

Building an Audience: What Drove Growth in the Facebook Followings of European Parties and Leaders, 2016 to 2020

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October 2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

A party's Facebook audience is the base on which its reach and engagement rest, yet little is known about how such audiences grow. I track the number of page likes of 112 party pages and 74 party leaders' pages in 20 European countries month by month from 2016 to 2020, using the counts recorded with each post collected through CrowdTangle. The typical page grew by about half a per cent a month, and growth slowed from about 1.3% a month in 2016 to about 0.3% from 2018. Growth was concentrated around elections: compared with the same page in other months, and with other pages in the same calendar month, pages grew by about 3 log points (roughly 3%) more in the month before a national election and by about 5 more in the month of the election, several times the median monthly rate, but no faster in the month after. The month before and the month of an election made up 5% of page-months and 18% of growth. The European Parliament election of May 2019 added about 1.5 points. A change of party leader did not add followers to the party's page. Pages gained more followers in months when they received more engagement, holding constant how much they posted, while posting more without more engagement was not associated with extra growth. Leaders' pages and populist parties' pages grew faster, and larger pages more slowly. Followings grew several times faster around elections, though most cumulative growth still accrued, slowly, in ordinary months.

Keywords: audience growth; followers; page likes; Facebook; election campaigns; political parties; party leaders; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

A party's following on Facebook determines how many people can see its posts without paying. It is also a visible measure of the party's standing online. Yet followings are not fixed: people like a page when something prompts them to, and may unlike it later. Research has documented how parties use Facebook and how many people follow politicians ([Larsson and Kalsnes 2014](#); [Nielsen and Vaccari 2013](#)), but less is known about what makes followings grow.

This paper tracks the followings of European party and leader pages month by month from 2016 to 2020. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** How fast did followings grow, and how did growth change over time?

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RQ2. Did elections and changes of leader bring new followers? **RQ3.** Did activity, posting more or drawing more engagement, bring growth?

2 Data and method

Followings. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party and party leader pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). CrowdTangle records the number of page likes at the time of each post. I take the last recorded count in each page-month and compute monthly growth as 100 times the change in log page likes (log points, approximately per cent for small values), for consecutive months from January 2016 to September 2020, with December 2015 used only as a base. This gives 8,713 page-months from 112 party pages and 74 leader pages in 20 countries, after excluding 19 page-months with absolute changes of more than 50 log points (a rise of about 65% or a fall of about 39%), which mostly reflect page mergers or errors, although some may be genuine viral surges.

Events. I code separately the month containing a national parliamentary election (ParlGov), the month before, and the month after. Because the count is the last one of the month, the election month can include days after the election. I also mark May 2019, the month of the European Parliament election, for the 18 countries in the sample that voted in it (all except Norway and Switzerland, and including the United Kingdom), and months in which a party's page saw a new permanent leader take office, from dates compiled from Wikipedia and news sources.

Method. I regress monthly growth on these indicators with page and calendar-month fixed effects, so that each page is compared with itself in other months and with other pages in the same month. To examine activity, I regress growth on the log of the page's interactions and the log of its posts in the month (or the previous month), with page and country-month fixed effects. Differences between kinds of page are compared within country-months. Standard errors are clustered by page.

3 Results

3.1 Slowing growth

The median page grew by about half a per cent a month, and the median page with at least 40 months of data grew by about 61 log points over the period, an increase of about 84%. Growth slowed sharply (Figure 1, left): the median monthly rate was 1.3% in 2016, 0.7% in 2017 and about 0.3% in 2018 to 2020, for both kinds of page, though leaders' pages grew faster, especially in 2016 (1.8% against 1.1%).

3.2 Faster growth around elections

Growth was concentrated around elections (Figure 1, right). Compared with the same page in other months and with other pages in the same month, pages grew by about 3.1 log points more in the month before a national election (SE 0.4) and by about 4.7 more in the election month (SE 0.5), six to nine times the median monthly rate of 0.5. In the month after, growth was back to normal (0.1, SE 0.3). The month before and the month of an election made up 5% of page-months but 18% of all growth; the other 82% accrued in ordinary months. The European Parliament election month of May 2019 added about

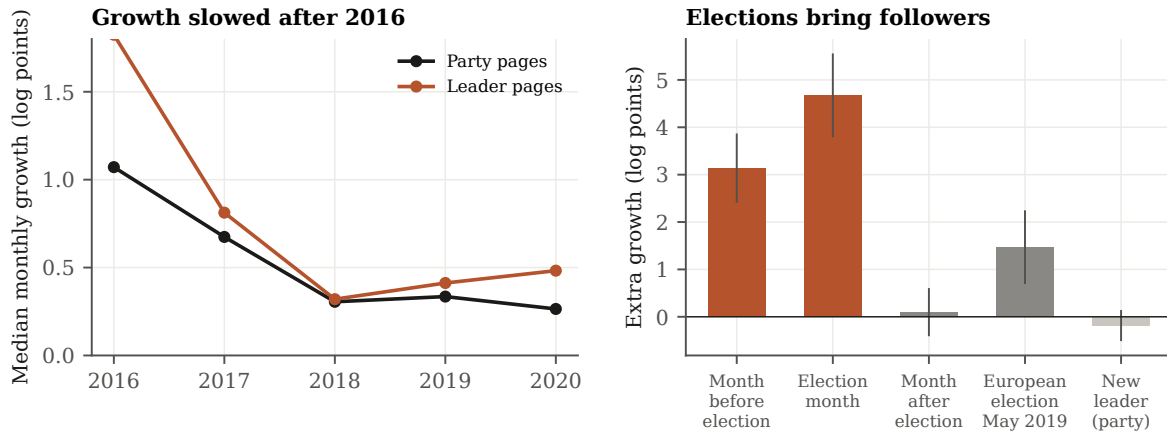


Figure 1. Left: median monthly growth in page likes by year, party and leader pages. Right: extra monthly growth, in log points, in months around national elections, in May 2019 and in months when a new party leader took office, compared with the same page in other months and other pages in the same month; 95% confidence intervals clustered by page. 8,713 page-months.

1.5 points (SE 0.4), a third of the effect of a national election month. A change of party leader added nothing detectable to the party's page (-0.15 , SE 0.16, estimated on party pages only).

3.3 Engagement, not posting, goes with growth

Months in which a page drew more engagement were months in which it gained more followers. Comparing the same page across months, and holding constant what was happening in the country, each log unit of interactions went with about 1.4 log points more growth (SE 0.15), while posting more, holding engagement constant, went with slightly less (-0.5 , SE 0.2). Engagement in the previous month also predicted growth (0.7, SE 0.15). The association holds, and is larger, when controlling for the previous month's following (2.3, SE 0.2) or measuring engagement per 1,000 followers (2.5, SE 0.2). It should not be read as causal: interactions scale with audience size and new followers themselves interact, so part of it is mechanical, and both may respond to the same events.

3.4 Who grew

Comparing pages in the same country and month, leaders' pages grew about 0.8 log points a month faster than party pages (SE 0.2), populist parties' pages about 0.7 points faster (SE 0.3), and larger pages more slowly, by about 0.6 for each log unit of existing followers (SE 0.1), although part of this may be regression to the mean. Entering or leaving government made no detectable difference (-0.15 , SE 0.3).

4 Discussion

Parties' Facebook audiences grew several times faster around elections than between them, although because elections are rare most growth still accrued in ordinary months. This fits the idea that people engage with parties when politics is salient, and that the permanent campaign online (Larsson 2016) does little to build audiences between elections. A substantial part, about a sixth, of the audiences parties had built by 2020 was gained in the few months around elections.

One possible, untested, mechanism for the link between engagement and growth is that Facebook shows users posts that others have engaged with, and some of those who see them follow the page. Posting more without drawing more engagement was not associated with extra growth. The faster growth of leaders' pages and populist parties' pages is consistent with their larger engagement per post (Hotham 2026), and the slower growth of larger pages with saturation of their potential audience, though this is speculative.

The design has clear limits. Follower counts are recorded only when a page posts, so growth is measured between the last posts of consecutive months, the interval between them varies, and months without posts break the series. The analysis begins in 2016. The associations between engagement and growth do not show which causes which: both may respond to the same events. Page likes are not reach, and many followers may never see a page's posts.

5 Conclusion

Across 186 party and leader pages in 20 European countries, Facebook followings grew slowly, and more slowly over time, except around elections, when they grew several times faster. Engagement, not posting volume, went with growth. Campaigns were the moments when parties' Facebook audiences grew fastest.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages and page-month 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 and compile the leadership dates. 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 and party leaders, analysed only as counts of page likes and interactions aggregated by page and month. 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).

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