

Second-Order Campaigns on Facebook? European Parliament and National Elections on European Party Pages, 2014 and 2019

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Abstract

European Parliament elections are often described as second-order national elections, in which less is at stake and parties and voters invest less. Does this hold for parties' campaigns on social media and the response of their audiences? I compare the Facebook pages of national parties in the twelve weeks before the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 (151 party-elections, 96 pages, 15 countries) with party pages before national parliamentary elections in the same countries (173 party-elections, 79 pages, 75 of them also in the European sample), using posts collected through CrowdTangle. In national campaigns, parties posted about 84% more in the final four weeks than in the weeks before and received more than three times the interactions. In European campaigns, they posted about 54% more and received about twice the interactions. The European multiplier was more than a third lower (0.47 log points), and the percentage rise less than half as large. The gap held for pages observed in both kinds of election, with standard errors clustered by country, and with national elections from 2013 onwards. A larger part of the gap appears in per-post response: in national campaigns the median post drew about 40% more than before the campaign, in European campaigns about 8% more, a rise that could not be distinguished from zero. Eurosceptic and populist parties, which might be expected to treat European elections as first-order, showed no detectably larger surge, though these estimates are imprecise. On Facebook, European Parliament campaigns were real but second-order, for parties and even more for their audiences.

Keywords: European Parliament elections; second-order elections; election campaigns; Facebook; social media engagement; political parties; Euroscepticism; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Since [Reif and Schmitt \(1980\)](#), elections to the European Parliament have been described as second-order national elections. Less is at stake than in national elections, which decide who governs. So turnout is lower, parties invest less in campaigns, and voters use the occasion to punish governments or support smaller parties ([Reif and Schmitt 1980](#)). Later work confirmed these patterns across many elections ([Schmitt 2005](#); [Hix and Marsh 2007, 2011](#)). News media also gave European campaigns

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less attention than national ones (de Vreese et al. 2006). Social media might change this. They make campaigning cheaper, and studies of the 2014 European election found that candidates and parties used them extensively (Nulty et al. 2016). Work on the permanent campaign asks how far parties' Facebook activity is concentrated around elections at all (Larsson 2016). But whether parties and their audiences on social media responded to European campaigns as they did to national ones has not been compared directly.

This paper compares the Facebook pages of national parties in 15 European Union countries before the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 with party pages before national parliamentary elections in the same countries between 2010 and February 2020. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** Did parties post as much more, and receive as much more engagement, in European campaigns as in national ones? **RQ2.** Did their audiences respond as strongly to each post? **RQ3.** Did parties with most at stake in Europe, such as Eurosceptic parties, treat European elections as first-order?

2 Data and method

Pages and elections. 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 the European Parliament elections of 22 to 25 May 2014 and 23 to 26 May 2019, I include the party pages in the 15 European Union countries in the data that posted from at least twelve weeks before to four weeks after the election in the country. I exclude three cases in which a national parliamentary election fell in the preceding twelve weeks (Hungary 2014, Finland and Spain 2019). This gives 151 party-elections from 96 pages (73 in 2014 and 78 in 2019).

For comparison I use national parliamentary elections in the same countries between 2010 and February 2020, defined in the same way. As in my related work, I exclude the French legislative elections and the Greek election of June 2012, so the national panel covers 14 countries. I also exclude national elections whose twelve-week baseline or three-week aftermath overlaps a European Parliament campaign, defined as the four weeks before European election day and the election week. This drops five elections and 32 party-elections: Hungary in April 2014, Slovenia in July 2014, Finland and Spain in April 2019 and Greece in July 2019. The national panel then has 173 party-elections from 79 pages, 75 of which are also in the European sample.

For each page and election I count posts and interactions (likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions) in each week from twelve weeks before election day to three weeks after, with weeks without posts counted as zero. Eurosceptic and populist parties are coded from the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). There are 31 Eurosceptic party-elections in the European sample.

Method. For page p at election e in week k , I regress the log of one plus total interactions (or posts, or the median interactions per post in weeks with posts) on indicators for the four weeks before election day, the election week and the week after, and the two weeks after that. Weeks -12 to -5 are the reference, and each model has a page-election fixed effect. To compare European and national campaigns I interact these indicators with an indicator for European elections. I do this in all party-elections and in the 75 pages observed in both kinds of election. Standard errors are clustered by page.

Robustness. I re-estimate the comparison in three further ways. First, I cluster standard errors by country (15 clusters). Because there are few clusters, I also report p -values from a wild cluster bootstrap by country. The page-election fixed effects and other regressors are partialled out first, the null hypothesis is

imposed, and the bootstrap uses Webb six-point weights and 9,999 draws. Second, I restrict the national elections to 2013 onwards, closer in time to the European elections and to the same period of Facebook’s development. Third, I move the reference period to weeks -12 to -9 , adding a separate indicator for weeks -8 to -5 .

3 Results

3.1 A smaller campaign surge

Figure 1 shows the weekly profiles. In both kinds of election, engagement rose through the final weeks of the campaign, but the rise was much steeper before national elections. Over the final four weeks, pages received more than three times their earlier interactions before national elections (a rise of 213%) and about twice before European elections (96%). The difference was 0.47 log points (SE 0.09). The European multiplier was therefore more than a third lower, and the percentage rise less than half as large. Comparing the 75 pages observed in both kinds of election gave a similar answer (0.43, SE 0.09).

The national rise began early. By week -5 , national engagement was already 158% above week -12 , while European engagement was not clearly above it. The reference period of weeks -12 to -5 therefore includes part of the national ramp-up, and the main estimates understate the national surge.

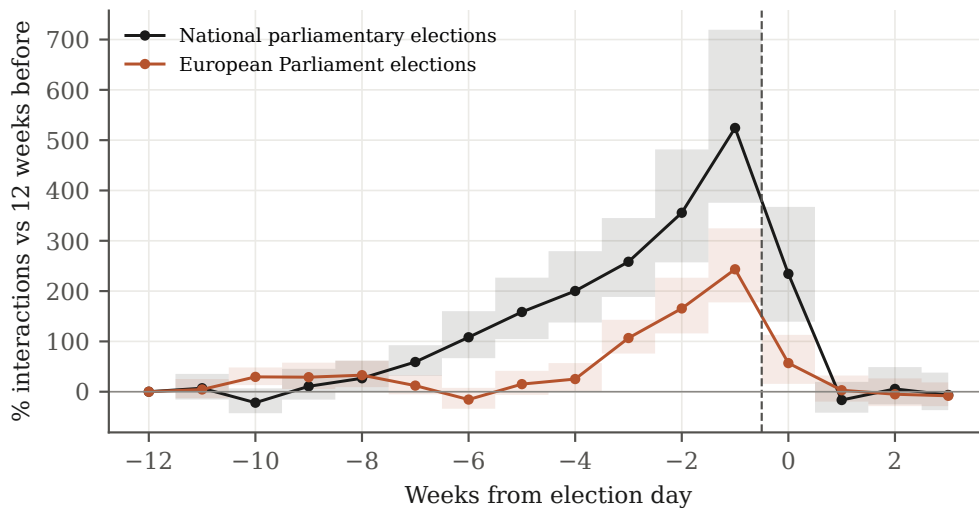


Figure 1. Total interactions on party pages by week relative to election day, compared with twelve weeks before, for national parliamentary elections (173 party-elections in 14 countries) and European Parliament elections (151 party-elections in 15 countries). Shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

3.2 Parties posted more, audiences responded less

Part of the difference lay with parties. In the final four weeks, pages posted about 84% more than before national elections and about 54% more before European ones, a difference of 0.18 log points (SE 0.05). A larger part of the gap appears in per-post response (Figure 2). Before national elections, the median post drew about 40% more in the final four weeks than earlier. Before European elections it drew about 8% more (SE 0.05), a difference of 0.26 log points (SE 0.05). Parties ran European campaigns on Facebook, but their followers responded to each post much as they did outside campaigns.

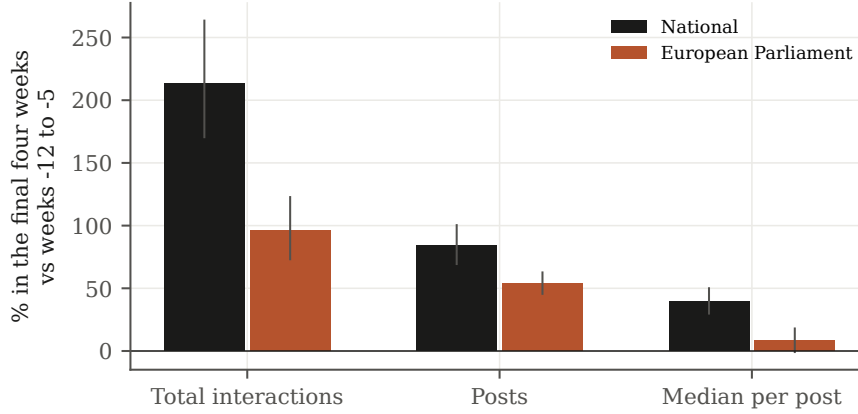


Figure 2. Change in total interactions, posts and median interactions per post in the four weeks before election day, compared with weeks -12 to -5 , for national and European Parliament elections. Party-election fixed effects; bars are 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

3.3 Robustness

Table 1 shows that the gap does not depend on these choices. With standard errors clustered by country, the difference was 0.47 log points for total interactions (SE 0.10), 0.18 for posts (SE 0.05) and 0.26 for the median post (SE 0.09). The wild cluster bootstrap gave p -values below 0.001, of 0.005 and of 0.008. With national elections from 2013 onwards (135 party-elections from 78 pages), the differences were 0.45 (SE 0.10), 0.20 (SE 0.05) and 0.21 (SE 0.06).

With weeks -12 to -9 as the reference, the national surge was larger. National engagement in weeks -8 to -5 was already 85% above the earlier weeks, and in the final four weeks it was 327% above them. European engagement showed no such early rise. The gap in the final four weeks widened to 0.80 log points (SE 0.11) for total interactions, 0.33 (SE 0.06) for posts and 0.34 (SE 0.06) for the median post. The main estimates are therefore conservative.

Table 1. European minus national change in the final four weeks before election day, in log points (standard errors in parentheses).

	Total interactions	Posts	Median per post
Main (clustered by page)	−0.47 (0.09)	−0.18 (0.05)	−0.26 (0.05)
Clustered by country	−0.47 (0.10)	−0.18 (0.05)	−0.26 (0.09)
Wild cluster bootstrap p	< 0.001	0.005	0.008
Pages in both samples (75)	−0.43 (0.09)		
National from 2013	−0.45 (0.10)	−0.20 (0.05)	−0.21 (0.06)
Reference weeks -12 to -9	−0.80 (0.11)	−0.33 (0.06)	−0.34 (0.06)

All models include page-election fixed effects. The main sample has 151 European and 173 national party-elections; the 2013 sample has 135 national party-elections. The bootstrap is clustered by country (15 clusters), imposes the null and uses 9,999 draws with Webb weights.

3.4 No detectably larger surge for Eurosceptics

Eurosceptic parties might be expected to treat European elections as first-order, since Europe is their issue. On Facebook they showed no detectably larger surge, though estimates are imprecise (31 Eurosceptic party-elections). Their European surge in engagement differed from other parties' by -0.08 (SE 0.16),

and their rise in posting by -0.02 (SE 0.06). Populist parties showed no detectable difference either, in engagement (-0.15 , SE 0.16) or in posting (-0.05 , SE 0.06). Governing parties increased their posting in European campaigns by about 14% more than opposition parties (0.13, SE 0.06), and their engagement rose somewhat more (0.24, SE 0.13). This is only suggestive: the posting difference has $p \approx 0.04$, among about ten such comparisons. The 2019 campaign was no more intense than 2014 in the final four weeks (-0.17 , SE 0.12), and engagement in the 2019 election week was if anything lower (-0.39 , SE 0.19).

4 Discussion

European Parliament campaigns on Facebook were real but second-order. Parties stepped up their posting before European elections, though less than before national ones. Their audiences responded much less: engagement rose mainly because there were more posts, not because each post drew more. This fits the second-order model (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hix and Marsh 2011), and extends it from voters, parties and news media (de Vreese et al. 2006) to the audiences of parties online. Social media made campaigning cheap, but they did not make audiences treat European elections as national ones.

That Eurosceptic and populist parties showed no larger surge is notable, though the estimates are imprecise. These parties often did well in European elections, consistent with the protest interpretation (Hix and Marsh 2007). But on Facebook their campaigns and their audiences were no detectably more energised than other parties'. Governing parties, which risk punishment in second-order elections, may have posted more, but this result is weak.

Other contests held on European election day probably raised engagement in some European campaigns. Local elections were held on the same day in Ireland and Greece in both years and in the United Kingdom in 2014. Lithuania held presidential run-offs on European election day in both years, Romania held a referendum in 2019, and Bremen held its state election in 2019. These contests probably inflate the European surge, so the gap with national elections is, if anything, conservative.

The design has clear limits. There are only two European elections, and the comparison with national elections is between different periods. Interactions also reflect platform reach and page audience size, which differ across periods; page-election fixed effects absorb levels but not period-specific surges. The pages are national parties' pages; candidates' and leaders' pages, and the European party groups, are not included. Engagement measures the response of parties' audiences, not of voters generally.

5 Conclusion

Across 15 European countries, parties' Facebook campaigns before the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 were smaller than before national elections, and their audiences responded much less to each post. Even on social media, European elections remained second-order.

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 elections and the party-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 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, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by page and week. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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