

After the Referendum: The SNP, Plaid Cymru and Facebook, 2014 to 2020

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2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum transformed the Scottish National Party. Its membership roughly quadrupled, and eight months later it won 56 of Scotland's 59 Westminster seats. I ask what happened to the SNP on Facebook after the referendum, comparing it with the UK-wide parties and with Plaid Cymru, the other main nationalist party in Great Britain. The data are 195,268 public posts from 82 pages tracked by CrowdTangle between 2010 and October 2020: the party pages of seven parties, the pages of the SNP and Plaid Cymru leaders, 46 pages of SNP MPs elected in 2015 and one SNP MSP, and 24 pages of Welsh MPs. CrowdTangle's coverage of the large parties' pages before 2014 is too thin to fix a pre-referendum baseline, so I compare engagement per post from 2014. From late 2014 to mid-2016 the typical SNP post drew about three-quarters of the engagement of a typical Labour or Conservative post; from mid-2016 to 2018 about half, as the SNP's own engagement fell; and 0.8 in 2019 and 1.35 in 2020. Per follower, SNP posts drew more than the large parties' throughout. From 2015 to 2019 the pages of SNP MPs drew 26% to 35% of all engagement with SNP pages, concentrated in a few MPs, and in 2020 Nicola Sturgeon's page drew 47%. Per follower, SNP MPs' pages drew no more than Welsh MPs'. Plaid Cymru's engagement was concentrated in the pages of its leader and former leader. How the SNP's Facebook lead over Plaid compares with its vote advantage depends on which pages are compared, ranging from below to well above the ratio of their Westminster votes. Independence almost disappeared from the SNP's page after 2014, falling from about 30% of posts to 3% to 5%, before returning to 17% in 2019; posts that mentioned it drew about 40% more engagement than other posts in every period. The referendum did not leave the SNP with a lasting engagement lead over the large UK parties, but it left a larger and more dispersed presence whose fortunes moved with the constitutional question and, in 2020, with the First Minister's role in the pandemic.

Keywords: Scottish National Party; Plaid Cymru; Scottish independence referendum; Facebook; CrowdTangle; nationalist parties; party campaigning

1 Introduction

On 18 September 2014 Scotland voted by 55% to 45% to remain in the United Kingdom. In the months that followed, the SNP's membership rose from about 25,000 to more than 100,000 ([Johns and Mitchell](#)

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2016), and in May 2015 the party won 50% of the vote in Scotland and 56 of its 59 seats at Westminster (Audickas et al. 2020). Research on the referendum campaign found that the Yes side generated more enthusiasm than the No side on social media (Shephard and Quinlan 2016).

This paper asks what happened to the SNP on Facebook after the referendum. I compare the SNP with two benchmarks. The UK-wide parties show whether the SNP's Facebook presence grew or shrank relative to political Facebook as a whole. Plaid Cymru, the other main nationalist party in Great Britain, shows what a nationalist party's Facebook looked like without a referendum. At the level of individual politicians, the SNP's 2015 intake of Westminster MPs, most of them new to Parliament, is compared with Welsh MPs from all parties.

I ask four questions. How did the engagement the SNP's posts drew compare with the large parties' after the referendum, and did it change? Where did the SNP's engagement go: to the party page, its leader, or its new MPs? How did the SNP compare with Plaid Cymru? And did the SNP keep talking about independence, and did those posts draw more engagement?

The paper extends earlier work on the balance between leader and party pages in Britain (Hotham 2026c), on satellite campaigns (Hotham 2026b) and on how Facebook engagement relates to support in Ireland (Hotham 2026a), all drawn from my doctoral research (Hotham 2021).

2 Background

The SNP entered the 2014 referendum as the party of government at Holyrood, with a large activist base (Mitchell et al. 2012). The Yes campaign was broader than the party, and much of its online activity took place on unofficial pages and groups (Shephard and Quinlan 2016). After the defeat, much of that activity converged on the SNP, which became the main vehicle for the Yes movement (Johns and Mitchell 2016).

Engagement with politicians' Facebook pages comes from users who choose to react to, comment on and share their content (Kalsnes et al. 2017; Stier et al. 2018), so it reflects the size and activity of a page's following as well as what the page posts. A referendum is an unusual mobiliser: it creates a clear cause and a date. One would expect it to raise a party's engagement. Whether that lasts beyond the vote is less obvious. Movements can fade, or can be absorbed into the ordinary work of a party and its representatives.

Plaid Cymru offers a contrast. It is also a nationalist party seeking independence, competing in a nation of about 3.1 million people, against Scotland's 5.4 million. In this period Wales had no independence referendum, and at the Westminster elections of 2015 to 2019 Plaid won 10% to 12% of the Welsh vote, against the SNP's 37% to 50% in Scotland (Audickas et al. 2020).

3 Data and methods

3.1 Pages and posts

The data come from CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team 2020), exported in October 2020 during my doctoral research. They cover four sets of pages:

- the national party pages of the SNP, Plaid Cymru, Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal

Democrats, UKIP and the Green Party of England and Wales;

- the pages of Nicola Sturgeon (SNP leader from November 2014) and Alex Salmond (leader until November 2014, then an MP until 2017; counted as SNP until he left the party in August 2018), and of Leanne Wood (Plaid leader until September 2018) and Adam Price (leader from September 2018);
- 47 pages from a CrowdTangle list of SNP politicians: 46 belong to the SNP MPs elected in 2015, including those who lost their seats in 2017 or 2019, and one to Humza Yousaf, an MSP and minister;
- 24 pages from a CrowdTangle list of Welsh MPs: 17 Labour, 4 Conservative and 3 Plaid Cymru, including some who left Parliament before 2020. The list covers 24 of Wales's 40 seats.

In total there are 195,268 posts from 82 pages between 2010 and 28 October 2020, after removing duplicate records, with 108.5 million interactions (reactions, comments and shares). The year 2020 covers January to October only.

CrowdTangle's coverage of some pages is incomplete. Labour's page, for example, has only 94 posts recorded in 2013 and 184 in 2014, and in no quarter of 2012 or 2013 are 30 or more posts recorded on both the Labour and the Conservative pages. The SNP page's recorded posts also fall sharply from March 2015, which may partly reflect coverage. Totals of engagement are therefore not comparable between pages in these years. For comparisons across parties I use the median engagement per post, I report post counts in the appendix, and I start the main comparison in 2014. Followers are measured by the page likes CrowdTangle records at the time of each post, available from 2015.

3.2 Measures and analysis

The main measure is the median number of interactions per post on each party page, by quarter. To compare the SNP with the large UK parties I divide the SNP's median by the geometric mean of the Labour and Conservative medians in the same quarter, and average these ratios geometrically within periods. A value of 1 means the typical SNP post drew as much engagement as the typical post from the two largest parties. I also report the ratio with Labour and the Conservatives separately, with UKIP and the Greens, and per 1,000 followers.

To describe where the SNP's engagement went, I sum interactions on the party page, the leaders' pages and the MPs' pages by year. To compare SNP MPs with Welsh MPs I use posts from 2016 to 2019 and regress log interactions per post on party, with month fixed effects and standard errors clustered by page, first without controls, then controlling for the page's followers and the post type, and then using interactions per 1,000 followers as the outcome. Because there are only three Plaid and four Conservative pages, I do not draw inferences about those two groups.

For independence, I flag posts that mention independence, an independent Scotland or Wales, the referendum (including "indyref", "ScotRef" and a second referendum) or the main Yes campaign terms, in English or Welsh. I report the share of posts that mention it, and the difference in log interactions between posts that do and do not, with month fixed effects and controls for post type, separately for three periods: before 19 September 2014, from then until the EU referendum of 23 June 2016, and after.

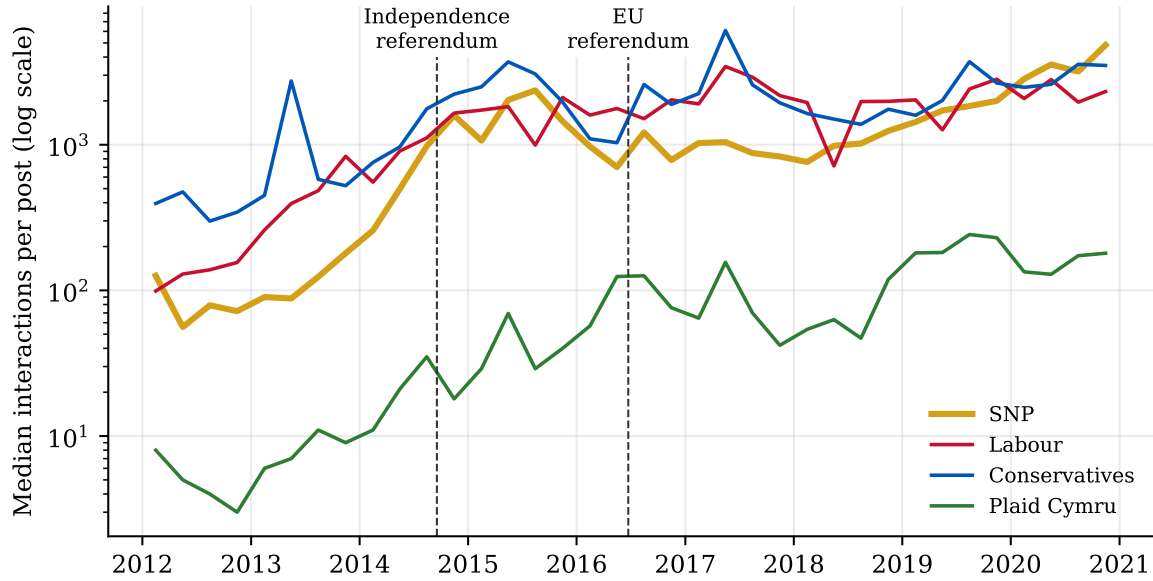


Figure 1. Median interactions per post on the SNP, Labour, Conservative and Plaid Cymru party pages, by quarter, 2012 to October 2020 (log scale). Before 2014 the Labour and Conservative series rest on few recorded posts.

Table 1. SNP party page: engagement per post relative to other party pages, by period. Ratios of quarterly medians, averaged geometrically within periods. “Per follower” compares median interactions per 1,000 page likes, available from 2015.

Period	SNP median	÷ Lab/Con	÷ Lab	÷ Con	÷ UKIP	÷ Lab/Con per follower	÷ Plaid
Jan–Sep 2014	501	0.53	0.61	0.46	0.29	–	24.9
Oct 2014–Jun 2016	1,347	0.74	0.82	0.66	0.31	1.54	30.9
Jul 2016–2018	966	0.48	0.50	0.45	0.86	1.20	12.9
2019	1,736	0.79	0.85	0.73	1.60	2.24	8.4
Jan–Oct 2020	3,528	1.35	1.56	1.18	1.68	3.80	23.2

SNP median: geometric mean of quarterly medians. Per follower from 2015 only.

4 Findings

4.1 Engagement per post after the referendum

Through 2014 the engagement the SNP’s posts drew rose steeply (Figure 1). The SNP page’s median rose from 258 interactions per post in the first quarter to 979 in the third and 1,590 in the fourth. The large parties’ medians rose too, roughly tripling over the year. Before 2014 the coverage of the large parties’ pages is too thin to say where the SNP started relative to them. In the one well-covered quarter, the first of 2012, the SNP’s median (126) was slightly above Labour’s (99).

From October 2014 to June 2016 the typical SNP post drew about three-quarters as much engagement as the typical Labour or Conservative post (a ratio of 0.74; Table 1). From July 2016 to the end of 2018 the ratio fell to 0.48. Most of this fall was the SNP’s own: its median fell by 28% between the two periods, while Labour’s rose by 18% and the Conservatives’ by 6%. The ratio rose to 0.79 in 2019 and to 1.35 in January to October 2020, when the typical SNP post drew more engagement than either large party’s.

The pattern depends on the comparison. Against Labour alone or the Conservatives alone, the shape

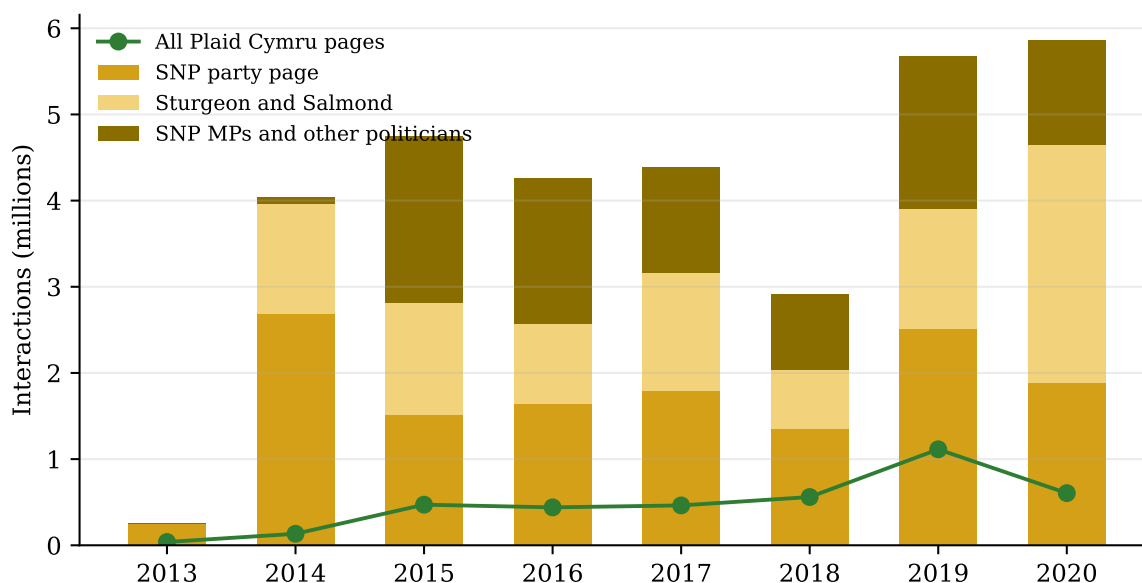


Figure 2. Interactions on SNP pages by year, divided between the party page, the pages of Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond (until August 2018), and the pages of SNP MPs elected in 2015 and one MSP, with total interactions on all Plaid Cymru pages, 2013 to October 2020.

is the same. Against UKIP, which also drew very high engagement in 2014 and 2015, the SNP's posts drew less than a third as much until 2016 and more from 2019; the high engagement of 2014 and 2015 was shared by other insurgent parties. Per follower, SNP posts drew more than the large parties' in every period from 2015, by 20% in 2016 to 2018 and by more than twice in 2019 and 2020: the SNP page had a smaller but more active following than Labour's, whose page likes tripled under Jeremy Corbyn.

4.2 Where the engagement went

After the referendum the SNP's engagement spread across more pages (Figure 2). In 2014 the party page drew two-thirds of the engagement on SNP pages and the leaders' pages most of the rest. In 2015 the new MPs' pages drew 33%, about as much as the party page (32%). From 2015 to 2019 MPs' pages drew 26% to 35% of all engagement on SNP pages, and the party page 32% to 47%. This was concentrated: Mhairi Black's page alone drew between 23% and 36% of all engagement on SNP MPs' pages from 2015 to 2017, and Ian Blackford's a quarter in 2020. Total engagement on SNP pages was 4.3 to 4.8 million interactions a year from 2015 to 2017, 2.9 million in 2018 and 5.7 million in 2019.

In January to October 2020 Sturgeon's page drew 2.8 million interactions, 47% of all engagement on SNP pages. Much of this was her communication as First Minister during the pandemic rather than party communication, and the two cannot be separated in these data. Without her page, engagement on SNP pages in 2020 was 3.1 million, below 2019.

Plaid Cymru's engagement was concentrated in its leader and former leader. Leanne Wood's and Adam Price's pages drew about two-thirds or more of all engagement on Plaid pages in every year from 2014. After Wood stood down as leader in 2018 her page continued to draw far more than Price's: 803,000 interactions in 2019 against 16,000. Plaid's three MPs drew 5% to 11%.

Table 2. Pages of SNP MPs elected in 2015 and Welsh MPs, by party, 2016 to 2019: medians across pages, and the difference in log interactions per post relative to Welsh Labour MPs (month fixed effects; standard errors clustered by page; with three Plaid and four Conservative pages, those estimates are descriptive only).

MPs	Pages	Median per post	Page likes	Per post per 1,000 likes	Difference no controls	Difference controls	Difference per follower
SNP (2015 intake)	46	36	3,602	9.1	0.95** (0.26)	0.33 (0.20)	0.02 (0.14)
Plaid Cymru	3	42	2,598	14.2	1.15 (0.22)	0.65 (0.16)	0.49 (0.13)
Welsh Conservative	4	30	2,893	11.0	0.80 (0.30)	0.38 (0.23)	0.28 (0.18)
Welsh Labour	17	17	2,048	11.4	ref.	ref.	ref.

Controls: log page likes at posting and post type. Stars for the SNP only: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Ratio of engagement on SNP pages to engagement on Plaid Cymru pages, by set of pages compared, and ratio of Westminster votes.

Pages compared	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Party pages	15.2	13.4	18.1	21.5	11.0	13.2
Party page and current leader	6.0	5.6	6.7	10.4	16.0	24.7
All pages	10.1	9.7	9.5	5.2	5.1	9.7
Westminster votes	8.0	–	5.9	–	8.1	–

4.3 SNP MPs and Welsh MPs

From 2016 to 2019 the typical SNP MP’s page drew more engagement per post than the typical Welsh Labour MP’s (Table 2): posts by SNP MPs drew about 2.6 times as much (0.95 log points). But SNP MPs also had larger followings (a median of 3,600 page likes against 2,000), and per follower they drew no more. With controls for followers and post type, the difference falls to 0.33 log points ($p = 0.11$); with interactions per 1,000 followers as the outcome it is 0.02 ($p = 0.89$). The median page drew 9 interactions per post per 1,000 followers for SNP MPs and 11 for Welsh Labour MPs. The SNP MPs’ advantage was in the size of their followings, not in how much each follower engaged. Scottish constituencies were also somewhat larger than Welsh ones. Plaid’s three MP pages drew more per post and per follower than Welsh Labour MPs, but three pages are too few to generalise from.

4.4 The SNP and Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru’s Facebook presence was much smaller, but how much smaller depends on which pages are compared (Table 3). On party pages alone, the SNP drew 11 to 22 times as much engagement as Plaid from 2015 to 2020. Across all pages, including 46 SNP MPs and three Plaid MPs, it drew 5 to 10 times as much. Comparing each party page plus its current leader, the ratio was about 6 in 2015 to 2017 and rose to 10 to 25 in 2018 to 2020, after Plaid’s leadership passed from Wood, whose page was large, to Price, whose page was small. The ratio of the two parties’ Westminster votes was 8.0 in 2015, 5.9 in 2017 and 8.1 in 2019 (Audickas et al. 2020). Depending on the pages compared, the SNP’s Facebook lead over Plaid was below or well above its vote advantage, and differences in the number of MPs and in which politicians had large pages matter as much as the parties themselves.

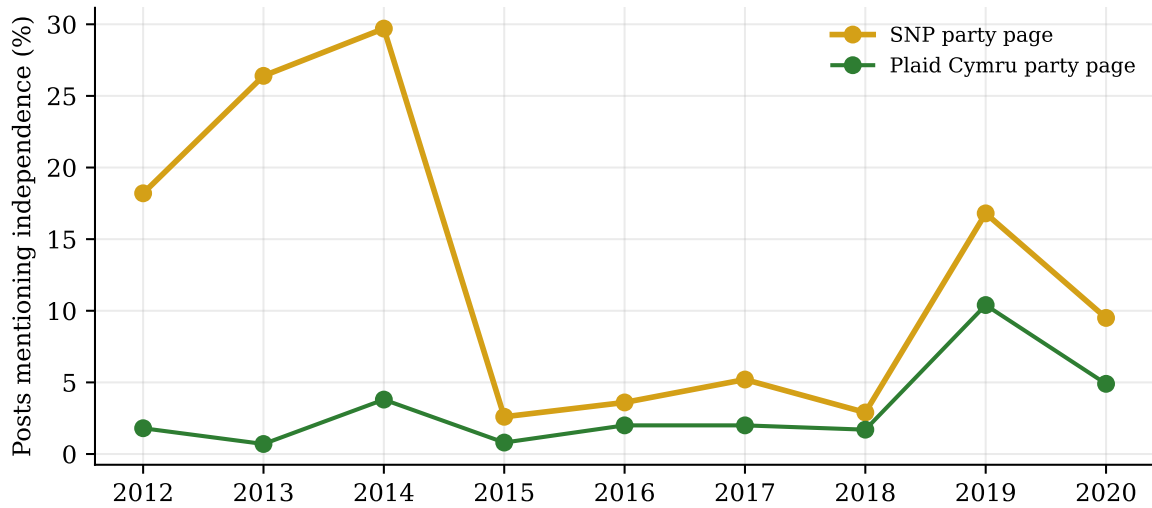


Figure 3. Share of posts on the SNP and Plaid Cymru party pages that mention independence, the referendum or the main Yes campaign terms, by year, 2012 to October 2020.

Table 4. Difference in log interactions between posts that mention independence and other posts on the same party page, by period (month fixed effects, controls for post type, robust standard errors).

Page and period	Difference (SE)	Independence posts	All posts
SNP, Before 19 Sep 2014	0.33 (0.02)	1,355	4,550
SNP, 19 Sep 2014 to 23 Jun 2016	0.35 (0.09)	48	1,927
SNP, From 24 Jun 2016	0.36 (0.05)	343	4,433
Plaid Cymru, Before 19 Sep 2014	0.81 (0.13)	45	1,992
Plaid Cymru, 19 Sep 2014 to 23 Jun 2016	0.29 (0.18)	22	1,998
Plaid Cymru, From 24 Jun 2016	0.92 (0.09)	143	2,894

4.5 Talking about independence

The SNP's page talked about independence constantly before the referendum and rarely after it (Figure 3). In 2013 and 2014 about 26% to 30% of its posts mentioned independence or the referendum. From 2015 to 2018 the share was 3% to 5%. It rose to 17% in 2019, when the party pressed again for a second referendum, and was 10% in 2020. Plaid's page mentioned independence in fewer than 4% of posts until 2018, and in 10% in 2019.

Posts that mentioned independence drew more engagement in every period. On the SNP page, they drew 0.33 log points more than other posts in the same month before the referendum, 0.35 between the two referendums and 0.36 after June 2016, about 40% more each time (Table 4). On Plaid's page the difference was larger before 2014 and after 2016 (0.81 and 0.92), but not clearly different from zero between the referendums, when Plaid made only 22 such posts. These differences describe which posts drew engagement; they do not show what the party's supporters, or voters, wanted, since engagement comes from activists and opponents and the posts on each topic differ in other ways.

5 Discussion

The referendum's effect on the SNP's Facebook presence was large but not lasting in the way often assumed. From late 2014 to mid-2016 the SNP's posts drew engagement close to that of the UK's largest parties. From mid-2016 they drew about half as much, mostly because the SNP's own engagement fell, and they recovered in 2019 and 2020 as independence returned to the agenda, a general election was held and Sturgeon became, during the pandemic, one of the most visible politicians in the UK. Per follower, the SNP's audience was consistently more active than the large parties'.

What lasted was the shape of the SNP's presence. Its 2015 intake of MPs built followings of their own, although most of their engagement went to a few of them, and their advantage over Welsh MPs lay in the size of their followings rather than the activity of their followers. Plaid Cymru's presence, by contrast, rested on its leader and former leader.

The SNP's page also moved away from the constitutional question after 2014, although posts about independence continued to draw more engagement. The return of independence to the page in 2019 coincided with a recovery in the SNP's engagement, but so did other events, and the data cannot separate them.

6 Limitations

Several limitations matter. First, CrowdTangle's coverage before 2015 is incomplete for some pages, which prevents a pre-referendum baseline and makes the 2014 comparison less certain than later ones. Second, the SNP MPs' pages come from a list built around the 2015 intake, and the Welsh MPs' list covers 24 of 40 seats; the comparisons describe these pages, not all politicians. Third, Sturgeon's engagement in 2020 mixes government and party communication. Fourth, the independence flag is a word list; it may miss some posts and catch a few that are not about independence, and in 2012 and 2013 many posts had no message text, so flagging relied on link text. Fifth, Facebook's growth and algorithm changes affect all parties, which is why I compare parties within periods. Finally, engagement measures attention and activity, not support or votes.

7 Conclusion

After the 2014 referendum the SNP's Facebook posts drew engagement close to that of the UK's largest parties for about two years, then about half as much, before recovering in 2019 and 2020. The referendum left the party with a broader presence, including dozens of MPs with their own followings and, by 2020, a leader whose page drew almost half its engagement. Whenever the SNP talked about independence, those posts drew more engagement than its others.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021](#)). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude,

by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Ethics and data

The data were collected through CrowdTangle during my doctoral research. They are public posts by parties and elected politicians. In line with CrowdTangle's terms, I do not publish post-level data. Deposited with this paper are quarterly and yearly engagement summaries by party page, posts recorded per quarter, yearly totals by group of pages, and page-level summaries for the MPs' pages.

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A Appendix

Table 5. Posts recorded by CrowdTangle and median interactions per post, party pages, 2012 to October 2020. Post counts before 2015 reflect CrowdTangle coverage and are incomplete for some pages.

Page	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
SNP posts	952	1,715	2,523	766	1,076	1,408	1,023	984	463
SNP median	79	110	684	1,242	898	928	955	1,728	3,360
Plaid posts	614	723	1,041	1,205	747	691	520	733	610
Plaid median	5	8	19	43	89	82	67	203	146
Labour posts	615	94	184	936	547	1,067	1,112	1,716	922
Labour median	113	380	978	1,602	1,749	2,728	1,462	2,292	2,422
Con. posts	78	96	317	436	224	602	889	1,853	984
Con. median	370	556	1,569	3,010	1,378	2,831	1,568	2,564	2,826
Lib Dem posts	166	298	248	289	408	779	1,070	1,738	1,428
Lib Dem median	60	54	249	411	308	639	218	486	223
UKIP posts	1,103	1,524	1,082	889	571	493	885	2,051	280
UKIP median	97	625	1,747	4,469	3,833	976	958	1,070	2,064
Green posts	147	395	666	1,046	815	868	417	771	513
Green median	21	84	508	1,090	486	683	597	495	372