

Not a Forecast: The Radical Right on Facebook in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, 2014 to 2020

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Abstract

Radical-right parties often draw more engagement on Facebook than their share of the vote would suggest. Does that advantage tell us anything about where their support is heading? I compare three established radical-right parties in Scandinavia: the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Progress Party (FrP) in Norway and the Danish People's Party (DF). The data are 61,081 posts recorded by CrowdTangle between 2014 and October 2020: the national party pages of the eight main parties in Sweden and Norway, and, for Denmark, where the export has no party pages, the pages of eight politicians who led or spoke for the main parties for most of the period. I compare each party's share of the interactions on these pages with its share in 1,733 national polls and at five elections. In Sweden and Norway the radical right drew more engagement than its poll share in every month, typically two to three times as much. The Sweden Democrats' page drew 34% of party-page interactions in 2015 and 68% in 2020, while their share in the polls stayed at about 19% to 21%. In an accounting sense, almost all of that growth came from posting more: their share of all posts rose from 12% to 37%, while engagement per post stayed at three to four times the other parties' average. The Progress Party's page drew 34% to 49% of interactions while its poll share was 12% to 16%. In Denmark the result depends on the pages compared: the DF leader's page drew less than DF's poll share, but with the page of its parliamentary group leader added, DF drew more. Its Facebook share gave no clear warning of its collapse at the 2019 election. Across all 24 parties, a rise in Facebook share was followed by a small rise in the polls: a typical three-month change in Facebook share was followed by a change of about a tenth of a point, against typical poll movements of one and a half points. For the Sweden Democrats and the Progress Party there was no association. In Sweden and Norway the radical right's advantage on Facebook was a stable feature of how these parties used and drew engagement on the platform, not a forecast of their support.

Keywords: radical right; Sweden Democrats; Progress Party; Danish People's Party; Facebook; Crowd-Tangle; opinion polls; Scandinavia

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1 Introduction

In two earlier papers I asked whether Facebook showed the rise of a party before the polls did. For Sinn Féin before the 2020 Irish election, a large and sustained rise in the party's share of engagement came one to three months before most polls recorded its surge, but the same measure had produced false signals (Hotham 2026a). For Podemos and Vox in Spain, both new parties drew a far larger share of engagement than of the vote before they broke through, but changes in their share were linked to later changes in the polls only around election campaigns (Hotham 2026c). Those were parties on the rise. This paper asks the same questions of established parties whose support rose, held steady and fell.

The main radical-right parties of Scandinavia are a natural test. They are usually grouped as one party family, although the Progress Party is often seen as the most moderate of them and is sometimes classed as right-wing populist rather than radical right (Jungar and Jupskås 2014). The Sweden Democrats entered the Riksdag in 2010 and won 12.9% in 2014 and 17.5% in 2018 (Valmyndigheten 2019). The Progress Party won 16.3% in 2013 and 15.2% in 2017, governed with the Conservatives from 2013 until January 2020, and fell to 8.2% at the local elections of 2019 (Statistics Norway 2019). The Danish People's Party won 21.1% in 2015, its best result, and 8.7% in 2019 (Danmarks Statistik 2019). All three were established, so the question is not whether Facebook saw them coming, but whether it tracked their support, and whether it showed a decline before the polls did.

Populist parties draw more engagement on Facebook than other parties of the same size, a premium I estimated at about 2.5 times across 17 European countries, with large premiums in Sweden and Norway (Hotham 2026b). Digital traces are better read as indicators of attention than of support (Gayo-Avello 2012; Jungherr et al. 2017), and social media have been argued to suit populist communication (Gerbaudo 2018). Swedish and Norwegian parties and politicians took up Facebook widely, though not universally, with activity intensifying around elections (Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Larsson 2016).

I ask three questions. How did each radical-right party's share of engagement compare with its support? Did changes in that share come before changes in the polls, for these parties and for parties in general? And what accounts for the shares: posting more, or drawing more per post?

2 Data and methods

2.1 Pages and posts

The data come from CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team 2020), exported in October 2020 during my doctoral research (Hotham 2021), from CrowdTangle lists of political pages in each country (Table 1). For Sweden and Norway I use the national party pages of the eight parties that held seats in parliament throughout the period, excluding youth wings. The Red Party, which held no Storting seats from 2013 to 2017, is not among them. The Sweden Democrats' page is recorded only from December 2014, so the Swedish series starts in January 2015. The Norwegian series starts in January 2014, because CrowdTangle recorded few posts on several Norwegian party pages in 2013; in the weeks before the 2013 election, for example, it recorded 17 posts on the Conservatives' page.

For Denmark the export contains no party pages, only a fixed list of politicians' pages. I use one page for each of the eight main parties, from January 2015: Mette Frederiksen (Social Democrats, leader from June 2015), Lars Løkke Rasmussen (Venstre, leader until 2019), Anders Samuelsen (Liberal Alliance, leader until 2019), Pia Olsen Dyhr (Socialist People's Party), Kristian Thulesen Dahl (DF),

Table 1. Pages, posts and interactions.

Page	Party	Posts	Interactions (m)	Page likes, Oct 2020
<i>Sweden, party pages, from January 2015</i>				
Sverigedemokraterna	SD	5,879	19.94	323,371
Socialdemokraterna	S	2,852	4.80	242,854
Moderaterna	M	3,522	4.44	116,021
Vänsterpartiet	V	2,728	3.54	136,011
Centerpartiet	C	2,707	1.10	58,840
Liberalerna	L	2,821	1.09	32,067
Kristdemokraterna	KD	2,268	1.01	37,829
Miljöpartiet de gröna	MP	1,768	0.86	68,568
<i>Norway, party pages, from January 2014</i>				
Fremskrittspartiet FrP	FrP	3,831	7.63	159,284
Høyre	H	4,740	3.99	125,071
Arbeiderpartiet	Ap	3,120	2.28	134,856
SV - Sosialistisk Venstreparti	SV	3,226	1.65	57,942
Miljøpartiet De Grønne	MDG	1,390	1.07	67,823
Senterpartiet	Sp	1,762	0.99	43,529
Venstre	V	1,775	0.51	35,613
KrF Kristelig Folkeparti	KrF	2,192	0.50	20,954
<i>Denmark, politicians' pages, from January 2015</i>				
Mette Frederiksen	S	1,461	5.46	240,097
Lars Løkke Rasmussen	V	1,402	3.30	207,069
Anders Samuelsen	LA	2,773	2.97	88,588
Pia Olsen Dyhr	SF	1,687	2.81	74,467
Kristian Thulesen Dahl	DF	1,431	2.13	72,524
Morten Østergaard	RV	2,259	1.99	67,674
Pernille Skipper	EL	1,308	1.83	70,819
Søren Pape Poulsen	K	2,179	1.36	50,167

Page likes are those CrowdTangle recorded on each page's last post in the period.

Pernille Skipper (political spokesperson of the Red-Green Alliance, which has no formal leader), Morten Østergaard (Social Liberals, until October 2020) and Søren Pape Poulsen (Conservatives). Each led or spoke for their party for most of 2015 to 2020, but the set is fixed, so after a change of leader the page no longer belongs to the party's leader. The list has no pages for the Alternative, which entered parliament in 2015, or the New Right, which entered in 2019. It also contains a second DF page, that of Peter Skaarup, DF's parliamentary group leader, which I use in a robustness check.

After removing duplicate records there are 61,081 posts with 77.2 million interactions, the sum of reactions, comments and shares: 24,545 posts in Sweden, 22,036 in Norway and 14,500 in Denmark. Facebook's reactions other than likes exist from February 2016, so the composition of interactions changes then. The year 2020 covers January to October only.

2.2 Polls and results

For the polls I use the national voting-intention polls compiled on Wikipedia for the Swedish elections of 2018 and 2022, the Norwegian elections of 2017 and 2021, and the Danish elections of 2019 and 2022 ([Wikipedia contributors 2026](#)), excluding regional and constituency polls. I compute the median

poll figure for each party in each month. Over the periods I use there are 503 Swedish, 664 Norwegian and 566 Danish polls. The Danish compilation has no polls for July to November 2015, May, June and December 2017, July 2018 and July 2019, and several months in 2017 and 2018 rest on one to four polls. I express each party's poll figure as a share of the total for the same eight parties, its *poll share*. Parties outside the eight, such as the Alternative, the New Right and the Red Party, are left out of the denominator, so poll shares are somewhat higher than raw poll figures. I do the same with official results for five elections: the Swedish general election of 2018 and European election of 2019 ([Valmyndigheten 2019](#)), the Norwegian election of 2017 ([Statistics Norway 2019](#)), and the Danish elections of 2015 and 2019 ([Danmarks Statistik 2019](#)).

2.3 Measures

The main measure is each party's *Facebook share*: its share of all interactions on the eight pages in its country, by month for the time series and by year (interaction-weighted) for the summaries. To see what accounts for it, I split each radical-right party's yearly share into its share of all posts and the average engagement of its posts relative to the other parties' posts. This is an accounting identity, not a causal decomposition. I also report the median interactions per post relative to the other parties, interactions per 1,000 page likes from 2016 (CrowdTangle records page likes for few posts before then), and the share of interactions that were angry reactions. For elections I use the 30 days before polling day, excluding the day itself.

To ask whether changes in Facebook share came before changes in the polls, I regress the change in a party's poll share over the next h months on the change in its Facebook share over the previous h months, controlling for the change in its poll share over the previous h months, for h of one, two and three months. For each radical-right party I use Newey-West standard errors, and also report estimates on non-overlapping windows. For all 24 parties pooled, by country and together, I cluster standard errors by party and, because 8 or 24 clusters are few, also report wild cluster bootstrap p -values (Webb weights, 999 replications, null imposed). Months without polls are dropped, so consecutive observations are not always consecutive months. The estimates are descriptive.

3 Findings

3.1 Sweden and Norway: far above their support

In Sweden and Norway the radical right drew more engagement than its poll share in every month (Figure 1). The ratio of Facebook share to poll share had a median of 2.3 for the Sweden Democrats (range 1.1 to 3.7) and 2.9 for the Progress Party (range 1.4 to 5.1). The Sweden Democrats' page drew 34% of the interactions on the eight party pages in 2015, 44% in 2017, 48% in 2018 and 68% in 2020 (Table 3). Their poll share barely moved: about 19% each year from 2015 to 2018 and 21% in 2019 and 2020. The gap between the two widened every year. In the month before the 2018 election the party drew 46% of the engagement and won 18% of the vote for these parties, and before the 2019 European election 46% against 16% (Table 2).

The Progress Party's page drew 34% to 49% of party-page engagement in each year from 2014 to 2020, against a poll share of 12% to 16%, and 2.2 times its share of the vote in the month before the 2017 election. Its Facebook share fell from 45% to 49% in 2016 and 2017 to 37% in 2018, while its poll share

Table 2. Facebook share in the 30 days before each election and share of the vote, among the eight main parties (%).

Country	Election	Party	Vote	Facebook	Ratio	Highest ratio
Sweden	General 2018	SD	17.8	45.7	2.6	SD (2.6)
Sweden	EP 2019	SD	15.7	46.4	3.0	SD (3.0)
Norway	General 2017	FrP	15.9	34.4	2.2	MDG (3.5)
Denmark	General 2015	DF	22.4	16.8	0.8	LA (2.9)
Denmark	General 2019	DF	9.7	5.2	0.5	RV (2.7)

Vote is the party's share of the votes cast for the eight parties. "Highest ratio" is the party with the largest ratio of Facebook share to vote share at that election.

held at about 15%; in 2019 both were lower, at 34% and 12%.

3.2 Posting more, and drawing more per post

Two things account for these shares (Figure 2; Table 3). First, the radical-right pages drew more per post. The Sweden Democrats' posts drew about three to four times the average engagement of the other parties' posts in every year, and their median post about 3.7 to 5.5 times the other parties' median. The Progress Party's posts drew about four times as much on average until 2017 (five times in 2014) and two to three times as much from 2018. Part of this is audience: both pages were among the largest in their countries. Per 1,000 page likes, the Sweden Democrats' posts drew a median of 9 to 15 interactions from 2016, against about 7 to 8 for the other Swedish parties, so the gap is smaller once page size is taken into account.

Second, and in Sweden more important for the trend, the Sweden Democrats posted more. Their share of all posts on the eight pages rose from 12% in 2015 to 25% in 2018 and 37% in 2020, while their engagement per post relative to the other parties did not rise. Holding their post share at its 2015 level, the identity gives a 2020 Facebook share of about 34%, the same as in 2015; holding their per-post ratio at its 2015 level gives 68%. In an accounting sense, then, almost all of the growth in their share came from posting more. In absolute terms, interactions on the Sweden Democrats' page rose from 0.9 million in 2015 to 6.9 million in the first ten months of 2020, while those on the other seven pages together rose from 1.7 million to 3.3 million. A measure based on share of engagement rewards volume.

The reactions differed too. In 2019 and 2020 angry reactions made up 18% and 24% of all interactions on the Sweden Democrats' posts, against 2% to 3% on the other Swedish parties' posts. The Progress Party's posts drew a smaller share of angry reactions than the other Norwegian parties' posts. The DF leader's posts drew a slightly higher share than the other Danish pages in 2016 to 2018, and four to nine times as high in 2019 and 2020.

3.3 Denmark: it depends on the pages

In Denmark, DF's leader drew less engagement than his party's support until DF's collapse. Kristian Thulesen Dahl's page drew 14% of the engagement on the eight Danish pages in 2015 and 9% to 11% from 2016 to 2018, while DF's poll share was 19% to 21%. In the month before the 2015 election, DF's best, his page drew 17% of the engagement against DF's 22% of the vote for these parties. The largest shares went to Anders Samuelsen of Liberal Alliance in 2015 and 2016, to Lars Løkke Rasmussen in 2017, to Morten Østergaard and Pia Olsen Dyhr in 2018, and to Mette Frederiksen in 2019 and 2020.

Table 3. The radical-right parties on Facebook and in the polls, by year.

	Facebook	Poll	Post	Mean	Median	Per 1,000 likes		Angry (%)
	share	share	share	ratio	ratio	Party	Others	party / others
<i>Sweden: SD</i>								
2015	33.9	18.5	12.5	3.6	5.0	–	–	–
2016	41.0	19.2	14.2	4.2	5.3	15.4	7.9	5.4 / 1.5
2017	43.6	19.0	19.7	3.1	3.7	9.5	8.1	6.2 / 1.7
2018	47.5	19.4	24.5	2.8	4.0	11.0	8.2	9.8 / 1.7
2019	61.5	20.7	28.0	4.1	5.4	9.4	6.6	18.2 / 2.7
2020 ^a	67.7	21.2	37.2	3.5	5.5	11.0	8.1	23.6 / 2.1
<i>Norway: FrP</i>								
2014	46.3	13.7	14.4	5.1	7.0	–	–	–
2015	35.7	13.1	13.2	3.7	4.3	–	–	–
2016	49.4	15.6	20.9	3.7	3.8	13.0	7.0	0.5 / 1.3
2017	45.1	14.4	17.3	3.9	5.0	16.2	8.5	0.6 / 1.2
2018	36.7	14.8	18.4	2.6	2.8	5.3	4.7	0.6 / 2.2
2019	33.5	11.5	18.2	2.3	2.5	6.8	6.0	0.8 / 2.2
2020 ^a	38.8	12.9	17.7	2.9	3.1	6.8	5.1	0.7 / 2.0
<i>Denmark: DF</i>								
2015	13.6	20.1	13.4	1.0	1.4	–	–	–
2016	8.7	20.9	6.7	1.3	1.7	19.3	10.5	2.9 / 2.3
2017	10.8	19.1	7.2	1.6	1.9	14.9	8.3	3.4 / 2.8
2018	11.0	19.1	7.5	1.5	1.8	12.5	8.5	4.2 / 3.6
2019	9.1	12.6	11.0	0.8	1.0	15.2	16.7	8.9 / 1.8
2020 ^a	7.5	7.7	13.5	0.5	0.9	19.7	20.1	9.3 / 1.1

Facebook share and post share are the party's share of all interactions and of all posts on the eight pages in the year (%). Poll share is the average of monthly poll shares (%). Mean and median ratio compare the party's interactions per post with the other parties' posts. Per 1,000 likes are medians, from 2016. Angry is the share of interactions that were angry reactions, from February 2016. ^a January to October.

This depends on which pages count. Peter Skaarup, DF's parliamentary group leader, posted more than Thulesen Dahl. With his page added, DF drew 30% to 31% of the engagement from 2015 to 2017, well above its poll share, and 22% to 27% from 2018 to 2020. Page choice matters in the other countries too, though the leader-page sets there are incomplete. On the pages of six Swedish party leaders, Jimmie Åkesson drew 30% to 40% of the engagement, more than the Sweden Democrats' party page drew among party pages in 2015 and less from 2016. On the pages of eight Norwegian party leaders, Siv Jensen drew 24% to 54%, a share that fell over the period.

Did Facebook show DF's collapse coming? DF's poll share fell from about 18% to 20% in late 2018 to 15% in April 2019 and 11% in June, and the party won 8.7% of the vote. The DF leader's share of engagement fell from 23% in July 2018 to between 5% and 8% from September 2018 to January 2019, before the polls fell, but it rose to 12.5% in February 2019, it had been as low before, and with Skaarup's page added the fall is much smaller. I do not read it as a signal.

3.4 Did changes in Facebook share come first?

Across all 24 parties, a rise in a party's Facebook share was followed by a small rise in its poll share (Table 4). A ten-point rise over one month was followed by a rise of about 0.2 points over the next month,

Table 4. Change in poll share over the next h months regressed on change in Facebook share over the previous h months.

	h	Coefficient	SE	p	p (bootstrap)	n
Sweden Democrats	1	0.014	0.013	0.300	–	68
Progress Party	1	0.023	0.016	0.151	–	80
Danish People’s Party	1	0.015	0.022	0.496	–	48
All parties, Sweden	1	0.028	0.010	0.004	0.024	544
All parties, Norway	1	0.018	0.004	<0.001	0.014	640
All parties, Denmark	1	0.027	0.012	0.018	0.047	384
All parties, three countries	1	0.023	0.004	<0.001	0.001	1,568
Sweden Democrats	2	0.017	0.018	0.335	–	66
Progress Party	2	0.004	0.014	0.799	–	78
Danish People’s Party	2	-0.010	0.043	0.813	–	42
All parties, Sweden	2	0.044	0.020	0.025	0.052	528
All parties, Norway	2	0.005	0.002	0.034	0.099	624
All parties, Denmark	2	0.003	0.009	0.749	0.876	336
All parties, three countries	2	0.013	0.006	0.030	0.023	1,488
Sweden Democrats	3	0.050	0.033	0.122	–	64
Progress Party	3	-0.011	0.018	0.563	–	76
Danish People’s Party	3	0.121	0.045	0.007	–	39
All parties, Sweden	3	0.065	0.020	0.001	0.117	512
All parties, Norway	3	-0.003	0.007	0.673	0.859	608
All parties, Denmark	3	0.013	0.008	0.126	0.107	312
All parties, three countries	3	0.019	0.011	0.075	0.096	1,432

Each model controls for the change in poll share over the previous h months. Single parties: Newey-West standard errors with h lags. All parties: standard errors clustered by party (8 or 24 clusters) and wild cluster bootstrap p -values (Webb weights, 999 replications). n is party-months; months without polls are dropped.

and similar or smaller amounts at two and three months; the three-month estimate is not statistically significant with the bootstrap. To put this in scale, a typical (one standard deviation) change in a party’s Facebook share over three months was about 6 points, which corresponds to roughly a tenth of a point in its poll share, while a typical three-month change in poll share was about 1.5 points. Within countries, the bootstrap p -values are below 0.05 only at one month, and the association is absent in Norway at two and three months.

For the Sweden Democrats and the Progress Party the association was not distinguishable from zero at any horizon, with or without overlapping windows. For DF the three-month estimate is positive with Newey-West standard errors, but it is not significant on non-overlapping windows, and there is no association at one or two months, so I do not treat it as robust. Over the period as a whole, the Sweden Democrats’ monthly Facebook share and poll share both rose, and their correlation is 0.47, but the Facebook share doubled while the poll share rose by less than three points.

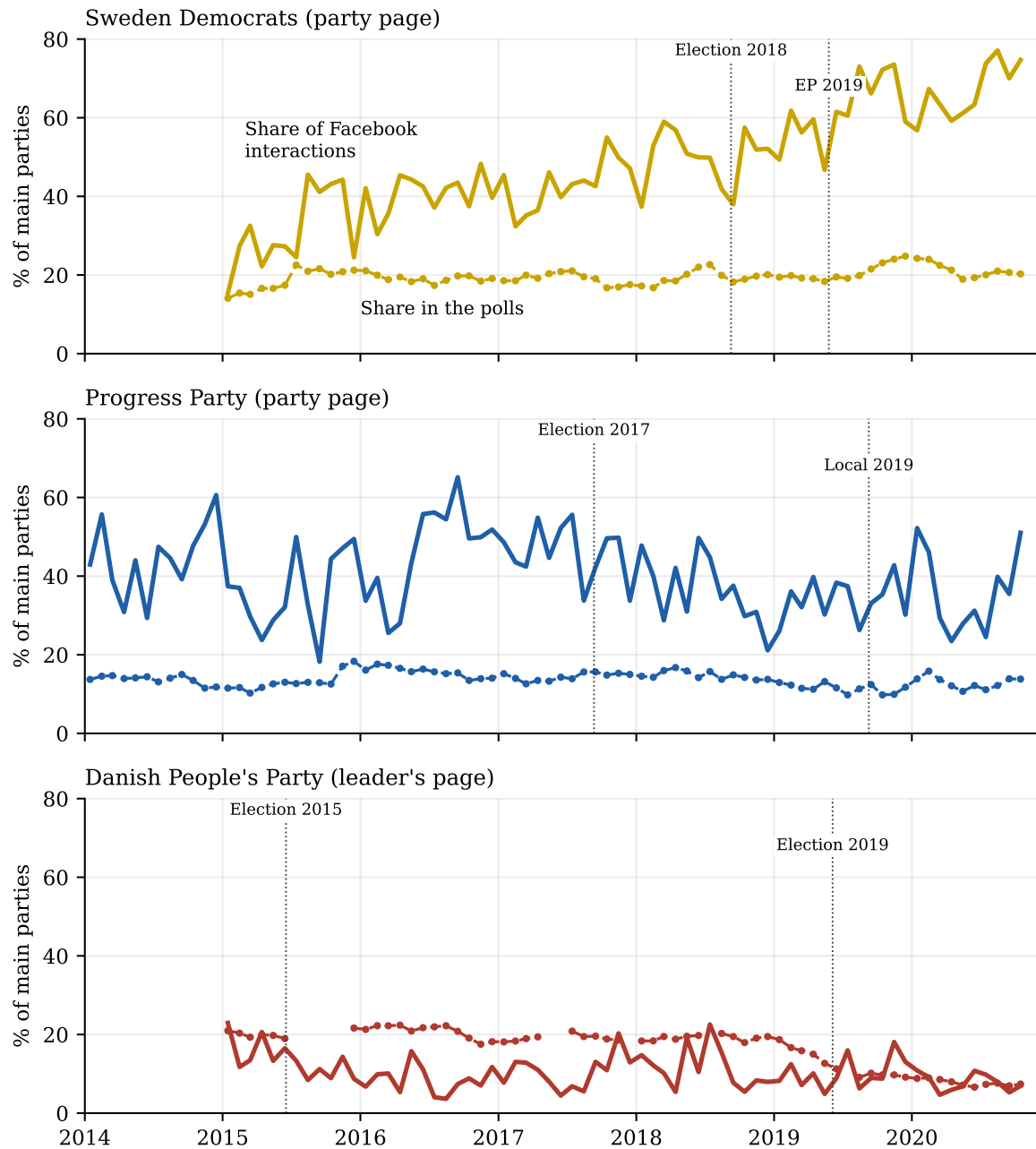


Figure 1. Each radical-right party's share of interactions on the main parties' pages (solid) and its share in the polls (dashed), by month. Sweden and Norway use party pages; Denmark uses the pages of the politicians listed in Table 1. Gaps in the dashed line are months without polls. Dotted lines mark elections.

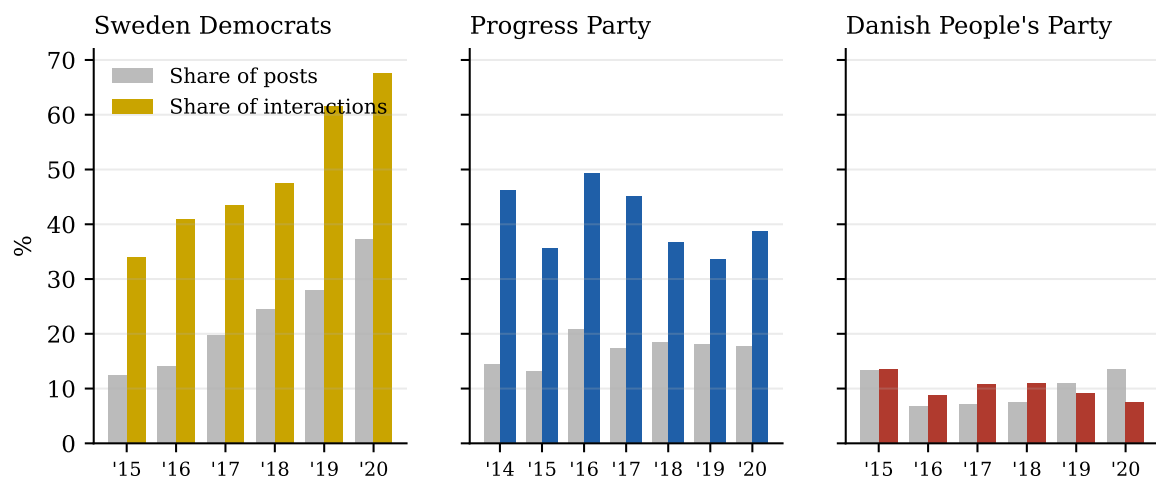


Figure 2. Each radical-right page's share of all posts (grey) and of all interactions (colour) on the eight pages in its country, by year (aggregate shares). Sweden and Denmark from 2015, Norway from 2014.

4 Discussion

In Sweden and Norway the radical right drew more Facebook engagement than its support in every month and at every election from 2017, typically by a factor of two to three. That advantage was stable or growing while the parties' support held steady, and in Sweden its growth is accounted for almost entirely by the Sweden Democrats posting more. It did not anticipate changes in their support. In Denmark the comparison rests on a fixed set of politicians' pages, and whether DF drew more or less than its support depends on whether one counts its leader's page alone or also that of its parliamentary group leader. Neither version gave a clear warning of DF's collapse in 2019.

This complements the earlier cases. For new parties such as Podemos and Vox, a large share of engagement marked a party with an unusual capacity to attract attention before that showed in votes (Hotham 2026c). For the established radical right in Sweden and Norway that capacity was already there and did not track their support. Its size is accounted for largely by how often a party posted, the size of its audience and the reactions its posts received, including, in Sweden, a high share of angry reactions. That fits the view that engagement measures attention (Jungherr et al. 2017) and the premium that populist parties draw (Hotham 2026b). Pooled across parties, changes in Facebook share carried a little information about later changes in the polls, but the amounts were small relative to typical poll movements.

5 Limitations

The Danish comparison uses a fixed set of politicians' pages because the export has no party pages; some of these politicians stopped leading their parties during the period, and two parties have no page. The leader-page comparisons for Sweden and Norway are incomplete for the same reason. The Norwegian list lacks the Red Party. The Swedish series starts in 2015 and the Norwegian in 2014. Shares depend on the set of pages and on how much each page posted. CrowdTangle records interactions on public posts but not whether posts were promoted with paid advertising, and engagement includes reactions from opponents. The poll medians come from compilations on Wikipedia, and some Danish months rest on few polls. The timing analysis uses overlapping windows over short, interrupted series and is descriptive. I do not test forecasting performance out of sample.

6 Conclusion

In Sweden and Norway the established radical right drew a far larger share of party Facebook engagement than of support, consistently, and in Sweden increasingly so because the Sweden Democrats posted more. In Denmark the answer depends on whose pages are counted. In none of the three countries did the parties' share of engagement anticipate their rises or falls in the polls by more than a small amount.

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.

Version 4 (October 2026) corrects the range for the Sweden Democrats' median post relative to the other parties' median from 3.5–5.5 to 3.7–5.5 times, to match the analysis output. No other figure changes.

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.

Ethics and data

The data were collected through CrowdTangle during my doctoral research. They are public posts by political parties and politicians. In line with CrowdTangle's terms, I do not publish post-level data. Deposited with this paper are monthly Facebook and poll shares by party, the monthly poll medians used, the election comparisons, and yearly summaries for the three radical-right parties.

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