Did Brexit Travel?
Eurosceptic Parties across Europe on Facebook after the 2016 Referendum

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Abstract

Eurosceptic parties across Europe might be expected to have drawn attention from the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016. I test whether engagement with the Facebook pages of Eurosceptic parties and leaders in 19 other European countries changed around the referendum and later Brexit milestones, using CrowdTangle data. I compare 37 Eurosceptic pages, classified with the PopuList, with other pages in the same country and week in a 25-week window around the vote (42,265 posts from 143 pages). Posts mentioning Brexit or the UK rose from under 1% to about 9% of posts in the two weeks after the vote, but equally for Eurosceptic and other pages. Engagement per post did not change differentially in those two weeks (-0.02 log points, SE 0.11), nor did the mix of reactions. Eurosceptic pages posted about 16% less than other pages in those weeks, but similar dips appear in late June 2014, 2017 and 2018. Of five later milestones, only the March 2019 extension gave a clearly positive estimate, about 23%, but it does not survive clustering by country or adjustment for testing both outcomes, coincides with the European Parliament campaign, and came without more posts about Brexit. In the United Kingdom itself, interactions per post with all parties' pages roughly doubled relative to pages elsewhere. On Facebook, Brexit was a large British event and a shared topic abroad, but I find no sign that it lifted Eurosceptic parties elsewhere relative to their rivals.

Keywords: Brexit; Euroscepticism; populist radical right; Facebook; engagement; reactions; event study; political parties; party leaders; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

The British vote to leave the European Union was widely discussed as a moment that might embolden Eurosceptic parties across the continent, or alternatively deter them as the costs of leaving became visible. Survey research has examined how the vote and the negotiations shaped public opinion about the EU in other member states (De Vries 2017) and how the vote divided Britain and Europe (Hobolt 2016). Less is known about whether Eurosceptic parties abroad drew more attention in the places where they speak to their audiences directly, such as Facebook.

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Social media offer a fine-grained test. If Brexit gave Eurosceptic parties elsewhere a moment, their pages should have drawn more engagement than their national rivals in the days and weeks after the vote, they may have posted more, and they may have talked about it more. The new reactions, introduced globally four months before the vote (Krug 2016), also allow a rough look at the emotional tone of the response: celebration, anger or mockery.

I ask three questions. **RQ1.** Did engagement with Eurosceptic party and leader pages in other European countries change, relative to other pages in the same country and week, around the 2016 referendum? **RQ2.** Did Eurosceptic pages post more, and more about Brexit, and did the mix of reactions to their posts change? **RQ3.** Did later Brexit milestones show similar patterns, and how do any changes compare with placebo dates and other international news events?

2 Data and method

Pages and posts. 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): 856,699 posts from 186 pages (112 party, 74 leader) in 20 countries, January 2010 to September 2020. The 25 British pages are not part of the comparison but are shown as context. In the main window, from 31 March to 21 September 2016 (weeks -12 to $+12$ around 23 June), 143 of the 161 non-British pages posted, with 42,265 posts in 19 countries; pages that did not post in a window drop out of it.

Eurosceptic pages. Parties are classified with version 4.0 of the PopuList, which labels European parties as populist, far right, far left and Eurosceptic by year, from expert judgement (Rooduijn et al. 2024; The PopuList 2026). A page is Eurosceptic if its party had a certain (not borderline) Eurosceptic classification in the event year; leaders' pages take their party's label. In 2016, 37 pages in 13 countries were Eurosceptic (11,847 posts in the window): 15 of the populist radical right, 12 of the radical left and 10 neither (among them Syriza, Sinn Féin and two Norwegian parties); 27 are populist, and 15 are leaders' pages. Following the PopuList, Fidesz and Sme rodina count as Eurosceptic, while the Slovenian SDS and NSi do not. All 13 countries also have non-Eurosceptic pages. Six countries have no Eurosceptic page in the sample and contribute only to the comparison group. Prominent Eurosceptic parties such as the Austrian FPÖ, the German AfD, the Italian Lega, the Dutch PVV and the Polish PiS are not in the sample. Adding borderline cases gives 41 pages.

Outcomes. Per post, the log of interactions (reactions, comments and shares, plus one). Per page and week, the log of one plus the number of posts and of total interactions, with zero weeks filled for pages that posted in the window. For posts with at least one reaction, the share of each of the five new reactions (Angry, Haha, Love, Wow, Sad) in all reactions including likes, in percentage points. Brexit posts are flagged by 45 keyword patterns for Brexit and for the United Kingdom or Britain in the sample's languages, applied to the message text in the raw exports; I report only counts. A stricter flag uses only the word Brexit.

Design. I regress each outcome on indicators for Eurosceptic pages in each week relative to 23 June, with page fixed effects and country by week fixed effects, so that each Eurosceptic page is compared with itself in the reference weeks (-12 to -5) and with other pages in the same country and week. Summary estimates pool the four campaign weeks before the vote (-4 to -1), the event weeks (0 and 1, 23 June to 6 July) and the following weeks (2 to 12). Standard errors are clustered by page, and as a check by country. For later milestones, the Article 50 notification (29 March 2017), the extensions agreed on 21 March, 10 April and 28 October 2019, and the departure on 31 January 2020, and for comparison dates, I

use a shorter window of weeks -8 to $+3$, with weeks 0 and 1 as the event. Percentages are $100(e^b - 1)$.

Placebos and checks. I repeat the short-window estimate on 23 June 2014, 2015 and 2017 (and, for posting, 2018 and 2019), on three other international news events (the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, the Brussels attacks of 22 March 2016 and the US presidential election of 8 November 2016, from 9 November), and on 300 random dates from March 2014 to June 2020 at least six weeks from any Brexit milestone. I also drop countries with a national parliamentary election within the window: Spain voted on 26 June 2016, three days after the referendum. For the six Brexit milestones, including the referendum, I adjust page-clustered p-values with the Holm method, across milestones for each outcome and across both outcomes together.

Platform changes. Reactions appear on most posts in Spain, Ireland and Portugal from October 2015, consistent with a test before the global launch, and everywhere from 24 February 2016 (Krug 2016), so the whole 2016 window has them; older posts carry only a few, presumably added later. CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts rose about two and a half to four times in May 2015, a year before the window. On 29 June 2016, in week 0, Facebook announced that the News Feed would give more weight to posts from friends and family (Mosseri 2016); this applies to all pages and is absorbed by the country-week effects, unless it affected kinds of page differently. Recorded posts by non-British pages fell in the four weeks after 23 June compared with the four before, by 26% in 2016 against 12% in 2015 and 10% in 2017, but across all post types (links by 14%, photos by 30%, native videos by 36%), with no type-specific step like that of May 2015. The larger fall in 2016 may partly reflect the end of the Spanish campaign.

3 Results

3.1 Engagement per post

Engagement with Eurosceptic pages abroad did not change relative to other pages when Britain voted (Figure 1, left). In the event weeks, the difference was -0.02 log points (SE 0.11; country-clustered SE 0.12), in the campaign weeks before -0.04 (SE 0.10), and on the three days from 23 to 25 June -0.12 (SE 0.12, against the same days' country effects). In weeks 2 to 12, Eurosceptic pages drew about 20% more per post than in the reference weeks (0.18, SE 0.09, $p = 0.05$), mostly from August, but the same summer window in 2015 shows a similar difference (0.26, SE 0.14), so this is not distinctive.

The null held with borderline Eurosceptic cases (-0.02, SE 0.10), without Spain (0.03, SE 0.12), for EU members only, without Norway and Switzerland (0.01, SE 0.12), and for non-photo posts (-0.12, SE 0.10) and link posts (-0.13, SE 0.09). It held for populist radical right pages (15 pages, -0.03, SE 0.11), Eurosceptic radical left pages (12 pages, 0.09, SE 0.21), party pages (0.01, SE 0.13) and leaders' pages (-0.02, SE 0.19). In the short window, the estimate was 0.05 (SE 0.11), smaller in size than the estimates for 60% of the 300 random dates.

3.2 Posting and Brexit posts

Eurosceptic pages posted less, not more, than other pages in the event weeks (Figure 1, right): about 16% fewer posts (-0.18, SE 0.10, $p = 0.07$; country-clustered SE 0.12), and about 39% less total engagement (-0.49, SE 0.22). The fall was concentrated among radical left pages (-0.43, SE 0.14) and leaders' pages (-0.32, SE 0.14), and was smaller without Spain (-0.11, SE 0.11). It is unlikely to reflect Brexit. In the short window, the 2016 estimate (-0.17, SE 0.06; Holm-adjusted $p = 0.05$ across

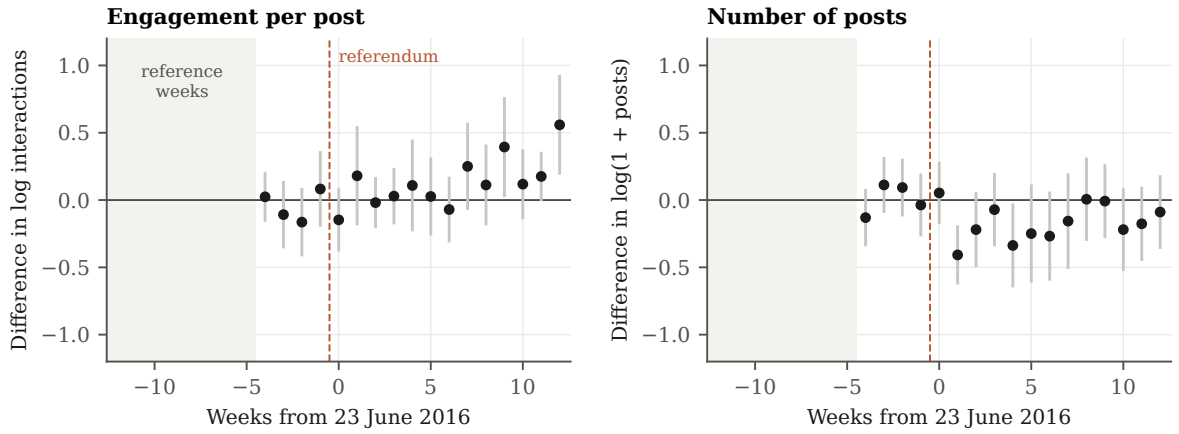


Figure 1. Eurosceptic pages in 19 countries compared with other pages in the same country and week, around 23 June 2016, relative to weeks −12 to −5 (shaded). Left: log interactions per post (42,259 posts). Right: log of one plus posts per page-week (3,550 page-weeks, 143 pages). Page and country-week fixed effects; 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

the six milestones) was similar on 23 June 2014 (−0.19, SE 0.15), 2017 (−0.18, SE 0.09) and 2018 (−0.16, SE 0.09), though not in 2015 (0.07, SE 0.10) or 2019 (−0.07, SE 0.10), and 8% of random dates gave a difference at least as large. Eurosceptic pages often seem to post relatively less at the start of the summer, though not every year.

Both groups posted about Britain (Figure 2, left). In the reference weeks 0.4% of Eurosceptic posts and 0.2% of other posts mentioned Brexit or the UK; in the event weeks, 9.2% (90 of 983) and 8.5% (227 of 2,667). With the stricter Brexit flag the shares were 7.3% and 5.6%. The differential change was 0.5 percentage points (SE 1.1). Of the pages that posted in the event weeks, 28 of 37 Eurosceptic and 83 of 102 other pages posted about it at least once. Eurosceptic pages' share stayed a little higher in weeks 1 to 4. In weeks 0 to 3, these posts drew about as much as the same pages' other posts in the same country-week, for Eurosceptic (6%, SE 0.12 log points, 117 posts) and other pages (8%, SE 0.08, 260 posts).

3.3 Reactions

The tone of the response to Eurosceptic pages did not change differentially. In the event weeks, relative to the reference weeks and to other pages, the Angry share changed by −0.3 percentage points (SE 0.7), Love by −0.1 (SE 0.5), Haha by 0.03 (SE 0.19), Wow by −0.07 (SE 0.05) and Sad by −0.3 (SE 0.2), from 41,855 posts with reactions. Raw shares moved for both groups: Love rose from 4.9% to 7.7% of reactions for Eurosceptic pages and from 2.8% to 4.7% for others, and Angry fell from 5.7% to 1.9% and from 3.1% to 2.4%, mostly before the vote: the Angry share of Eurosceptic pages was already 1.4 points lower in the campaign weeks (SE 0.5). Radical right and radical left Eurosceptic pages showed no clear change in the event weeks either.

3.4 Britain as context

In Britain itself the referendum was a large event on Facebook. Compared with non-British pages in the same weeks, the 23 British pages that posted in the window drew about 124% more interactions per post in the event weeks (0.81, SE 0.21), after a smaller rise in the campaign weeks (0.31, SE 0.14). The three

Eurosceptic British pages, UKIP, its leader Nigel Farage and the Democratic Unionist Party, did not gain relative to other British pages (−0.13, SE 0.53), and posted about 38% less (−0.49, SE 0.22).

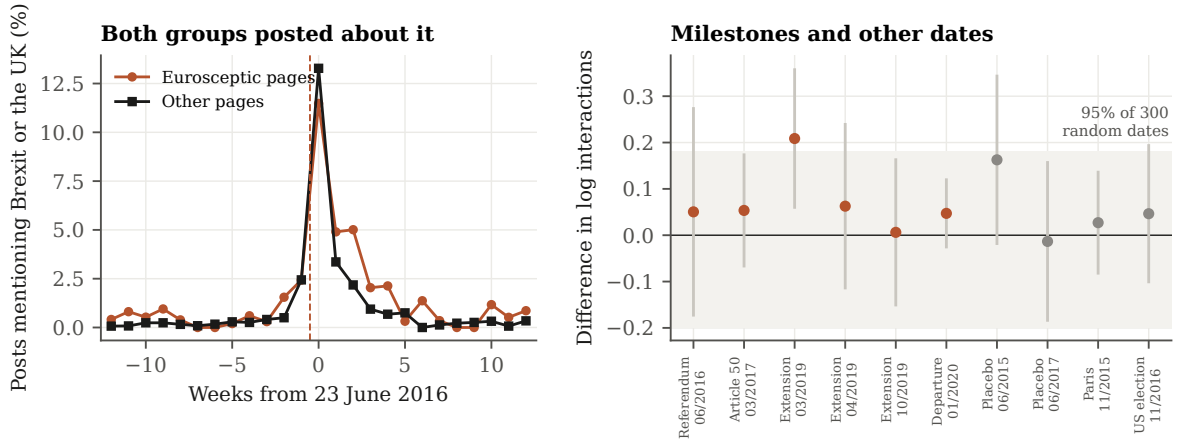


Figure 2. Left: share of posts by non-British pages mentioning Brexit or the UK, by week around 23 June 2016, Eurosceptic and other pages. Right: difference in log interactions per post between Eurosceptic and other pages in weeks 0 and 1, relative to weeks −8 to −1, around Brexit milestones (orange) and comparison dates (grey); 95% confidence intervals clustered by page. The shaded band is the 2.5th to 97.5th percentile of the same estimate on 300 random dates.

3.5 Later milestones and placebos

Later milestones show little (Figure 2, right). Per-post differences were 0.05 around the Article 50 notification (SE 0.06), 0.06 around the April 2019 extension (SE 0.09), 0.01 around the October 2019 extension (SE 0.08) and 0.05 around the departure in January 2020 (SE 0.04). The exception was the March 2019 extension, about 23% (0.21, SE 0.08), larger in size than on 96% of random dates. It persisted in weeks 2 and 3 (0.22, SE 0.08) and without Finland, which voted in April (0.21, SE 0.08). It should be read with caution. Its Holm-adjusted p was 0.05 across milestones and 0.09 across milestones and outcomes, and with country clustering the SE was 0.13 ($p = 0.11$). The window for the April extension, three weeks later, overlaps it by nine weeks, yet gave only 0.06. It is also hard to read as a Brexit effect: the window runs from late January to mid April 2019, the run-up to the European Parliament election, and Eurosceptic pages' share of Brexit posts did not rise relative to others (−0.05 points, SE 0.38). For posting, apart from the referendum itself, only the October 2019 extension stood out (0.18, SE 0.08; Holm-adjusted $p = 0.08$; 0.16, SE 0.08, without Switzerland, Spain and Portugal, which held elections), when Eurosceptic pages' Brexit share rose relative to others (1.0% against 0.2%; difference 0.8 points, SE 0.4), though Brexit posts remained a small share of what they posted.

The comparison dates gave estimates of similar size: 0.16 for June 2015 (SE 0.09), −0.01 for June 2017 (SE 0.09), 0.02 for June 2014 (SE 0.11), 0.03 after the Paris attacks (SE 0.06), 0.08 after the Brussels attacks (SE 0.05) and 0.05 after the US election (SE 0.08). Across the 300 random dates the estimates had a standard deviation of 0.10, and 95% lay between −0.20 and 0.18. The 2016 referendum estimate sits in the middle of this range.

4 Discussion

On Facebook, Brexit was a British event and a shared topic, but not a moment for Eurosceptic parties elsewhere. Pages of all kinds abroad mentioned it in the two weeks after the vote, Eurosceptic pages no more than others, and engagement with Eurosceptic pages and the reactions to them moved with their national rivals. This is consistent with the view that the moments that mobilise audiences for parties are mostly national, even for issues framed as transnational. It is also consistent with mixed lessons drawn from Brexit abroad: the vote could be read as a precedent or a warning (De Vries 2017), and audiences of Eurosceptic pages may have been divided in how they saw it. Populist pages, many of them Eurosceptic, draw more engagement per post than other parties in general (Hotham 2026), but the referendum did not widen the gap for Eurosceptic pages.

The one large milestone estimate, March 2019, is fragile: it does not survive country clustering or adjustment across both outcomes, an overlapping window gave a small estimate, and it fits the European Parliament campaign at least as well as Brexit. With six milestones and two outcomes, one or two estimates of this size are not surprising. The posting dip after the referendum shows how seasonal patterns can look like event effects: similar dips appear in three of five other years.

The design has clear limits. The sample lacks several of the best-known Eurosceptic parties, and the Eurosceptic group mixes the radical right, the radical left and others, though the first two were tested separately. The comparison is relative: an event that raised engagement with all parties in a country equally is absorbed by the country-week effects, and Brexit may have raised attention to politics for all parties abroad. The keyword flag is approximate and may miss posts or catch unrelated ones. The Spanish election and the News Feed change fall in the event weeks, though excluding Spain did not change the result. Interactions are not reach, and they may come from users in any country. With 37 Eurosceptic pages, differences smaller than about a third would be hard to detect.

5 Conclusion

Across 143 party and leader pages in 19 countries, the British vote to leave the EU goes with no detectable change in engagement with Eurosceptic pages relative to their national rivals, in the reactions they drew, or in how much they posted about Britain compared with other parties. Later milestones show at most isolated differences that other explanations fit better. On Facebook, Brexit was discussed across Europe, but it did not travel as a lift for Eurosceptic parties.

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 with their classification, the keyword patterns and page-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 and party leaders, analysed only as counts of interactions, reactions and posts aggregated by page and week. Message text was used only to flag posts by keyword; no post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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