Less Is More?
Post Length and Engagement on the Facebook Pages of European Parties and Leaders, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Do short posts draw more engagement on social media than long ones? I examine this using 856,220 Facebook posts by 112 party and 74 party leader pages in 20 European countries, 2010 to 2020, collected through CrowdTangle. The median post had 85 characters of text in 2010 and 252 in 2020. Comparing posts by the same page, of the same type, with other posts in the same country and month, from June 2015 onwards, posts with no text drew about 42% fewer interactions than posts of 101 to 200 characters, also when content passed on from other pages is excluded. Among posts with text, engagement was U-shaped but mostly flat: very short posts (1 to 50 characters) drew about 11% more interactions and the longest (more than 800) about 20% more. The longest posts drew about 58% more shares, 35% more comments and 15% more likes and reactions. Length went with more engagement mainly for text-only posts. The association was steeper before 2015 than after, but this coincides with a break in data capture. Pages that wrote longer posts on average did not draw more engagement. These are associations: pages choose how much to write. Whether a post had text went with larger differences than how long the text was.

Keywords: post length; message length; user engagement; shares; comments; Facebook; political parties; party leaders; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Every post a party publishes on Facebook carries some text, or none. One might expect short posts to draw more engagement, because users scroll quickly and Facebook cuts long text off behind a "see more" link. Yet longer text can also carry an argument, a call to action or a story, which may give users more reason to comment or to share. Studies of political actors' posts have examined which features of a post go with engagement (Bene 2017; Bene et al. 2022; Heiss et al. 2019), and in one such study longer posts drew more engagement (Heiss et al. 2019). In online news, longer articles were more likely to appear on a newspaper's most e-mailed list (Berger and Milkman 2012). But these studies usually cover one country, one campaign or a short period, and treat length as one feature among many.

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This paper examines the length of text on European parties' and leaders' Facebook posts over a decade, asking three questions. **RQ1.** How long were parties' posts, and how did their length change from 2010 to 2020? **RQ2.** Did shorter or longer posts draw more engagement, and did longer text draw comments and shares rather than likes? **RQ3.** Did the association differ by type of post, type of page and over time, and between pages as well as within them?

2 Data and method

Posts. 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). The data contain 856,699 posts from 112 party pages and 74 leader pages in 20 countries, from January 2010 to 30 September 2020. I exclude 479 posts of rare kinds: 449 announcements of scheduled live broadcasts, 28 Vine posts and 2 albums. This leaves 856,220 posts, which I group into five types: links (379,156), photos (230,713), video (171,016, including native, older Facebook and live video), text-only status updates (44,056) and YouTube links (31,279).

Length. Length is the number of characters (Unicode characters, including spaces, emoji and any web addresses typed into the text) in the post's message, the text the page wrote above the link, photo or video. It does not include the headline or description of a linked article. Of all posts, 101,358 (11.8%) have no message; CrowdTangle records the field as missing, and I code these as having length zero ("no text"). I cannot rule out that CrowdTangle failed to capture the text of some of them. A further 18 posts contain only spaces and are kept as posts with text. Among posts with text, log characters and log words correlate at 0.93. About 16% of posts contain a web address in their text. The median post has 181 characters (interquartile range 84 to 315; 99th percentile 1,798; maximum 4,999). I group length into seven bins (Table 1), with 101 to 200 characters as the reference, and also use the log of length among posts with text. No text is read or quoted; only its length is used.

Engagement. The main outcome is the log of a post's total interactions (reactions, comments and shares) plus one. I also model the logs of comments, shares, and likes plus other reactions (each plus one), and comments and shares relative to likes and reactions, as differences of logs. Reactions beyond the like began in February 2016.

Method. I regress each outcome on the length bins with page fixed effects, country-month fixed effects and post type fixed effects. As a stricter check I replace page and country-month effects with page-month fixed effects (11,029 cells), so that a post is compared only with the same page's other posts that month. I also estimate models separately for each type. Standard errors are clustered by page; I also report clustering by country. To test whether patterns differ between kinds of page, I add interactions of the length bins with an indicator for leaders' pages or for populist pages (40 pages of populist parties and their leaders, classified as in Hotham 2026a). Coefficients are in log points; a coefficient b corresponds to a difference of $100(e^b - 1)$ per cent.

The May 2015 capture break. Posts classified as photos jumped about 2.5 to 4 times from May 2015, while link posts were flat, reflecting a change in how CrowdTangle captured or classified posts (Hotham 2026b). Between February to April 2015 and June to August 2015, the median photo post rose from 134 to 188 characters and the share of photo posts with no text fell from 27% to 8%, while link posts were steady (201 and 195 characters, 9% and 8% with no text). For this reason the main results use posts from June 2015 onwards (595,425 posts from all 186 pages, after dropping 2 posts that are alone in their fixed-effect cell) and control for type; I report the full period and the earlier period for comparison.

3 Results

3.1 Posts got longer

Parties' posts got steadily longer (Figure 1, left). The median post had 85 characters in 2010, 167 in 2014, 215 in 2018 and 252 in 2020. Posts with no text fell from 28% of posts in 2011 to 7% in 2018 (partly reflecting the capture break), and posts of more than 800 characters rose from under 1% in 2010 to 12% in 2020. The trend is not driven by new pages: among 120 pages with at least 20 posts in both 2012 and 2019, the median rose from 85 characters in 2010 to 251 in 2020, and the median of page medians (pages weighted equally) rose from 83 to 254. From June 2015, status updates were the longest type (median 264 characters) and video and YouTube posts the shortest (182 and 175). Posts with no text were mostly links (36%), videos (32%) and photos (31%).

Posts with no text are not a random subset. Judging from link addresses, from June 2015 about 46% of them pointed to a photo, video or post of another Facebook page (79% of videos and 60% of photos with no text, 9% of links), against 7% of posts with text. This classification is approximate. Posts with no text are spread across pages: the median page left 5% of its posts without text, 12 pages more than 30%, and the ten pages with most such posts account for 30% of them. Their share was 7% to 11% in each year from 2015.

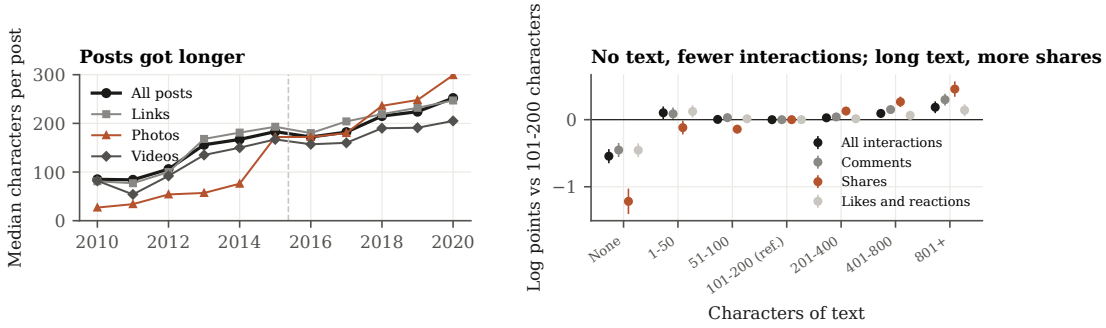


Figure 1. Left: median characters of text per post by year, all posts and by type; the dashed line marks the May 2015 capture break. Right: interactions, comments, shares, and likes and reactions by length of text, compared with posts of 101 to 200 characters, in log points, with page, country-month and post type fixed effects; June 2015 to September 2020, 595,425 posts; 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

3.2 Posts with no text drew less; long text went with sharing

Table 1 and Figure 1 (right) show the main results. Compared with posts of 101 to 200 characters by the same page, of the same type, in the same country and month, posts with no text drew about 42% fewer interactions (−0.54, SE 0.05). Among posts with text, the relationship was U-shaped but mostly flat. Posts of 1 to 50 characters drew about 11% more interactions (0.10, SE 0.05). Posts of 51 to 400 characters drew about the same as the reference. Posts of 401 to 800 characters drew about 10% more (0.09, SE 0.03), and posts of more than 800 characters about 20% more (0.19, SE 0.04). Adding a squared term to the log of length places the lowest point at about 114 characters. Overall, doubling the length of a post with text went with only about 2% more interactions (log length 0.028, SE 0.015).

Longer text went with more sharing above all: posts of more than 800 characters drew about 58% more shares than the reference (0.46, SE 0.06), 35% more comments (0.30, SE 0.04) and 15% more likes and reactions (0.14, SE 0.05). Very short posts drew about 13% more likes and reactions but 11% fewer

Table 1. Engagement by length of text, compared with posts of 101 to 200 characters. Log points (standard errors clustered by page), with page, country-month and post type fixed effects. Columns 5 and 6 are the log of comments (shares) minus the log of likes and reactions. June 2015 to September 2020. Log length: separate models of posts with text.

Characters	Interactions	Comments	Shares	Likes	Comments/ likes	Shares/ likes
No text	−0.54 (0.05)	−0.45 (0.05)	−1.22 (0.10)	−0.46 (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.76 (0.09)
1 to 50	0.10 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	−0.12 (0.05)	0.12 (0.05)	−0.04 (0.02)	−0.24 (0.03)
51 to 100	0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.14 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	−0.15 (0.02)
101 to 200	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
201 to 400	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)	0.13 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.01)	0.11 (0.02)
401 to 800	0.09 (0.03)	0.15 (0.03)	0.27 (0.04)	0.06 (0.03)	0.09 (0.02)	0.20 (0.02)
801 or more	0.19 (0.04)	0.30 (0.04)	0.46 (0.06)	0.14 (0.05)	0.16 (0.03)	0.31 (0.04)
Log length	0.03 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.05 (0.01)	0.17 (0.01)
Posts	595,425 (bins); 541,999 (log length)					

shares. Measured against likes, posts of more than 800 characters drew about 37% more shares and 17% more comments, and posts with no text about 53% fewer shares (Table 1). Doubling the length of a post went with about 13% more shares (0.18, SE 0.02) and 4% more comments, but almost no change in likes.

With page-month fixed effects, posts with no text drew about 37% fewer interactions (−0.46, SE 0.05), very short posts 9% more (0.09, SE 0.04) and the longest posts 20% more (0.18, SE 0.04). Clustering by country widens the standard errors (for the longest posts from 0.04 to 0.07). The estimate for the longest posts is similar when web addresses are removed before measuring length (0.20, SE 0.04), for posts without a web address in the text (0.17, SE 0.04), without 2020 (0.17, SE 0.05) and from 2016 controlling for the page's followers at the time of posting (0.20, SE 0.04; recorded for 83% to 100% of posts from 2016). Log words rather than characters gives a slope of 0.056 (SE 0.014). Excluding the 65,130 posts that link to another page's photo, video or post, posts with no text drew about 44% fewer interactions (−0.58, SE 0.07) and the longest posts about 18% more (0.16, SE 0.04). Dropping the 12 pages that left more than 30% of their posts without text gives −0.55 (SE 0.06) for no text. Over the full period from 2010, very short posts drew no more than the reference (0.01, SE 0.04), and before May 2015 about 11% fewer (−0.11, SE 0.04).

3.3 Length and post type

Length went with the largest differences where the text was the content (Figure 2, right). For status updates, posts of 401 to 800 characters drew about 46% more interactions than those of 101 to 200 (0.38, SE 0.05), and posts of more than 800 about 57% more (0.45, SE 0.07); doubling the length went with about 10% more (0.14, SE 0.03). For links, photos and videos, the slope on log length was about 0.01 (SE 0.01 to 0.02); only the longest photo and video posts stood out (about 16% more), and the longest links did not (0.06, SE 0.08). Posts with no text drew less for every type: about 46% fewer interactions for links, 37% for photos and 44% for videos. Longer text went with more shares relative to likes for every type, and with more comments relative to likes for every type except videos.

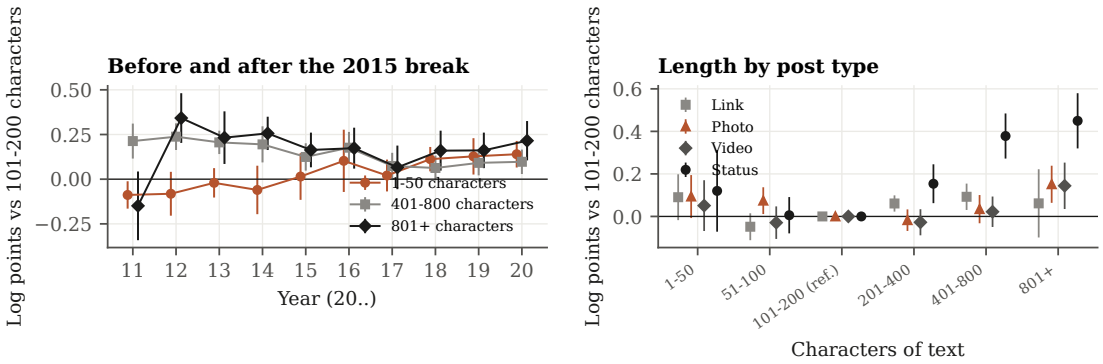


Figure 2. Left: interactions on posts of 1 to 50, 401 to 800 and more than 800 characters compared with posts of 101 to 200 characters, estimated separately for each year with page, country-month and post type fixed effects. 2015 spans the capture break. Right: interactions by length of text compared with posts of 101 to 200 characters, estimated separately for each type, with page and country-month fixed effects, June 2015 to September 2020. 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

3.4 Before and after 2015

The association with length differed before and after 2015 (Figure 2, left). From 2011 to 2014, very short posts drew slightly fewer interactions than posts of 101 to 200 characters (between −0.09 and −0.02), and the slope on log length was 0.06 to 0.11. From 2015 the slope was 0.02 to 0.04, and very short posts drew as much as or more than the reference (about 12% to 15% more in 2018 to 2020). In a pooled model of posts with text, the slope on log length was 0.11 (SE 0.03) before May 2015 and 0.08 lower (SE 0.03) from June 2015. From June 2015 there was no clear trend: the slope changed by 0.008 a year (SE 0.011) and the premium of very short posts by 0.004 a year (SE 0.034). The change came in 2015, with the capture break and the shift towards photos and video, not with Facebook's 2018 News Feed change (Hotham 2026c), so I do not read it as a change in how users responded to length.

3.5 Party, leader and populist pages

Estimated separately, very short posts on leaders' pages drew about 17% more interactions and the longest about 31% more, against 8% and 16% on party pages. In the pooled model with interactions, only the difference for the longest posts is clearly distinguishable from zero (0.28, SE 0.09; very short posts 0.04, SE 0.08). The slopes on log length estimated separately were almost the same (0.026 for parties, 0.028 for leaders; pooled difference 0.053, SE 0.031). Evidence of a difference is thus confined to the longest posts.

On populist pages, the longest posts drew no more than the reference (0.06, SE 0.06), against about 25% more on other pages. The pooled difference for the longest posts was −0.18 (SE 0.08), but the difference in the log-length slope was not statistically significant (−0.033, SE 0.033). These differences are suggestive rather than firm. Posts with no text drew about 40% fewer interactions on every kind of page.

3.6 Between and within pages

Within pages, posts longer than the page's own average drew slightly more interactions (0.044, SE 0.018). Across the 186 pages, those that wrote longer posts on average drew fewer interactions per post

(−0.72 log points per log unit of average length, SE 0.22, holding constant country and the mix of types). Pages that wrote longer posts had smaller followings (correlation −0.21), and with followers added the difference across pages is no longer significant (−0.14, SE 0.17).

4 Discussion

For European parties and leaders, less was not more in general: once a post had some text, its length had little association with total engagement, and the largest difference was between posts with and without text. Longer text went with more sharing and commenting relative to likes, which fits the idea that a substantive message gives users something to pass on or respond to (Berger and Milkman 2012; Heiss et al. 2019).

For status updates the text is the post, and length went with much more engagement; for links, photos and videos the text is a caption, and its length went with little difference. The weaker association after 2015 cannot be separated from the capture break.

The design has clear limits. Length is chosen by the page, and the associations should not be read as effects of length. Pages may write more for posts they consider important. Posts with no text are often content passed on from other pages; the gap remains when these are excluded, but the classification is approximate and some missing text may reflect capture. Fixed effects do not remove differences between individual posts. Length in characters is a crude measure that ignores content, tone and language. The May 2015 capture break changed the mix of photo posts, and the outcome changed when Facebook added reactions in 2016. The analysis covers engagement, not reach or persuasion.

5 Conclusion

Across 186 party and leader pages in 20 European countries, posts got much longer between 2010 and 2020. Posts with no text drew far less engagement than posts with some; among posts with text, length went with only small differences in total engagement, but with more shares and comments relative to likes. Whether a post had any text went with larger differences in engagement than how long the text was.

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 and aggregate data by page, month, type and length bin 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 characters and interactions and, to identify content passed on from other pages, the addresses of linked posts. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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