

Does Governing Cost Parties Attention on Facebook? Incumbency, Coalitions and Engagement in Europe, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Governing parties tend to lose votes, and junior coalition partners often lose more. Does governing also cost parties attention on social media? I use 660,307 posts from 109 official party pages in 16 European countries, collected through CrowdTangle and covering January 2010 to September 2020, and code each party's place in the national cabinet from ParlGov, with corrections. Fifty-six pages changed status during the period, through 49 entries into government and 43 exits. I compare each party with itself in and out of government, relative to other parties in the same country and month. While in government, a party's posts drew about 18% fewer likes, comments, shares and reactions than the same party's posts in opposition (95% CI 4% to 30%), with the same estimate for the head of government's party and for junior partners. The difference between them lies in volume. The head of government's party posted somewhat more and kept its total engagement, while junior partners posted about 15% less and drew about 25% less in total, an estimate whose interval includes no change. The cost builds with time in office: in its first year the head of government's party drew no less than in opposition, and in its third and fourth years about 40% less. Leaving government did not restore engagement within the two years I can observe. Governing parties' posts were shared less and drew fewer angry reactions. I find no difference between populist and other parties. Event studies around entries and exits are noisy, and parties that entered government had usually gained attention in the year before, so I treat the results as descriptive rather than causal.

Keywords: cost of governing; coalition government; junior partners; incumbency; Facebook; social media engagement; Europe; ParlGov; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Governing is costly for parties. Across many democracies, parties in government lose votes at the next election, a regularity known as the cost of ruling (Paldam 1986; Nannestad and Paldam 2002; Wlezien 2017). Within coalitions the cost is not shared equally: junior partners often lose more than the party that leads the government (Klüver and Spoon 2020). These findings are about votes. Much of what parties now do between elections happens on social media, where they speak directly to their followers and

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where the response to each message is counted. If governing wears down a party's support, it may also wear down the attention its own channels receive. It may do the opposite. A party in government controls the agenda, announces decisions and has ministers with news to share, and some accounts of online campaigning expect established and powerful actors to dominate digital attention as they dominate other media ([Gibson and McAllister 2015](#); [Jungheer 2016](#)).

This paper asks whether parties receive less engagement on Facebook while they are in government, and more once they leave. I use the official Facebook pages of 109 national parties in 16 European countries from 2010 to 2020. During that decade, 56 of these pages changed status at least once, entering or leaving the national cabinet, or moving between leading it and serving as a junior partner. I compare each party with itself, in and out of government, against other parties in the same country and month. I ask three questions. **RQ1.** Do parties receive less engagement per post, and less in total, once they enter government, and more once they leave? **RQ2.** Are junior coalition partners penalised more than the head of government's party? **RQ3.** Does the effect differ between the head of government's party and other governing parties, between populist and mainstream parties, and with time in office?

The answers are as follows. A governing party's posts drew about 18% fewer interactions than the same party's posts in opposition. Per post, the head of government's party and junior partners lost about the same. They differed in volume: the leading party posted somewhat more and kept its total engagement, while junior partners posted less and drew about a quarter less in total, though the interval for the total includes no change. The per-post cost was not immediate. In its first year in office the head of government's party drew at least as much as in opposition; by its third and fourth years it drew about 40% less. Leaving government did not bring engagement back within two years. Governing parties' posts were shared less and drew fewer angry reactions. I find no difference between populist and other parties, though few populist parties changed status. Event studies around each entry and exit are noisy, and they show that parties which entered government had usually gained attention in the year before. The design cannot separate the cost of governing from the end of that pre-election rise, so I present the results as careful descriptions of within-party change, not as causal effects.

The paper extends my doctoral research on how parties use Facebook ([Hotham 2021](#)) and two recent papers that use the same or related European data. In a paper on the engagement premium of populist parties ([Hotham 2026a](#)), government status was a control variable; I reported there that, with party fixed effects, being in government lowered engagement for all parties a little, and that the premium of populist parties did not change detectably when they entered or left government. In a working paper on personalisation ([Hotham 2026b](#)), I studied what happens to a politician's own page when they become or stop being party leader. This paper asks a different question: what happens to the party's own page when the party enters or leaves the national government, and whether it matters if the party leads the government or joins it as a junior partner. It also corrects the government coding used in the populist paper, which in some cases recorded parties in government when they were in opposition. In earlier work on Britain I looked at how engagement was divided between government, party and politicians' pages in the first wave of Covid-19 ([Hotham 2026c](#)) and between leaders' and party pages over a decade ([Hotham 2026d](#)); the comparative design here allows within-party comparisons that a single country cannot.

2 Background and expectations

The cost of ruling. Studies of elections in many countries find that governing parties lose votes on average at the next election, whatever the state of the economy ([Paldam 1986](#); [Nannestad and Paldam](#)

2002). Explanations differ. One stresses the accumulation of disappointed voters: each decision in office alienates someone, and the coalition of minorities that elected a government frays over time. Another stresses policy: governments move policy, and public preferences move in the opposite direction, so that the electorate drifts away from whoever is in power (Wlezien 2017). Both accounts expect the cost to grow with time in office rather than appear on the first day.

Junior partners. In coalition governments, the electoral cost falls unevenly. Junior partners have less control over policy and less visibility than the party of the head of government, and they may be blamed for compromises without receiving credit for results. Studying coalition governments in Europe, Klüver and Spoon (2020) find that governing as a junior partner tends to cost parties votes at the next election. If attention on social media follows a similar logic, junior partners should lose more engagement than the leading party when they enter government.

Government and opposition on social media. Social media were once expected to level the field between established and challenger parties, but most studies find that established parties and leaders draw the largest audiences, a pattern described as normalisation (Gibson and McAllister 2015; Jungherr 2016). Parties use Facebook continuously, not only at elections (Larsson 2016), and the engagement their posts receive depends both on who is posting and on what they post (Heiss et al. 2019; Bene et al. 2022; Stier et al. 2018). Government and opposition parties post different things. Governing parties announce and defend decisions. Opposition parties criticise, and comparative studies of negative campaigning find that party characteristics, of which government or opposition status is one, matter more than the electoral context for how often parties attack their rivals (Walter et al. 2014). Engagement metrics reward conflict and emotion, so opposition may be the better position from which to draw likes, comments and shares. Against this, a governing party has more to announce and the head of government's party has the most prominent figures in national politics.

Expectations. From this I take four expectations, stated as descriptive patterns rather than causal hypotheses. **E1:** a party receives less engagement per post while in government than while in opposition. **E2:** the loss is larger for junior partners than for the head of government's party. **E3:** the loss grows with time in office. **E4:** engagement recovers after a party leaves government. I also examine whether the pattern differs for populist parties, which are often thought to rely on an anti-establishment message that sits uneasily with office.

3 Data

3.1 Pages and posts

The posts come from CrowdTangle, Facebook's public-content tool (CrowdTangle Team 2020), which I used in October 2020 to export the historical posts of lists of party and politician pages in Europe for my doctoral research. Each record is a post with its date, type, the number of page likes at the time of posting and counts of likes, comments, shares and, from 2016, the reactions love, wow, haha, sad, angry and care. I define *interactions* as the sum of all of these. The data are the same as those used in the populist paper (Hotham 2026a): official national party pages, with the personal pages of party leaders as a second sample.

For the main analysis I use the party pages. I drop Switzerland, whose four largest parties share the Federal Council throughout and whose three pages in the data therefore never change status (9,453 posts). The main sample has 660,307 posts from 109 party pages in 16 countries, posted between January 2010

Table 1. Party pages by country, January 2010 to September 2020. Entries and exits count changes into and out of the national cabinet while the party’s page was active. Medians are interactions per post.

Country	Party pages	Posts	Pages ever in government	Entries	Exits	Median, governing	Median, opposition
Finland	8	38,729	7	8	7	47	80
France	12	66,024	5	4	3	147	135
Germany	4	25,192	2	0	0	466	99
Greece	5	27,956	2	4	3	67	97
Hungary	7	78,024	2	1	1	1,382	242
Ireland	1	6,462	0	0	0		269
Lithuania	4	12,866	4	2	3	29	62
Luxembourg	7	17,834	4	2	1	17	16
Norway	8	33,566	7	4	4	274	184
Portugal	6	37,207	2	2	2	117	140
Romania	3	26,082	2	3	3	325	358
Slovakia	5	23,206	5	6	3	250	255
Slovenia	6	30,432	5	5	5	48	50
Spain	13	131,315	4	4	2	451	201
Sweden	8	33,942	6	2	4	147	514
United Kingdom	12	71,470	3	2	2	1,616	238
All	109	660,307	60	49	43	167	166

Notes: Switzerland (three pages, all in government throughout) is excluded. A further four changes moved a party between leading the government and serving as a junior partner without leaving it.

and September 2020, with about 513 million interactions in total. Table 1 describes it. Coverage is uneven, as the populist paper discusses: Spain, France and the United Kingdom have 12 or 13 party pages each, while some important parties are missing from the exports, including the German Social Democrats and both main Irish governing parties. Germany and Ireland contribute no changes of status, because the German pages belong to parties that were in government (CDU and CSU) or in opposition (Die Linke and the Pirates) throughout, and the one Irish page is Sinn Féin’s.

3.2 Government status

I code whether each party was in the national cabinet on the day of each post, and whether it was the party of the head of government, using the cabinet and party data in ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2024). I call the head of government’s party the *leading party* and other cabinet parties *junior partners*. Parties that supported a minority government from outside the cabinet, such as the Democratic Unionist Party in Britain from 2017 to 2019 or the Portuguese left after 2015, count as opposition.

I checked every change of status in the data against ParlGov’s own records and against public sources, and applied the corrections I had made for related work on the first Covid-19 wave in Europe, extended to the whole decade. Altogether the corrections changed the government or leading-party code of 13,038 posts. The largest were these. ParlGov records the Philippe and Castex governments in France under Les Républicains, the former party of both prime ministers, so the original coding put Les Républicains in government from 2017; they were in opposition from May 2012, and I code them so. In France’s semi-presidential system I treat En Marche, the President’s party, as the leading party from the formation of the first Philippe government on 15 May 2017, which ParlGov dates from 14 June 2017; MoDem

joins as a junior partner and the Socialists leave on the same date. The CSU was coded as the head of government's party in Germany, but Angela Merkel led the CDU, so I code the CSU as a junior partner. For Slovenia, ParlGov dates governments from the day the prime minister was elected by parliament rather than the day the government took office; I use the latter for the second Janša government (10 February 2012), the Šarec government (13 September 2018) and the third Janša government (13 March 2020). I date the Spanish coalition of 2020 from the swearing-in of its ministers on 13 January rather than the investiture, and the Skvernelis government in Lithuania from 13 December 2016, when it took office, rather than from his appointment. The leader sample needed one further correction: the head-of-government flag had been copied from the party to every leader's page, so that, for example, Pablo Casado's page carried the flag while Mariano Rajoy was prime minister, and Jeremy Corbyn's in the months of 2010 when Gordon Brown was. For leaders I code instead whether the person was head of government on the day.

Fifty-six of the 109 pages changed status at least once while active (Figure 1). Counting each change of a page between opposition and government, there were 49 entries into government (25 as leading party, 24 as junior partner) and 43 exits (21 and 22), in 14 countries. Four further changes moved a party between leading the government and serving in it as a junior partner, as when the Finnish Centre Party gave up the prime ministership in 2019 but stayed in government. Over the whole sample, 15.5% of posts were by leading parties, 8.1% by junior partners and 76.5% by parties in opposition.

3.3 Other variables

I control for each party's vote share at the most recent national election before the post, from ParlGov, as in the populist paper; where no result is recorded, mostly for new parties before their first national election, I set the share to 0.5% and add an indicator. Vote share matters here because parties usually enter government after gaining votes and leave after losing them, and electoral strength is likely to move engagement too. I report estimates with and without it. I classify parties as populist if the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024) classifies them as populist in any year from 2010 to 2020; 24 party pages meet this definition, and 10 of them changed status in the period, including SYRIZA, Fidesz, SMER, the Norwegian Progress Party, Podemos and the Slovenian Democratic Party. Page likes at the time of posting, which I use as a measure of a page's audience, are recorded consistently only from 2016.



Figure 1. Government status of the 56 party pages that changed status, 2010 to 2020. Black: party of the head of government; grey: junior partner in the national cabinet; thin line: opposition, while the page was active. Status on the 15th of each month, from ParlGov with the corrections described in the text. ISO country codes in brackets. In Hungary, ParlGov records no head of government's party for the cabinet of Gordon Bajnai, who was not a party member, so the Socialists (MSZP) appear as a junior partner.

4 Method

Within-party comparisons. The main model compares the same party in and out of government, relative to other parties in the same country and month:

$$\log(1 + y_{ipt}) = \beta_L \text{Lead}_{pt} + \beta_J \text{Junior}_{pt} + \gamma \log V_{pt} + \mu_p + \alpha_{c(p),m(t)} + \tau_{k(i)} + \varepsilon_{ipt}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{ipt} is the interactions on post i by party p at time t , Lead and Junior indicate that the party was the head of government's party or a junior partner on that day, V is its last vote share (with the no-result indicator), μ_p is a party fixed effect, α a country-by-month fixed effect and τ a fixed effect for the post type (photo, link, status, video and so on). The party fixed effect means that each party is compared with itself, so lasting differences between parties, such as size of following, ideology or how skilfully they use Facebook, drop out. The country-by-month effect compares each post with posts by other parties in the same country and month, which removes the growth of Facebook, national events and election campaigns that affect all parties alike. A coefficient of -0.2 , for example, means that a party's posts drew about 18% fewer interactions in government than in opposition, compared with the change for other parties in its country over the same months. Standard errors are clustered by party.

This model estimates the average difference per post, which weights parties by how often they post. I also aggregate the posts to party-months, filling in months with no posts between a page's first and last post, and estimate the same model for three outcomes: the median interactions per post, the number of posts and the total interactions in the month, each logged. The total combines the other two and is the closest measure of the overall attention a party's page received.

Event studies. The fixed-effects model assumes that entering and leaving government have equal and opposite effects that do not change with time. To see what happens around each change, I estimate event studies. For each entry into or exit from government, I take the party's months from two years before to two years after, keeping only the months before and after the change in which its status did not change again, and compare them with the same months for other parties in the same country whose status did not change over the four years. I stack these comparisons and estimate quarterly differences with event-by-party and event-by-month fixed effects, a stacked design that avoids comparing late changes with earlier ones (Cengiz et al. 2019; Goodman-Bacon 2021; Sun and Abraham 2021). I use events with at least 12 months of the old status before the change and six months of the new status after it. Of 42 such entries and 36 such exits, 34 entries and 28 exits have at least one comparison party in the same country. The reference period is the quarter beginning a year before the change. I chose it to fall before most election campaigns, which in these data usually precede entries and exits by a few weeks or months, but the choice matters, as I discuss below.

Time in office. To look at the build-up of any cost, I replace the government indicators in the main model with indicators for the year of the party's current continuous spell in government (first, second, third, fourth, fifth or later), separately for leading parties and junior partners. A spell that began before 2010 is dated from its start, using ParlGov and public sources for spells that began before the first cabinet in my extract (for example, the Luxembourg Socialists from 2004 and the Spanish Socialists from 2004).

What the design can and cannot show. Entering or leaving government is not random. Parties enter after elections they did well in and leave after elections they did badly in. Vote share captures part of this, but not momentum, campaign attention, changes of leader, or the many other things that come with a change of government. The country-by-month effects remove events that affect all parties in a country, but not those specific to the party that enters or leaves. I therefore describe within-party changes

and their timing, and avoid reading them as the effect of office as such. Where the event studies show differences before a change, I report them.

5 Results

5.1 Less engagement per post in government

Raw figures say little, because governing parties are usually the large ones. The median post by a leading party drew 249 interactions, the median post by a junior partner 65, and the median post by a party in opposition 166. Comparing different parties in the same country and month and controlling for vote share, governing parties drew less per post (Table 2, column 1): about 35% less than opposition parties of the same size (95% CI 16% to 49%).

The within-party comparison points the same way (Table 2, columns 2 to 4, and Figure 2). The same party drew about 18% fewer interactions per post while in government than while in opposition (95% CI 4% to 30%), relative to other parties in the same country and month and holding its vote share constant. Without the vote-share control the estimate is about 12% ($p = 0.09$). For the head of government's party, the estimate is a fall of 18% (95% CI from a fall of 34% to a rise of 2%, $p = 0.08$); for junior partners, a fall of 19% (CI 5% to 31%). The two are almost identical ($p = 0.95$ for the difference). Measured with party-month medians, both fell by about 16% (column 6). This estimate is close to the one I reported in the populist paper, -0.15 log points, which used the uncorrected government coding and included Switzerland; with the corrected coding it is -0.20 .

Junior partners look worse when the outcome is the mean rather than the typical post. A Poisson model, which estimates the ratio of mean interactions and is therefore driven by a party's most successful posts, gives a fall of 19% for leading parties and 42% for junior partners (CI 11% to 63%; column 5), though the difference between the two is not statistically significant ($p = 0.13$). In government, junior partners seem to have lost more of their exceptional posts than of their ordinary ones.

5.2 Leading parties posted more; junior partners less

The two kinds of governing party differed in how much they posted. Leading parties posted about 13% more in government than in opposition (CI from 10% fewer to 44% more), and junior partners about 15% less (CI from 29% fewer to 3% more; Table 2, column 7). The difference between the two is close to conventional significance ($p = 0.06$). As a result, the total interactions on a leading party's page in a month did not change detectably (an estimated 9% more, with a wide interval from 28% less to 65% more), while junior partners' totals fell by about 25% (CI from 47% less to 7% more; column 8). Counting only months in which the party posted, the fall for junior partners is about 30% (CI 6% to 47%) and for leading parties about 8% (not significant).

This is the shape a junior partner penalty takes in these data. It is not that each post by a junior partner drew less than a post by the leading party; per post, both lost about the same. It is that junior partners also posted less, while leading parties posted more, so that the leading party's page kept its share of the attention and the junior partner's shrank. The difference between the two totals is not statistically significant ($p = 0.14$), so the evidence for a junior partner penalty in total attention is suggestive rather than firm.

Table 2. Government status and engagement on party pages. Outcome: $\log(1 + \text{interactions})$ per post in columns 1 to 4; interactions per post (Poisson) in column 5; logged party-month median interactions per post, number of posts and total interactions in columns 6 to 8. All models include country-by-month fixed effects; post-level models include post-type fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by party page in parentheses.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Between	Within	Within	Within	Poisson	Median	Posts	Total
In government	−0.43** (0.13)	−0.12 (0.07)	−0.20* (0.08)					
Head of government's party				−0.20 (0.11)	−0.21 (0.11)	−0.17* (0.08)	0.13 (0.12)	0.09 (0.21)
Junior partner				−0.21* (0.08)	−0.55* (0.22)	−0.18 (0.10)	−0.16 (0.09)	−0.29 (0.18)
Head = junior, p				0.95	0.13	0.97	0.06	0.14
Party fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vote share	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit	Post	Post	Post	Post	Post	Month	Month	Month
Observations	660,307	660,307	660,307	660,307	660,307	11,040	11,352	11,352

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. 109 party pages in 16 countries. Vote share is the log of the party's share at the last national election, with an indicator where none is recorded. Column 6 uses party-months with at least one post; columns 7 and 8 include months without posts between a page's first and last post. "Head = junior" gives the p -value for the difference between the two coefficients.

5.3 Around entry and exit

Figure 3 shows the event studies, quarter by quarter, relative to the quarter that began a year before the change. The intervals are wide, with between 13 and 18 events in each panel, and the paths should be read as broad shapes.

Parties that entered government as the leading party drew more per post in the months around the change than a year before (33% more on average over the two quarters on either side of it; CI from 3% less to 82% more). This is the election and government formation, when the winning party is at the centre of attention. After that, engagement per post settled near its level of a year before: 6% above it in the first year after entry and about the same level in the second, with wide intervals. Total interactions were higher after entry, by about a third on average, but with an interval from a fall of 41% to a tripling.

Parties that entered as junior partners did not have this peak. Their engagement per post was about 15% below the reference quarter around the change and about 29% below it from six months after entry to the end of the second year (CI 3% to 48%), and their total interactions about 25% below it (CI from 54% less to 22% more). This fits the junior partner penalty. But the reference quarter is not neutral: junior partners' engagement per post had also been about 23% lower two years before entry than in the reference quarter (CI 2% to 39%), and a joint test rejects equal pre-entry quarters ($p = 0.006$). The year before entry, which includes the campaign, was a high point. Relative to two years before entry, the junior partners' engagement per post after entry was about the same.

The same issue affects all entries. Pooled across both kinds, engagement per post was about 17% lower in months 6 to 23 after entry than in the reference quarter (CI from 33% lower to 4% higher), but it had been about 20% lower two years before entry too (CI 2% to 35%; joint test of pre-entry quarters $p = 0.04$). Parties that entered government had usually been gaining attention in the run-up. The event studies cannot tell whether governing then cost them attention, or whether the rise that brought them into government simply ended.

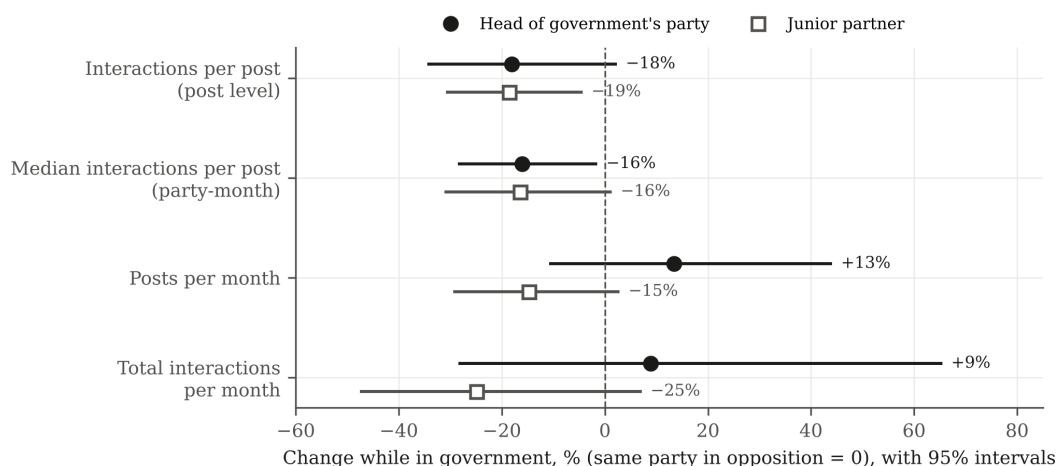


Figure 2. Change in engagement while in government, relative to the same party in opposition and to other parties in the same country and month, controlling for vote share. Interactions per post from the post-level model (Table 2, column 4); the other rows from party-month models (columns 6 to 8). Percentages are $100(e^{\beta} - 1)$.

Exits show less. Parties that left government as the leading party drew more per post around the change (43% more than a year earlier; CI 8% to 90%), as election defeats and changes of government drew attention, and then returned to their earlier level in the second year after exit. Junior partners that left government drew less: about 28% less per post in the first year after exit (CI 7% to 44%) and about half the total interactions (52% less, with an interval from 77% less to 3% more), before recovering partly in the second year. Pooled across both kinds, engagement per post after exit was about the same as a year before (4% lower, CI from 29% lower to 29% higher). I find no sign of a recovery in engagement when parties left office.

A simpler test points the same way. Adding an indicator for opposition after a spell in government to the main model, the same party drew about 38% less per post in opposition after governing than in its other opposition periods, mostly the years before it entered government (CI 16% to 54%; 39 pages contribute such periods). In that model, the estimates for government are larger (falls of about 40%), because the comparison is now with opposition before office. Leaving government did not restore what the party had drawn before it entered. Some of this reflects the electoral decline that usually comes with leaving government; and as the event studies show, the years before entry are themselves often a high point.

5.4 Time in office

If governing wears down a party's attention, the cost should grow with time. Figure 4 shows the estimates by year of the current spell in government. For the head of government's party, the first year in office brought no loss: engagement per post was 27% higher than in opposition (CI from 2% lower to 64% higher, $p = 0.08$), a pattern that resembles a honeymoon. In the second year it was 8% lower (not significant). In the third and fourth years it was about 40% lower (40%, CI 20% to 55%; and 43%, CI 24% to 57%), and in the fifth year or later 29% lower ($p = 0.08$). For junior partners the pattern is flatter: 13% lower in the first year, close to their opposition level in the second to fourth years, and 27% lower from the fifth year (CI 13% to 39%), an estimate that rests mostly on long-serving partners such as the Luxembourg Socialists, the Swedish People's Party in Finland and the Norwegian Progress Party.

Pooling both kinds of party, the estimates are 12% higher in the first year, 2% lower in the second and about a third lower from the third year onwards (34%, 35% and 28% for the third, fourth and fifth or

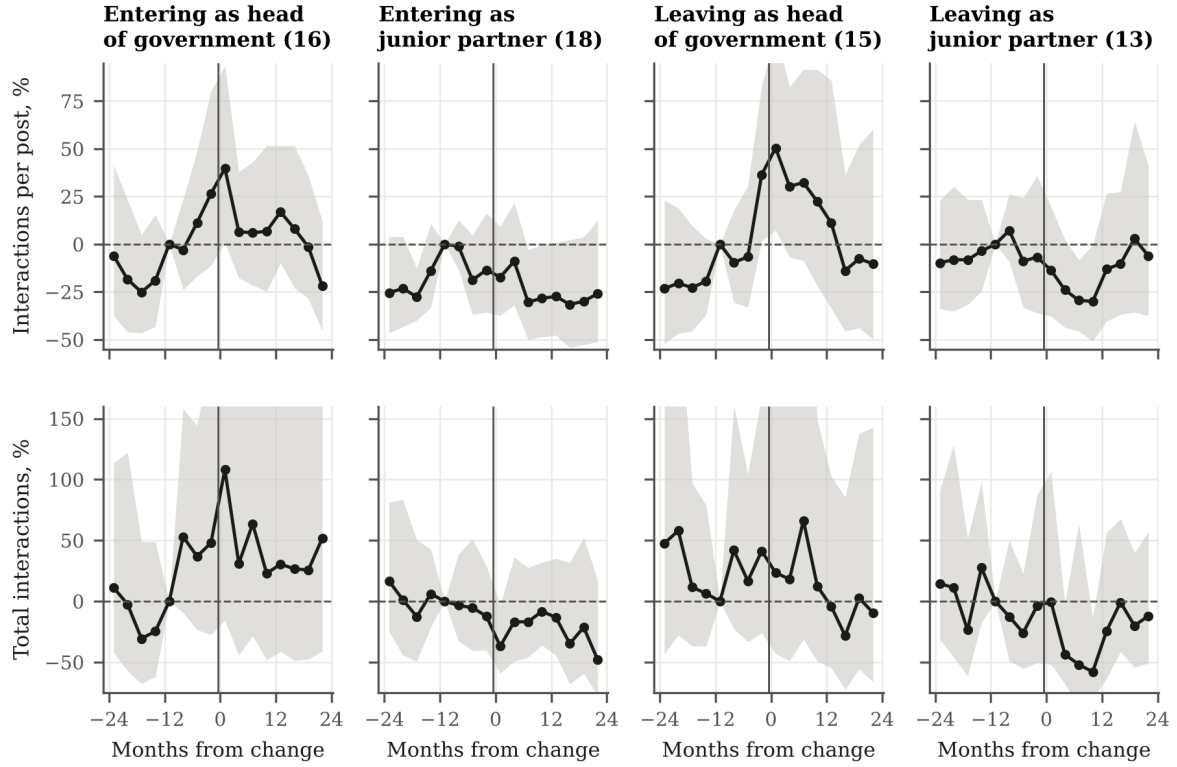


Figure 3. Engagement around entries into and exits from government. Stacked event studies: each party that changed status compared with parties in the same country whose status did not change, by quarter from two years before to two years after the change, relative to the quarter beginning 12 months before (set to zero). Top row: mean log interactions per post; bottom row: log total interactions in the month. Percentages are $100(e^{\hat{\beta}} - 1)$. Shaded: 95% intervals, clustered by party. Number of events in brackets.

later years). A linear version gives a fall of about 4% per year in office (CI from a fall of 9% to a rise of 1%). This time pattern matches the cost-of-ruling literature: the cost of office accumulates rather than arriving with the keys. It also helps explain the event studies: for the leading party, the second year after entry is too early for most of the cost to appear.

Time in office is not the only thing that changes over a government's life. The third and fourth years of a spell are also the years in which a government faces its next election, when it may already be falling in the polls, and the longest spells belong to a few parties. The tenure pattern describes when the cost appears, not why.

5.5 Populist and mainstream parties

Populist parties are often thought to depend on an anti-establishment message, which might make office especially costly for their engagement. I find no sign of this. The interaction between government and populism is close to zero (a coefficient of 0.04, SE 0.18), and so are the separate interactions for leading parties (0.08, SE 0.30) and junior partners (0.00, SE 0.17). These estimates rest on the 10 populist pages that changed status, among them SYRIZA's entry in 2015 and exit in 2019, Fidesz's entry in 2010, SMER's return in 2012 and exit in 2020, and the Progress Party's entry in 2013 and exit in 2020. The intervals are wide enough to include a populist cost of office about twice as large as the average, and also none at all. This agrees with the populist paper, which found that the populist premium was smaller for populists in government but did not change detectably when the same party moved in or out

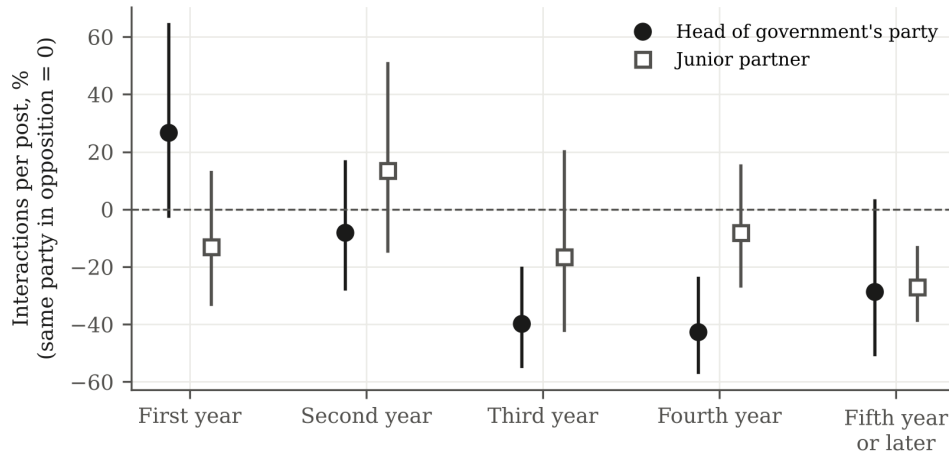


Figure 4. Engagement per post by year of the current spell in government, relative to the same party in opposition, controlling for vote share, with country-by-month, party and post-type fixed effects. 95% intervals, clustered by party.

of government (Hotham 2026a). I also find no clear difference between the first and second half of the decade: interactions of the government indicators with posts from 2015 onwards are not statistically significant.

5.6 Audience and the kind of engagement

Engagement per post depends on how many people follow a page and on how they respond. From 2016, when page likes are recorded, the estimates for engagement per post are similar to those for the whole period but less precise (falls of 16% for leading parties and 14% for junior partners, neither significant). Page likes themselves changed little with government status: an estimated 2% fewer for leading parties and about 10% fewer for junior partners ($p = 0.06$). Holding page likes constant, the estimates for engagement per post are falls of 14% for leading parties and 6% for junior partners, neither significant. The data are too thin in these years to say firmly whether the cost of governing came from smaller audiences or less engagement per follower, but for junior partners part of it seems to come through slower growth of their page's audience.

The kind of engagement changed more clearly. From 2017, I compare each post's composition: the percentage of its interactions that were shares, comments and each reaction (Figure 5). In opposition, shares made up 17.5% of a party post's interactions on average, comments 9.7%, angry reactions 3.7% and love and care reactions 3.4%. In government, within the same party, the share of shares was 5.4 percentage points lower for leading parties (SE 1.0) and 3.5 points lower for junior partners (SE 0.8). Comments made up 2.8 points more of a leading party's interactions (SE 0.6). Angry reactions were 0.7 points less common for leading parties (SE 0.5, not significant) and 1.3 points less common for junior partners (SE 0.7, $p = 0.05$), while love and care reactions were more common (0.8 and 1.5 points). Laughing reactions were slightly more common for leading parties (0.4 points, $p = 0.07$).

These are differences in the response to the party's own posts, and the data say nothing about who was responding. One reading is that opposition posts, which may more often criticise the government, were shared by supporters and provoked anger at the government, while governing parties' posts drew comments, including critical ones, and a little more laughter. Shares carry posts beyond a page's own followers, so the fall in shares is one route by which governing may have narrowed parties' reach.

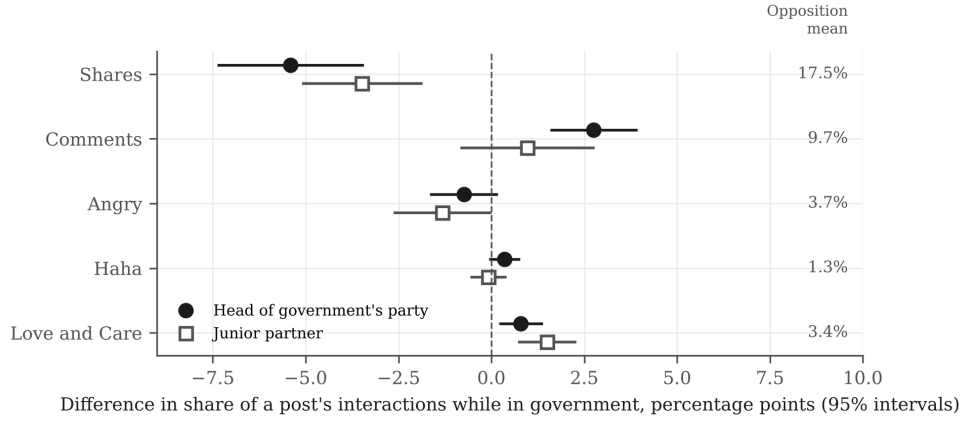


Figure 5. Composition of engagement in government, 2017 to 2020. Difference in each type's percentage of a post's interactions while the party was in government, relative to the same party in opposition, with country-by-month, party and post-type fixed effects and vote share; 95% intervals, clustered by party. Right: mean percentage for parties in opposition.

5.7 Leaders

The personal pages of party leaders give a second view, though a less clean one, because the pages of the leaders in the data cover years before and after their leadership, and leaders' own office effects are the subject of my working paper on personalisation (Hotham 2026b). With the same model on 183,886 posts from 71 leaders' pages in 14 countries, posts on a leader's page drew about 45% less per post when their party was in government but they were not head of government (CI 29% to 57%). Being head of government added about 90% (CI 36% to 167%), so that heads of government drew about as much per post (5% more) as when their party was in opposition. Heads of government also posted far more. The pattern echoes the junior partner penalty: in government, attention on leaders' pages went to the person at the top, and the pages of other party leaders whose parties governed, including leaders of junior partners and ministers, drew less. Because 37 of these pages changed government status but only 16 changed head-of-government status, and because leaders' careers change in many ways at once, I treat this as a supporting observation.

5.8 Robustness

Table 3 reports checks on the main estimates for leading parties and junior partners. The estimates are similar without 2020, the year of Covid-19, when attention to governments rose sharply in many countries; with standard errors clustered by country; without posts by parties with no recorded vote share; and without videos. Leaving out one country at a time gives estimates between -0.23 and -0.14 for leading parties and between -0.25 and -0.16 for junior partners. The estimate for leading parties is smallest, and not significant, without France, where my coding of En Marche as the leading party involves a judgement about a semi-presidential system.

The most demanding check adds a separate linear trend for each party at the party-month level. This removes any steady rise or decline in a party's engagement over the decade, which could otherwise be confused with the effect of entering or leaving government, but it also absorbs much of the variation that the design relies on. With trends, the estimates are smaller and not significant: about -0.15 and -0.10 for median engagement per post and -0.06 and -0.20 for total interactions. Part of the within-party

Table 3. Robustness of the estimates for leading parties and junior partners. Outcome: $\log(1 + \text{interactions})$ per post, except the trend rows (party-month median per post and party-month total). All models include party and country-by-month fixed effects and vote share. Standard errors clustered by party page unless stated.

	Head of government's party		Junior partner	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Main estimate (Table 2, column 4)	−0.20	0.11	−0.21*	0.08
Posts before 2020 only	−0.19	0.12	−0.19*	0.08
Without France	−0.14	0.12	−0.17*	0.08
Clustered by country	−0.20*	0.08	−0.21*	0.08
Without posts lacking a recorded vote share	−0.19	0.12	−0.17*	0.08
Without video posts	−0.16	0.12	−0.20*	0.08
Party-specific linear trends, party-month median	−0.15	0.11	−0.10	0.09
Party-specific linear trends, party-month total	−0.06	0.20	−0.20	0.15
Leaving out one country at a time (range)	−0.23 to −0.14		−0.25 to −0.16	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

difference in the main model may therefore reflect long-run trends in parties' fortunes rather than government status as such.

6 Discussion

The results answer the three questions with different degrees of confidence.

On the first, parties drew less engagement per post while in government than while in opposition. The estimate, about 18%, is consistent across specifications and countries, but it shrinks when party-specific trends are added, and it does not appear as a clear break in the event studies, because the parties that entered government had been gaining attention beforehand. Nor did engagement recover when parties left. What the data show most clearly is an asymmetry. A party's years in opposition before it governs tend to be its best years on Facebook; its years in government and after are worse, and leaving office does not bring the old level back within two years.

On the second, there is a junior partner penalty, but not in the form I expected. Per post, junior partners and leading parties lost about the same. The difference lay in how much they posted and therefore in total attention: the head of government's party posted more and kept its total, while junior partners posted less and drew about a quarter less in total, though with an interval that includes no change. Leaders' pages show a sharper version of the same pattern, with attention going to the head of government. In a coalition, the leading party's page remains a main channel of government communication, while junior partners may find it harder to claim credit or set the agenda. This is consistent with the electoral evidence on junior partners (Klüver and Spoon 2020), without showing that the same mechanism is at work.

On the third, time in office mattered more than populism. For the head of government's party, the first year in office brought no loss, and the cost appeared from the third year. This is the pattern the cost-of-ruling literature would predict for votes (Paldam 1986; Wlezien 2017), here appearing in the attention parties receive on their own channels. I find no difference between populist and other parties, though few populist parties changed status.

These findings bear on the normalisation debate in a specific way. Established and governing parties draw large audiences on social media (Gibson and McAllister 2015), but within parties, office itself did not bring more engagement per post. Opposition may be a better position from which to draw likes,

comments and shares, and governing parties' posts were shared less and drew fewer angry reactions. The large audiences of governing parties seem to reflect their size and history rather than office.

The limits are important. The pages are those in the CrowdTangle lists I built in 2020, not a census of European parties, and major governing parties are missing in some countries. The number of changes of status is modest (49 entries and 43 exits), and in several countries all of them come from one or two elections, so the event studies are imprecise. Entering and leaving government come with elections, leadership changes and shifts in public opinion that the design cannot separate from office itself. Interactions are not reach: CrowdTangle does not record how many people saw a post, and engagement can be inflated by a few very active users. Page likes are recorded consistently only from 2016. Finally, my coding of government status relies on judgements in a few cases, notably the treatment of France's semi-presidential system, minority governments supported from outside and caretaker periods, which ParlGov sometimes records as a separate cabinet.

7 Conclusion

Across 16 European countries from 2010 to 2020, parties' Facebook pages drew less engagement per post while those parties were in government than while they were in opposition, by about a fifth. The head of government's party and junior partners lost about the same per post, but the leading party posted more and kept its total, while junior partners drew less in total. For the leading party, the cost appeared from the third year in office, and leaving government did not restore what had been lost within two years. Governing parties' posts were shared less and drew less anger. Because parties enter government on the back of a rise in attention, the design cannot say how much of this is a cost of office as such. A useful next step would be to combine these data with measures of what parties posted, to see whether the decline follows a change in the content of governing parties' posts or in the audience's response to the same kind of content.

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 ParlGov codes and government status corrections, and party-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. 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 aggregated by post, party and month. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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