

Follow the Leader? How British Parties Divided the Work between Leader Pages and Party Pages on Facebook at the 2015 and 2017 General Elections

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Abstract

British parties campaign on Facebook through two kinds of page: the party's own page and the page of its leader. Do the two do the same job? I compare 1,208 hand-coded posts from the Labour and Conservative party pages and the pages of Ed Miliband, David Cameron, Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May in the month before the 2015 and 2017 general elections. This gives four pairs of pages, one for each party at each election. The division of labour was consistent. Party pages were the campaign machine: almost all their posts carried political information (97% against 78% on leader pages), and they were far more likely to ask people to share (59% against 8%) and to vote (55% against 35%) and to use the party slogan. Leader pages were the personal voice. They used first-person language (53% against 32%), personal messages (14% against 4%) and plain text posts (17% against 3%) more often, and put the leader at the centre more often (65% against 38%). Each of these differences points the same way in all four pairs. Attacks on the other side were not consistently given to either kind of page. In three pairs the party page criticised the opposing leader more often than the leader page did, but in 2017 Corbyn's page did so more than Labour's own (26% against 11%). The leader page spoke for the person and the party page did the selling, but who threw the punches depended on the leader.

Keywords: personalisation; party leaders; Facebook; election campaigns; Labour Party; Conservative Party; political communication

1 Introduction

On Facebook, a British party campaigns twice over. It posts on its own page, and its leader posts on theirs. Both pages are run by party staff, both are paid for by the campaign, and they speak to overlapping audiences. Yet they are different kinds of thing. One is an organisation and the other is a person, and the personalisation literature suggests that voters relate to them differently ([Karvonen 2010](#); [McAllister 2007](#)). Do parties use the two pages for the same things, or do they divide the work?

In a separate preprint I show that leader pages were central to the size of British parties' Facebook audiences between 2010 and 2020 ([Hotham 2026b](#)). That paper is about attention. This one is about

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content: what parties chose to say on each kind of page. I use 1,208 posts from the Labour and Conservative party pages and their leaders' pages in the month before the 2015 and 2017 general elections, coded by hand for over 800 features (Hotham 2021a). The design gives four matched pairs, a party page and a leader page for each party at each election, so I can ask whether a difference between the two kinds of page holds across parties, leaders and years. I ask three questions. **RQ1.** How did the information on leader pages differ from that on party pages? **RQ2.** How did they differ in voice and personalisation? **RQ3.** Which kind of page asked people to act, and which attacked opponents?

The answers show a clear and consistent division of labour. Party pages were the campaign machine. They carried political information, slogans and requests to vote and share. Leader pages were the personal voice. They spoke in the first person, carried personal messages and put the leader at the centre. The one task that was not consistently allocated was attack, which depended on the leader.

2 Leaders, parties and Facebook

Personalisation. The personalisation of politics describes a shift in attention from parties to individual politicians (Karvonen 2010; McAllister 2007). Social media give leaders their own channels, which they can use to present themselves as people as well as politicians. Studies of politicians' Facebook pages distinguish professional self-presentation from emotional and private self-presentation, and find that private and emotional content can draw more engagement (Metz et al. 2020). Images of the politician are a central part of this (Farkas and Bene 2021). Even in party-centred systems, campaigns use social media to give their candidates a personal profile (Enli and Skogerbo 2013).

Why divide the work. A party with two pages can use each for what it does best. A leader's page can carry the warmth and directness of a person speaking. A party's page can carry the institutional business of a campaign: policy, slogans and requests to vote, share and volunteer. There are reasons to divide attack as well. Negative messages can cost the person who delivers them, so parties may keep attacks off the leader's page and give them to the party page. My earlier work on Labour in 2017 found such a division across Labour's own pages and its satellite campaign, Momentum (Hotham 2021b, 2026a). This paper asks whether the same logic separates a party's page from its leader's page.

Expectations. If parties divide the work, leader pages should carry more personal content and less campaign business than party pages, and the difference should appear for both parties at both elections. If parties also protect their leaders from negativity, party pages should do more of the attacking.

3 Data and method

Posts. I collected all posts that could be retrieved through Netvizz from eight pages: the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, the Conservative Party and David Cameron from 8 April to 6 May 2015, and the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, the Conservative Party and Theresa May from 3 May to 7 June 2017. That gives 1,208 posts: 315 from Labour pages and 326 from Conservative pages in 2015, and 422 and 145 in 2017. The leader pages contributed 410 posts and the party pages 798. Facebook limited the posts that tools such as Netvizz could return, favouring each page's most engaged posts, so the data are best read as the posts most people saw rather than a guaranteed census. The same posts are used in my paper on identity ownership (Hotham 2026c).

Coding. I coded every post by hand with a scheme of over 800 binary codes. I use 28 codes that capture

information (political information, policy detail, pledges, mainly rhetorical content, the party slogan), voice and personalisation (the leader at the centre of the post, first-person language, personal messages, personal life and family, plain text posts), tone and attack (posts targeting or criticising the opposing leader, mainly negative posts, “us versus them” language, re-edited news content, humour), the party and the public (praise of MPs and members, pictures of the public, the public’s own words) and requests for action (to vote, share, visit the party website, volunteer, sign up, give an email address or visit another website). A paid second coder recoded a 10% sample of these posts; Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004) across all binary codes was 0.81, and 0.86, 0.84, 0.74 and 0.72 for the information, mobilisation, framing and personalisation codes.

Analysis. For each code I compare the leader page with the party page within each of the four pairs. I summarise the comparison in two ways. First, I count in how many of the four pairs the leader page had the higher share. Second, I fit a binomial regression with a fixed effect for each party and year and an indicator for leader pages, so the leader-page odds ratio compares each leader page only with its own party’s page at the same election. I report post-level p -values adjusted across the 28 codes with Holm’s method (Holm 1979), and a page-adjusted p -value that inflates the standard error by the extra variation between pairs and uses a t distribution with three degrees of freedom. With four pairs the page-adjusted test is conservative and has little power, so I put most weight on whether a difference appears in all four pairs.

4 Findings

Figure 1 shows the main differences, pooled across the four pairs, and Table 1 gives the shares for every pair.

4.1 The machine: party pages carried the campaign business

Party pages carried political information in 97% of posts, against 78% on leader pages, and the party page was ahead in all four pairs. They used the party slogan more often (46% against 35%, all four pairs) and pointed to the party website more often (21% against 10%). Above all, they asked people to act. Party pages asked people to share in 59% of posts and leader pages in 8%, a gap that appears in every pair and is the largest in the data: on the Conservative page in 2015, 76% of posts asked people to share, against 4% on Cameron’s page. Party pages asked for votes in 55% of posts and leader pages in 35%, again in all four pairs. Requests to volunteer and to sign up to campaign were rare everywhere but more common on party pages. Policy detail was slightly more common on party pages (41% against 33%), but this difference is not consistent across pairs and not significant, and pledges were about as common on both.

4.2 The person: leader pages carried the personal voice

Leader pages spoke as a person. First-person language appeared in 53% of leader-page posts and 32% of party-page posts, and the leader page was ahead in all four pairs. Personal messages, posts about something other than a political issue, appeared in 14% of leader-page posts against 4%, again in all four pairs. Leader pages were much more likely to post plain text without an image, video or link (17% against 3%), which in all four pairs was a leader-page habit, most of all for Miliband and Cameron (28%

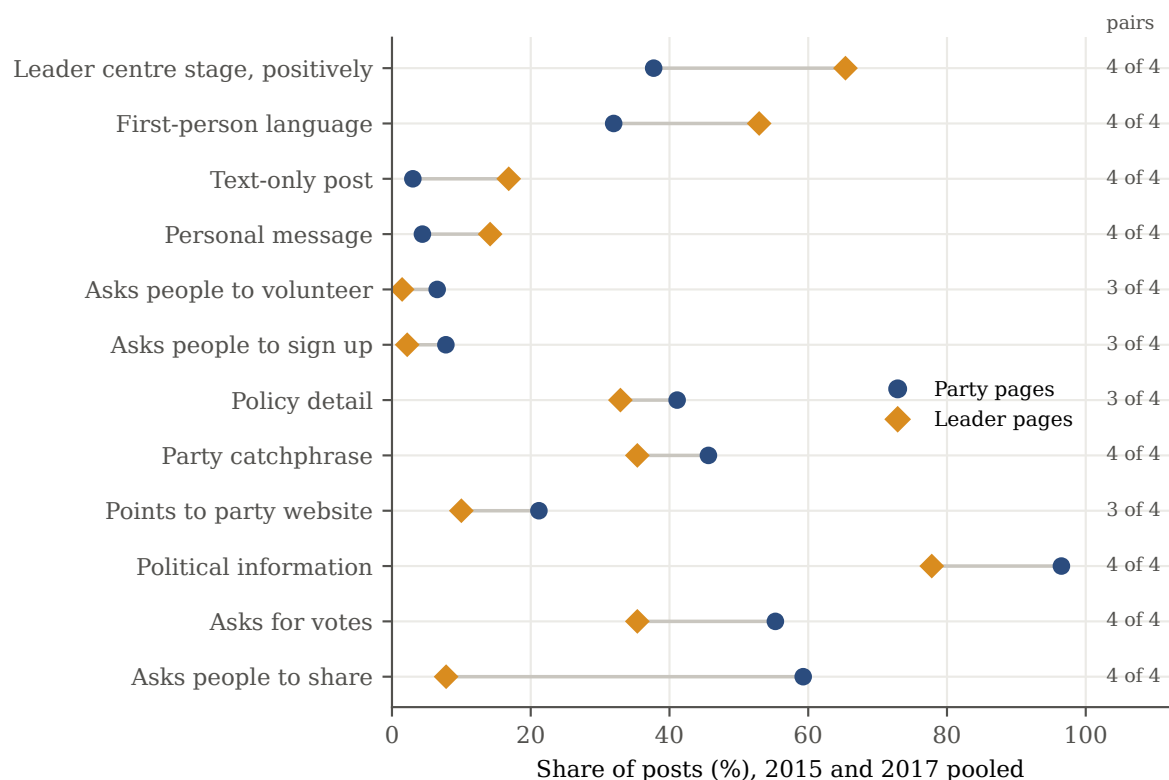


Figure 1. Leader pages and party pages, Labour and Conservative, 2015 and 2017 pooled. Share of posts carrying each code. “Pairs” gives the number of the four party-and-election pairs in which the difference points the same way as the pooled difference.

of their posts each). Leader pages also put the leader at the centre more often (65% against 38%), as one would expect, although the gap varied: Theresa May’s page did so in 98% of posts, but the Conservative party page in 2017 also did so in 83%. Posts about the leader’s personal life and interests were rare on both kinds of page but more common on leader pages in every pair, and posts about the leader’s family in three of the four. Leader pages were also more likely to be mainly rhetorical than factual (60% against 47%), but this difference is driven by the 2017 Labour pair and is not consistent.

4.3 Attack: it depended on the leader

Criticism of the opposing leader did not follow a fixed rule (Figure 2). In three of the four pairs, the party page did more of it: Labour’s page criticised Cameron in 30% of posts in 2015 against 15% on Miliband’s page, the Conservative page criticised Miliband in 37% against 28% on Cameron’s page, and in 2017 the Conservative page criticised Corbyn in 47% of posts against 24% on May’s page. In 2017 Labour reversed the pattern. Corbyn’s own page criticised May in 26% of its posts, while Labour’s party page did so in only 11%. Mainly negative posts and “us versus them” language followed a similar pattern, with no consistent difference between the two kinds of page. Pooled across the pairs, none of the attack codes differs significantly between leader and party pages.

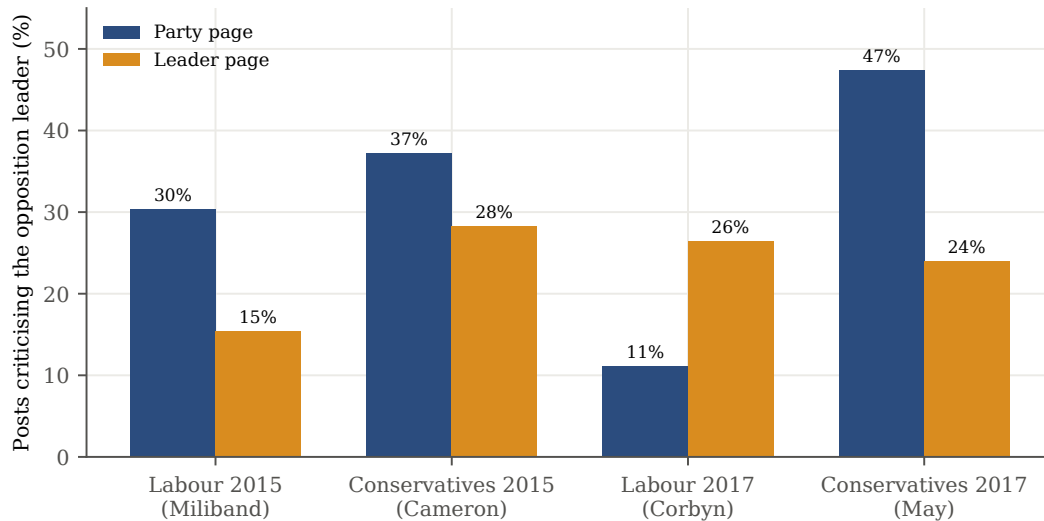


Figure 2. Posts criticising the opposing party’s leader, party page and leader page, by party and election.

4.4 How robust is the division?

Twelve of the 28 codes differ significantly between leader and party pages after Holm adjustment in the post-level test, and six differences (political information, the leader at the centre, first-person language, personal messages, requests to vote and requests to share) remain significant in the page-adjusted test, which treats the four pairs as the units that matter. Each of these six points the same way in all four pairs, which on its own would happen by chance only one time in eight for a single code. The differences in political information, voice and requests to share, in particular, are large in every pair.

5 Discussion

The two kinds of page did different jobs. The party page was the campaign machine: information, the slogan, and above all requests to vote and share. The leader page was a person talking: in the first person, with personal messages and plain text, as if typed by the leader. This division held for Labour and the Conservatives, under four different leaders, at two elections. It looks less like an accident of any one campaign than a settled way of running two pages.

The division makes sense. Requests to share are the business of reach, and a party page that asks people to spread its posts is acting as a broadcaster. A leader who asked followers to share every post would sound like a salesman. A party page that spoke in the first person would sound odd. Each page did what suited its voice. This also helps explain why leader pages could build large audiences ([Hotham 2026b](#)): they offered something personal that the party page did not.

Attack is the exception. Three of the four leaders left most of the criticism of their opponent to the party page, which fits the idea that parties protect their leader from negativity. Corbyn did not. His page criticised May more often than Labour’s own page did, and his page was among the most negative of the eight. By early 2018 Corbyn’s page had more followers than Labour’s own (about 1.39 million against 1.02 million; [Hotham 2021a](#)), and in 2017 Labour’s wider campaign gave attack and partisan content to Momentum and to Corbyn’s own page rather than to the party page ([Hotham 2021b](#), [2026a](#)). Who attacks seems to be a strategic choice that depends on the leader and the campaign, not a fixed rule of

Table 1. Leader pages and party pages, by party and election. Each cell gives the share of leader-page posts and party-page posts carrying the code.

	Leader / party page share (%)				Pooled			
	Lab 15	Con 15	Lab 17	Con 17	OR [95% CI]	p_{Holm}	p_{pages}	Pairs
<i>Information</i>								
Political information	59 / 95	91 / 97	79 / 100	68 / 91	0.10 [0.06, 0.16]	<0.001	0.025	0L 4P
Policy detail	36 / 38	27 / 32	39 / 58	28 / 20	0.71 [0.55, 0.92]	0.151	0.229	1L 3P
Makes a pledge	59 / 50	57 / 46	58 / 66	66 / 54	1.18 [0.92, 1.50]	1.000	0.498	3L 1P
Mainly rhetoric, not fact	62 / 64	55 / 49	60 / 23	70 / 73	1.83 [1.42, 2.36]	<0.001	0.256	2L 2P
Party catchphrase	5 / 27	20 / 27	69 / 80	26 / 28	0.54 [0.40, 0.72]	<0.001	0.099	0L 4P
<i>The personal voice</i>								
Leader centre stage, positively	51 / 30	69 / 53	58 / 19	98 / 83	3.35 [2.56, 4.38]	<0.001	0.026	4L 0P
First-person language	46 / 36	62 / 34	40 / 19	78 / 57	2.51 [1.94, 3.24]	<0.001	0.013	4L 0P
Personal message	13 / 5	19 / 3	13 / 5	6 / 4	3.55 [2.28, 5.53]	<0.001	0.024	4L 0P
Personal life and interests	8 / 4	8 / 2	6 / 5	2 / 1	1.91 [1.11, 3.29]	0.302	0.103	4L 0P
Leader's family	5 / 3	2 / 1	0 / 0	4 / 0	2.69 [1.01, 7.19]	0.621	0.149	3L 1P
Text-only post	28 / 0	28 / 9	1 / 0	14 / 6	6.61 [4.02, 10.88]	<0.001	0.052	4L 0P
<i>Attack and tone</i>								
Opposition leader targeted	17 / 32	28 / 39	28 / 12	24 / 47	0.82 [0.62, 1.08]	1.000	0.713	1L 3P
Criticises opposition leader	15 / 30	28 / 37	26 / 11	24 / 47	0.83 [0.63, 1.10]	1.000	0.722	1L 3P
Mainly negative	28 / 33	22 / 28	35 / 16	20 / 42	1.06 [0.80, 1.38]	1.000	0.908	1L 3P
Us versus them	27 / 32	36 / 39	39 / 38	30 / 45	0.84 [0.65, 1.08]	1.000	0.269	1L 3P
Re-edited news content	5 / 25	4 / 12	24 / 3	4 / 18	0.90 [0.62, 1.31]	1.000	0.917	1L 3P
Humour	4 / 8	5 / 6	7 / 3	2 / 5	0.93 [0.54, 1.59]	1.000	0.852	1L 3P
<i>Party and public</i>								
Praises party MPs	3 / 3	11 / 10	5 / 4	4 / 3	1.11 [0.66, 1.87]	1.000	0.713	3L 1P
Praises members	8 / 8	1 / 4	6 / 5	4 / 0	1.05 [0.60, 1.87]	1.000	0.907	3L 1P
Public pictured	18 / 27	43 / 38	51 / 47	42 / 26	1.11 [0.87, 1.43]	1.000	0.620	3L 1P
Public's own words	0 / 8	1 / 1	10 / 9	10 / 9	0.83 [0.49, 1.39]	1.000	0.685	3L 1P
<i>Asking people to act</i>								
Asks for votes	14 / 41	24 / 36	59 / 85	32 / 42	0.37 [0.28, 0.48]	<0.001	0.029	0L 4P
Asks people to share	17 / 54	4 / 76	8 / 59	2 / 40	0.05 [0.03, 0.08]	<0.001	0.014	0L 4P
Points to party website	35 / 35	3 / 23	3 / 12	10 / 8	0.45 [0.31, 0.66]	<0.001	0.223	1L 3P
Asks people to volunteer	1 / 9	0 / 5	3 / 7	2 / 1	0.23 [0.10, 0.54]	0.014	0.101	1L 3P
Asks people to sign up	4 / 13	0 / 6	3 / 7	2 / 1	0.30 [0.14, 0.60]	0.014	0.100	1L 3P
Asks for email address	0 / 5	1 / 11	3 / 1	10 / 5	0.48 [0.24, 0.95]	0.498	0.471	2L 2P
Link to outside website	68 / 26	4 / 31	22 / 18	10 / 9	1.14 [0.85, 1.52]	1.000	0.881	3L 1P
Posts (leader / party)	78 / 237	138 / 188	144 / 278	50 / 95				

Notes: Leader pages are Ed Miliband and David Cameron (2015) and Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May (2017). OR is the leader-page odds ratio from a binomial regression with a fixed effect for each party and election. p_{Holm} is the post-level p -value adjusted across the 28 codes; p_{pages} allows for extra variation between pairs (t with 3 degrees of freedom). Pairs counts how many of the four pairs had a higher share on the leader page (L) or the party page (P); ties are not counted.

how the two kinds of page are used.

6 Limitations

The study has four main limitations. First, it covers two parties, four leaders and two elections, so the comparisons rest on four pairs of pages, and the 2017 Conservative pages contributed only 145 posts. Second, Facebook limited the posts that could be retrieved, favouring the most engaged, and the two election windows differ in length. Third, my archive holds counts by page and code rather than post-level records, so I cannot study combinations of codes within posts or link content to engagement. Fourth, I cannot see who wrote the posts. Leader pages are run by staff as well as by leaders, so the “personal voice” is a campaign choice about how the page should sound, not evidence that the leader wrote the post.

7 Conclusion

British parties used their two Facebook pages for two jobs. The party page sold the campaign and asked people to vote and share. The leader page spoke as a person. This division held across parties, leaders and elections. Attack was the job that moved: usually the party page’s, but in 2017 Corbyn’s own. For anyone studying party communication online, the lesson is to treat the party page and the leader page as parts of one campaign with a division of labour, and to look at both.

Provenance and AI use

The data were collected with Netvizz for my doctoral research, before Netvizz closed in 2019. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021a](#)). An earlier version was presented at the Political Studies Association conference in 2019 ([Hotham 2019](#)), and the analysis develops Chapter 6 of the thesis. The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Data availability

The counts of posts carrying each code, by page, are shared with this preprint. The posts themselves are not shared, in line with the terms under which they were collected.

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