

A Smaller Rally: Governing and Opposition Pages on Facebook in Europe's First Covid-19 Wave

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Abstract

Surveys found that trust in governments rose across Europe when the first Covid-19 lockdowns began. I ask whether attention on Facebook moved in the same direction: towards the pages of governing parties and heads of government and away from the opposition. I use 81,372 posts from 147 party and leader pages in 15 European countries, compared week by week with the same country's opposition pages around the date when each country's lockdown stringency first reached 70 on the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker. Interactions with governing pages roughly doubled in the first eight weeks, but interactions with opposition pages also rose by about 60%. Relative to the opposition, governing pages gained by a factor of 1.34 (95% CI 0.86 to 2.08) with each page weighted equally and 1.44 (1.05 to 1.96) when weighted by interactions. The gain began in the two weeks before lockdown, was concentrated on heads of government's own pages, and had gone by the summer. Weighted by interactions, it shrank by about 3% a week. Within countries, the relative gain tracked the recent death toll more closely than lockdown stringency, but between countries neither stringency nor deaths predicted its size. Laughing and angry reactions became rarer on heads of government's pages, and love and care

more common, though laughter fell on opposition leaders' pages too. The rally on European political Facebook was real but modest, short and hard to separate from the noise of ordinary political weeks.

Keywords: Covid-19; rally round the flag; Facebook; governing parties; opposition; lockdown; Europe

Introduction

In the spring of 2020 governments across Europe closed schools, shops and borders and told people to stay at home. Surveys taken in those weeks found that trust in national governments, satisfaction with democracy and support for incumbent parties rose (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Bol et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). These findings fit the long tradition of research on the “rally round the flag” effect, the short rise in support for leaders that follows a sudden international or national crisis (Baum, 2002; Mueller, 1970).

Surveys capture what people say they think of their government. They say less about where people turned their attention and how they responded to what governing politicians said. In earlier work on Britain I used Facebook to study this second question (Hotham, 2026a). I found that official government pages drew about 5% of the engagement on British government, party and politicians' pages before the pandemic and 29% in the first wave, and that laughing and angry reactions on the UK government's main page almost disappeared during the weeks of the “stay home” message and returned when the message changed. Britain was one case, with one government, one opposition and one sequence of events.

This paper asks whether the same pattern appears across Europe. It uses a different but related set of pages: the official pages of national parties and the personal pages of party leaders and heads of government in 18 European countries, collected through CrowdTangle for my research on populist parties (Hotham, 2026b). These data do not include government department pages, so the question is narrower than in the British paper. I ask whether attention on Facebook shifted from opposition parties and leaders to governing parties and heads of government when lockdowns began, how large and how lasting the shift was, and whether it followed lockdown stringency or the death toll. I also ask whether reactions to heads of government's posts changed as they did in Britain.

The European data allow a design the British case did not. Lockdowns began at slightly different dates in different countries, and the severity of lockdown and the number of deaths varied a great deal. I place each country's pages on a common timeline around the week in which its lockdown began, using the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021), and compare governing and opposition pages in the same country and week. I compare the same weeks of 2019 as a placebo. I relate the size of the shift, within and between countries, to stringency and to deaths reported by Our World in Data (Mathieu et al., 2020).

The answer is that there was a rally on European political Facebook, but it was smaller and less certain than the British case suggested. Both governing and opposition pages drew more interactions when lockdowns began. Governing pages gained more, by about a third to a half in the first eight weeks, and most of that gain went to heads of government's own pages. The gain began just before lockdown and had gone by the summer. It tracked deaths more than stringency within countries, but its size did not follow either between countries. The tone of reactions to heads of government's posts warmed, but the fall in laughter was shared with opposition leaders.

Background

Rallies and the first wave

The rally effect describes a short-term rise in support for leaders during a crisis (Mueller, 1970). Explanations stress either patriotism, as citizens close ranks behind the leader, or the information environment, as opposition elites mute their criticism and the media report the government's response rather than the debate about it (Baum, 2002). The two explanations make different predictions for social media. If citizens close ranks, attention and warmth should move towards governing leaders. If the rally reflects a quieter opposition, the opposition's own audience may shrink or fall silent.

The Covid-19 pandemic produced rallies across democracies. Using surveys fielded before and after the start of lockdowns in Western Europe, Bol et al. (2021) found that lockdowns raised voting intentions for the party of the head of government, trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. Baekgaard et al. (2020) found a large rise in trust in Denmark after its lockdown. Kritzinger et al. (2021) found rising trust in national government in Austria, France and Germany and argued that it reflected both fear of the virus and the government's response. Schraff (2021), using Dutch panel data, argued that trust rose with the spread of the virus rather than with the lockdown itself. That disagreement, between a rally driven by the threat and a rally driven by the government's own action, is the one I can test most directly, by comparing the timing and size of any shift on Facebook with deaths and with stringency.

Rallies fade. In Britain, public confidence in the government fell from late May 2020 (Fancourt et al., 2020). Opposition parties in many parliaments moved from cooperation to criticism over

the spring as debate turned from emergency measures to their costs and to the easing of restrictions (Louwerse et al., 2021). If Facebook attention followed the same path, the rally should be largest in the first weeks of lockdown and decline as restrictions eased.

Attention and reactions on Facebook

Most research on political Facebook pages studies parties and candidates during election campaigns (Stier et al., 2018). Interactions on a page are a measure of attention and engagement, not of support: people comment on and share posts they disagree with, and engagement with a page can rise because people seek information from it (Jungherr et al., 2017). In a pandemic, a head of government's page is a source of news about the rules, and some of the attention it draws will be informational. Leaders' use of social media in the first wave attracted early attention for that reason (Rufai and Bunce, 2020).

Facebook's reactions offer a rough measure of the emotional response to a post. Users can choose love, haha, wow, sad or angry, and from April 2020 a care reaction, as well as the like. The mix of reactions has been used to measure emotional responses to political posts (Eberl et al., 2020; Muraoka et al., 2021). In Britain, the striking change in the first wave was not a rise in love for the government but a fall in laughter and anger on its pages (Hotham, 2026a).

Expectations

I expected interactions with governing parties and heads of government to rise relative to the opposition when lockdowns began, and the rise to fade over the following months. If the rally followed the government's action, it should begin with lockdown and be larger where lockdowns were stricter. If it followed the threat, it should track deaths and be larger where more people

died. I expected laughing and angry reactions to fall on heads of government's pages relative to opposition leaders' pages. I had no firm expectation for populist parties, but because populist parties draw more engagement on Facebook in ordinary times (Hotham, 2026b), I checked whether governing or opposition populists behaved differently.

Data

Pages and posts

The posts are those used in my earlier work on populist parties (Hotham, 2026b): posts from the official Facebook pages of national parties and the personal pages of party leaders in European countries, exported from CrowdTangle, Facebook's public-content tool, in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team, 2020). The full corpus contains 856,699 posts from 186 pages in 20 countries, from January 2010 to 30 September 2020. Each record gives the post's date, its counts of likes, comments and shares and, from 2016, its reactions. I define interactions as the sum of these. Government status comes from ParlGov cabinet records (Döring and Manow, 2024) and the populist classification from the PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024), as in the earlier paper. I analyse only aggregate counts and do not reproduce or describe any post.

The pages were curated lists rather than a census. Coverage differs between countries: Spain and the United Kingdom have many party and leader pages, while Germany has four party pages and no leader pages, Belgium has only leader pages and Portugal only party pages. Many heads of government, including those of Germany, France, Portugal, Finland and Belgium, have no personal page in the data. The comparison is therefore between the governing and opposition pages each country's list contains, not between all governing and opposition voices.

Government status

The governing side in each country is the set of pages of parties in the national cabinet, and the personal pages of their leaders, on 1 April 2020. I fix each page's status at that date for the whole analysis window, so that the comparison follows the same pages before and after lockdown.

Heads of government are the leaders whose personal pages belong to the person who held that office on 1 April 2020.

Because the analysis depends on government status at a specific moment, I checked every page's coding against changes of government in 2019 and 2020 and corrected the mechanical errors I found (Appendix Table A1 lists them). The most consequential concerned France, where Les Républicains had been coded as a governing party because the prime minister, Édouard Philippe, had been elected for it; the party was in opposition, and I recoded its 1,130 posts in the window accordingly. Several leader pages carried the head-of-government flag of their party rather than of the person: former British prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May, Boris Johnson before he took office in July 2019, and Romania's deputy prime minister Raluca Turcan. The change of government in Slovenia was dated ten days before the new cabinet took office on 13 March 2020, and the entry of Unidas Podemos into the Spanish government six days before its ministers took office on 13 January 2020. Other changes of government in the period, in Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Norway, Romania and Slovakia, were dated correctly. Italy, where the government changed in September 2019, is not in the corpus.

Countries

I drop Switzerland, where all the parties in the data sit in the collegial Federal Council and there is no opposition to compare with, and Latvia, which has a single opposition page with ten posts

since 2019. In Slovakia and Slovenia new governments took office in the same week as lockdown began, after an election in Slovakia and a change of coalition in Slovenia, so the governing side changed at the moment of the event. I leave both out of the main analysis and report results including them. Sweden never reached a stringency of 70 in 2020 and is outside the main event study, but it enters the analyses of stringency and deaths and, using the date it first reached 60, the comparisons between countries and of reactions.

The main sample covers 15 countries: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. To be included, a page had to post at least once in the 12 weeks before lockdown and once in the 13 weeks after. That leaves 147 pages, 40 governing (24 party pages and 16 leader pages) and 107 opposition, which posted 81,372 times in the 39 weeks of the window and drew 177 million interactions (Table 1).

Lockdown, stringency and deaths

I take the daily stringency index for each country from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021). The index combines school and workplace closures, cancellation of events, limits on gatherings, closure of public transport, stay-at-home requirements, restrictions on internal movement and international travel controls, and public information campaigns, on a scale from 0 to 100. I define a country's lockdown date as the first day in 2020 on which its index reached 70, and check the results with thresholds of 60 and 80. At 70, lockdown dates in the main sample fall between 16 March (Lithuania, Luxembourg) and 27 March (Finland, Hungary, Ireland). Peak stringency in the first half of 2020 ranged from 71 in Finland to 91 in Ireland, and 65 in Sweden.

Deaths come from the Our World in Data compilation (Mathieu et al., 2020), as new deaths per million people, smoothed. In the current version of the data these values change once a week. By 31 May 2020 cumulative deaths ranged from 17 per million in Greece and 19 in Lithuania to 763 in the United Kingdom and 807 in Belgium. Across the 16 countries with a lockdown date, mean stringency in the first eight weeks and cumulative deaths at the end of them were almost uncorrelated ($r = 0.10$). Within countries, from week to week, the two moved together ($r = 0.59$), because deaths rose in the weeks after restrictions were introduced and fell as they were eased.

Method

The weekly panel

The unit is the page-week. For each country I count weeks from the Monday of the week in which its lockdown began, week 0, and keep weeks -12 to 26 , from mid-December 2019 to mid-September 2020. Weeks in which a page did not post are kept with zero interactions, so the panel is balanced; 5.8% of page-weeks are zeros.

I first describe the governing side's share of interactions in each country and week: the interactions on governing pages divided by those on all pages in the country. This share depends on how many pages of each kind the country's list contains, so I compare it only over time within countries, and average it across countries with each country weighted equally.

Event study

To estimate the relative change, I regress weekly interactions on indicators for governing pages in each period after the reference weeks, with a fixed effect for each page and for each country-

week. The page effects remove differences in audience between pages. The country-week effects remove everything that affected all of a country's pages in a given week, including the general rise in Facebook use during lockdown and any national news. What remains is the change on governing pages relative to the change on opposition pages in the same country and week. The reference period is weeks -12 to -3 , mid-December to early March. I estimate the change in the two weeks before lockdown, when the virus was already dominating the news in most countries, and in three later periods: weeks 0 to 7 , roughly the strictest period of lockdown; weeks 8 to 15 , as restrictions were eased; and weeks 16 to 26 , the summer. For the event-study figure I estimate a separate coefficient for each week, with weeks -6 to -3 as the reference, so that the earlier weeks show whether governing and opposition pages were moving in parallel before the pandemic.

I estimate each model in two ways, because the answer depends on how pages are weighted. The first is ordinary least squares on the logarithm of one plus weekly interactions, which gives each page roughly equal weight. The second is Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood on the count of interactions, which estimates the proportional change in total interactions and so gives more weight to the pages that draw most of them. The first answers whether the typical governing page gained relative to the typical opposition page; the second whether governing pages as a whole gained a larger share of the attention. I report both, as ratios: a ratio of 1.5 means interactions on governing pages rose 50% more than on opposition pages in the same country. Standard errors are clustered by country. With 15 clusters, conventional cluster-robust tests can over-reject, so for the main least-squares estimate I also report a wild cluster restricted bootstrap with Webb weights and $9,999$ replications.

To separate posting from engagement per post, I estimate the same model for the log of one plus the number of posts and for the log of one plus mean interactions per post in weeks when the page posted.

Placebo

Spring is not an ordinary time in politics, and the first months of 2019 included general elections in Spain, Finland, Belgium, Denmark and Greece and the European Parliament election. To check whether governing pages usually gain relative to the opposition in these weeks, I repeat the analysis for the same calendar weeks of 2019, moving each country's lockdown date back 52 weeks and fixing government status on 1 April 2019. I also estimate a triple difference that compares the 2020 and 2019 changes for the 145 pages present in both years.

Dose and fade

To ask whether the rally followed stringency or deaths, I use calendar weeks from 6 January to 21 September 2020 for the 16 countries including Sweden, and interact the governing indicator with the previous week's mean stringency index and with the logarithm of one plus the previous week's mean daily deaths per million. Because the country-week fixed effects absorb the direct effects of stringency and deaths, these coefficients measure only whether the governing side's relative position moved with them. I enter the two measures separately and together, and separate weeks before and after each country's peak stringency to see whether the response to easing mirrored the response to tightening.

To estimate the fade, I replace the period indicators after lockdown with a level and a linear trend in weeks since lockdown, so that the trend coefficient gives the weekly change in the governing side's relative interactions.

Between countries, I measure the size of each country's rally as the ratio of two ratios: the change in total weekly interactions on governing pages from the reference weeks to weeks 0 to 7, divided by the same change on opposition pages. I relate its logarithm to mean stringency in those eight weeks and to cumulative deaths per million at their end, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. With 16 countries this is a descriptive check.

Reactions

For reactions I compare the personal pages of the nine heads of government in the data (in Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) with the 47 opposition leaders' pages in the same countries, using 15,706 posts. For each post I compute the share of likes and reactions that were haha, angry, and love or care combined, as in the British paper (Hotham, 2026a). Care was introduced in April 2020, so I combine it with love. I report the shares averaged across pages, so that each page counts equally, and estimate the change on heads of government's pages relative to opposition leaders' pages with post-level regressions with page and country-week fixed effects, clustered by country, for the same periods as above and for the same weeks of 2019.

Populist parties

As a secondary descriptive check, I split governing and opposition pages by the PopuList classification and estimate the change for populist opposition pages relative to other opposition

pages. Only Hungary had a populist governing party in the main sample in April 2020, so I cannot separate a populist government from Hungary itself.

Results

Both sides gained attention, governing pages more

When lockdowns began, political Facebook in Europe became busier. In the reference weeks, the 40 governing pages drew about 1.31 million interactions a week and the 107 opposition pages about 1.86 million. In the first eight weeks of lockdown the governing pages drew 2.78 million a week and the opposition pages 3.06 million. Interactions with governing pages roughly doubled; interactions with opposition pages rose by about 60%. Governing pages posted 456 times a week before and 734 times a week in the first eight weeks of lockdown; opposition pages 1,280 and 1,781 times.

The pattern was common but not universal. Interactions with governing pages rose in 13 of the 15 countries, and so did interactions with opposition pages (Table 1). Governing pages gained more than the opposition in 11 of the 15. The median country's governing pages drew 2.11 times their earlier weekly interactions, and its opposition pages 1.49 times. In Finland, France, Lithuania and Romania opposition pages gained more than governing pages.

Figure 1 shows the governing side's share of interactions, averaged across countries. It fluctuated around 39% in the reference weeks, rose to 46% in the week before lockdown, peaked at 49% in week 2 and averaged 43.7% across weeks 0 to 7. It then declined, to 41.0% in weeks 8 to 15 and 36.1% in the summer weeks, slightly below where it began. In the same weeks of 2019 the share moved from 26.5% to 28.5%. The levels differ between the two years because governments

changed in several countries between April 2019 and April 2020; what matters is the change within each year.

The governing side's gain in share was much smaller than the gain of government pages in Britain, where the share of official government pages rose from 5% to 29% (Hotham, 2026a). The two measures differ. The British figure compared official government pages, whose audience is the public as a whole, with party and politicians' pages; the European data contain only party and leader pages, and both sides drew more attention. In the United Kingdom in these data, the Conservative Party and Boris Johnson's pages took 34.6% of the interactions on party and leader pages in the reference weeks and 43.2% in weeks 0 to 7, and their weekly interactions rose 3.71 times while those of the opposition rose 2.08 times.

The relative gain

Table 2 reports the event-study estimates. With pages weighted equally, governing pages gained relative to opposition pages by a factor of 1.34 in weeks 0 to 7 (95% CI 0.86 to 2.08; wild bootstrap $p = .19$) and 1.42 in weeks 8 to 15 (0.96 to 2.10). Neither is distinguishable from no change. Weighted by interactions, the gain was 1.44 in weeks 0 to 7 (1.05 to 1.96) and 1.13 in weeks 8 to 15 (0.85 to 1.50). By weeks 16 to 26 both estimates were below one (0.95 and 0.86). Most of the gain came from more interactions per post rather than more posts: relative to the opposition, governing pages posted 1.09 times as often (0.93 to 1.29) and drew 1.14 times as many interactions per post (0.95 to 1.36), neither estimate clearly different from one.

The gain began before lockdown. In the two weeks before each country's lockdown date, governing pages were already 1.26 (0.86 to 1.85) and 1.42 (1.08 to 1.85) times their reference level relative to the opposition. In most countries these were the weeks in which the first deaths

were reported, schools began to close and governments held their first emergency press conferences, before stringency reached 70. Figure 2 shows the weekly coefficients. Before week -2 they scatter around one with no trend, which supports the comparison. After lockdown the interaction-weighted estimates are above one in most weeks until about week 12 and below one in most weeks from week 19; the equally weighted estimates are noisier, with wide intervals in every week.

Against the same weeks of 2019

The 2019 placebo is the most important check. With pages weighted equally, governing pages gained 1.05 times relative to the opposition in the 2019 equivalent of weeks 0 to 7 (0.77 to 1.42), close to no change, so the 2020 estimate of 1.34 stands out. With pages weighted by interactions, the 2019 estimate was 1.34 (0.83 to 2.14), almost as large as the 2020 estimate of 1.44. In the triple difference, which compares the 2020 change with the 2019 change for the same pages, the gains were 1.15 (0.68 to 1.92) with pages weighted equally and 1.06 (0.62 to 1.80) weighted by interactions (Table 3). The spring of 2019 was full of election campaigns, in which incumbents' and challengers' pages surge at different times, and the placebo intervals are wide. But the comparison means I cannot claim that the European rally on Facebook, measured over all governing and opposition pages, was larger than the ordinary movement of these pages in a spring of national and European elections.

Heads of government

The gain was concentrated on heads of government. Comparing the eight heads of government's pages in the main sample with opposition leaders' pages, the interaction-weighted gain in weeks 0 to 7 was 1.87 (1.49 to 2.35), compared with 1.21 (0.93 to 1.58) for the heads of government of

the same countries in the same weeks of 2019 (Table 3). With pages weighted equally the estimate was 1.52 with a very wide interval (0.22 to 10.38), because the leader pages are few and their weekly interactions vary a great deal. By weeks 8 to 15 the interaction-weighted gain for heads of government had disappeared (1.05). Party pages gained less: 1.06 (0.74 to 1.50) weighted equally and 1.29 (0.99 to 1.69) weighted by interactions. The pages of the head of government's party gained 1.10 and 1.39 relative to opposition parties, with intervals that include one. The rally, so far as there was one, was a rally to the person leading the government rather than to the governing parties.

Robustness

The estimates for weeks 0 to 7 are similar when lockdown is defined at a stringency of 60 (1.27 and 1.48) and less clear at 80, which leaves only eight countries (1.40 and 1.08). Including Slovakia and Slovenia makes little difference (1.30 and 1.45). Excluding Ireland, Norway and Spain, where an election or a change of government fell in the reference weeks, gives 1.26 and 1.59. Capping each post at the 99th percentile of interactions, keeping only pages that posted in at least 90% of weeks, shortening the reference period to weeks -6 to -3, and clustering by page instead of country all leave the estimates between 1.19 and 1.44 (Table 3). Dropping one country at a time gives estimates between 1.17 (without Ireland) and 1.43 (without Finland) with pages weighted equally, and between 1.29 (without the United Kingdom) and 1.66 (without Spain) weighted by interactions. No single country accounts for the result, but the United Kingdom contributes a good part of the interaction-weighted estimate.

Ireland is the largest single case. Varadkar's page drew 5.60 times its earlier weekly interactions in the first eight weeks, while the opposition's pages drew 0.59 times theirs. The reference weeks

in Ireland included the campaign for the general election of 8 February 2020, in which opposition pages drew unusually high engagement. The Irish estimate reflects the end of a campaign as well as the start of the pandemic, which is why I check the results without it.

The fade

The rally faded quickly. Weighted by interactions, the governing side's relative interactions stood 1.57 times their reference level in the lockdown week (1.14 to 2.16) and declined by 2.8% a week (95% CI for the weekly ratio 0.95 to 0.99), so that half the gain had gone in about 8 weeks and all of it in about 16 (Table 4, panel E). With pages weighted equally, the decline was 1.8% a week and less precise (0.96 to 1.01), with half the gain gone in about 11 weeks. Either way, by the summer the governing side had returned to its pre-pandemic position relative to the opposition, and its share of interactions was slightly below where it had been in the winter (Figure 1). In Britain, engagement with government pages fell at about 5% a week after the first jump (Hotham, 2026a); the European rally on party and leader pages was smaller and faded at a similar or slightly slower pace.

Stringency or deaths?

Within countries, the governing side's relative interactions moved with deaths more consistently than with stringency (Table 4). With stringency alone, a 10-point higher index in the previous week was associated with 1.05 times the relative interactions with pages weighted equally (1.00 to 1.10) and 1.02 times weighted by interactions (0.98 to 1.05). With deaths alone, a one-unit higher logarithm of daily deaths per million in the previous week was associated with 1.16 times (0.97 to 1.39) and 1.08 times (1.03 to 1.14). When both enter together, neither is clearly different from one, because within countries the two rose and fell together; the deaths coefficient in the

interaction-weighted model is unchanged at 1.08 (0.96 to 1.22) while the stringency coefficient falls to 1.00.

The response to stringency was asymmetric. Up to the week after each country's peak stringency, a 10-point higher index was associated with 1.08 times the governing side's relative interactions in both models (interaction-weighted 1.01 to 1.15); after the peak, as restrictions were eased, the association was 1.04 and 1.01 and not clearly different from one. The governing side gained as restrictions were tightened, but did not lose in proportion as they were lifted. Its later decline followed the fall in deaths and the passage of time more than the easing of lockdown. The death toll was associated with governing pages posting more (1.07 times per unit, 1.01 to 1.13) rather than with more interactions per post (1.00), while stringency was weakly associated with interactions per post (1.02, $p = .09$) and not with posting.

Between countries, the size of the rally did not follow either measure (Figure 3). The slope of the log rally ratio on mean stringency in the first eight weeks was 0.08 per 10 points (95% CI -0.79 to 0.94 ; $r = 0.07$), and on log cumulative deaths per million 0.16 (-0.12 to 0.44 ; $r = 0.28$).

Without Ireland the correlations were -0.30 for stringency and 0.20 for deaths. Countries with strict lockdowns and few deaths, such as Greece and Portugal, saw rallies about as large as countries with many deaths, such as the United Kingdom and Sweden, and Belgium and Spain, with two of the three highest death rates in the sample, saw small ones. With 16 countries and pages that differ in kind between them, the absence of a relationship is not strong evidence against one, but nothing in the data suggests that stricter lockdowns or higher death tolls produced larger rallies on Facebook.

Reactions

The reactions to heads of government's posts changed in the direction seen in Britain, but the comparison with opposition leaders makes the change less distinctive (Figure 4, Table 5).

Averaged across the nine pages, haha made up 3.1% of likes and reactions on heads of government's pages in the reference weeks and 0.9% in weeks 0 to 7. Angry fell from 2.7% to 1.1%, and love and care rose from 8.8% to 11.9%. Haha fell on eight of the nine pages, angry on six, and love and care rose on eight (Appendix Table A2). In the same weeks of 2019, haha fell on five of nine pages, angry on five and love on five.

On opposition leaders' pages, laughter also fell, from 2.4% to 1.3%, while anger stayed level at 4.1% and 4.2% and love and care rose from 6.6% to 7.5%. Figure 4 shows that the fall in laughter on both kinds of page came in the weeks just before lockdown and that it was common to both. Relative to opposition leaders, the change on heads of government's pages in weeks 0 to 7 was -0.9 percentage points for haha (95% CI -3.6 to 1.8), -1.1 for angry (-5.3 to 3.1) and $+1.8$ for love and care (-0.1 to 3.6). In the same weeks of 2019 the equivalent estimates were $+0.8$, $+0.5$ and -0.9 . Over the summer, anger on opposition leaders' pages rose to 5.2% while it stayed at 1.6% on heads of government's pages, and the difference in love and care remained ($+1.8$, 0.3 to 3.3).

Individual pages varied. The largest change was on Leo Varadkar's page in Ireland, where haha fell from 14.8% to 4.1% and angry from 13.8% to 0.7%, but his reference weeks were those of an election campaign. On Boris Johnson's page, haha fell from 4.2% to 0.3%, as it did on the UK government pages in the British study (Hotham, 2026a). On Pedro Sánchez's page anger rose,

from 2.2% to 4.5%, and on Viktor Orbán's page the mix barely changed. The direction of change was common, but its size was not.

Populist parties

Populist opposition parties and leaders did not differ clearly from other opposition pages.

Relative to the 84 non-populist opposition pages, the 23 populist opposition pages in 11 countries changed by a factor of 1.06 in weeks 0 to 7 with pages weighted equally (0.69 to 1.63) and 0.75 weighted by interactions (0.58 to 0.98). The second estimate suggests that the largest populist opposition pages lost some ground in the first weeks of lockdown, but the first does not, and the difference had gone by the summer. In Hungary, the one country with a populist governing party in the sample, Fidesz and Orbán's pages drew 3.97 times their earlier weekly interactions in the first eight weeks and the opposition's pages 2.05 times, a rally ratio of 1.93, close to that of Denmark, Luxembourg and Greece. One country cannot show whether populist governments drew larger or smaller rallies.

Discussion

A smaller rally

Across Europe, lockdowns brought more attention to political pages on Facebook, and the governing side gained somewhat more of it than the opposition. In the typical country the governing side's share of interactions rose by about five percentage points, its relative interactions rose by about a third to a half, and the gain had gone by the summer. The rise was concentrated on heads of government's personal pages; governing parties' own pages gained

little. This fits the survey evidence that support for heads of government and their parties rose in the first wave (Bol et al., 2021), and the original formulation of the rally as a rise in support for the leader (Mueller, 1970).

The rally on Facebook was much smaller than the one I found for official government pages in Britain (Hotham, 2026a). The difference is partly one of measurement. In a crisis people turn to the state for information, and in Britain much of that demand went to official government pages, which are not in the European data. Party and leader pages are partisan spaces, and the opposition's supporters did not desert their pages when lockdowns began. Engagement with opposition pages rose too. If the rally was partly a matter of opposition elites muting criticism (Baum, 2002), that is not visible here as a fall in attention to the opposition. Rather, attention to politics rose on both sides, and the governing side's share rose modestly.

The placebo is a reminder of how much political Facebook moves in ordinary times. In the spring of 2019, with elections in several countries, the governing side's pages also gained relative to the opposition when weighted by interactions. Against that background, the 2020 gain is not clearly distinguishable from ordinary variation. I read the European evidence as consistent with a modest rally to heads of government, not as proof of one.

Threat or action?

The timing of the rally speaks to the debate between explanations based on lockdown and on the threat of the virus (Bol et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). The governing side's gain began in the two weeks before lockdown, when the virus dominated the news but stringency was still rising. Within countries, its relative interactions moved with the death toll at least as closely as with stringency, rose as restrictions tightened, and did not fall as they were eased. This pattern is

closer to a rally driven by the threat than by the government's action, as Schraff (2021) argued for trust. It is also consistent with attention following the news: deaths and the leader's announcements were the news. Between countries, neither stringency nor deaths predicted how large the rally would be, which suggests that national politics, the composition of each country's pages and events specific to each country mattered more than the severity of the crisis.

Reactions

In Britain the most striking change was the near disappearance of laughter and anger on the government's own pages during the "stay home" weeks (Hotham, 2026a). Across Europe, laughter and anger also fell on heads of government's pages, and love and care rose, on almost every page. But laughter fell on opposition leaders' pages too, in the same weeks. The pause in mockery was in part a general change in the tone of political Facebook in the first weeks of the pandemic, not only a change in how people treated those in power. What distinguished heads of government's pages was that anger stayed low for longer and that love and care stayed higher, while anger on opposition leaders' pages rose over the summer. These differences are imprecisely estimated, with only nine heads of government and nine countries.

I read laughing reactions to political posts as derision and angry reactions as hostility, but I have not coded what users laughed at or were angry about, and a reaction can be aimed at the subject of a post rather than its author. Love and care on a head of government's post about the pandemic may express sympathy with the victims as much as approval of the leader.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. The first is coverage. The pages were curated lists, which differ between countries in which parties and leaders they contain, and several heads of government and major parties have no page in the data. The governing and opposition sides are therefore samples of each country's political pages, not the whole of them, and differences between countries partly reflect differences between lists.

Second, the comparison rests on few units. There are 15 countries in the main sample, 40 governing pages and eight heads of government, so estimates are imprecise and depend on how pages are weighted. I report both weightings, and the equally weighted estimates are not distinguishable from no change. With 15 clusters, standard errors are themselves uncertain, which is why I report a wild bootstrap for the main estimate.

Third, the design is descriptive. The event study compares governing and opposition pages in the same country and week, and the placebo compares the same weeks a year earlier, but lockdowns were not assigned at random and fell within two weeks of each other across Europe. The timing of lockdown cannot be separated from the arrival of the virus or from news coverage of it. The associations with stringency and deaths are associations, not effects.

Fourth, interactions measure attention, not support or reach. People engage with posts they dislike, and some posts may have been promoted with paid advertising. Interactions were recorded when the data were exported in October 2020, so recent posts had less time to accumulate them, although the comparison between governing and opposition pages in the same week reduces this concern.

Fifth, government status is fixed at 1 April 2020. In Ireland a new government took office in June 2020, and in several countries the reference weeks contained elections or government formation. I check the results without those countries, but the comparisons in those cases mix the pandemic with ordinary political change.

Finally, the data cover one platform and end in September 2020. They say nothing about Twitter, television or newspapers, or about the later waves of the pandemic.

Conclusion

When lockdowns began across Europe in March 2020, attention to political pages on Facebook rose on both sides. Governing parties and heads of government gained more than the opposition, by about a third to a half in the first eight weeks, with the gain concentrated on heads of government's own pages. It began before lockdown, followed deaths more than stringency, and was gone by the summer. Heads of government's pages drew less laughter and anger and more love and care, though laughter fell on opposition leaders' pages too. Compared with the British case, where official government pages drew almost a third of political engagement, the European rally on party and leader pages was smaller, shorter and harder to distinguish from the movements of ordinary political seasons.

This paper extends my doctoral research on how political parties use Facebook (Hotham, 2021) and my earlier study of Britain's first wave (Hotham, 2026a).

Statements and Declarations

Ethical considerations. Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. It analyses public posts by the official Facebook pages of national political parties and the personal pages of party leaders and heads of government, collected through CrowdTangle in October 2020, together with public data on government responses and deaths. The posts are analysed only in aggregate, and no post is quoted.

Consent to participate. Not applicable.

Consent for publication. Not applicable.

Declaration of conflicting interest. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Funding. I received no specific funding for this work. It builds on my doctoral research, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Data availability and AI use. The posts are public posts by party and politician pages, collected through CrowdTangle in October 2020. The post-level data are not published; aggregated data are available from me on request. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker and Our World in Data are publicly available from their providers. The analysis code is available from me. I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

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Tables

Table 1. Countries, pages, lockdown dates, stringency and deaths.

Country	Lockdown	Governin	Oppositi	Posts	Peak	Deaths	Governin	Oppositi
	n	g pages	on pages		stringenc	per	g, ratio	on, ratio
					y	million,		
						31 May		
Belgium	18 Mar	1	4	1,893	81	807	2.11	1.58
Denmark	18 Mar	1	7	1,514	72	98	4.00	1.58
Finland	27 Mar	5	3	3,700	71	54	0.78	1.44
France	17 Mar	2	10	4,945	88	287	1.48	1.84
Germany	22 Mar	2	2	2,067	77	109	1.17	1.10
Greece	21 Mar	2	8	8,391	84	17	2.73	1.49
Hungary	27 Mar	2	11	12,493	77	54	3.97	2.05
Ireland	27 Mar	1	5	2,151	91	320	5.60	0.59
Lithuania	16 Mar	1	4	1,575	87	19	1.46	2.46
Luxembourg	16 Mar	4	4	1,777	80	127	2.60	1.31
Norway	24 Mar	6	9	3,433	80	43	1.23	0.72
Portugal	19 Mar	1	5	6,499	88	137	3.22	1.38
Romania	22 Mar	2	2	5,896	87	66	0.93	1.69
Spain	17 Mar	6	13	15,083	85	610	1.56	1.49
Sweden	1 Apr*	(not in main sample)			65	436	1.28	0.71
United Kingdom	23 Mar	4	20	9,955	80	763	3.71	2.08
Main sample		40	107	81,372				

Note: Lockdown: first day in 2020 with an Oxford stringency index of 70 or more; *Sweden: first day at 60 or more, used only in the comparisons between countries and of reactions. Pages and posts: main sample, weeks –12 to 26. Peak stringency: highest daily value, January to June 2020. Deaths: cumulative deaths per million, Our World in Data. Governing and opposition ratios: total weekly interactions in weeks 0 to 7 divided by total weekly interactions in weeks –12 to –3. Slovakia and Slovenia, where new governments took office in the week of lockdown, are not shown.

Table 2. Interactions on governing pages relative to opposition pages in the same country and week.

	(1) Interactions, log OLS	(2) Interactions, Poisson	(3) Posts, log OLS	(4) Interactions per post, log OLS	(5) 2019 placebo, log OLS	(6) 2019 placebo, Poisson
Weeks -2 to -1	1.26 [0.86, 1.85]	1.42 [1.08, 1.85]	1.11 [0.96, 1.29]	1.04 [0.88, 1.24]	0.91 [0.71, 1.15]	1.32 [0.78, 2.25]
Weeks 0 to 7	1.34 [0.86, 2.08]	1.44 [1.05, 1.96]	1.09 [0.93, 1.29]	1.14 [0.95, 1.36]	1.05 [0.77, 1.42]	1.34 [0.83, 2.14]
Weeks 8 to 15	1.42 [0.96, 2.10]	1.13 [0.85, 1.50]	1.08 [0.93, 1.26]	1.10 [0.95, 1.29]	0.83 [0.51, 1.35]	1.18 [0.82, 1.70]
Weeks 16 to 26	0.95 [0.60, 1.50]	0.86 [0.70, 1.06]	0.88 [0.76, 1.02]	1.08 [0.95, 1.24]	0.76 [0.43, 1.37]	1.60 [0.74, 3.47]
Pages	147	147	147	147	147	147
Page-weeks	5,733	5,733	5,733	5,400	5,733	5,733

Note: Ratios (exponentiated coefficients) with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Each coefficient compares the change on governing pages from weeks -12 to -3 with the change on opposition pages. Page and country-week fixed effects; standard errors clustered by country (15 countries). Log OLS: $\log(1 + \text{weekly count})$; Poisson: pseudo-maximum likelihood on the weekly count. Column (4) uses weeks with at least one post. Placebo: same calendar weeks of 2019, government status on 1 April 2019. Wild cluster restricted bootstrap p -value for column (1), weeks 0 to 7: .19.

Table 3. Subsets and robustness.

Specification	Countries	Pages	Weeks 0 to 7, log OLS	Weeks 0 to 7, Poisson	Weeks 8 to 15, log OLS	Weeks 8 to 15, Poisson
Party pages only	13	90	1.06 [0.74, 1.50]	1.29 [0.99, 1.69]	1.00 [0.72, 1.41]	1.21 [0.89, 1.64]
Leader pages only	11	57	1.71 [0.36, 8.18]	1.58 [0.93, 2.69]	2.22 [0.76, 6.44]	0.98 [0.70, 1.38]
Heads of government against opposition leaders	10	49	1.52 [0.22, 10.38]	1.87 [1.49, 2.35]	2.39 [0.65, 8.83]	1.05 [0.71, 1.57]
Heads of government against opposition leaders, 2019 placebo	11	51	1.11 [0.75, 1.66]	1.21 [0.93, 1.58]	1.23 [0.58, 2.60]	1.36 [1.06, 1.74]
Head of government's party against opposition parties	13	78	1.10 [0.76, 1.58]	1.39 [0.90, 2.13]	0.80 [0.55, 1.17]	1.15 [0.71, 1.86]
Lockdown at stringency 60	16	162	1.27 [0.82, 1.96]	1.48 [1.06, 2.07]	1.36 [0.96, 1.93]	1.14 [0.87, 1.51]
Lockdown at stringency 80	8	67	1.40 [0.59, 3.29]	1.08 [0.86, 1.35]	1.67 [0.74, 3.74]	1.09 [0.83, 1.42]
Including Slovakia and Slovenia	17	161	1.30 [0.87, 1.95]	1.45 [1.07, 1.95]	1.36 [0.95, 1.97]	1.14 [0.87, 1.49]
Excluding Ireland, Norway and Spain	12	107	1.26 [0.78, 2.04]	1.59 [1.20, 2.12]	1.19 [0.77, 1.84]	1.01 [0.68, 1.51]
Excluding the United Kingdom	14	123	1.21 [0.78, 1.87]	1.29 [0.92, 1.79]	1.38 [0.88, 2.16]	1.29 [1.03, 1.63]

Specification	Countries	Pages	Weeks 0 to 7, log OLS	Weeks 0 to 7, Poisson	Weeks 8 to 15, log OLS	Weeks 8 to 15, Poisson
Posts capped at 99th percentile	15	147	1.31 [0.86, 2.01]	1.29 [1.00, 1.64]	1.41 [0.96, 2.09]	1.18 [0.92, 1.52]
Pages posting in at least 90% of weeks	15	129	1.19 [0.75, 1.89]	1.43 [1.08, 1.90]	1.37 [0.92, 2.05]	1.12 [0.83, 1.53]
Reference weeks –6 to –3 only	15	147	1.38 [0.86, 2.22]	1.44 [0.96, 2.16]	1.46 [1.00, 2.14]	1.14 [0.92, 1.40]
Standard errors clustered by page	15	147	1.34 [0.81, 2.20]	1.44 [1.11, 1.86]	1.42 [0.99, 2.03]	1.13 [0.92, 1.38]
2020 against 2019, same pages (triple difference)	15	145	1.15 [0.68, 1.92]	1.06 [0.62, 1.80]	1.72 [0.90, 3.29]	0.94 [0.71, 1.25]

Note: As Table 2. Heads of government: personal pages of the head of government on 1 April compared with opposition leaders' pages. Triple difference: change in 2020 relative to the change in the same weeks of 2019 for pages present in both years.

Table 4. Stringency, deaths and the fade of the rally.

	Log OLS	Poisson
A. Stringency alone (per 10 points, previous week)	1.05 [1.00, 1.10]	1.02 [0.98, 1.05]
B. Deaths alone (per unit of $\log(1 + \text{daily deaths per million})$, previous week)	1.16 [0.97, 1.39]	1.08 [1.03, 1.14]
C. Both together		
Stringency	1.04 [0.98, 1.11]	1.00 [0.95, 1.06]
Deaths	1.04 [0.84, 1.29]	1.08 [0.96, 1.22]
D. Stringency while rising and after the peak		
Up to the week after peak stringency	1.08 [0.97, 1.20]	1.08 [1.01, 1.15]
Later weeks	1.04 [0.99, 1.10]	1.01 [0.98, 1.04]
E. Fade from the lockdown week		
Level in the lockdown week	1.49 [0.93, 2.41]	1.57 [1.14, 2.16]
Change per week	0.98 [0.96, 1.01]	0.97 [0.95, 0.99]
Countries (A to D; E)	16; 15	16; 15
Pages (A to D; E)	162; 147	162; 147

Note: Ratios with 95% confidence intervals. Panels A to D: calendar weeks 6 January to 21 September 2020, governing indicator interacted with the previous week's mean stringency (per 10 points) and $\log(1 + \text{mean daily deaths per million})$; page and country-week fixed effects; 16 countries including Sweden. Panel E: main sample, level change from the lockdown week and linear change per week thereafter, with an indicator for weeks –2 to –1. Standard errors clustered by country.

Table 5. Reactions on heads of government’s and opposition leaders’ pages (percentage of likes and reactions).

	Haha, heads of government	Haha, opposition leaders	Angry, heads of government	Angry, opposition leaders	Love and Care, heads of government	Love and Care, opposition leaders
Weeks –12 to –3	3.1	2.4	2.7	4.1	8.8	6.6
Weeks 0 to 7	0.9	1.3	1.1	4.2	11.9	7.5
Weeks 8 to 15	1.2	1.7	1.2	5.1	12.0	8.0
Weeks 16 to 26	1.6	1.8	1.6	5.2	10.7	6.7
Difference-in-differences (percentage points)						
Weeks 0 to 7, 2020	-0.9 [-3.6, 1.8]		-1.1 [-5.3, 3.1]		1.8 [-0.1, 3.6]	
Weeks 8 to 15, 2020	-0.9 [-4.0, 2.2]		-2.3 [-5.8, 1.2]		1.6 [-0.5, 3.7]	
Weeks 16 to 26, 2020	-0.7 [-4.0, 2.5]		-2.1 [-5.4, 1.3]		1.8 [0.3, 3.3]	
Weeks 0 to 7, same weeks 2019	0.8 [-0.9, 2.5]		0.5 [-2.0, 3.1]		-0.9 [-2.3, 0.6]	
Weeks 8 to 15, same weeks 2019	0.0 [-1.1, 1.1]		-1.2 [-3.5, 1.1]		-0.1 [-2.0, 1.7]	
Weeks 16 to 26, same weeks 2019	-0.1 [-0.9, 0.7]		-0.8 [-3.0, 1.4]		-1.7 [-3.5, 0.1]	

Note: Shares averaged across pages. Nine heads of government’s pages and 47 opposition leaders’ pages in nine countries; 15,706 posts. Difference-in-differences: post-level regressions of each share on indicators for heads of government’s pages in each period, with page and country-week fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country; 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Care was introduced in April 2020.

Figures

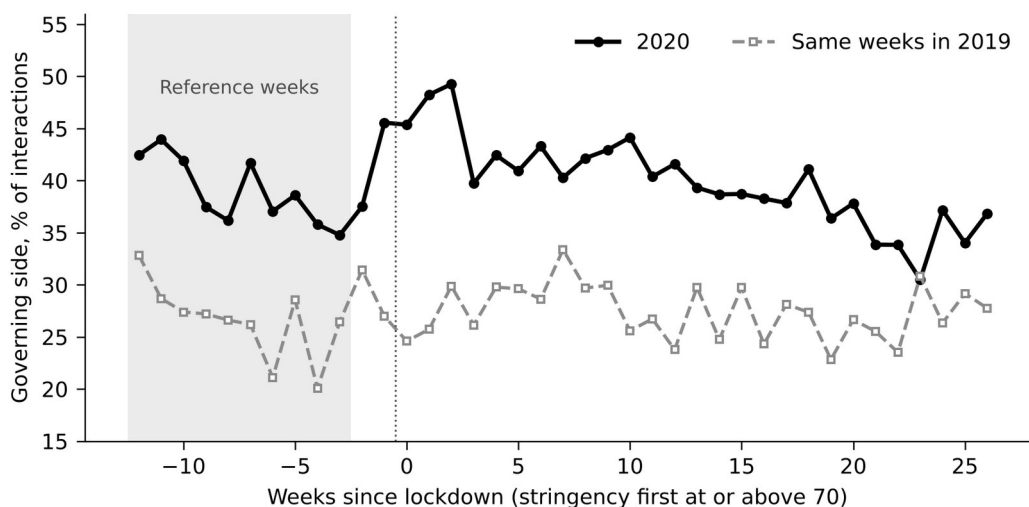


Figure 1. The governing side's share of interactions on party and leader pages, by week relative to lockdown, averaged across 15 countries, 2020 and the same weeks of 2019. Shaded: reference weeks. Dotted line: start of the lockdown week.

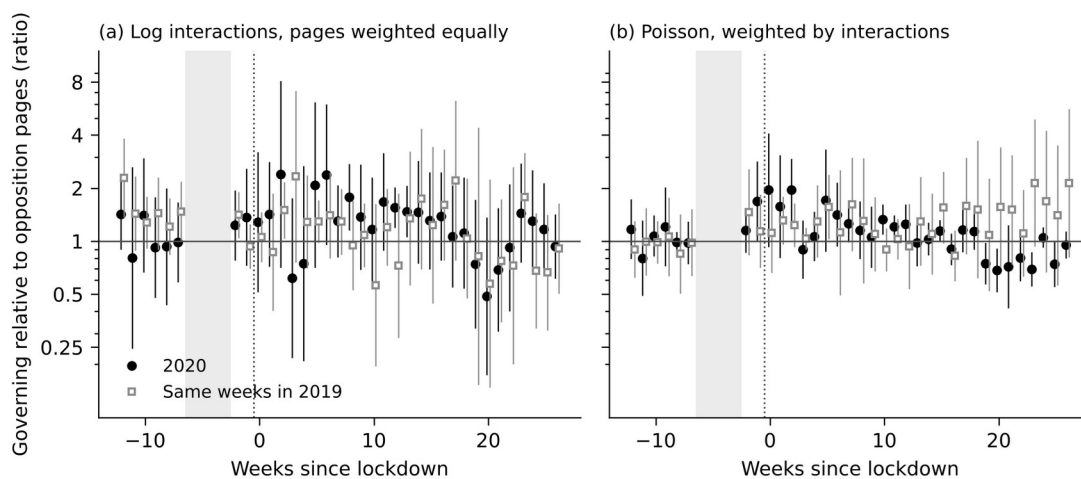


Figure 2. Weekly interactions on governing pages relative to opposition pages in the same country, by week relative to lockdown, with 95% confidence intervals, 2020 and the same weeks

of 2019. Reference: weeks -6 to -3 (shaded). Page and country-week fixed effects; standard errors clustered by country.

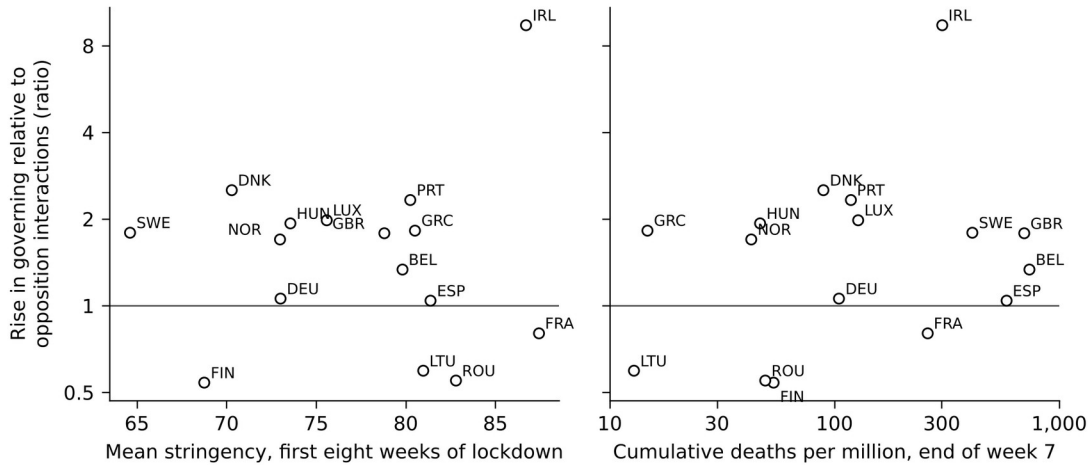


Figure 3. The rally in each country against mean stringency in the first eight weeks of lockdown and cumulative deaths per million at their end. Rally: change in total weekly interactions on governing pages from weeks -12 to -3 to weeks 0 to 7 , divided by the same change on opposition pages. Log scales for the ratio and for deaths.

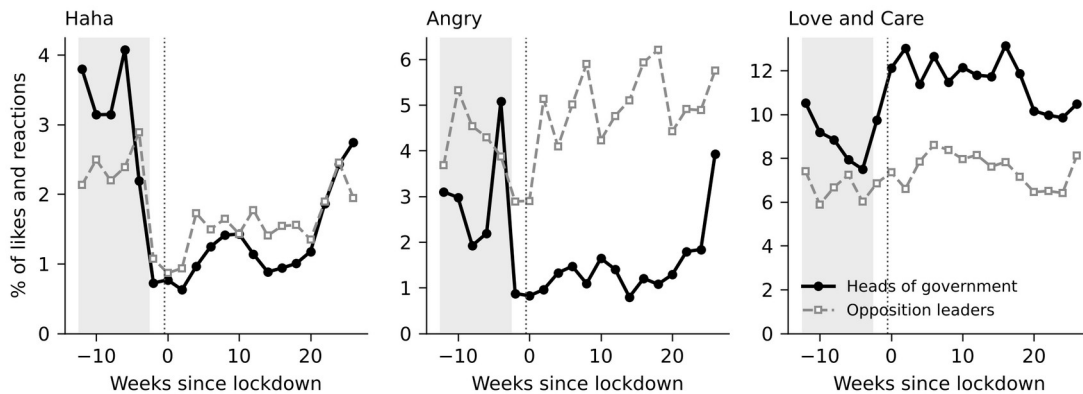


Figure 4. Haha, angry, and love and care reactions as a share of likes and reactions on heads of government's and opposition leaders' pages, two-week periods relative to lockdown, averaged across pages. Shaded: reference weeks.

Appendix

Table A1. Corrections to government status.

Country	Correction	Posts recoded, 2019 to Sept 2020
France	Les Républicains coded as governing; recoded as opposition	1,130
France	Head of government's party flag moved from Les Républicains to La République En Marche (the President's party)	761; 1,765
Germany	CSU carried the head of government's party flag; recoded (the Chancellor's party is the CDU)	2,095
United Kingdom	Head of government flag removed from David Cameron's and Theresa May's (after 24 July 2019) pages and from Boris Johnson's page before 24 July 2019	41; 17; 134
Romania	Head of government flag removed from Raluca Turcan (deputy prime minister)	781
Latvia	Head of government flag added to Krišjānis Kariņš from 23 January 2019 (country not analysed)	755
Slovenia	Change of government moved from 3 March to 13 March 2020	Four pages, 3 to 12 March
Spain	Unidas Podemos entry into government moved from 7 January to 13 January 2020	57

Note: Government status from ParlGov cabinet records, checked against the dates on which cabinets took office. Changes of government in Denmark (June 2019), Finland (June 2019), Greece (July 2019), Norway (January 2020), Romania (November 2019), Slovakia (March 2020) and Ireland (June 2020) were already dated correctly.

Table A2. Reactions on each head of government’s page before and during the first eight weeks of lockdown (percentage of likes and reactions).

Page	Country	Posts, weeks –12 to –3	Posts, weeks 0 to 7	Haha, before	Haha, weeks 0 to 7	Angry, before	Angry, weeks 0 to 7	Love and Care, before	Love and Care, weeks 0 to 7
Boris Johnson	United Kingdom	92	127	4.2	0.3	0.6	0.3	13.2	18.8
Erna Solberg	Norway	41	56	3.8	1.4	2.6	0.4	7.5	13.6
Kyriakos Mitsotakis	Greece	74	69	1.4	0.9	1.1	1.2	16.8	18.4
Leo Varadkar	Ireland	40	78	14.8	4.1	13.8	0.7	5.0	10.0
Mette Frederiksen	Denmark	56	62	0.5	0.1	1.0	0.2	8.3	15.5
Orbán Viktor	Hungary	50	109	1.4	1.7	0.5	0.4	5.5	6.2
Pedro Sánchez	Spain	90	178	1.7	0.8	2.2	4.5	14.2	13.9
Stefan Löfven	Sweden	58	48	1.5	0.3	0.5	0.3	8.4	10.5
Xavier Bettel	Luxembourg	15	21	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.2	12.9	14.1

Note: Before: weeks –12 to –3. The Irish reference weeks include the campaign for the general election of 8 February 2020. Sweden: weeks counted from 1 April 2020.