

Engagement Is Not a Poll: Facebook and 31 European Elections, 2011 to 2020

Tristan Hotham*

2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

Can Facebook engagement tell us who will win an election? I compare parties' shares of interactions on their Facebook pages in the 30 days before 31 national elections in 15 European countries between 2011 and 2020 with their vote, their final polls and their previous result, for 172 party-elections. As a forecast on its own, engagement was poor: its mean absolute error was 9.6 points, against 1.8 points for the final polls and 5.8 points for simply repeating the previous election. It did worse than the polls in every one of the 31 elections, and it overstated populist parties by about ten points. Engagement did carry some information: on its own it explained about a third of the variance in the change in parties' votes since the previous election. But almost all of that was already in the polls. Where a party's share of engagement ran ahead of its poll share, it beat its poll only slightly and not significantly, and adjusting the polls using engagement made forecasts worse in a test on elections left out of the estimation. In the largest poll misses engagement often pointed the same way as the error, but these cases come from a few elections with few parties covered, and an apparent link for populist parties disappears without Slovakia's 2016 election. On this evidence, engagement is a measure of attention, not a poll, and it should not be read as one.

1 Introduction

Every election campaign now produces social media numbers, and they are often read as signs of who is winning: which leader has the most followers, which party's posts are shared most, whose videos are watched. Academic work has asked the same question since the early days of social media, mostly with Twitter. Early studies claimed that mentions of parties or candidates predicted their vote ([Tumasjan et al. 2010](#); [DiGrazia et al. 2013](#)). Such predictions were shown to be fragile ([Jungherr et al. 2012](#)) and did not hold up across studies ([Gayo-Avello 2013](#)).

Facebook pages offer a cleaner test. Parties run official pages, the interactions on them are counted the same way everywhere, and they can be compared directly with polls and results. In earlier case studies I found mixed answers. Sinn Féin's engagement ran ahead of its polls before the Irish election of 2020 ([Hotham 2026a](#)), while the radical right's engagement in Scandinavia ran far ahead of its vote at every election and was not a forecast of it ([Hotham 2026c](#)). Populist parties in general draw much more engagement than their vote would suggest ([Hotham 2026b](#)).

*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.

This paper pools the evidence. I use the official Facebook pages of parties in 31 national elections in 15 European countries between 2011 and 2020, from CrowdTangle data I collected for my doctoral research (Hotham 2021), together with each party’s vote (Döring and Manow 2024) and its average in the final polls. I ask three questions. How accurate is engagement as a forecast compared with polls and with the previous result? Does it add anything to the polls? And when the polls went badly wrong, did engagement point the right way?

2 Data and methods

2.1 Elections and parties

The data are all posts by the official pages of national parties in my CrowdTangle lists, exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020). I take every national parliamentary election between 2011 and 2020 in a country with party pages in the data, and keep the parties whose pages posted at least five times in the 30 days before the election and for which final polls exist. I keep elections with at least three such parties. Some elections drop out at this stage: Luxembourg has almost no published polls, in Germany in 2017 only two units remain once the CDU and CSU are combined, and in Portugal in 2015 PAN was not polled separately, leaving two parties. This gives 172 party-elections in 31 elections in 15 countries (Table 1).

The parties covered won between 28% and 98% of the vote in each election. Coverage is low in some: Hungary has no Fidesz page in the data, and Germany in 2013 has no SPD page. Vote shares and previous results come from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2024), and populist parties are identified from the PopuList (The PopuList 2026).

2.2 Polls

For each party I average the national polls whose fieldwork ended in the 14 days before the election, or the last three published polls where there were fewer than three in that window. The fallback applies in Switzerland, Finland in 2015, Hungary in 2018, Lithuania and Slovakia, several of which restrict publication before the vote; in Switzerland the last three polls reach back to late August, well before the 30-day Facebook window. Where pollsters reported both all respondents and decided voters, I use decided voters: in Slovenia in 2018 this leaves three polls, and in Lithuania some polls published on an all-respondent basis were rescaled to decided voters. Daily tracking polls count once per published wave. In all, the averages draw on about 475 polls. They were compiled by AI agents from public lists of published polls, mostly on Wikipedia (Wikipedia contributors 2026), and recorded with their sources and the rules applied. I checked one election, Sweden in 2018, against the source table, where the averages matched exactly; the others have not yet been checked by hand. Where polls report only a combined figure, I combine the parties on the other measures too: the CDU and CSU in Germany, and La République en Marche and MoDem in France in 2017. For Podemos, whose poll figures include its allies, I use the alliance’s result, although the Facebook measure is the Podemos page alone; similarly, in Hungary in 2014 the MSZP row is the Unity alliance in the polls and the vote but the MSZP page on Facebook. In France, some poll figures for the UMP, Les Républicains and the Socialists include their allies. The ten rows where poll and vote definitions differ are kept in the main analysis and dropped in a check. For France I use the first round of the legislative elections.

2.3 Measures and models

A party's Facebook share is its share of the interactions (reactions, comments and shares) on the pages of the parties covered in that election, in the 30 days before the vote. I compute the vote, the poll and the previous result the same way, as shares of the parties covered, so that all four measures sum to 100 in each election. Parties without a previous result in the data have a previous share of zero; this includes a few that had stood before under other arrangements, so I also report the previous-result error without them.

I measure accuracy by the mean absolute error between each measure and the vote. To test whether engagement adds to the polls, I regress each party's poll error (vote share minus poll share) on its Facebook gap (Facebook share minus poll share), with standard errors clustered by election. A positive coefficient means that parties whose engagement ran ahead of their polls tended to beat them. To check whether using engagement would improve a forecast, I estimate this model leaving out one election at a time, adjust that election's polls by the estimated relationship, and compare the errors. I also test whether engagement predicts the change in a party's vote since the previous election.

Table 1. Elections, parties covered, the share of the vote they won, and the mean absolute error of each measure (points, as shares of the parties covered).

Country	Election	Parties	Vote covered (%) ^a	Mean absolute error (points)		
				Polls	Facebook	Previous
Switzerland	2015-10	3	65	0.4	14.6	1.2
Switzerland	2019-10	3	58	0.5	2.3	0.7
Germany	2013-09	3	52	1.3	26.1	5.7
Spain	2011-11	5	84	1.1	9.4	5.7
Spain	2015-12	8	93	1.6	10.7	9.9
Spain	2016-06	7	94	1.6	7.5	2.0
Spain	2019-04	9	93	1.0	9.1	4.4
Spain	2019-11	9	91	0.8	10.4	2.6
Finland	2015-04	7	80	1.1	4.9	2.4
Finland	2019-04	7	77	0.5	7.3	2.6
France	2012-06	5	77	1.4	3.5	8.8
France	2017-06	8	88	1.9	5.3	12.1
United Kingdom	2015-05	5	92	1.8	13.3	6.5
United Kingdom	2017-06	6	96	1.6	7.6	5.3
United Kingdom	2019-12	6	96	0.7	6.4	2.9
Greece	2019-07	5	87	1.0	13.5	5.7
Hungary	2014-04	3	51	1.4	3.1	4.5
Hungary	2018-04	5	46	3.1	7.9	9.7
Lithuania	2012-10	3	28	1.5	4.5	8.5
Lithuania	2016-10	4	70	7.3	15.2	11.9
Norway	2013-09	8	96	0.7	6.6	3.4
Norway	2017-09	8	96	0.4	6.9	1.9
Portugal	2019-10	5	73	0.4	17.6	5.4
Romania	2016-12	3	74	4.6	36.2	9.9
Slovakia	2012-03	3	59	1.4	17.3	10.6
Slovakia	2016-03	4	58	10.7	21.3	13.4
Slovakia	2020-02	5	64	5.1	6.5	12.4
Slovenia	2014-07	4	42	2.1	18.5	6.4
Slovenia	2018-06	6	69	2.0	5.4	10.7
Sweden	2014-09	7	83	1.5	4.6	1.7
Sweden	2018-09	8	98	1.4	7.0	2.6
All	31	172		1.8	9.6	5.8

^a Share of the national vote won by the parties covered. The All row averages over party-elections.

3 Results

3.1 Accuracy

As a forecast on its own, engagement was poor (Figure 1, Table 1). Its mean absolute error was 9.6 points, against 1.8 points for the final polls and 5.8 points for repeating the previous election (5.4 without parties lacking a previous result). It did worse than the polls in all 31 elections, and worse than the previous result in 24 of them. The polls named the largest party correctly in 28 elections, the previous result in 20 and engagement in 13. The mean rank correlation with the result within elections was 0.93 for the polls, 0.77 for the previous result and 0.55 for engagement. Adding leaders' pages to party pages made little difference (an error of 10.0 points).

Because all measures are shares of the parties covered, errors are larger where few parties are covered. Converting back to points of the national vote, the errors are 1.3 points for the polls, 7.4 for engagement and 4.4 for the previous result. Restricting the analysis to the 19 elections where the covered parties won at least 70% of the vote gives 1.2, 8.9 and 4.8 points. The ranking is the same in every case.

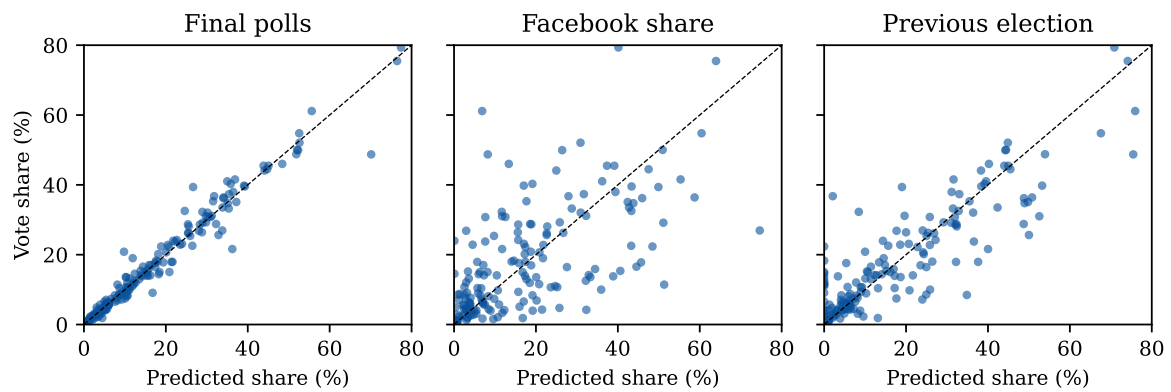


Figure 1. Vote share against final polls, Facebook share and previous election, 172 party-elections. All measures are shares of the parties covered in each election. The dashed line marks a perfect forecast.

Engagement's errors were not random. Populist parties' Facebook share was about ten points higher, relative to their vote, than that of other parties of similar size, and larger parties were understated (Figure 2 shows the errors by election). This is the engagement premium of populist parties I found in earlier work (Hotham 2026b), and it means that raw engagement systematically overstates them.

3.2 Does engagement add to the polls?

Engagement did contain information about the vote. On its own, a party's Facebook gap relative to its previous result explained about a third of the variance in the change in its vote ($R^2 = 0.36$), and adjusting the previous result by this relationship, estimated on the other elections, reduced its error from 6.2 to 5.6 points, improving it in 18 of 31 elections. But nearly all of that information was already in the polls. Holding the polls constant, the Facebook gap added little: the coefficient of the poll error on the Facebook gap is 0.07 and not significant (Table 2). A party whose Facebook share ran ten points ahead of its poll share beat its poll by less than one point on average. The result is the same with windows of 14 or 60 days, with leaders' pages added, without the ten rows where polls and results are not like for like, and on a log-ratio scale (0.03, $p = 0.15$). In the 19 elections where the covered parties won at least

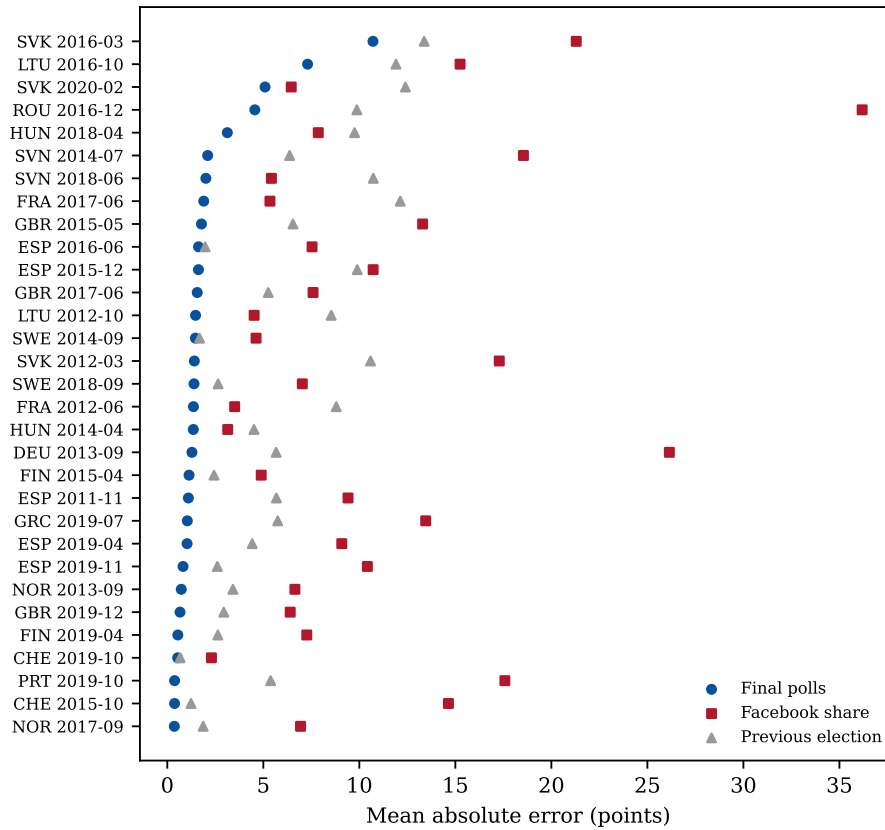


Figure 2. Mean absolute error of each measure in each election, ordered by the error of the polls.

70% of the vote, the coefficient is -0.01 ($p = 0.77$): the small positive estimate comes from elections with few parties covered. In a regression of the vote on both the polls and the Facebook share, the polls carry almost all the weight (0.93 against 0.06), and adding engagement raises the explained variance only from 0.958 to 0.961.

Table 2. Regression of poll error (vote share minus poll share) on the Facebook gap (Facebook share minus poll share), all in points of the parties covered. Coefficients with standard errors clustered by election; * $p < 0.05$.

	30 days	14 days	60 days	Party and leader pages	Like-for-like rows only
Facebook share minus poll share	0.066 (0.047)	0.068 (0.043)	0.062 (0.046)	0.064 (0.046)	0.073 (0.051)
Party-elections	172	172	172	172	162

Using engagement to adjust the polls did not help. Estimating the relationship on all other elections and applying it to each election in turn, the adjusted forecasts had a mean absolute error of 2.17 points, against 2.00 for the polls alone (both averaged by election), and improved on the polls in only 14 of the 31 elections.

3.3 When the polls were wrong

The cases where engagement looked prescient are the cases where the polls missed badly (Figure 3). Among the 12 largest poll errors, engagement pointed in the direction of the error in 10, against 58% for all parties; with that base rate, 10 of 12 would occur by chance about 6% of the time, and the 12 come from only six elections. They include Slovakia in 2016, when the governing Smer-SD fell well below its

polls while SaS and OL'aNO beat theirs; Lithuania in 2016, when the Social Democrats fell short and the Homeland Union did better; and Slovakia in 2020, when OL'aNO beat its polls by a wide margin. Among the 37 populist party-elections, a gap between engagement and polls went with poll error (a coefficient of 0.16, $p = 0.02$), but this depends on one election: without Slovakia in 2016, where three of the four covered parties are populist and only four parties are covered, the coefficient is 0.04 ($p = 0.40$).

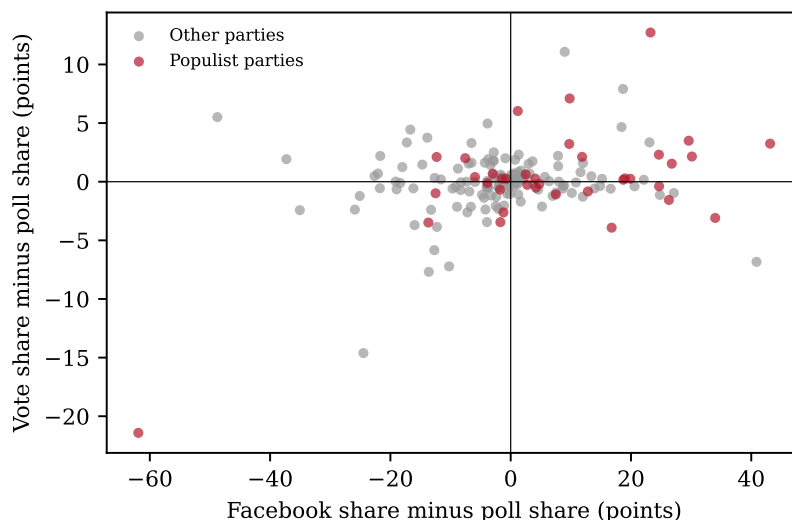


Figure 3. Poll error against the Facebook gap, 172 party-elections. Points above zero beat their polls; points to the right drew more engagement than their poll share.

These patterns should be read with care. Selecting the largest misses after the event, and testing several subgroups, makes some agreement likely by chance, and the Facebook gap is large for many parties whose polls were accurate. The populist result rests on 37 party-elections in 22 elections. They are worth testing on new elections, not reading as a forecasting rule.

4 Discussion

Engagement on parties' Facebook pages is a poor forecast of their vote. It is far less accurate than the final polls, and less accurate even than assuming nothing has changed since the last election. It is systematically biased towards populist parties, whose audiences engage far more than their voters' numbers would suggest. And the real information it carries about change in the vote is almost entirely already in the polls.

This matches the history of social media forecasting. Early claims that online activity predicted votes (Tumasjan et al. 2010; DiGrazia et al. 2013) did not survive systematic testing (Jungherr et al. 2012; Gayo-Avello 2013), and polls, for all their errors (Jennings and Wlezien 2018), remain far more accurate. Engagement measures attention: how many people chose to react, comment or share, many of them repeatedly, some of them opponents and some outside the country. That attention is related to political momentum, which is why it moves with the polls, but it is a different quantity.

The one open question is whether engagement can help when polls are badly wrong. In the largest misses here it often pointed the same way as the error, but those cases are few, come from a handful of elections with few parties covered, and are not robust. At most, engagement might flag where polls could be missing a surge or a collapse; the signal is too noisy, and too biased by the engagement premium, to be

used as a forecast.

5 Limitations

The parties are those with pages in my CrowdTangle lists, which cover some countries much better than others; Germany has only three parties in the data, and some elections leave out parties that won a substantial share. All measures are shares of the covered parties, which makes them comparable but exaggerates differences where few parties are covered; the checks on raw points and on high-coverage elections address this. The poll averages depend on public lists of polls, which vary in completeness, and on rules for combining parties and alliances; they were compiled by AI agents from those lists, and only one election has been checked against the source table by hand. In Portugal in 2019 the PSD's previous share includes its 2015 coalition partner. Countries differ in when polls may be published. CrowdTangle's historical coverage is not guaranteed to be complete. Interactions include engagement from opponents, from outside the country and possibly from paid promotion. The analysis is of party pages only, not of advertising, groups or private sharing.

6 Conclusion

Across 31 European elections between 2011 and 2020, parties' shares of Facebook engagement were a poor forecast of their vote, much worse than the final polls and worse than the previous result. What they knew about the vote, the polls already knew. In the largest polling misses engagement often pointed the same way as the error, but that pattern rests on a few elections, and on average engagement added nothing a forecaster could use. Engagement is a measure of attention, and it should not be read as a poll.

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](#)) and on my preprints on Ireland, Scandinavia and the populist engagement premium ([Hotham 2026a,c,b](#)). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The poll averages were compiled by AI agents (Claude, by Anthropic) from public lists of polls. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Ethics and data

The data are public posts by parties. In line with CrowdTangle's terms, I do not publish post-level data and I do not quote posts. The party-election data, including the poll averages and their sources, are available from the author.

References

CrowdTangle Team (2020). CrowdTangle. Facebook, Menlo Park, CA.

- DiGrazia, J., McKelvey, K., Bollen, J., and Rojas, F. (2013). More tweets, more votes: Social media as a quantitative indicator of political behavior. *PLoS ONE*, 8(11):e79449.
- Döring, H. and Manow, P. (2024). Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov): Information on parties, elections and cabinets in established democracies. <https://www.parlgov.org>.
- Gayo-Avello, D. (2013). A meta-analysis of state-of-the-art electoral prediction from Twitter data. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(6):649–679.
- 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). Ahead of the polls? Sinn Féin, Facebook and the 2020 Irish general election. Preprint, Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23314380>.
- Hotham, T. (2026b). Do populists win on Facebook? The engagement premium of populist parties in Europe, 2010 to 2020. Preprint, Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23314347>.
- Hotham, T. (2026c). Not a forecast: The radical right on Facebook in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, 2014 to 2020. Preprint, Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23314394>.
- Jennings, W. and Wlezien, C. (2018). Election polling errors across time and space. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2:276–283.
- Jungherr, A., Jürgens, P., and Schoen, H. (2012). Why the Pirate Party won the German election of 2009 or the trouble with predictions: A response to Tumasjan et al. *Social Science Computer Review*, 30(2):229–234.
- The PopuList (2026). The PopuList 4.0: An overview of populist, far-left and far-right parties in Europe. Dataset, version 4.0, <https://popu-list.org>.
- Tumasjan, A., Sprenger, T. O., Sandner, P. G., and Welp, I. M. (2010). Predicting elections with Twitter: What 140 characters reveal about political sentiment. In *Proceedings of the Fourth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, pages 178–185.
- Wikipedia contributors (2026). Opinion polling pages for national elections, 2011–2020. English-language Wikipedia pages “Opinion polling for the [year] [country] election” and national-language equivalents, with pollofpolls.no, Politpro and national press reports where noted; accessed 2026.