as election campaigns move so quickly that, usually by the time somebody is able to respond to disinformation, it is too late.

As for specific regulations aimed at counteracting disinformation online, the primary focus should be limiting the influence of foreign actors with malevolent intentions. The most crucial step, therefore, is improving cyber security to prevent foreign interference in national elections. Disclosure is another potentially important lever. When generative AI, or other technologies, are used to create deceptive images or videos, it should be mandatory to disclose this fact. A diligent media also plays a vital role. The current economic model of the media sector means journalists often lack the time or resources to check their facts, yet fact-checking remains an essential tool in the fight against disinformation.

## Finally, what's your prognosis on all of this, Darrell? Would you say you are optimistic or pessimistic about how things might play out in the future?

I think the key takeaway is that you cannot put the genie back in the bottle. I am not defeatist, I do believe there are aspects we can regulate, but it is unrealistic to think we can completely repress disinformation. You cannot just draw up a blanket law to restrict it because people will always find a work-around. I think it is better to focus efforts on the most egregious cases. Such an approach, if handled well, could also be effective in helping raise public awareness about the reality of disinformation. With the technology that is currently available, the ability to create fake reality is just getting exponentially better. Citizens will need to be prepared for that and adopt a more critical stance toward the online content they encounter.

### Contact the Author



**Orpha de Lenne**  
Senior Research Expert  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
orpha.delenne@ipsos.com





# PUBLIC AWARENESS AND TRUST IN EUROPEAN STATISTICS



**A majority of EU citizens are familiar with Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union), and two-thirds of these individuals trust Eurostat’s statistics and data, affirming its reputation for impartiality, objectivity and independence. These findings underscore the importance of transparency and credibility in shaping public trust in, and awareness of, statistical information, especially in an era of mis- and disinformation.**

We carried out this Flash Eurobarometer survey on behalf of Eurostat. It covered EU citizens’ attitudes towards statistics and data in general, as well as their knowledge and perceptions of Eurostat. The survey was conducted online among a representative sample of 25,903 citizens aged 15 and over across the 27 EU Member States.

### Key findings:

**71%** of respondents say that, when searching for statistics and data on their country or on Europe, they pay attention to the data source.

**69%** of respondents have heard of Eurostat and about two-thirds of this group agree that the organisation provides trustworthy (67%) and impartial (65%) data and statistics.



Specific types of statistics and data with which Eurostat is most commonly associated are those relating to the economy and finance (41% of respondents mentioned this), population and social conditions (40%) and environment and energy (33%).



[Read more](#)



[Infographic](#)

### Contact the Author



**Christophe Leclerc**  
Senior Research Expert  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
[christophe.leclerc@ipsos.com](mailto:christophe.leclerc@ipsos.com)

# INFORMING EVIDENCE-BASED DEBT POLICY

**European consumers recognise that over-indebtedness is a very serious problem and one that has a range of psychological and practical impacts for those affected. At the same time, they are almost unanimous in the view that the problem is common and, indeed, on the increase, with new measures urgently needed to address it.**

The European Commission and EISMEA tasked us with carrying out focus groups among consumers across the EU, as part of a wider study to assess consumer over-indebtedness and its implications. The focus groups were specifically concerned with gathering insights on consumers' understanding, perspectives and experiences of over-indebtedness, including how they have responded (or would respond) on finding themselves in the situation. We conducted the groups in 18 Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden). Two groups were conducted per country – one among consumers who had personally experienced over-indebtedness and the other among consumers who had not. As part of each focus group, we administered a short questionnaire to obtain an objective assessment of participants' levels of financial literacy and financial resilience.



Overall Study Report



Country Reports

## Key findings:



The participants correctly identified that over-indebtedness was a severe or extreme situation that involved having multiple debts simultaneously, or a high level of accumulated debt, and being unable to make the necessary repayments.



The problem was seen to be relatively common – and on the increase – due to a confluence of factors, including lasting economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rapidly increasing prices combined with low or stagnating wages, the proliferation of short-term loan and credit options (often with high rates of interest), as well as intensifying consumerism.



Over-indebtedness was seen to result in significant psychological distress – whether in the form of extreme stress, despair, depression or suicidality – and to have serious practical repercussions (e.g., problems accessing credit, potential bankruptcy). Across the focus groups, participants commonly recounted personal experiences of such impacts.



Asked to identify possible coping strategies for over-indebtedness, participants most often mentioned individual-level behavioural adaptations (working more, cutting back on spending etc.) or seeking support from friends or family. Formal external support mechanisms – such as direct financial assistance or debt advice – were mentioned in Northern European countries but much less so, or not at all, in Southern and Eastern European ones. Indeed in a few countries – principally Greece, Italy and Romania – participants had no conception of debt advice at all

## Contact the Author

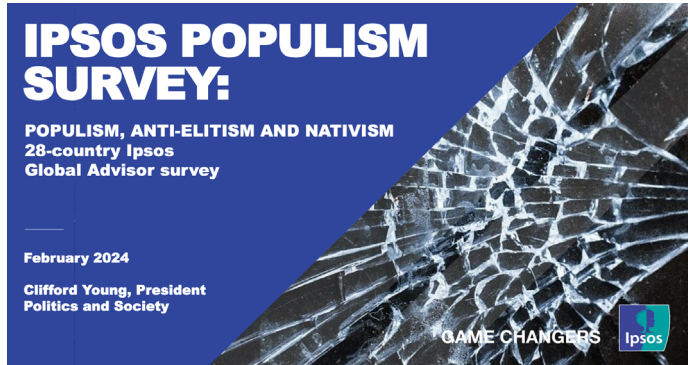


**Sara Davidson**  
Research Director  
Ipsos European Public Affairs  
sara.davidson@ipsos.com



# MORE FROM IPSOS: NEWS & EVENTS

## NEW GLOBAL STUDIES & WHITE PAPERS



### Populism, anti-elitism and nativism

This report, based on a survey of more than 20,000 adults across 28 countries, reveals widespread suspicion of elites, anti-establishment sentiment and a feeling that the system is broken. The report also anticipates potential electoral outcomes in different countries that will be going to the polls in 2024. Explore the [full report](#) or dip into this handy [one-pager on the key takeouts](#).

### The Ipsos Reputation Council 2024

The Reputation Council brings together an impressive group of senior communicators from many of the world's most respected companies, and provides a guide to the latest thinking and practice in corporate communications and corporate reputation management. [Check out the report](#) from the latest sitting, which includes the results of a quickfire poll on the threat posed by disinformation, and considers whether AI is a friend or foe to business.

### Elections and online disinformation

Delving into the citizens' perspective, [this study](#) – conducted by Ipsos and UNESCO in 16 countries set for elections in 2024 – focuses on the perceived influence of disinformation on political life and on ongoing/upcoming election campaigns. It also considers views on the most appropriate ways of addressing the problem.

### Views on disinformation risks in the age of generative AI

[This 29-country survey](#), conducted among a total of over 21,000 adults globally, sheds light on public perceptions concerning risks related to the increasingly significant role of AI in our lives, and its association with disinformation.



## WEBINAR



[This recent episode](#) of Ipsos' KEYS webinar series is all about getting closer to how we all feel – as

citizens, consumers and customers. Are emotions universal? How do we measure them? Why are they important for our clients? And what are the differences – and similarities – across countries? The presenters draw on new scientific research and real-world examples to uncover how great communications and marketing can harness the power of emotions. To keep up to date with future webinars in the series, bookmark the [Ipsos KEYS homepage](#).



# THE DISINFORMATION EDITION

## EUROPEAN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Digest | March 2024

