

Leader or Party?

How Facebook Engagement Divided between European Party Leaders and Their Parties, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

The personalisation of politics suggests that leaders increasingly overshadow their parties, and social media might be expected to speed this up. I compare the Facebook engagement received by party leaders' pages with that received by their parties' pages, for 53 leader and party pairs from 44 parties in 11 European countries between 2010 and 2020, using posts collected through CrowdTangle and counting a leader's page only while that person led the party. On average, leaders' pages received 43% of the combined engagement of leader and party, while making about a third of the posts: the median leader's post drew about 1.8 times as much as the party's. The split varied enormously, from leaders who took less than a fifth of the engagement, such as Christian Levrat of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, to those who took more than four fifths, such as Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Alexis Tsipras in Greece. Leaders of larger parties took a larger share. But there was no sign of growing personalisation over the decade: comparing the same leader and party over time, the leader's share did not rise, and a rise of more than about six points over the decade can be ruled out. During election campaigns, leaders posted somewhat more and the gap in engagement per post narrowed. On Facebook, leaders were often the main draw, but the balance between leader and party was a persistent feature of each party, with no sign of a rising trend.

Keywords: personalisation; party leaders; political parties; Facebook; social media engagement; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

A long line of research argues that politics has become more personalised: leaders matter more to voters, media coverage centres more on them, and parties increasingly campaign through them (McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). Social media seem to suit this trend. Leaders can run their own pages, speak in their own voice and build audiences of their own, and studies of campaigns have found that personalised communication is common on these platforms (Enli and Skogerbø 2013;

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Metz et al. 2020). In my earlier work on Britain, leaders' pages took a large and varying share of their parties' Facebook engagement (Hotham 2026).

This paper takes the comparison across Europe and over a decade. For 53 pairs of a party's page and its current leader's page in 11 countries between 2010 and 2020, I ask three questions. **RQ1.** How is engagement divided between leaders' and parties' pages? **RQ2.** Did the leader's share grow over the decade, as personalisation would suggest? **RQ3.** What is the leader's share associated with: party size, populism, holding office, or election campaigns?

The answers are as follows. Leaders' pages received a large share of engagement, on average 43%, and much more per post than their parties' pages. The share varied widely between pairs, and was larger for leaders of larger parties. But it did not grow over the decade.

2 Background

Personalisation. Personalisation can mean that leaders become more important to voters, that media focus more on leaders, or that parties present themselves through their leaders (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; Karvonen 2010). The evidence for a long-term rise is mixed and depends on the country and the measure (Karvonen 2010).

Social media. Social media give leaders a direct channel and an audience that can be measured. A study of Norway's 2011 local election campaign found that politicians used Facebook and Twitter for personalised communication, even in a party-centred system (Enli and Skogerbo 2013), and research on politicians' posts found that personal and emotional content can raise engagement (Metz et al. 2020). If audiences increasingly attach themselves to leaders, the leader's share of the engagement that a leader and party receive together should grow.

Expectations. Leaders who hold office, lead populist parties or lead large parties might attract a larger share, since they are more visible. Campaigns might work either way: they put leaders in the spotlight, but parties also step up their own communication. In Britain, campaigns lowered the leader's share, mainly because party pages posted more (Hotham 2026).

3 Data

Pages and pairs. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party and party leader pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). A leader's page is matched to the party's page only for the months in which that person led the party, using leadership dates compiled from Wikipedia and news sources. A pair-month is included when both pages posted in that month. This gives 3,226 pair-months from 53 leader and party pairs, 44 parties, 52 leaders and 11 countries. Leaders' pages made 100,963 posts and received 281 million interactions; party pages made 222,221 posts and received 295 million. Some pairs involve co-leaders (Caroline Lucas, Gergely Karácsony) or interim leaders (Raluca Turcan, Nigel Farage in 2016), and SYRIZA was a coalition until 2013. The number of pairs rises from 9 in 2010 to about 40 from 2016, because many leaders' pages appear only later in the data.

Measures. The leader's share is the leader's page's interactions as a percentage of the interactions on the leader's and party's pages together in the month. I also compute the leader's share of posts, the log ratio of leader to party interactions, and the log ratio of their interactions per post. Page likes, recorded from

2016, give a measure of audience size.

4 Method

The share is first described by pair. To examine change over time, I regress the leader's share (or the log ratio of leader to party interactions) on time with a fixed effect for each pair, so that the comparison is within the same leader and party; adding the time since the leader took office separates a general trend from leaders building audiences over their tenure. To examine campaigns and office, I add month fixed effects and indicators for campaign months (the month of a national election and the month containing the date 30 days before it) and for months in which the leader's party held the prime ministership. Differences between pairs in party size (the log of the party's vote share at the last national election), populism and government participation are estimated with country-month fixed effects; months before a new party's first election, and countries with a single pair, drop out of this model (2,511 pair-months). Standard errors are clustered by pair.

5 Results

5.1 Leaders as the main draw for many parties

Across pairs, leaders' pages received on average 43% of the combined engagement (median 42%), while making about a third of the posts (34%). The median leader's post drew about 1.8 times as many interactions as the party's, and leaders' posts drew more than their party's in 68% of pairs. In a little over a third of pairs, the leader received more than half of the combined engagement.

Figure 1 shows the variation. At one end, Bertalan Tóth of the Hungarian Socialists, Tim Farron of the Liberal Democrats, Petra Gössi of the Swiss FDP and Christian Levrat of the Swiss Social Democrats took less than a fifth. At the other, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Alexis Tsipras in Greece took more than four fifths, and Nigel Farage at the Brexit Party, Jeremy Corbyn and David Cameron more than 70%. By country, the average across pairs was 59% in Greece (five pairs, and high because of New Democracy and SYRIZA) and 23% in Switzerland (three pairs). Leaders' shares of page likes, available from 2016, averaged 43% and correlated with their shares of engagement (0.67), so the split partly tracks the size of each page's audience.

Comparing pairs in the same country and month, leaders of larger parties took a larger share: about 6 points more for each log unit of vote share (SE 2.6), roughly 4 points more for a party with twice another's vote. Leaders of populist parties (−1.7 points, SE 4.4) and of parties in government (−2.9, SE 4.4) did not take a detectably different share, though both estimates are imprecise.

5.2 No trend over the decade

The average share across pairs was about 50% in 2010 to 2012, when few pairs are observed, about 41% in 2014 and 2015, and between 41% and 46% from 2016 (Figure 2, left). Much of this reflects which pairs are observed. Comparing the same leader and party over time, there was no rise: the estimated change was −0.8 points per year (SE 0.7), so a rise of more than about 0.6 points a year can be ruled out, and the log ratio of leader to party engagement changed by −0.05 per year (SE 0.04). The 15 pairs observed from 2013 or earlier to 2018 or later show the same (−0.07, SE 0.05), as does a model that

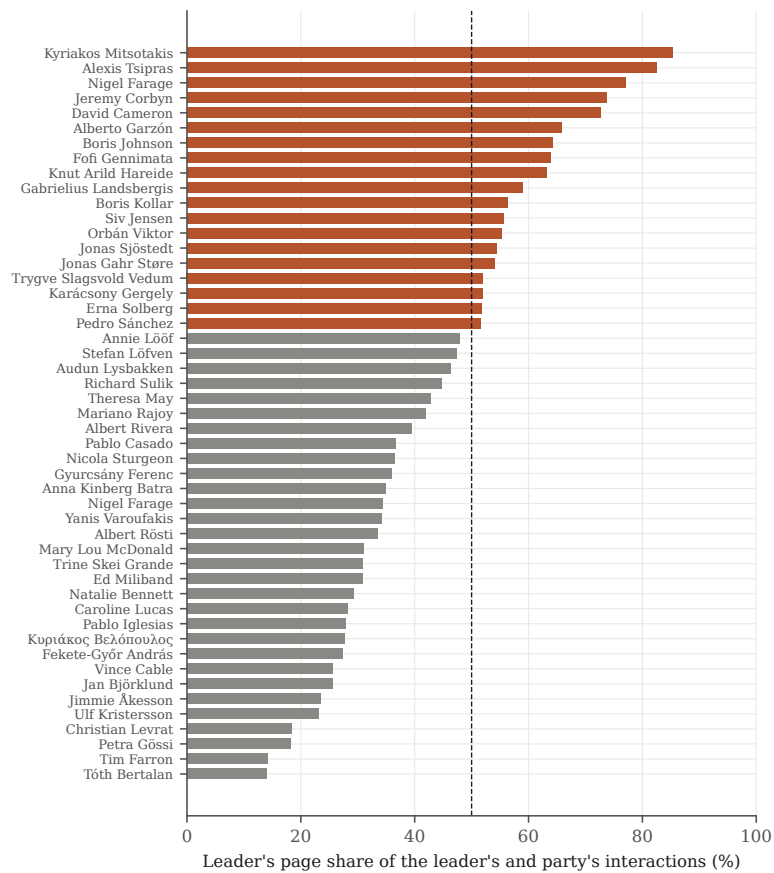


Figure 1. Leader’s page share of the interactions on the leader’s and party’s pages together, average over months, for pairs observed in at least 12 months. Shaded bars mark pairs in which the leader took more than half.

allows for the time since the leader took office (-0.05 , SE 0.04). Starting the sample in 2012, 2014 or 2016 gives estimates between -0.3 and $+0.7$ points a year, none distinguishable from zero. Comparing the same party over time, across successive leaders, gives -0.5 points a year (SE 0.7). Within pairs, the year-by-year estimates were below 2010 in every year, significantly so in 2015, though the 2010 baseline rests on nine pairs (Figure 2, right).

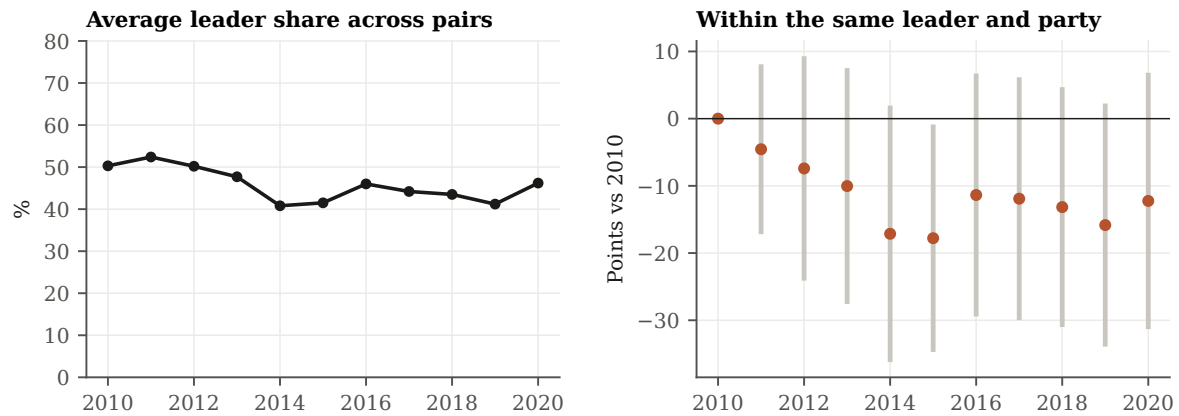


Figure 2. Left: average leader share across the pairs observed in each year (mean of pair averages). Right: leader share by year within the same leader and party (pair fixed effects), compared with 2010, with 95% confidence intervals clustered by pair.

5.3 Campaigns and office

During election campaign months, leaders' pages posted somewhat more relative to their parties (by about 11%; 0.10 log points, SE 0.09, an imprecise estimate), but their advantage in engagement per post narrowed by about 18% (0.20 log points, SE 0.08), so the leader's share of engagement fell slightly, by about 2 points, an estimate that cannot be distinguished from zero. The effect of holding the prime ministership is too imprecise to judge, since only seven pairs change status.

6 Discussion

On Facebook, party leaders were often the main draw. Their pages received, on average, more than four in ten of the interactions that leader and party received together, from only a third of the posts, and in a third of pairs the leader received more than the party. In this sense, party communication on Facebook was strongly personalised.

But personalisation on Facebook was not a rising trend over the decade. Within the same leader and party the share did not rise; if anything it was lower after 2010, though that baseline rests on nine pairs. The balance was instead a feature of each party: higher for leaders of larger parties, and varying between countries, though several countries contribute only a few pairs. This fits the view that personalisation varies between countries and parties rather than rising everywhere (Karvonen 2010), and it matches the British pattern of large, stable differences between leaders (Hotham 2026).

Campaigns narrowed the gap between leaders and parties in engagement per post, consistent with leaders posting more during campaigns, each post drawing less, and party pages holding their own.

The design has clear limits. Only 53 pairs are observed, mostly from 2014 onwards, and leaders without

pages, or whose pages are not on my lists, are missing; the pairs observed in 2010 are few. Leadership dates were compiled from public sources and a few are uncertain by days to weeks. The data record engagement, not reach, and leaders' and parties' pages are often run by the same staff, so the split reflects how parties choose to communicate as well as how audiences respond.

7 Conclusion

Across 53 leader and party pairs in 11 European countries between 2010 and 2020, leaders' Facebook pages received on average 43% of the engagement that leader and party received together, from a third of the posts. The share varied widely and was larger for leaders of larger parties, but within the same leader and party it did not grow. Personalisation on Facebook was a stable feature of particular parties and countries rather than a trend.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The list of pairs and leadership dates, the analysis code and pair-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 leadership dates were compiled in 2026. 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 compile the leadership dates and 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 page and month, and publicly reported dates of leadership changes. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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