

ANALYSIS ELECTION DISINFORMATION



# Which Narratives Shape Misinformation About Elections





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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This white paper systematically analyzes **disinformation surrounding elections** in Germany. The false information can be assigned to four categories: the voting process, electoral law, election polls and results, and election campaigning and candidates. Based on nearly 180 dpa fact-checks, **typical narratives and techniques of disinformation** are identified and illustrated with examples.

Disinformation around elections aims **to undermine trust in democratic processes**. The goal of this analysis is therefore to equip media professionals and media literacy educators with knowledge about how such disinformation operates. From this knowledge, prebunking strategies can be developed to sensitize people to false information before they encounter it. This can help strengthen **public resilience** against election disinformation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 Elections & Disinformation

Allegations of “stolen elections” or demands for recounts – false information circulates increasingly around elections to attack the integrity of the vote and its results. Many voters worry that such “fake news” could influence election outcomes, as shown by a 2025 survey commissioned by the Vodafone Institute. Trust in free and fair elections is essential for orderly processes and acceptance of results. Disinformation, by contrast, seeks to undermine this trust and attacks democratic processes.

To counter this, it is vital for media professionals and media literacy educators to understand what election-related disinformation looks like and how it operates. The fact-checking team at the German Press Agency (dpa) provides thorough verification journalism since 2019, drawing on an archive of several thousand written fact-checks. For this analysis, nearly 180 fact-checks on German election topics were evaluated.

The result is an analysis of disinformation narratives during past elections. Four main categories were identified where false information circulates most frequently:

- The voting process
- Electoral law
- Polls and election results
- Campaigns and candidates

The following analysis examines these categories with examples, highlighting common narratives and methods. A better understanding of these can help sensitize people to such election disinformation before they encounter it – a concept known as prebunking.

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## 1.2 What is Prebunking?

Most people are familiar with “debunking”: journalists check whether a claim is true or false and refute false information after it has already circulated. The counterpart is “prebunking”: People are educated about common misinformation techniques so they can recognize them when encountered. Prebunking is intended to function like a vaccine against misinformation.

Prebunking formats can use examples to explain manipulation techniques, such as exploiting emotions or exploiting existing societal conflicts. Misinformation claims often take information out of context and misrepresent them, or contain personal attacks and use references to fake experts.

The dpa fact-check team also advocates for an approach that empowers users to verify information themselves. Many verification techniques, such as specific web searches or reverse image searches, are easy to learn.

Specifically regarding elections, it is also important to convey knowledge about the voting process and its democratic safeguards. Election procedures are complex, and it is a core journalistic task to explain them. If knowledge of procedures, electoral law, and statistics increases, citizens are better equipped to recognize and stop the spread of false information.

### 1.3 Knowledge base for professionals

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False information around election dates presents an additional challenge for media professionals. Their reporting is already in demand during these times, and this topic adds to their workload. The expertise of those who teach media literacy or deal professionally with disinformation is also particularly needed before elections.

This analysis aims to provide both groups with practical knowledge from verification journalists. Many examples from four categories of common election disinformation illustrate the techniques used to spread falsehoods around elections. This can serve as a basis for developing prebunking formats to sensitize citizens to election disinformation – whether they are created as text or video, or workshops.

To find topics for such prebunking formats, this analysis presents common narratives and methods for the four categories of frequent election disinformation (election process, electoral law, polls and results, party programs and candidates). The second main part of the analysis introduces ideas for possible prebunking formats, including a case study: social media videos produced by the dpa fact-checking team before the German Federal Elections in 2025.

This analysis was created as part of the project “From Federal to Local: Prebunking Disinformation in German Elections” ahead of the 2026 local elections in Bavaria and state elections in Rhineland-Palatinate. The project partners – the dpa fact-checking team, the media literacy association Medienebene e.V., and the Günther-Holland-Journalistenschule (GHJS), which is the educational program of the local Bavarian newspaper “Augsburger Allgemeine” – used it to create prebunking social media videos for their communities. The project was funded by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF).

# 2

## TOPICS & NARRATIVES OF ELECTION FAKES

### 2.1 Voting Process, postal voting, voter turnout

A large portion of dpa's published fact-checks on election topics dealt with claims about the voting process. These claims commonly question the legitimacy of the election or try to prove alleged election fraud. Claims include:

- Misinformation about ballots or ballot boxes,
- Alleged manipulation observations by election workers or observers,
- Claims about postal voting or voter turnout.

This provides starting points for prebunking formats: those who know how an election actually works and what types of disinformation have circulated in the past are better able to critically question false claims.

Common claims regarding the voting process:

#### Narrative

If your ballot looks like **this**, it means election fraud or invalidity.

#### Techniques

- ↳ Photos/videos of real ballots suggest authenticity
- ↳ omission of information

↳ exploiting ignorance of ballot regulations or minority rights

#### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Ballots with a cut-off corner are valid
- Photography and filming are prohibited in voting booths
- Ballots are valid only without a signature
- An email address on a ballot invalidates the vote
- Voting notifications cannot be used to cast votes for others

**Common claims regarding procedures at the polling station:**

**Narrative**

If that happens at your polling place, it shows that manipulation and election fraud are taking place there.

**Techniques**

- ↳ Exploiting a lack of knowledge about election procedures, such as guidelines for ballots or ballot boxes
- ↳ Photos or videos of real ballot boxes or polling places

**Examples of fact-checks (dpa)**

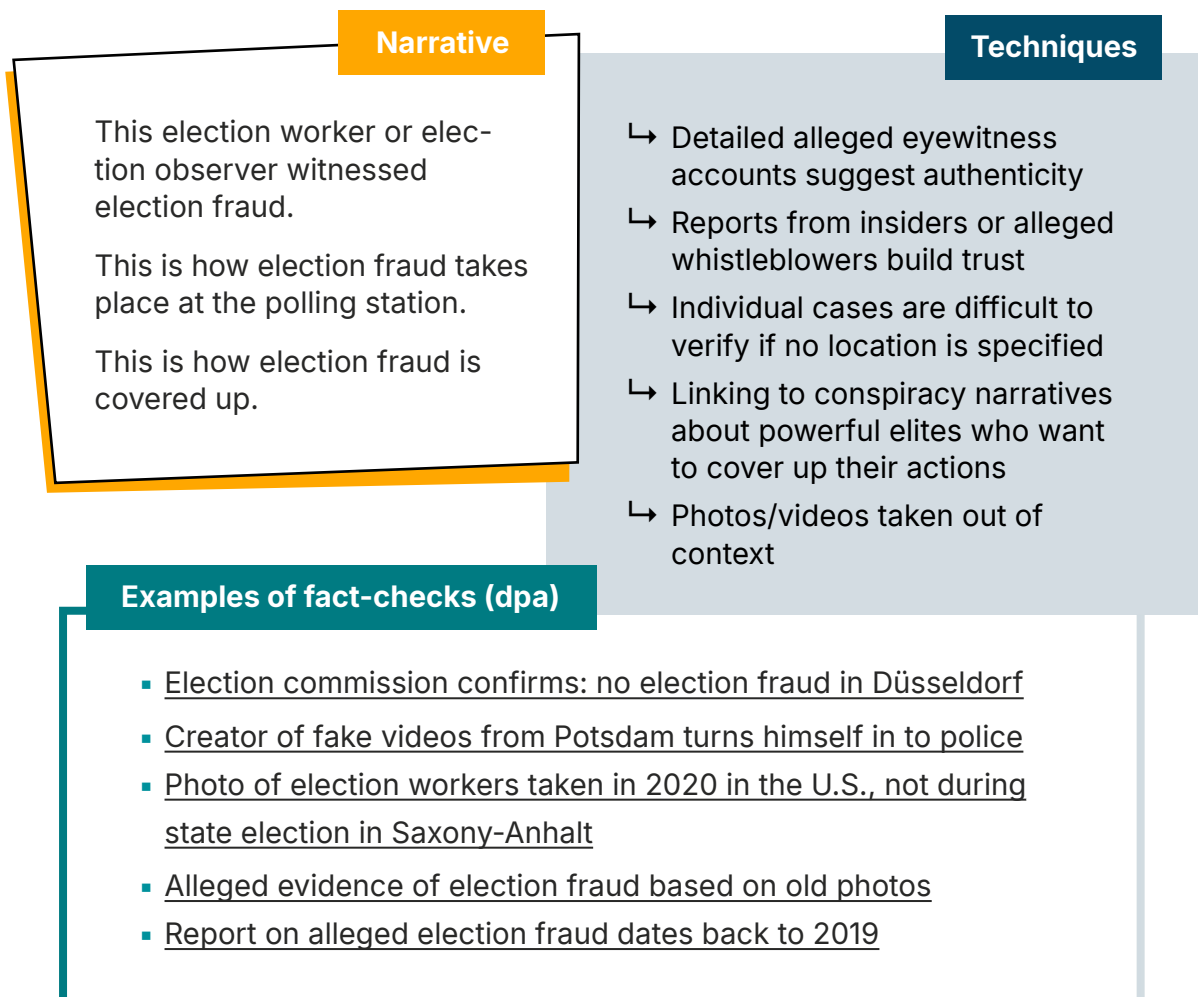
- Ballot boxes must be locked, but do not require a seal
- City states the lock on Laschet's ballot box was «fully functional»
- Federal Election Regulation also permits cardboard ballot boxes
- Ballot boxes are supervised on Election Day
- No manipulation has been proven in the U.S. election

Based on experience by the dpa fact-checking team, narratives involving alleged or actual election workers and observers frequently emerge around election day. In videos or text messages, these individuals report observations from polling stations, which are typically presented as evidence of manipulation or election fraud.

Official election workers, like voluntary election observers, are a crucial pillar of a functioning democracy. They ensure the orderly conduct of a fair election and are "close to the action." As a result, they are trusted by the public. However, this trust can also be exploited for the dissemination of misinformation.

These examples provide an opportunity to clarify the differences between election workers and election observers, as well as their respective responsibilities. It is also important to address the fact that supposed insider reports from election workers have become a common method for casting doubt on the legitimacy of elections. For this reason, it is essential to be prepared and to approach such narratives with caution.

### Common claims regarding election workers or election observers:



Because elections are organized and conducted by people, mistakes can naturally occur. However, even if a certain amount of mishaps happen, they are a serious failure but not equivalent to election fraud. Disinformation deliberately blurs this line and uses the true core (the mishaps) to make the false information (the alleged fraud) more believable.

To counter this with prebunking, it can be helpful to provide transparent information about known mishaps in elections. This allows the public to rely on verified information from professional journalists. It is also important to explain what impact errors have, what security mechanisms exist during an election, and how a possible complaint process works.

**Common claims regarding mishaps and errors in elections:**

**Narrative**

Errors are evidence of fraud and rigged election results.

Errors/mishaps are intended to cover up election fraud by those in power or to keep certain people from voting.

**Techniques**

- ↳ Exploiting anger and outrage over actual election mishaps
- ↳ Mixing facts with interpretation
- ↳ Exaggeration, mixing false and accurate information

**Examples of fact-checks (dpa)**

- Voting at the polling station was interrupted only briefly
- A peculiarity in the local elections leads to many invalid votes
- Numerous mishaps in the federal election, but no evidence of manipulation
- The ballot box was not sealed before the polling station opened
- No indication of mixed-up votes

In recent years, postal voting has become a particular focus of false claims surrounding the voting process. There is indeed legitimate criticism of the postal voting process, such as the fact that it is more prone to errors or that postal voters may miss the final phase of the election campaign. However, disinformation goes beyond this criticism. Postal voting is sometimes equated with particularly easy manipulation or electoral fraud. Disseminators of false information also often exploit the fact that the results of postal votes can differ from those of polling stations. If this difference is decisive for the final result, calls of electoral fraud are often quickly raised. These phenomena and prejudices can be addressed in pre-bunking videos.

### Common claims regarding postal voting:

#### Narrative

Postal voting makes election fraud possible.  
Postal voting is rigged.  
Election results are manipulated through postal voting.

#### Techniques

- ↳ Taking advantage of voters' lack of knowledge about the complex process of casting a postal ballot
- ↳ Misrepresenting the procedures for counting votes and determining results
- ↳ Taking advantage of particularly close results at the local or state level

#### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- [Story about ballots in the Elbe River is fabricated](#)
- [AfD listed on official postal ballot documents in Leipzig](#)
- [Graphic doesn't prove election manipulation in Brandenburg](#)
- [Counting of postal ballots did not begin until election night](#)
- [No evidence of fraud in Brandenburg district administrator election](#)

## 2.2 Electoral law

Electoral law can play a decisive role in whether someone secures a seat in a parliament or a local council. Changes to electoral law are therefore often politically controversial. It is not uncommon for such changes to end up in courts, where revisions are sometimes mandated. The controversies and emotions underlying these political disputes are exploited by misinformation claims. Moreover, electoral law is complex, which also serves as an entry point for disinformation.

For prebunking formats, it could be useful to explain current controversies surrounding electoral law or recent court rulings. There is also recurring misinformation narrative that an electoral law declared (partially) invalid could affect previous election results. This could be clarified through prebunking. Additionally, false claims about the election contestation process are repeatedly spread, about which transparent information can be provided through prebunking.

### Common claims regarding electoral law:

#### Techniques

- ↳ Exploiting voters' lack of knowledge about electoral law
- ↳ Emotions: Exploiting fears of discrimination/preferential treatment of political opponents
- ↳ Misinterpretation of court rulings/political processes
- ↳ Exaggeration, mixing false and accurate information
- ↳ Ideology of "Reichsbürger" („sovereign citizens“)

#### Narrative

There is no valid electoral law.

A court or a politician has annulled the election results.

The electoral laws are only changed to ensure victory for one party.

#### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Court ruled only one election law unconstitutional
- Federal Constitutional Court confirmed the validity of the electoral law in 2024
- Rulings by federal courts on the mayoral election in Ludwigshafen are fabricated
- Elections are postponed in the event of a state of emergency
- Elections are valid even with low voter turnout

## 2.3 Election polls & results

Election polls provide voters with orientation and reflect the current public mood. Credible election research is a crucial part of any campaign. On election night, the counted votes and projected seat distributions reveal who will hold how much power in the future.

Misinformation often arises around these critical numbers. Discrepancies between polls and election results are cited as evidence of election fraud. Additionally, manipulated or unreliable polls are circulated to claim that a party is expected to gain significantly more or less support. The goal may be to undermine trust in credible polling. The same applies to election results – trust in accurate results is essential for a peaceful and undisputed transfer of power..

Polling is complex and presents an entry point for disinformation. A lack of understanding about statistics is often exploited to spread false claims. Prebunking formats could explain the methodology and limitations of credible polling: How do statisticians work? What is the significance of polls? How can one distinguish between reliable and unreliable polls?

Common claims regarding election polls:

### Narrative

**These** are the real poll numbers. Everyone else is lying to you.

### Techniques

- ↳ Taking advantage of a lack of knowledge regarding statistical methods
- ↳ Omitting information
- ↳ Manipulated graphics

### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Arbitrary chart on women's voting behavior
- No evidence of reputable polling behind U.S. made survey
- Chart with poll results manipulated
- Fake poll shows support for Werteunion
- Screenshot from Politbarometer was manipulated

## Common claims regarding election polls:

### Narrative

Polls are manipulated to influence the election results.

If the polls and the election results differ significantly, there was election fraud.

### Techniques

↳ Reinterpreting mishaps or errors as fraudulent intent

### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Ticker displays fictional projection two days before the federal election
- Discrepancies between polls and election results are not evidence of election fraud
- Was the Freie Wähler party omitted from the ARD poll? Allegations of manipulation are untenable
- Rounding effect results in an odd total in election poll

Misinformation about election results often relies on omission. The result of a single voting district or an early count is presented as the final result or as “more accurate” than the official outcome. Those spreading such claims exploit the fact that many people find it difficult to understand how significantly results and vote shares in certain districts can differ – which is normal. Notably, this type of false claim has frequently appeared in recent years during state or local elections.

Prebunking formats could explain how results are reported and processed on election night – from individual polling stations to the highest electoral authority. They could also address the security mechanisms in place to prevent manipulation.

## Common claims regarding election results:

### Techniques

- ↳ Taking advantage of a lack of knowledge regarding the distortions inherent in small numbers or interim results, the counting process, and the reporting of results
- ↳ Omitting information
- ↳ Manipulated or out-of-context graphics

### Narrative

The election results have been rigged, because this single result tells a completely different story.

**This** is the true election result.

### Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Why the election result in Bad Freienwalde flipped last minute
- Preliminary results are not final – AfD only third in Brackel
- Post shows results from only one voting district
- Results from individual voting districts may differ from the final result
- Election tally counts are not updated simultaneously everywhere

## 2.4 Election campaigns, party programs & candidates

In elections, the candidates and their parties' programs are always in the spotlight. On one hand, it is normal for campaigns to use exaggeration and sharp rhetoric. Harshly criticizing political opponents is also part of the campaign.

However, spreading fake campaign posters, fabricated statements, or false personal information about a candidate crosses the line of what freedom of expression and democratic debate allow. In some cases, these actions are part of organized disinformation campaigns, such as those conducted by the Russian propaganda group "Storm 1516" during the 2025 German federal election.

A common feature of much of the misinformation in this area is the exploitation of (alleged) sensational stories and emotionally charged topics. Prebunking formats can help raise awareness of these tactics and educate the public on verification techniques, enabling citizens to fact-check fake quotes or counterfeit campaign posters themselves.

**Common claims regarding campaign posters or party programs:**

**Narrative**

Look at this ridiculous/outrageous campaign poster.  
It's unbelievable what this person/party is calling for.

**Techniques**

- ↳ Manipulation of photographed campaign posters
- ↳ Photo montages
- ↳ Repurposing old fabrications for new elections
- ↳ Exploiting emotions during election campaigns
- ↳ Exploiting stereotypes about political parties

**Examples of fact-checks (dpa)**

- Alleged SPD campaign ad about «bottle deposit» is a fake
- No Merz quote: Image comes from a poster-building website
- Fake photo of SPD election banner at the Brandenburg Gate
- CDU campaign slogan does not come from this SED poster
- AfD poster was digitally added to a flood photo

Common claims regarding candidates:

Narrative

It's unbelievable what candidate X said.

It's unbelievable what candidate X / party X stands for.

Techniques

↳ Fake quotes: Fabricated/manipulated quotes, quotes taken out of context

↳ Distortion, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of party programs

↳ Appealing to emotions, sensationalism, outrage

Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Headline distorts Baerbock's warning
- Post about pensioners is a fake and not by Robert Habeck
- Partially false information regarding the CDU's tax and levy plans
- No evidence for alleged Scholz quote regarding state elections
- Supposed party comparison misrepresents positions

Narrative

Candidate X is behaving in this scandalous manner.

Because Candidate X has done **this**, he/she is unfit for office.

Techniques

↳ Personal attacks: Misinterpreting or fabricating personal or professional details about a candidate

↳ Sensationalizing real or fabricated professional or personal behavior

Examples of fact-checks (dpa)

- Robert Habeck lives in Flensburg
- Merz and the University of St. Gallen deny: no teaching position
- Flood relief donations not used for Laschet's election campaign
- Baerbock passed master's exam after completing her intermediate exams
- Nude photo shows Russian model, not Baerbock

# 3

## TIPS FOR PREBUNKING BEFORE ELECTIONS

### 3.1 Overview & topics for Prebunking content

From the analysis, four categories of election disinformation and their associated narratives and techniques emerge. The following table summarizes these and suggests possible prebunking topics:

Category	Narrative	Techniques
<b>Voting process, postal voting, voter turnout</b>	If your ballot looks like this, it indicates election fraud/the vote is invalid.	Photos/videos of real ballots, ballot boxes, or real polling places suggest authenticity
	If this happens at your polling place, it shows that manipulation and election fraud are taking place there.	Exploiting ignorance regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• election procedures</li> <li>• the appearance of ballots</li> <li>• requirements for ballot boxes</li> <li>• the process for casting postal ballots</li> </ul>
	This election worker or observer has witnessed election fraud.	Alleged insider or whistleblower reports build trust.
	This is how election fraud unfolds at the polling station/ how it's covered up.	Individual cases that are difficult to verify (e.g. no location is specified)
	Errors are evidence of fraud and falsified election results.	Linking to conspiracy narratives (e.g. elites who want to cover up their actions)
	Errors/glitches are intended to cover up election manipulation by those in power/to keep certain people from voting.	Exploiting emotions: Anger and outrage over actual election mishaps  Misrepresentations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• of procedures during vote counting and result determination</li> <li>• Photos/videos taken out of context</li> <li>• Exaggeration, mixing of false and accurate information</li> </ul>
	Postal voting enables election fraud.	

#### Possible Prebunking stories

- What a real ballot looks like and why it's often misused in misinformation.
- Myths around postal voting.
- Why to be skeptical of insider reports.
- What we really know about election fraud.
- How frustration over mishaps is turned into misinformation.

Category	Narrative	Techniques
Electoral law	There is no valid electoral law.	Exploiting voters' lack of knowledge about electoral laws
	A court or a politician has annulled the election results.	Emotions: Exploiting fears of discrimination or preferential treatment of political opponents
	The electoral laws are only changed to ensure victory for one party.	Misinterpretation of court rulings or political processes Exaggeration, mixing of false and accurate information Ideology of "Reichsbürger" („sovereign citizens“)

### Possible Prebunking stories

- Why election law is often disputed.
- How election law is used in fake news about fraud.

Category	Narrative	Techniques
Election polls, results	These are the real poll numbers. Everyone else is lying to you.	Exploiting a lack of knowledge of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• statistical methods, the distortions inherent in small numbers or interim results</li> <li>• the counting process, and the reporting of results</li> </ul>
	Polls are manipulated to influence the election results.	Omitting information
	If polls and the election results differ significantly, there was election fraud.	Manipulated or out-of-context graphics
	The election results have been manipulated, because this individual result shows something completely different.	Reinterpreting glitches or errors as fraudulent intent

### Possible Prebunking stories

- What polls really mean.
- How to spot a legitimate poll.
- How results are determined.
- Common fakes about vote counting.
- Why individual polling station results may differ from final results.


Category	Narrative	Techniques
<b>Programs, candidates</b>	Look at this ridiculous/outrageous campaign poster.	Manipulation of photos of campaign posters
	It's unbelievable what this candidate said/what this party is calling for.	Exploitation of emotions during the campaign; sensationalism, outrage
	Because Candidate X did this or that, he/she is unelectable.	Fabricated quotes, quotes taken out of context, manipulated quotes
		Distortion, misinterpretation, or misrepresentation of party programs  Personal attacks: Misinterpretation or fabrication of personal or professional details about a candidate  Sensationalizing real or fabricated professional or personal behavior


### Possible Prebunking stories

- How to spot fake quotes in campaigns.
- Why fake posters keep circulating.
- How to check claims about candidates.
- How you're misled during campaigns.

### 3.2 Prebunking videos for the 2025 German Federal Election

Ahead of the 2025 German federal election, the dpa fact-checking team produced five videos on TikTok and Instagram to educate about current misinformation and common disinformation patterns. The aim was not only to debunk current false claims but also to impart knowledge and skills so that users can spot misinformation themselves:

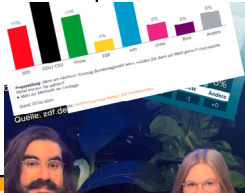
Topic	Video hook	Format
<p><u>Prebunking for the German Federal Election</u></p> 	<p><b>„Did you know there’s a vaccine against disinformation?“</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Host explanations</li><li>• 2-3 examples</li><li>• tips for fact-checking</li></ul>

Topic	Video hook	Format
<p><u>Spotting fake quotes</u></p> 	<p><b>„Did Habeck really say that?“</b></p> <p>(Robert Habeck back then was the leading candidate of the German Green party)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Host dialogue</li><li>• showing video evidence; step-by-step how-to-verify (screencast)</li><li>• examples from two parties for balance</li></ul>

**Prebunking videos German  
Federal Elections 2025**

**Topic**

Interpreting polls correctly



**Video hook**

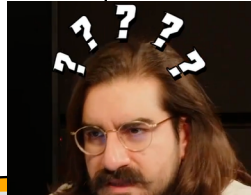
„Have you ever seen wild poll results online?“

**Format**

- Host explanations
- background info on polling
- two examples of bad polls
- tips for fact-checking

**Topic**

Checking TV debate claims



**Video hook**


„Did you watch the TV debate too?“

**Format**

- Host dialogue
- Showing debate clips, then fact-checks
- tips for checking during debates

**Topic**

Sorting election rumours



**Video hook**

„I've heard so many rumors about the election. Let's sort them out.“

**Format**

- Host dialogue
- three example claims with explanations
- background on fake warnings

# 4

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## SUMMARY & OUTLOOK

This analysis shows that disinformation systematically targets all aspects of the democratic election process. Election-related misinformation can be categorized into four areas: the voting process, electoral law, polls and results, and lastly campaigns and candidates. Many claims have repeatedly appeared fact-checks by dpa over the years. The goal of this disinformation is to undermine trust in the integrity of elections.

In 2026, Germany faces several elections: state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, as well as local elections in Bavaria, Hesse, and Lower Saxony.

For media professionals and media literacy educators, as well as the general public, these are opportunities to encounter election disinformation. To handle this, knowledge and actionable options are needed – both of which this analysis aims to provide.

By analyzing election disinformation, recurring narratives and disinformation techniques become visible. These can then be conveyed in prebunking formats, enabling citizens to recognize instead of spread election-related misinformation. Hopefully, this can contribute to protecting democratic processes.

# APPENDIX

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## A Scalable Model for Prebunking Disinformation

The project “From Federal to Local: Prebunking Disinformation in Elections” was designed as a pilot initiative to address the growing challenge of disinformation during local and regional elections. Although the project was implemented in Germany, its methodology, tools, and results are adaptable for organizations in other countries. As the analysis is based on dpa’s work, the linked fact-checks are in German.

The project’s focus was to shift from reactive fact-checking to proactive prebunking: this strategy exposes audiences to weakened versions of false narratives in advance, helping them build resilience. In combining national-level expertise with local partnerships, the project aimed to reach young audiences (ages 16–24) through engaging, mobile-first content on platforms like TikTok or Instagram. Below are the key phases of the project, which can serve as a blueprint:



- **Identify relevant disinformation narratives**  
Review recent fact-checks, monitoring data, or public debates to identify recurring false narratives in your country or region.
- **Translate insights into simple messages**  
Use the narrative patterns from the Blueprint to create easy-to-understand storylines that explain how misinformation works and why it is misleading.
- **Develop short-form content**  
Engaging, mobile-first formats (e.g. short videos, reels, posts) reflect the language and style of your target audience — especially younger users.
- **Work with local partners or creators**  
Collaborate with youth organizations, journalists, or content creators who understand local contexts and can adapt the content to specific communities.
- **Plan and run a dissemination campaign**  
Publish content in a coordinated way (e.g. via a content calendar), using relevant hashtags and platforms such as TikTok or Instagram to maximize reach.
- **Evaluate and adjust**  
Track basic metrics such as views, engagement, and audience feedback, and use these insights to improve future content.

Status: January 2026

Title: Graphic (dpa) / Photo: Sebastian Gollnow (dpa)

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