

Equal on Facebook?

Engagement and Vote Shares of European Parties, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Does social media level the field between large and small parties, or do the parties that win votes also win attention online? Research on this question, framed as equalisation against normalisation, has mostly studied what parties do online rather than how audiences respond. I compare each party's share of the interactions received by its country's party pages on Facebook with its share of the vote at the last national election, for 107 party pages in 16 European countries from 2010 to 2020 (875 party-years, 431 million interactions, collected through CrowdTangle). Engagement followed votes, but less than proportionally: a party with twice the vote share of another received about 1.7 times the engagement share (elasticity 0.79, SE 0.08), and 0.84 in the year after an election, when vote shares are freshest. This came almost entirely from what each post received rather than from how much parties posted, since small parties posted nearly as much as large ones. Parties with more than a fifth of the vote received a median of about 40% less of the engagement than of the vote, while at the median those with less than a tenth received slightly more. Engagement was about as concentrated across parties as the vote, but on different parties: the largest party by votes received the most engagement in only a quarter of country-years, well below what random variation around a proportional relationship would produce. Populist parties drew more than their vote share and governing parties less. These patterns did not change detectably over the decade. On Facebook, the attention of party audiences was neither simply normalised nor equalised: it was reordered, with the largest parties rarely at the top.

Keywords: equalisation; normalisation; party competition; Facebook; social media engagement; political parties; populism; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Since parties first went online, researchers have asked whether the internet changes the balance between them. The equalisation view holds that cheap, direct communication lets small and new parties compete on more equal terms with large ones. The normalisation view holds that large parties, with more money, staff and attention, carry their advantages online, so that politics online comes to look like politics as usual (Margolis and Resnick 2000). Two decades of research have produced mixed answers, often

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depending on the period, the country and whether one looks at websites or social media (Schweitzer 2008; Strandberg 2009; Gibson and McAllister 2015).

Most of that research has studied supply: how sophisticated parties' websites were, how actively they posted, what they offered. Less is known about demand, the attention that audiences give each party once it is online. Social media make that attention measurable. On Facebook, every like, comment, share and reaction is a small act of attention, and the totals can be compared with the votes each party won.

This paper asks three questions using posts from 107 party pages in 16 European countries between 2010 and 2020. **RQ1.** How closely does each party's share of Facebook engagement follow its share of the vote? **RQ2.** Is engagement more or less concentrated across parties than the vote? **RQ3.** Did these relationships change over the decade?

The answers are as follows. Engagement followed votes less than proportionally, so large parties received a smaller share of engagement than of the vote and small parties a slightly larger one. Engagement was about as concentrated across parties as the vote, but the largest party rarely received the most. These patterns did not change detectably over the decade.

2 Background

Equalisation and normalisation. Early optimism held that the internet would reduce the advantages of large parties by lowering the cost of reaching voters. Margolis and Resnick (2000) argued instead that online politics would come to mirror offline politics. Studies of party websites found mainly normalisation, with established parties catching up with or overtaking smaller ones as campaigning online professionalised (Schweitzer 2008), and limited openings for outsiders (Strandberg 2009). Gibson and McAllister (2015), studying candidates in Australia, found that newer, more interactive Web 2.0 tools had equalising effects for minor parties.

From supply to demand. Much of this work measures what parties do. On social media, audiences decide which parties' content they engage with, and platforms decide whose content they show. Engagement depends on a party's audience and on the content it posts (Larsson 2016). My earlier work found that populist parties drew more engagement per post than other parties of similar size in Europe (Hotham 2026a), and that parties in government drew less than those in opposition (Hotham 2026b). Both suggest that engagement may not simply follow votes.

What to expect. If engagement normalised, a party's share of engagement would track its share of the vote one for one, and the concentration of engagement across parties would match that of the vote. If it equalised, engagement would track votes less than proportionally and be spread more evenly. A third possibility is that engagement tracks votes less than proportionally but is still concentrated, on parties chosen by something other than size.

3 Data

Pages and engagement. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). For each party and calendar year I sum the interactions (likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions) its page received and count its posts. A party's engagement share is its interactions as a share of all interactions received by the party pages in its country that year; its post share is defined in the same way.

Votes. Vote shares are from the most recent national parliamentary election, from ParlGov (Döring et al. 2024), averaged over the posts in the year. A party’s vote share is expressed as a share of the votes won by the parties with pages in the data, so that engagement and vote shares refer to the same set of parties. Parties with no previous national result are excluded, as are country-years with fewer than three parties. This leaves 875 party-years from 107 party pages in 16 countries, with 546,488 posts and 431 million interactions. The number of parties covered rises from 45 in 2010 to 107 in 2020, so I also show results for the 81 pages that had posted by mid-2012 and were still posting in December 2019. A party counts as in government if it was in government at any point in the year. The median country-year has six parties, and 41% have four or fewer.

4 Method

The main measure is the elasticity of engagement share with respect to vote share, estimated from

$$\log E_{pcy} = \beta \log V_{pcy} + \lambda_{cy} + \epsilon_{pcy}, \quad (1)$$

where E_{pcy} and V_{pcy} are party p ’s engagement and vote shares in country c and year y , and λ_{cy} is a country-year fixed effect. With $\beta = 1$, engagement shares are proportional to vote shares; with $\beta < 1$, large parties receive less than their vote share and small parties more. Because engagement share is post share times relative engagement per post, the elasticity divides exactly into a part due to posting and a part due to engagement per post. Standard errors are clustered by party page.

The elasticity says how shares relate on average but not how concentrated engagement is. For that I compute the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979), $1/\sum_p s_p^2$, separately for votes and for engagement in each country-year. I also record whether the party with the largest vote share received the largest engagement share.

5 Results

5.1 Engagement followed votes, but less than proportionally

Figure 1 plots each party-year’s engagement share against its vote share. The two are clearly related, but the cloud is flatter than the line of equal shares and widely scattered around it (within R^2 0.35). The elasticity was 0.79 (SE 0.08, Table 1): a party with twice another’s vote share received on average about 1.7 times its engagement share. The interval excludes one. The estimate was similar using months rather than years, using only long-running pages, and dropping any one country (0.69 to 0.84), though with few parties in each country the country-specific estimates range widely, from below zero to above one.

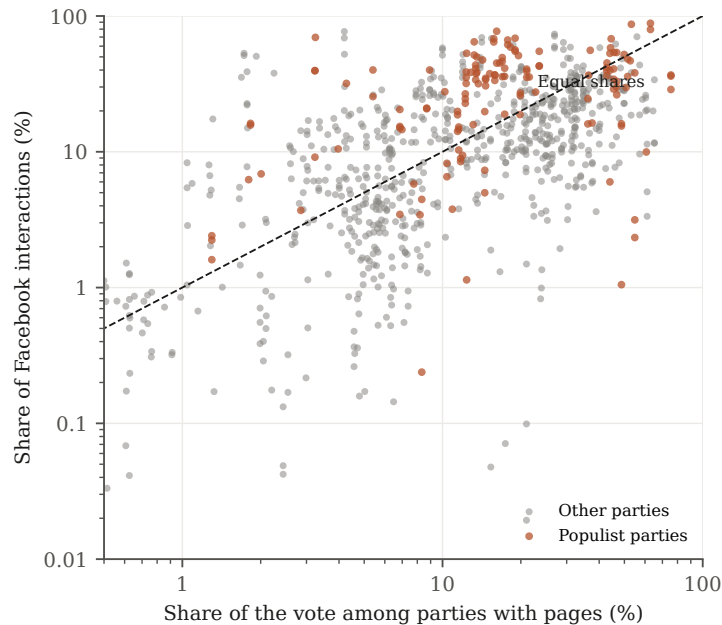
The vote at the last election is an imperfect measure of a party’s current support, and noise in it would bias the elasticity towards zero. Two checks suggest this explains only part of the shortfall. In the twelve months after an election, when vote shares are most up to date, the elasticity was 0.84 (SE 0.08), against 0.72 to 0.78 later in the cycle, and excluding election years gave 0.75. But measurement error can only be bounded, not removed: the reverse regression of vote share on engagement share implies an upper bound of 2.25, so the data cannot rule out a proportional relationship with true current support.

The relationship came almost entirely from engagement per post. Small parties posted nearly as much as large ones: the elasticity of post share with respect to vote share was only 0.15. What differed was how

Table 1. Elasticity of Facebook engagement share with respect to vote share.

	Elasticity (SE)	<i>N</i>
Party pages, party-years (main estimate)	0.79 (0.08)	875
share of posts	0.15 (0.05)	875
engagement per post relative to the country's pages	0.65 (0.07)	875
Party-months instead of party-years	0.78 (0.08)	9,962
Pages posting by mid-2012 and in December 2019	0.80 (0.09)	775
Party-months within 12 months of an election	0.84 (0.08)	3,000
Excluding election years	0.75 (0.09)	650
Controlling for populist party and government	0.86 (0.08)	875
Party page plus the party's leaders' pages	0.93 (0.10)	875
Share of page likes, 2016 to 2020	0.79 (0.08)	417
Change per five years (interaction with year), 2012 to 2019	0.11 (0.12)	

Note: Regressions of the log share on the log vote share among parties with pages, with country-year (or country-month) fixed effects; standard errors clustered by page. The post and per-post rows sum to the main estimate. The 95% intervals for the populist and government model (0.70 to 1.02) and the leader-page model (0.74 to 1.12) include one. In the populist and government model, populist parties had 2.8 times the engagement share expected from their vote share (1.02 log points, SE 0.27) and parties in government 45% less (−0.60, SE 0.16).

**Figure 1.** Share of Facebook interactions against share of the vote, party-years, log scales. Shares are among the parties with pages in each country and year. The dashed line marks equal shares.

much each post received, with an elasticity of 0.65. Large parties' posts drew more than small parties' posts, but not in proportion to their votes.

By size, parties with more than 20% of the national vote received a median of about 40% less of their country's engagement than of its vote (Figure 2). Parties with less than 10% received slightly more of the engagement than of the vote, by about 10% at the median, and parties with 10% to 20% slightly less.

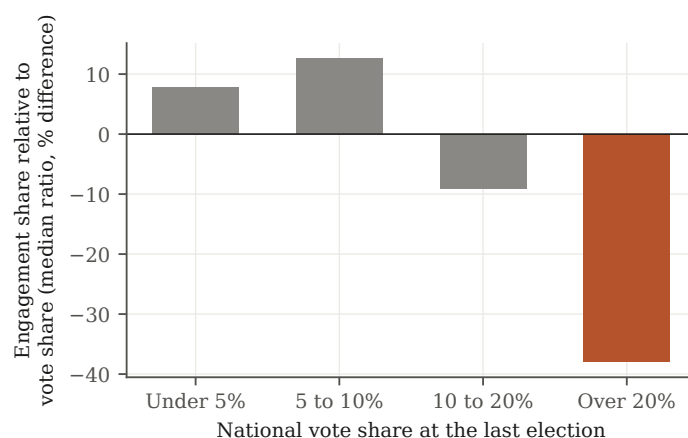


Figure 2. Engagement share relative to vote share, by the party's national vote share at the last election. Median of the ratio across party-years, expressed as a percentage difference.

5.2 Similar concentration, different order

The effective numbers of parties, computed among the parties with pages, were similar: averaged over years, 3.6 by votes and 3.4 by engagement, a ratio of 0.97, with engagement more dispersed in 42% of country-years. This comparison needs a benchmark, because party-level variation in engagement concentrates shares by itself. If engagement followed vote shares with the observed elasticity and the observed scatter but no systematic departures, the expected ratio would be about 0.84. Engagement was, if anything, slightly less concentrated than that benchmark, and about as concentrated as the vote.

What stands out is which parties led. The party with the largest vote share received the largest engagement share in only a quarter of the 146 country-years, against about 42% expected under the same benchmark (95% range 34% to 51%). On average it had 42% of the vote among parties with pages and 24% of the engagement, while the party that topped engagement received 45% of it. When the engagement leader was not the largest party, it was a populist party 45% of the time and a party in government 29% of the time. Among the parties most often in this position were the Progress Party in Norway, the Rassemblement National, the Sweden Democrats, the CSU (whose national vote share understates its standing in Bavaria), UKIP and OL'aNO in Slovakia, among others.

Two characteristics account for part of the departure from proportionality. Controlling for whether a party was populist and whether it was in government raised the elasticity to 0.86. Populist parties had 2.8 times the engagement share their vote share would predict, and parties in government 45% less. Parties in opposition as a whole, however, received only slightly more than their vote share (about 7% at the median).

5.3 Stable over the decade

Figure 3 shows the elasticity year by year. It was between 0.58 and 0.98, with no clear trend: the estimated change per five years was 0.06 (SE 0.09), or 0.11 (SE 0.12) over 2012 to 2019, when coverage was more complete, and the pattern was the same for long-running pages. The split between posting and engagement per post was also stable, with posting contributing little in every year after 2010. The ratio of the effective numbers of parties showed no trend (-0.006 per year, SE 0.018).

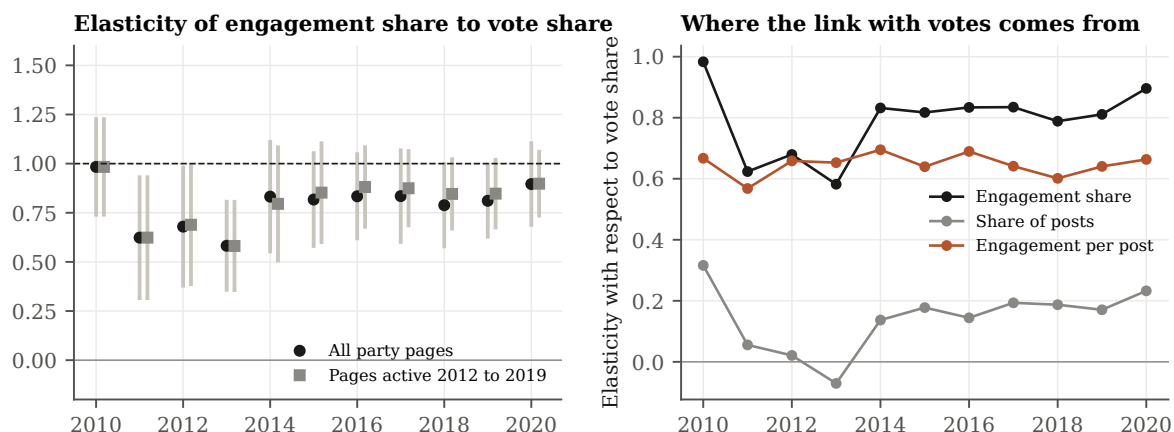


Figure 3. Left: elasticity of engagement share with respect to vote share by year, with 95% confidence intervals clustered by page, for all party pages and for pages posting by mid-2012 and in December 2019. Fewer pages are covered in 2010 and 2011. Right: the elasticity split into the parts due to share of posts and engagement per post.

5.4 Leaders' pages and audiences

Large parties may lose engagement on their party pages to their leaders' pages. Counting the interactions on a party's leaders' pages (where they are in the data, for 37% of party-years) together with those on its party page raised the elasticity to 0.93 (SE 0.10), close to proportional. But leaders' pages are covered for 53% of party-years of parties with more than 20% of the vote and 22% of those with less than 5%, so this partly reflects coverage. Even so, the largest party topped engagement in only 27% of country-years. The share of page likes, a measure of audience size available from 2016, had the same elasticity as engagement (0.79), so smaller parties' relative success reflects the size of their audiences.

6 Discussion

The question of equalisation or normalisation has usually been asked of parties' activity online. Asked of audiences' attention on Facebook, the answer is not a simple one. Engagement shares followed vote shares at the last election less than proportionally, which looks like equalisation, though part of this may reflect the gap between past votes and current support. Engagement was about as concentrated as the vote, so it was not spread more evenly across many parties. And the largest parties rarely led: they received much less of the engagement than of the vote, and the top place went to a different party in three country-years out of four.

The parties that took that place were often populist, consistent with my earlier findings that populist parties drew more engagement per post and governing parties less (Hotham 2026a,b), but they also

included governing and mainstream parties. The pattern is better described as reordering than as either equalisation or normalisation. It showed no clear trend over the decade.

Part of the shortfall of large parties may reflect attention going to their leaders' pages. When those pages are counted, engagement comes close to proportional to votes, although leaders' pages are better covered for large parties. This fits a broader personalisation of party communication, and it means that conclusions about equalisation depend on which pages one counts.

The design has clear limits. The pages are those on my CrowdTangle lists, and leaders' pages are covered for only some parties. Vote shares refer to the last national election and change only at elections. Shares are computed among the parties with pages, so the effective numbers of parties are not the usual electoral ones. Engagement is not reach or persuasion, and the people who engage are not a sample of voters. The country-level estimates rest on few parties each and vary widely.

7 Conclusion

Across 16 European countries between 2010 and 2020, Facebook engagement with party pages followed votes less than proportionally and was about as concentrated as the vote. The largest parties rarely led in engagement, which often went to populist and other parties instead. Social media neither simply equalised nor normalised party competition for attention; they reordered it.

Data and code

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

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021](#)). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

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

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