

Party Before Leader?

Leaders' and Party Pages on Facebook in Spain, 2015 to 2020

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Abstract

Spain held four general elections between December 2015 and November 2019, as the two-party system gave way to five national parties. I use 74,884 posts from the Facebook pages of seven Spanish parties and seven of their leading politicians, from January 2015 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle, to ask two descriptive questions. First, how much of each party's engagement came through its leader's page? Less than one might expect for parties founded around prominent leaders: the Podemos party page drew between 51% and 83% of the engagement on the Podemos and Pablo Iglesias pages in every year, and the People's Party page drew more than its leader's in every year. Alberto Garzón (Izquierda Unida) drew more than his party page in every year, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) from 2016 to 2018, and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos) in 2018 and 2019, when his share reached 67% in the year his party's vote collapsed. Second, how did the parties' engagement compare with their votes? At all four elections, the pages of Podemos (from 2016, United Podemos) drew between 2.1 and 3.2 times their share of the vote, and Izquierda Unida's 5.8 times in 2015, while the PSOE and the People's Party drew between 0.21 and 0.45 times theirs (up to 0.63 when United Podemos is limited to two pages), including the PSOE when it won in 2019. Vox, which has no leader page in the data, drew 1.4 and 1.8 times its vote share in 2019. On Facebook, the parties that led Spain's governments were the quietest.

1 Introduction

In December 2015 Spain's two-party system broke down. Podemos and Ciudadanos (Cs) together won more than a third of the vote, and the People's Party (PP) and the Socialists (PSOE) fell to their lowest combined share since the transition ([Orriols and Cordero 2016](#)). Further elections followed in June 2016, April 2019 and November 2019, with Vox entering parliament in 2019 and Pedro Sánchez of the PSOE becoming prime minister in June 2018 after a motion of no confidence. In January 2020 the PSOE formed a coalition government with United Podemos. Through this period the parties' leaders were unusually visible, and several of them, Iglesias, Rivera and Sánchez, and later Pablo Casado, were new to leading a national campaign.

That makes Spain a useful case for two questions about Facebook. How much of each party's engagement came through its leader's page rather than its party page? And how did the parties' engagement compare

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with their votes at four elections in four years? In an earlier paper on the same export I compared the Podemos and Vox party pages (Hotham 2026b). This paper adds the leaders' pages and the four main parties.

The paper is one of a series using the same CrowdTangle export, collected during my doctoral research (Hotham 2021). It complements studies of populist parties across Europe (Hotham 2026a) and of leaders and party pages in Britain (Hotham 2026c).

2 Background

Parties now use Facebook continuously (Larsson 2016), and politicians use their own pages to reach audiences directly (Stier et al. 2018). Personal and self-centred posts tend to draw more engagement (Metz et al. 2020; Bene et al. 2022), which gives parties a reason to route communication through their leaders. In Britain I found that the leader's share of a party's Facebook engagement ranged from about three-quarters for some leaders to a quarter or less for others (Hotham 2026c). Spain's new parties were founded around prominent leaders, which might lead one to expect high leader shares.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Pages and posts

The data come from two CrowdTangle lists of Spanish pages, one of parties and one of politicians, exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020). I use the national pages of seven parties (PSOE, PP, Podemos, Cs, Izquierda Unida, Vox and, from September 2019, Más País) and the pages of the people who led or fronted them: Sánchez, Mariano Rajoy, Casado, Iglesias, Rivera, Garzón and Íñigo Errejón, who was Podemos's second figure and campaign director in 2015 and 2016 and led Más País from 2019. I count Errejón with Más País only. Leaving his page out of the Podemos list makes Podemos's share smaller, not larger. Vox's leader, Santiago Abascal, has no page in the lists, so Vox appears through its party page only; this is a limit of the data, not a finding. I leave out an unofficial "Unidas Podemos – Plataforma Ciudadana" page, as in my earlier paper, and the pages of Podemos's regional allies, such as En Comú Podem and Compromís, which together drew under 2% as much as the Podemos and Iglesias pages in each window. I keep posts from 1 January 2015 to 30 September 2020. After removing 31 duplicate posts (same page, time and text; 8 in the study period), the sample is 74,884 posts with 231 million interactions (Table 1). Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares. Timestamps are in UK time, one hour behind Spain, which moves window edges slightly.

3.2 Leaders

For each party I calculate the leader's share of the interactions on the leader's page and the party page together, by year, counting only the periods when the person led the party. Sánchez led the PSOE from July 2014 to October 2016 and again from June 2017, so the period between is left out. Rajoy led the PP until July 2018 and Casado from then. Rivera led Cs until 11 November 2019, the day after the November election. Garzón was the candidate of Izquierda Unida's Popular Unity list in 2015, while Cayo Lara remained its coordinator until May 2016, and he became coordinator in May 2016. I count

Table 1. Pages in the sample, January 2015 to September 2020.

Page	Posts	Interactions (m)	Median per post
PSOE (party)	7,864	9.3	790
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE leader 2014–16 and from 2017; PM from 2018)	3,720	10.4	1,899
Partido Popular (party)	11,095	12.1	632
Mariano Rajoy (PP leader to July 2018; PM to June 2018)	968	3.0	2,027
Pablo Casado (PP leader from July 2018)	2,841	4.7	853
Podemos (party)	13,245	67.5	2,998
Pablo Iglesias (Podemos leader)	4,699	26.6	3,016
Ciudadanos (party)	6,062	13.6	1,052
Albert Rivera (Cs leader to November 2019)	1,893	9.5	3,125
Izquierda Unida (party)	4,292	10.5	1,248
Alberto Garzón (IU candidate 2015, coordinator from 2016)	4,374	18.2	2,094
Vox (party)	10,259	30.4	473
Más País (party, from September 2019)	164	0.1	358
Íñigo Errejón (Podemos, then Más País leader)	3,408	15.0	2,715
Total	74,884	231.0	

him from 2015 as the party’s lead figure; counting him only from May 2016 changes his 2016 share from 61% to 57%.

3.3 Elections

I compare each list’s share of interactions in the 30 days before each general election with its share of the vote among the lists compared ([Ministerio del Interior 2019](#)). Each list’s pages are its party page and the page of its leader or candidate at the time. In 2015 Podemos and its regional allies and Izquierda Unida’s Popular Unity list are compared separately. From 2016 Podemos and Izquierda Unida ran together as Unidos (later Unidas) Podemos, and I combine their four pages. Vote shares for Podemos include its regional allied lists (En Comú Podem, En Marea and Compromís in 2015 and 2016), whose pages are not counted, so the Podemos ratios are if anything understated. In November 2019 I also compare Más País, counting its party page and Errejón’s. Because United Podemos has four pages from 2016 while other lists have one or two, I also report a check that limits it to the Podemos and Iglesias pages. As checks, I use party pages only, leader pages only, and windows of 14 and 60 days. The April and November 2019 elections were six and a half months apart, so their windows do not overlap.

4 Results

4.1 Leaders carried less of the engagement than one might expect

Table 2 and Figure 1 show each leader’s share. The Podemos party page drew more than Iglesias’s page in every year: his share was between 17% and 30% in every year except 2016, when it reached 49%. Rajoy drew between 29% and 38% of the two PP pages while he led the party, and Casado between 33% and 46%. Garzón drew between 58% and 73% of the Izquierda Unida pages, more than the party page in every year. Sánchez drew between 43% and 73% of the two PSOE pages, more than the party page from 2016 to 2018, with his highest share in the second half of 2017, after he won back the party leadership. Rivera’s share rose steadily, from 20% in 2015 to 51% in 2018 and 67% in 2019.

Table 2. Leader's share of the interactions on the leader's page and the party page together (%), by year, counting only periods when the person led the party (Garzón from 2015 as IU's candidate). Part-years: Sánchez 2016 (to September) and 2017 (from 18 June); Rajoy and Casado 2018 (split on 21 July); Rivera 2019 (to 11 November); 2020 runs to September.

Leader	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Sánchez (PSOE)	43	52	73	62	43	47
Rajoy (PP)	29	30	38	38	–	–
Casado (PP)	–	–	–	46	33	39
Iglesias (Podemos)	17	49	28	22	24	30
Rivera (Cs)	20	43	45	51	67	–
Garzón (IU)	58	61	73	68	63	59

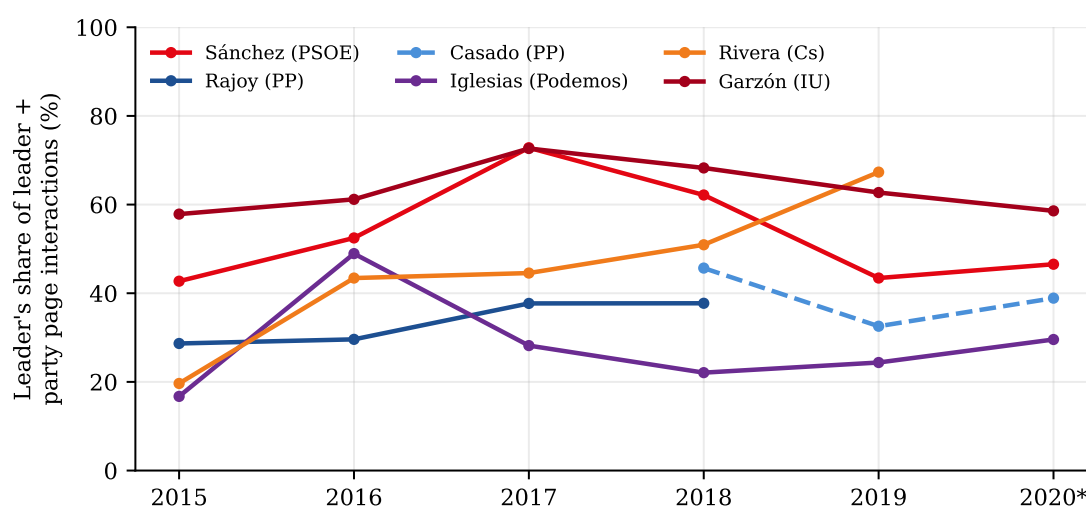


Figure 1. Leader's share of the interactions on the leader's page and the party page together, by year.

Rivera's rising share reflects his party page's decline more than his own growth. His median post drew between about 2,800 and 3,400 interactions each year from 2016 to 2019, while the Cs party page's median post fell from 1,800 in 2016 to 550 in 2019. In 2019, the year Cs's vote fell from 15.9% in April to 6.8% in November, two-thirds of the party's Facebook engagement came through its leader's page.

4.2 The governing parties were the quietest

At all four elections, the lists of Podemos and its allies drew far more than their share of the vote (Figure 2, Table 3). In December 2015 the Podemos and Iglesias pages drew 48% of interactions against 23% of the vote among the lists compared, and Izquierda Unida's two pages drew another 24% against 4%. In June 2016 the combined Unidos Podemos pages drew 67% against 24%, in April 2019 54% against 17%, and in November 2019 41% against 15%. The ratios were between 2.1 and 3.2 for Podemos and its combined lists, and between 2.3 and 2.9 when United Podemos is limited to the Podemos and Iglesias pages.

The PP and the PSOE drew far less than their share of the vote at every election: the PP between 0.21 and 0.32 times, and the PSOE between 0.31 and 0.45 times. That includes the PSOE in both 2019 elections, which it won with 28% of the vote while its two pages drew 14% and 10% of interactions. Limiting United Podemos to two pages raises the PSOE's ratios to between 0.33 and 0.63 and the PP's to between

0.22 and 0.41, still well below their votes. Cs drew between 0.53 and 0.75 times its share until November 2019, when its share of interactions fell less than its vote and the ratio reached 1.05. Vox, with its party page only, drew 1.42 times its vote share in April 2019 and 1.78 times in November, when its share of interactions (31%) was six times the PP's (5%) although the PP won more votes. Más País drew 1.45 times its share in November 2019.

These patterns hold with United Podemos limited to two pages, with party pages only, with leader pages only, and with 14- and 60-day windows (Table 4). The exceptions are Cs and Más País in November 2019, whose ratios range from 0.37 and 0.33 with party pages only to 2.03 and 3.16 with leader pages only, because Rivera's and Errejón's pages carried most of their parties' engagement, and Cs in June 2016, whose ratio is 1.05 when United Podemos is limited to two pages.

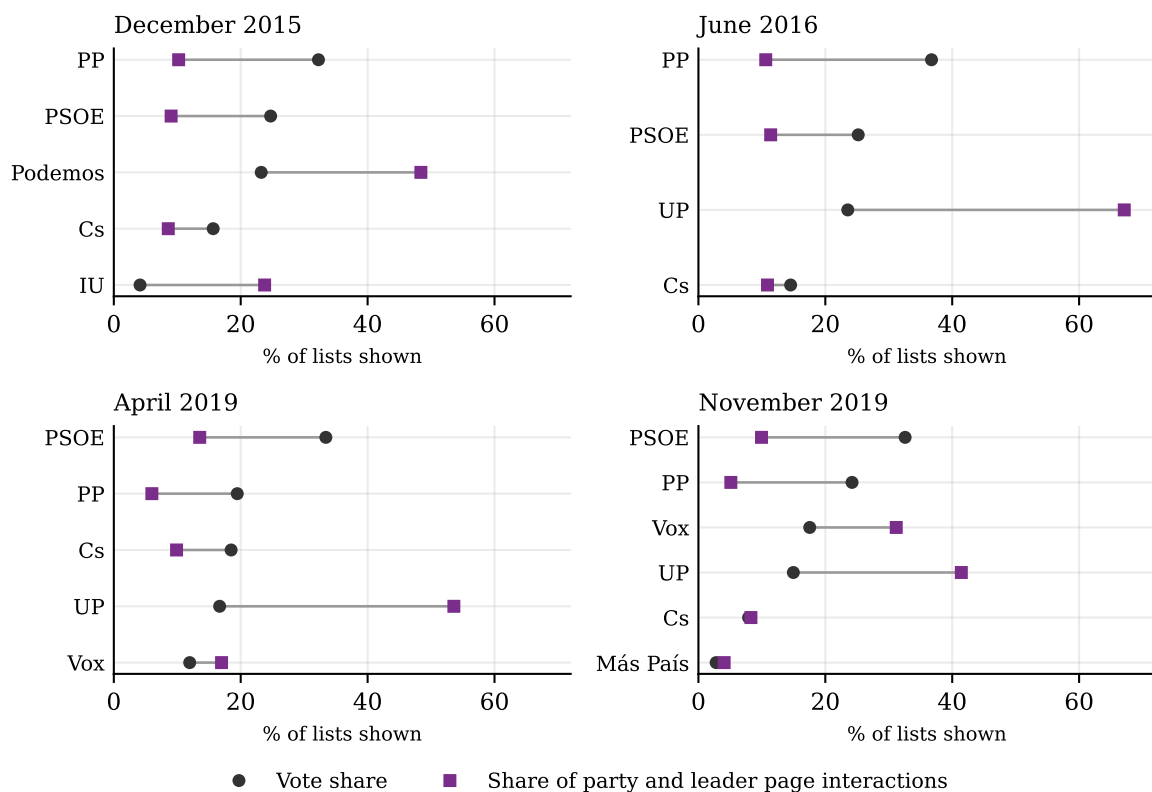


Figure 2. Share of interactions on each list's party and leader pages in the 30 days before each general election, and vote share, among the lists compared. Vox has no leader page in the data.

Table 3. Facebook and vote shares in the 30 days before each general election. Vote % is renormalised among the lists shown. Ratio is Facebook % divided by vote %.

Election	List	Posts	Facebook %	Vote %	Gap (points)	Ratio
December 2015	PP	495	10.2	32.3	-22.0	0.32
	PSOE	264	9.0	24.7	-15.7	0.37
	Podemos	400	48.4	23.2	+25.2	2.08
	Cs	159	8.6	15.7	-7.1	0.55
	IU	485	23.8	4.1	+19.6	5.75
June 2016	PP	599	10.6	36.7	-26.1	0.29
	PSOE	264	11.4	25.2	-13.8	0.45
	UP	563	67.1	23.5	+43.6	2.85
	Cs	148	10.9	14.5	-3.6	0.75
April 2019	PSOE	422	13.5	33.4	-19.9	0.41
	PP	274	6.0	19.5	-13.5	0.31
	Cs	197	9.9	18.5	-8.6	0.53
	UP	581	53.6	16.7	+36.9	3.21
	Vox	108	17.0	12.0	+5.0	1.42
November 2019	PSOE	252	9.9	32.6	-22.6	0.31
	PP	228	5.1	24.2	-19.1	0.21
	Vox	129	31.2	17.5	+13.6	1.78
	UP	530	41.4	15.0	+26.5	2.77
	Cs	208	8.3	7.9	+0.4	1.05
	Más País	130	4.1	2.8	+1.3	1.45

Table 4. Ratio of Facebook share to vote share under alternative page sets and windows. Dashes mark lists with no leader page.

Election	List	Main (30 days)	UP: two pages only	Party pages only	Leader pages only	14 days	60 days
December 2015	PP	0.32	0.32	0.38	0.24	0.33	0.32
	PSOE	0.37	0.37	0.32	0.41	0.38	0.35
	Podemos	2.08	2.08	2.19	1.96	2.08	2.04
	Cs	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.50	0.70
	IU	5.75	5.75	4.88	6.73	5.70	5.52
June 2016	PP	0.29	0.41	0.38	0.18	0.30	0.25
	PSOE	0.45	0.63	0.49	0.41	0.49	0.42
	Cs	0.75	1.05	0.93	0.53	0.72	0.90
	UP	2.85	2.29	2.56	3.20	2.81	2.86
April 2019	PP	0.31	0.35	0.30	0.28	0.30	0.34
	PSOE	0.41	0.45	0.39	0.39	0.45	0.40
	Cs	0.53	0.60	0.40	0.71	0.52	0.49
	UP	3.21	2.88	2.89	3.39	3.15	3.13
	Vox	1.42	1.59	2.14	–	1.42	1.57
November 2019	PP	0.21	0.22	0.19	0.21	0.22	0.21
	PSOE	0.31	0.33	0.24	0.36	0.34	0.30
	Cs	1.05	1.11	0.37	2.03	0.66	1.08
	UP	2.77	2.51	2.52	2.73	3.02	2.92
	Vox	1.78	1.89	2.62	–	1.74	1.68
	Más País	1.45	1.55	0.33	3.16	1.03	1.20

5 Discussion

Spain does not fit a simple picture in which parties' Facebook presence is carried by their leaders. The party page of Podemos, the most leader-identified of the new parties, drew more engagement than Iglesias's own page in every year. The old parties were split: the PP's party page outdrew its leaders, while Sánchez drew about half of the PSOE's engagement, and more than half from 2016 to 2018. Leader shares also moved with circumstances. Sánchez's share peaked in 2017, after he regained the PSOE leadership, and Rivera's rose as his party's support collapsed. A high leader share can mean a strong leader, or a weak party page.

The election comparisons repeat a pattern seen elsewhere in this series: engagement was concentrated on the challengers. Podemos and its allies drew two to three times their vote share at every election, and Vox's party page alone drew more than the PP's two pages in both 2019 elections. From January 2020 Podemos and Izquierda Unida were in government, so their 2020 figures are no longer those of challengers. The two parties that led every government in the period drew a fraction of their vote on Facebook. Engagement measures the size and activity of a party's online audience, and in Spain that audience was not a guide to who would govern.

6 Limitations

The lists contain only some pages for each party. Vox has no leader page in the lists, Más País only has a party page from September 2019, and I do not count regional pages, including those of Podemos's allied lists and the PSOE's regional federations. The "leader" for each election is the national leader or candidate, which does not fit every party equally well. CrowdTangle's historical coverage is not guaranteed to be complete. Interactions are not support: they include engagement from opponents, from outside Spain and possibly from paid promotion. Four elections in four years, with the same parties and leaders, are not independent tests.

7 Conclusion

In Spain between 2015 and 2020, leaders carried less of their parties' Facebook engagement than one might expect. The Podemos party page outdrew Iglesias in every year, the PP's party page outdrew its leaders, and Rivera's leader share rose as his party declined. At every election, the challengers drew far more engagement than their votes and the parties that led the governments drew far less.

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 wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Ethics and data

The data are public posts by political parties and politicians. In line with CrowdTangle's terms, I do not publish post-level data and I do not quote posts. Aggregated data are available from the author: interactions by page and year, the leader shares and the election comparisons.

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