

After the Votes Are Counted: Facebook Engagement with European Parties around National Elections, 2010 to 2020

Tristan Hotham*

October 2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

Election campaigns are the busiest time for parties on social media, but little is known about what happens to their audiences once the votes are counted. I follow 95 party pages on Facebook through 229 party-elections in 16 European countries between 2010 and early 2020, using posts collected through CrowdTangle, comparing each page in the weeks after a national election with the weeks before the campaign. Engagement rose steeply through the campaign: in the final week it was nearly six times its level twelve weeks earlier. It fell sharply once the election was over: in the following months pages posted about a third less and received about 40% fewer interactions than before the campaign began. Results were associated with the immediate response. For parties that gained two or more points of the vote, the median post in the election week and the week after drew about 2.7 times its pre-campaign level, compared with about 75% to 95% more for other parties, and each five points gained was associated with about 30% more interactions in those two weeks. The advantage did not last: in the following months winners and losers alike fell back. From 2016, when Facebook's emoji reactions are available, the emotional mix also changed with the result. On the pages of parties that stayed in opposition, Angry reactions rose by about 1.3 points of all interactions after the election, from a base of about 2%, and Sad reactions by 0.6 points, whether or not the party had gained votes. On the pages of the 12 parties that entered government, Love rose by 2.2 points and Angry fell. Party audiences on Facebook mobilise for the campaign, respond briefly to good results, and anger rises on the pages of parties left in opposition.

Keywords: elections; election results; winners and losers; Facebook; social media engagement; emoji reactions; political parties; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Parties' use of social media is often studied during election campaigns, when activity and attention are at their height (Jungherr 2016). But parties also communicate between elections, though how far their campaigning is permanent is debated (Larsson 2016), and the moment an election ends is a turning point for them and their supporters. Some parties have won and will govern; others have lost and must explain why. Research on voters shows that winning and losing shape how citizens feel about politics

*Independent researcher. ORCID 0000-0003-4931-9349. Correspondence: contact@tristanhotham.com. The views expressed are the author's own and do not represent those of any employer.

and democracy ([Anderson et al. 2005](#)). Whether the same divide appears among the audiences of parties online is less well known.

This paper follows the Facebook pages of European parties through national elections, from twelve weeks before election day to eleven weeks after. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** How does engagement with party pages change through the campaign and after the election? **RQ2.** Does the result, measured as the change in a party's vote share, shape what happens after? **RQ3.** Do the emotional reactions of party audiences change with the result and with whether the party enters government?

The answers are as follows. Engagement rose steeply through the campaign and fell below its earlier level after the election. Parties that gained votes saw a short burst of engagement around the result that did not last. And the emotions expressed on their pages followed the outcome: more anger and sadness on the pages of parties that stayed in opposition, more love and less anger on those of parties that entered government.

2 Background

Campaign cycles. Parties post more as elections approach, and their followers engage more ([Larsson 2016](#); [Jungheer 2016](#)). Less is known about the end of campaigns. Once the election is over, the reasons to post fall away, campaign staff move on, and audiences may lose interest. A sharp fall in engagement would show how much of parties' online audience is mobilised by the campaign itself.

Winners and losers. For voters, being on the winning side raises satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions, while losing lowers them ([Anderson et al. 2005](#)). Audiences of party pages are partisans, and they may respond to results with celebration or disappointment. A party that gains votes may also attract new followers and media attention, raising engagement, while a party that loses may see its audience disengage.

Emotions. Facebook's emoji reactions, introduced in 2016, give a coarse record of how audiences feel about posts ([Muraoka et al. 2021](#)). My earlier work showed that the share of Angry reactions on European party pages rose modestly over time and that governing parties drew less engagement overall ([Hotham 2026a,b](#)). An election result that sends a party into government or keeps it in opposition might shift these emotions directly: love for the winners, anger or sadness among the losers.

3 Data

Pages, posts and elections. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 ([CrowdTangle Team 2020](#); [Hotham 2021](#)). Election dates and vote shares come from ParlGov ([Döring et al. 2024](#)). I include every national parliamentary election between 2010 and February 2020 for which a party's page was active from at least twelve weeks before to twelve weeks after. I exclude the French legislative elections, whose pre-campaign weeks fall in the presidential campaign, and the Greek election of June 2012, whose window overlaps that of May 2012. This leaves 229 party-elections, from 95 party pages, 47 elections and 16 countries. For each party-election I count posts and interactions in each week from twelve weeks before election day to eleven weeks after, with weeks without posts counted as zero. Some windows include other events, such as the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 and, for two elections in 2020, the start of the pandemic.

Results. I measure the result as the change in the party’s vote share from its previous national election. I set it to missing where the two elections compare a party’s own list with an alliance list, which leaves 192 party-elections, and group parties into those that gained two points or more (49), those within two points (97) and those that lost two points or more (46). I also record whether the party was in government in the last observed week before the election (weeks -4 to -1) and in the last observed week of the window (weeks 8 to 11), so that parties in caretaker cabinets are coded by the government formed afterwards: 30 entered government, 22 left it, 46 stayed in and 131 stayed in opposition. In Switzerland, the parties of the Federal Council always count as staying in government.

Reactions. For elections from mid-2016, when emoji reactions were established, I measure Love, Haha, Sad and Angry reactions as percentages of all interactions in the week (116 party-elections). In the weeks before the campaign they averaged 3.7%, 1.9%, 0.9% and 2.1%.

4 Method

For party p at election e in week k , I estimate

$$y_{pek} = \beta_1 \text{Campaign}_k + \beta_2 \text{Election}_k + \beta_3 \text{After}_k + \alpha_{pe} + \varepsilon_{pek}, \quad (1)$$

where Campaign marks the four weeks before election day ($k = -4$ to -1), Election the week of the election and the week after ($k = 0, 1$), After the following ten weeks ($k = 2$ to 11), and the reference is weeks -12 to -5 . The party-election fixed effect α_{pe} compares each page with itself. Outcomes are the log of one plus total interactions, the log of one plus the number of posts, the log of one plus the median interactions per post (in weeks with posts), and the reaction percentages. To compare results, I interact the period indicators with the vote change (per five points) or estimate the model separately for each group. Standard errors are clustered by page. The design compares each party with its own pre-campaign level; it does not show that the result caused the changes, since results also reflect what happened during the campaign. Because week -12 alone is a noisy reference, the weekly profile is shown for description and the period estimates use weeks -12 to -5 .

5 Results

5.1 Up through the campaign, down after

Figure 1 shows the weekly profile. Engagement rose steadily from about seven weeks before the election and peaked in the final week, at nearly six times its level in week -12 , while posting more than doubled. After the election both fell sharply. Over the four campaign weeks, pages received about three times as many interactions as in weeks -12 to -5 (an increase of 195%) and posted about 75% more. In the election week and the week after, posts fell by about 28% but the median post drew about twice as much, so the total was a little above its pre-campaign level. The posts made in these weeks are selected, often reporting results or thanking voters, so the higher median partly reflects which posts were made. In the following ten weeks, pages posted about a third less than before the campaign and received about 40% fewer interactions; the median post drew about 23% more. Counting only weeks with posts gives the same pattern, with a smaller fall.

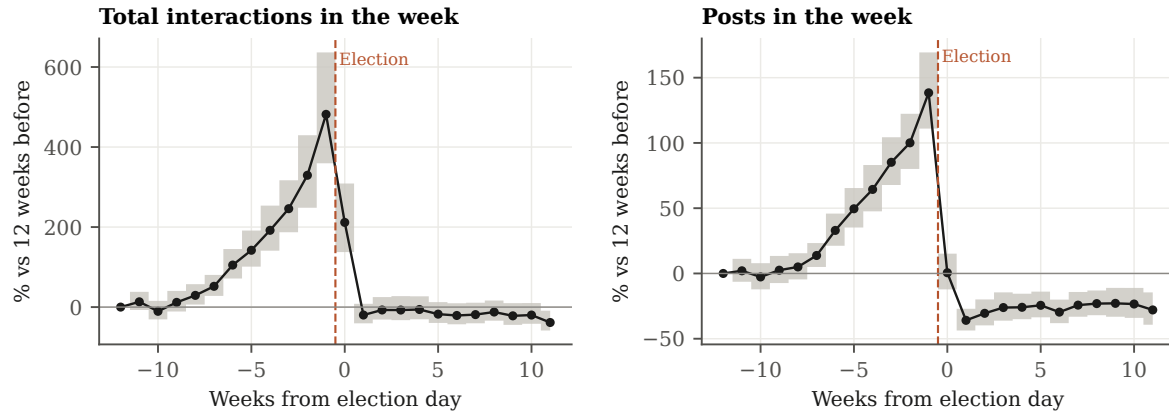


Figure 1. Total interactions and number of posts by week relative to election day, compared with twelve weeks before, within party-elections. 229 party-elections; shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

5.2 A short-lived boost for winners

Figure 2 compares parties by result. During the campaign the three groups looked alike. In the election week and the week after, they diverged. Parties that gained two points or more received about twice the interactions of their pre-campaign weeks, while the other groups received about the same as before; their median post drew about 2.7 times its earlier level, against about 75% to 95% more for the other groups. Each five points gained was associated with about 30% more interactions in these two weeks (0.26 log points, SE 0.11; SE 0.10 clustering by country), an estimate that stays between 0.20 and 0.30 when any one country is dropped.

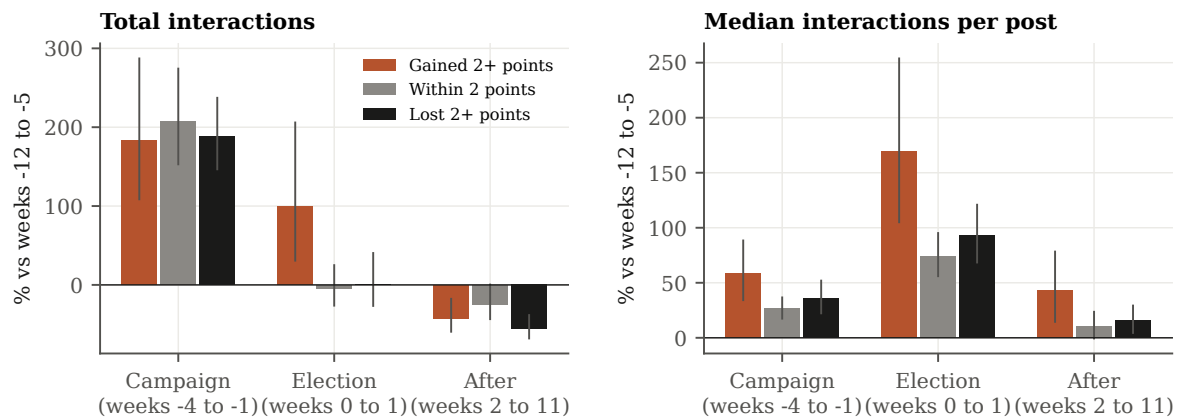


Figure 2. Change in total interactions and median interactions per post by period, compared with weeks –12 to –5, for parties that gained two or more points of the vote, stayed within two points, or lost two or more points. Separate party-election fixed effects models; bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

The boost did not last. In the following ten weeks, parties that gained received about 43% fewer interactions than in their pre-campaign weeks and parties that lost about 56% fewer; parties whose vote barely changed fell least, by about a quarter. Both groups fell more than parties whose vote barely changed, significantly so only for losers. Winners' posts continued to draw somewhat more each, but they posted less.

5.3 Love for the new government, anger in opposition

From 2016, the emotional mix also changed after elections (Figure 3). On the pages of parties that were in opposition before and after the election, Angry reactions rose by 1.3 points of all interactions in the ten weeks after the election week (SE 0.22), from a base of about 2.1%, and Sad reactions by 0.6 points (SE 0.12), from about 0.9%. Love barely changed. The rise in anger was similar whether the party had gained votes (1.6 points), held steady (1.0) or lost (1.9), so it reflects remaining in opposition rather than losing votes. On the pages of the 12 parties that entered government, the pattern reversed: Love rose by 2.2 points (SE 0.39; 0.28 clustering by country), from about 3.9%, and Angry fell by 1.5 points (SE 0.57; 0.36 by country) from about 2.5%, with Sad down 0.6 and Haha down 1.3. These 12 cases come from six government formations, four of them in Finland in 2019 and four in Slovakia in 2020; without the 2020 cases the estimates are similar (Love 2.1, Angry -1.7). Parties that stayed in government saw little change apart from fewer Haha reactions. Only three parties left government in this period, too few to say anything about. In the election week itself, Love rose on all pages, by about two points.

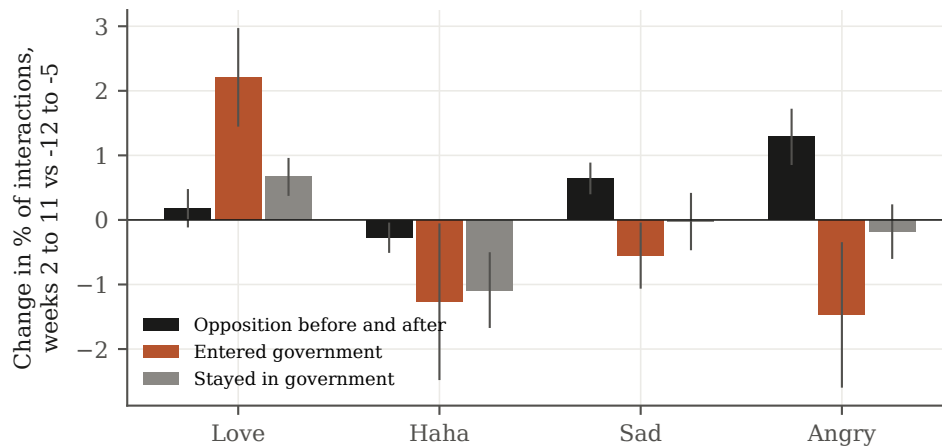


Figure 3. Change in Love, Haha, Sad and Angry reactions as a percentage of all interactions, weeks 2 to 11 after the election compared with weeks -12 to -5 , by government status before and after the election. Elections from mid-2016; 78 party-elections in opposition throughout, 12 entering government and 23 staying in government. Bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

6 Discussion

The audiences of European party pages were mobilised by campaigns and demobilised by their end. Engagement after an election fell well below its level before the campaign, as parties posted less and their followers engaged less. Much of the engagement parties receive around elections is therefore tied to the campaign itself, rather than to a lasting audience.

The result mattered, but briefly. Parties that gained votes received a burst of engagement around the result, perhaps as supporters responded to good news, but within a few weeks they were back to the same post-campaign lull as everyone else. On Facebook, at least, there is little sign of a lasting engagement advantage for winners.

The emotional response was more lasting. In the months after an election, the pages of parties left in opposition drew more anger and sadness, while those of parties entering government drew more love and less anger. This resembles the divide between winners and losers found among voters ([Anderson](#)

et al. 2005), and it means that the anger seen on party pages is partly a product of the electoral cycle: it rises on the pages of parties that remain in opposition, whether or not they gained votes. The warmer reactions on the pages of new governing parties sit alongside my earlier finding that governing parties draw less engagement than parties in opposition (Hotham 2026b): the warmth of entering government may come first, and the costs of governing later.

The design has clear limits. The comparison is with each party's own pre-campaign weeks, and results are not randomly assigned: parties that gain votes may also have run more engaging campaigns. Government formation can take months, and I measure government status at the end of the window, by which time some governments had not yet formed. The reaction results rest on elections from 2016 and, for parties entering government, on only 12 cases. Reactions record emotions only coarsely, and the data cover engagement, not reach or the content of posts.

7 Conclusion

Across 229 party-elections in 16 European countries, Facebook engagement with party pages rose through the campaign, fell sharply after it, and briefly favoured parties that gained votes. The emotional tone of party audiences followed the result for longer, with more love on the pages of new governing parties and more anger and sadness on those left in opposition.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. Election dates and results come from ParlGov. The analysis code, the list of pages and elections and the party-week aggregate data are available from the author.

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.

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.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are public posts by the official Facebook pages of political parties, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by page and week. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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).

References

- Anderson, C. J., Blais, A., Bowler, S., Donovan, T., and Listhaug, O. (2005). *Losers' Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- CrowdTangle Team (2020). CrowdTangle. Facebook, Menlo Park, CA.
- Döring, H., Huber, C., and Manow, P. (2024). Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov): Information on parties, elections and cabinets in established democracies. <https://www.parlgov.org>.
- Hotham, T. (2021). *How Do Political Parties Use Facebook and What Does It Offer to Their Campaigns*. PhD thesis, University of Bath. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23300282>.
- Hotham, T. (2026a). Angrier, or just more expressive? Facebook reactions to European parties and leaders, 2016 to 2020. Preprint, Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23396858>.
- Hotham, T. (2026b). Does governing cost parties attention on Facebook? Incumbency, coalitions and engagement in Europe, 2010 to 2020. Preprint, Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23398392>.
- Jungherr, A. (2016). Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 13(1):72–91.
- Larsson, A. O. (2016). Online, all the time? A quantitative assessment of the permanent campaign on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 18(2):274–292.
- Muraoka, T., Montgomery, J., Lucas, C., and Tavits, M. (2021). Love and anger in global party politics: Facebook reactions to political party posts in 79 democracies. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 1.