

# New Leader, New Audience?

## Party Leadership Changes and Facebook Engagement in Europe, 2010 to 2020

Tristan Hotham\*

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### Abstract

Parties often change leader in the hope of a fresh start, and in an age of personalised politics a new leader might be expected to bring new attention. Is a change of leader followed by a change in the engagement a party receives on social media? I compile the dates of 106 changes of party leader in 15 European countries between 2010 and 2020 and follow the parties' Facebook pages, collected through CrowdTangle, from twelve weeks before each change to six months after, comparing them with other parties' pages in the same country over the same weeks. In the week a new leader took office, a party's page received about 2.4 times its usual engagement relative to other parties, and over that week and the next about 60% more. The median post drew about 13% more in the following ten weeks. But total engagement soon returned to its earlier level: from two weeks to six months after the change it was not detectably higher than before. Where the new leader followed an interim leader (17 changes), engagement after the change was much higher than in the weeks before it, but a longer baseline shows that these parties' engagement had fallen during the interim period, and after the change it returned to about its level a year earlier, with the party posting more. A change of leader brings a moment of attention and a small rise in what each post receives, but on average no lasting new audience for the party's page.

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

## 1 Introduction

Leaders have become more central to how parties present themselves and how voters see them ([McAllister 2007](#); [Rahat and Sheaffer 2007](#)). When a party changes leader, it is often hoping to change its fortunes: a new face, a new message and renewed media attention ([Cross and Blais 2012](#)). On social media, where leaders are often more visible than the parties they lead, a new leader might be expected to bring new followers and new engagement to the party's own channels.

This paper asks whether that happens on Facebook. Using dates I compiled for 106 changes of leader in parties whose pages are in my data, I compare each party's page before and after the change with

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\*Independent researcher. ORCID 0000-0003-4931-9349. Correspondence: [contact@tristanhotham.com](mailto:contact@tristanhotham.com). The views expressed are the author's own and do not represent those of any employer.

the pages of other parties in the same country over the same weeks. I ask three questions. **RQ1.** Does engagement with the party's page rise when a new leader takes office? **RQ2.** Does any rise last? **RQ3.** Does it depend on the circumstances of the change?

The answers are as follows. Engagement rose sharply in the week of the change, and the median post drew somewhat more for some months. But total engagement returned to its previous level within a few weeks. When the new leader followed an interim leader, engagement rose much more relative to the weeks just before the change, but mainly because it had fallen during the interim.

## 2 Background

**Leaders and personalisation.** Research on personalisation argues that leaders have become more important in electoral politics and in the media coverage of parties (McAllister 2007; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). Social media may extend this trend, since leaders can communicate directly and their pages often attract larger audiences than their parties'. A change of leader is therefore one of the few moments when a party can visibly renew itself.

**Leadership change.** Leaders are replaced for many reasons: electoral defeat, scandal, retirement, or a decision to move to another office (Cross and Blais 2012). Some changes are planned handovers; others follow a resignation, often after a defeat, with an interim leader in charge until a successor is chosen. The circumstances may matter for engagement. A planned handover may change little, while the end of a period of crisis or drift, under a caretaker, may mark a clearer new start.

**Expectations.** If a new leader brings new attention, engagement with the party's page should rise when the leader takes office. Whether the rise lasts depends on whether the new leader attracts a lasting audience or only a moment of news. My earlier work found that engagement depends on a party's status and position (Hotham 2026a,b); a change of leader is a change within the party that leaves these largely in place, at least at first.

## 3 Data

**Leadership changes.** I compiled, from Wikipedia and national news sources, the dates on which each party in my data changed its principal leader (leader, chair, president or secretary-general, whichever is the top post) between mid-2009 and September 2020, recording interim leaders and co-leaders separately. An event is the date a new permanent single leader formally took office, where the date is known to the day. I exclude people who had led the party, including as interim leader, in the previous three years, and leaders returning after temporarily stepping aside; interim leaders later confirmed in post are therefore excluded. I also exclude four cases that are not a change of an existing top post (a party's first formal leader, a newly created post, a formalised de facto leader and one case where the top post is unclear), and events after which the party changed leader again within six months. The date is when the new leader took office, which for some parties follows the leadership election by a few weeks. Changes in parties with co-leaders or collective leadership are excluded. I keep events for which the party's page posted from at least twelve weeks before to six months after. This leaves 106 events in 65 party pages and 15 countries. In 17 of them, the new leader followed an interim leader appointed within the previous year, usually after the previous leader resigned; examples include the elections of Jeremy Corbyn, Santiago Abascal, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Inés Arrimadas.

**Posts.** 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 page I count posts and interactions (likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions) in each week from twelve weeks before the change to 25 weeks after, with weeks without posts counted as zero.

**Comparison pages.** For each event, the comparison pages are the other party pages in the same country that were active over the same weeks and had no change of leader (including interim changes) from 26 weeks before to 26 weeks after the event. There are on average five comparison pages per event; one event with no comparison page is dropped.

## 4 Method

I stack the events and estimate, for page  $p$  in event  $e$  and week  $k$ ,

$$y_{pek} = \sum_j \beta_j \text{Treated}_{pe} \times \text{Period}_{jk} + \alpha_{pe} + \gamma_{ek} + \varepsilon_{pek}, \quad (1)$$

where the periods are the four weeks before the change ( $k = -4$  to  $-1$ ), the week of the change and the week after ( $k = 0, 1$ ), weeks 2 to 11 and weeks 12 to 25, with weeks  $-12$  to  $-5$  as the reference. The page-event fixed effect  $\alpha_{pe}$  compares each page with itself, and the event-week effect  $\gamma_{ek}$  removes anything that affected all parties in the country that week. The coefficients  $\beta_j$  are the changes on the party's page relative to other parties. Outcomes are the log of one plus total interactions, the log of one plus posts, and the log of one plus the median interactions per post in weeks with posts. Standard errors are clustered by page. The timing of leadership changes is not random, and parties may change leader when their fortunes are already shifting; the four weeks before the change show whether engagement was moving beforehand.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 A spike, then a return

Figure 1 shows the weekly profile of total interactions relative to comparison pages. There is no sign of a change in the four weeks before the new leader took office. In the week of the change, the party's page received about 2.4 times its usual engagement relative to other parties. By the following week, it was back close to its earlier level, and it stayed within the range of its earlier variation for the next six months.

Figure 2 gives the period estimates. Over the week of the change and the week after, total interactions were about 60% higher than before (0.47 log points, SE 0.14), posts about 21% higher and the median post drew about 24% more. In weeks 2 to 11, total interactions were about 19% higher, and in weeks 12 to 25 about 8% higher, neither distinguishable from zero. Posting returned to its earlier level. The median post continued to draw more, by about 13% in weeks 2 to 11 (0.13, SE 0.05) and about 12% in weeks 12 to 25 (0.12, SE 0.06). The point estimates are similar when any one country is dropped and when the seven events followed by a national election within six months are excluded.

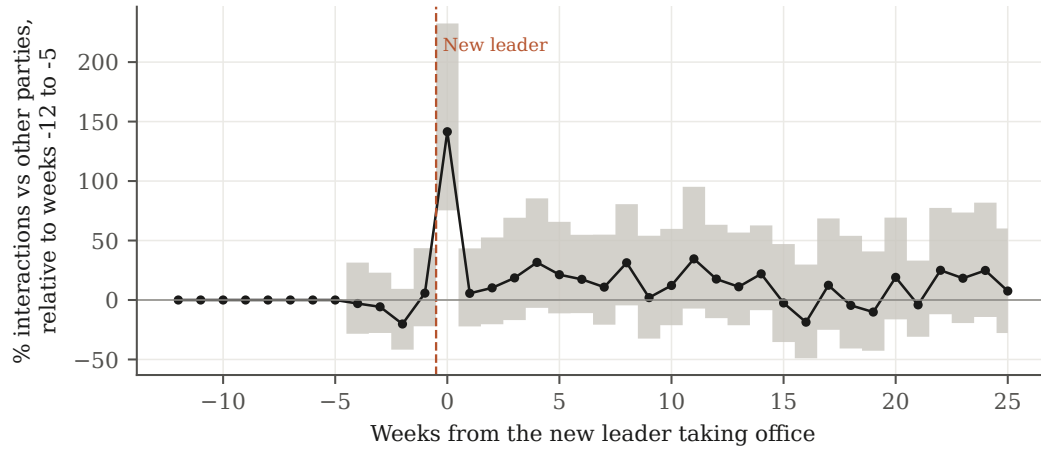


**Figure 1.** Total interactions on the party’s page by week relative to the date the new leader took office, compared with other parties in the same country, with weeks –12 to –5 as the reference. 106 events; shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

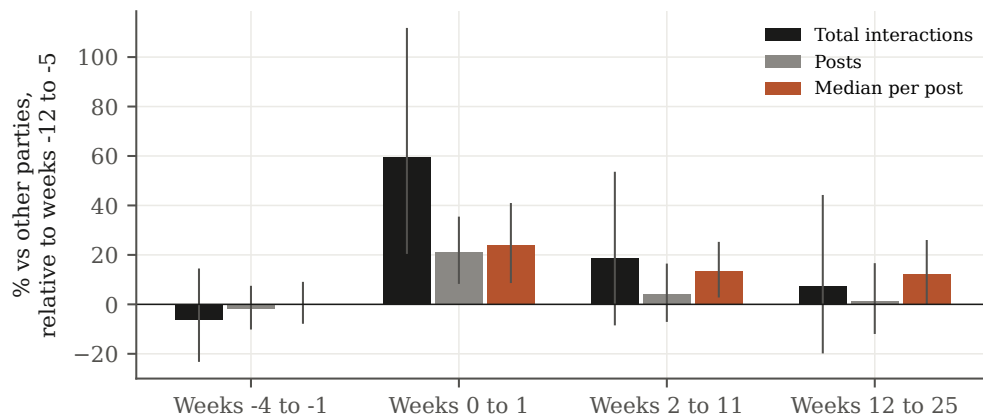


**Figure 2.** Change in total interactions, posts and median interactions per post on the party’s page, by period, compared with other parties in the same country and relative to weeks –12 to –5. Bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

## 5.2 After an interim: recovery rather than renewal

The circumstances of the change mattered for the comparison with the weeks just before it (Figure 3). For the 89 direct handovers from one permanent leader to the next, engagement rose by about 43% over the change week and the week after and then returned to its earlier level. For the 17 changes in which the new leader followed an interim leader, engagement nearly tripled over the change week and the week after and was about 2.5 times its level in weeks –12 to –5 in weeks 2 to 11 (0.92 log points, SE 0.31; between 0.77 and 1.05 when any one event is dropped). In weeks 12 to 25 the estimate was 0.74 (SE 0.41), an imprecise estimate. These parties also posted about 31% more in weeks 2 to 11.

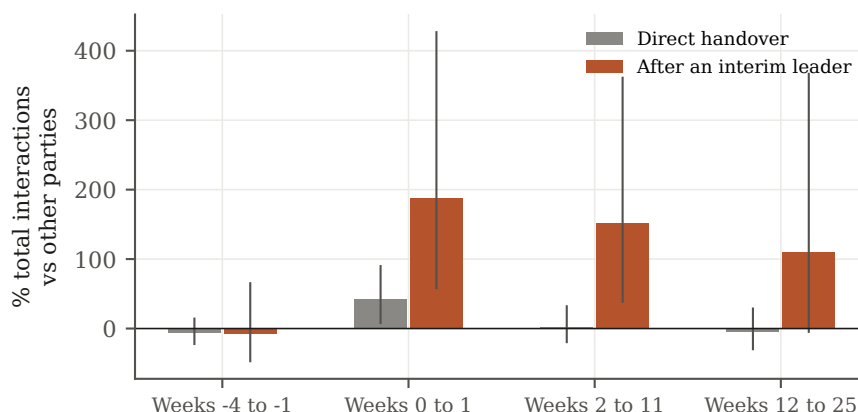


**Figure 3.** Change in total interactions on the party's page by period, relative to weeks –12 to –5, for direct handovers (89 events) and for new leaders who followed an interim leader (17 events). Separate stacked models; bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

The weeks before these changes, however, were not typical. Extending the window back to a year before the change, for the events where the pages were active that long, and using weeks –52 to –13 as the reference, the 15 parties with interim leaders were already about 36% below their earlier level in weeks –12 to –5 (–0.45, SE 0.30) and about 39% below in the four weeks before the change. After the change, in weeks 2 to 11, they were close to their earlier level (0.23, SE 0.28). For the 81 direct handovers, the earlier weeks showed no such dip (–0.02, SE 0.11). Much of the apparent gain after an interim period is therefore a recovery from a slump during the interim, together with more posting by the party, rather than a new audience.

## 6 Discussion

A change of leader is followed by a moment of attention to a party on Facebook, but on average not by a lasting gain. Engagement more than doubled in the week the new leader took office and the median post drew somewhat more for months after, but the total returned to its earlier level within a few weeks. For most parties, a new leader did not bring a new audience to the party's page.

Parties led by interim leaders were the exception only in appearance. Their engagement rose sharply after a new leader took over, but it had fallen while they were without a permanent leader, often after a defeat, and after the change it returned to roughly where it had been a year earlier. Choosing a new leader seems to end a period of reduced attention more than it creates new attention.

The design has clear limits. Leadership changes are not random: parties change leader when things

are going badly or when an opportunity arises. The comparison with other parties in the same country removes national events but not party-specific ones. The dates were compiled from Wikipedia and news sources and some are uncertain by a day or two, which matters little for weekly data; the date used is when the leader took office, which can come weeks after the leadership election. I also examined whether the change differed for parties in government, after an election or before one; these exploratory comparisons are not reported in detail, since several were run and none was clear across outcomes. The pages are those on my CrowdTangle lists, and the data record engagement with the party's page, not with the new leader's own page, which may absorb much of the new attention.

## **7 Conclusion**

Across 106 changes of party leader in 15 European countries, a new leader was followed by a short spike in engagement with the party's Facebook page and a modest rise in what each post received, but no lasting rise in total engagement. The larger rise after an interim leader was mostly a recovery from a slump.

## **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 leadership changes, with sources, the analysis code and the page-week 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, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by page and week, 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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