Small Parties, Big Pages: Engagement and the Vote among Finnish Parties on Facebook, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Finland's three largest established parties won about two-thirds of the vote cast for the parties studied here, but drew well under half of their Facebook engagement. I use 38,729 posts from eight Finnish party pages, January 2010 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle. The Finns Party, the main challenger, is not in the data, so all shares are among the parties that are. Because CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts changed in May 2015, I compare shares within periods. From June 2015, the Centre Party, the National Coalition and the Social Democrats together drew 44% of interactions against 67% of the vote among the seven continuing parties. The Left Alliance drew 26%, 2.6 times its vote share, and led every year from 2016 to 2019. The Christian Democrats drew 2.5 times their vote share, mainly by posting far more. Movement Now, launched in 2018, drew 11% of interactions in the month before the 2019 election, when it won 2.3% of the vote. The Greens went the other way: their share of interactions fell from about a third in the second half of 2015 to under a tenth in 2019, as they posted less and their posts gained less than others', while their vote rose from 8.5% to 11.5% and to 16.0% at the European election. Being in government made no clear difference to a page's engagement once the capture change is allowed for. Small parties looked larger on Facebook than at the ballot box, but in these data engagement shares did not anticipate who would gain votes.

Keywords: Facebook; political parties; Finland; small parties; engagement; elections; government and opposition; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Finnish elections in the 2010s were fought between three established parties of similar size, the Centre Party (Keskusta), the National Coalition (Kokoomus) and the Social Democrats (SDP), and a challenger, the Finns Party, which won between 17% and 19% at each parliamentary election from 2011. Around them sat a ring of smaller parties: the Greens, the Left Alliance, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats. The 2019 election changed the picture: the Greens and the Left Alliance gained ground, and Movement Now (Liike Nyt), a movement founded in April 2018 by Harry Harkimo, a former National Coalition MP, won 2.3% of the vote and one seat.

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Social media were expected to help small parties compete with large ones, an idea known as equalisation, while others expected online competition to mirror offline power, known as normalisation (Gibson and McAllister 2015). Studies of Finland's 2011 election, the first in which candidates used social media on a large scale, found its effects on the campaign to be modest (Strandberg 2013). This paper describes how the official Facebook pages of eight Finnish parties compared with one another and with the vote between 2010 and 2020. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** How did the parties' shares of Facebook engagement compare with their shares of the vote, and did small parties draw more than their size? **RQ2.** Were the Greens' and the Left Alliance's gains in 2019, and Movement Now's entry, visible on Facebook beforehand? **RQ3.** Did being in government go with more or less engagement?

2 Data and method

Pages and posts. The posts come from a CrowdTangle list of Finnish party pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). The list has eight national party pages: the Centre Party, the National Coalition, the SDP, the Greens (Vihreät), the Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto), the Christian Democrats (KD), the Swedish People's Party (RKP) and, from April 2018, Movement Now, which registered as a party in November 2019. The Finns Party and its 2017 breakaway, Blue Reform, are not in the list, and I found no page for either in the other exports from the same project. The Finns Party won 19.1% of the vote in 2011, 17.7% in 2015 and 17.5% in 2019, and 12.9% and 13.8% at the European elections of 2014 and 2019. Every comparison below is therefore among the parties in the data, which won between 79% and 85% of the vote at each election, and vote shares are renormalised among them. Leaders' pages are not in the list. The export has 39,232 posts and no duplicate post addresses. I removed the 503 posts made after September 2020, leaving 38,729 posts with 6.1 million interactions (Table 1). Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares. I converted timestamps to Helsinki time.

Table 1. Party pages in the sample. [a]Median interactions per post and page likes are for January 2016 to September 2020, when page likes at posting are recorded for 96% of posts; Movement Now from April 2018.

Party page	Posts 2010 to 2020	Posts from June 2015	Interactions from June 2015 (m)	Median per post[a]	Page likes 2020 (000s)
Centre (Keskusta)	5,045	2,379	0.51	134	17.1
National Coalition (Kokoomus)	3,514	2,612	0.75	111	35.3
Social Democrats (SDP)	5,322	3,484	1.05	169	28.4
Greens (Vihreät)	7,387	3,077	0.72	133	41.7
Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto)	6,031	3,741	1.32	229	36.5
Christian Democrats (KD)	7,641	6,482	0.61	44	7.3
Swedish People's Party (RKP)	2,838	2,158	0.22	68	9.8
Movement Now (Liike Nyt)	951	951	0.14	64	10.7

A change in capture. CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts changed in May 2015, just after the April 2015 election. On the pages of 19 other European countries collected for the same project, photos rose from 14% of posts in April 2015 to 41% in May. In Finland the step is less sharp, because photo posts were already rising in the 2015 campaign: the seven pages then active had 13 photo posts a month from June 2014 to February 2015, 40 in March and 64 in April 2015, and 69 a month in the year from May 2015, while link posts rose only from 227 to 263 a month over the years either side. Photos were 4% of posts before May 2015 and 27% from June 2015. The 2014 and 2015 election windows therefore fall

before the change, and the 2015 window may already be partly affected by it. Engagement also grew steeply over the decade: the eight pages drew 15,000 interactions in the 30 days before the 2011 election and 277,000 in the 30 days before the 2019 election. I therefore avoid comparing levels across years and use each party's share of all interactions on the pages within the same period. The main comparisons use June 2015 to September 2020 (24,884 posts, 5.3 million interactions), and I check the main shares with photo posts excluded. Earlier figures are shown for context only.

Comparisons. I compare each party's share of interactions with its share of the vote among the same parties, in the 30 days before each parliamentary election (17 April 2011, 19 April 2015, 14 April 2019) and European Parliament election (25 May 2014, 26 May 2019), with windows of 14 and 60 days as checks (Wikipedia 2026a,c,e,b,d). For the whole period from June 2015, I compare with the average of each party's 2015 and 2019 shares. For government and opposition, I code each page by whether its party was in the cabinet on the day of the post, from the cabinet start dates and the departures of the Left Alliance in March 2014 and the Greens in September 2014. I regress log interactions per post (log of one plus interactions) on government status with page and calendar-month fixed effects, so that each page is compared with itself in other months and with the other pages in the same month, which also absorbs capture changes common to all pages. Standard errors are clustered by page. With only eight pages, I also report wild cluster bootstrap p-values (Webb weights, 9,999 replications).

3 Results

3.1 Small parties drew more than their vote

From June 2015 to September 2020, the Centre Party, the National Coalition and the SDP together drew 44% of the interactions on the seven continuing party pages, against 67% of the vote among the same parties (Figure 1, left). They also posted less: 35% of the posts. The gap was largest for the Centre Party, which drew 10% of interactions against 22% of the vote, a ratio of 0.44. The National Coalition drew 0.64 times its vote share and the SDP 0.92 times. With photo posts excluded, the big three drew 43%. The big three's share was below their vote share at every election window, from 38% against 59% at the 2019 European election to 58% against 70% at the 2015 parliamentary election (Table 2).

Two small parties stood out. The Left Alliance drew 26% of interactions from June 2015, 2.6 times its vote share of about 10% among these parties, and drew more than any other page in every year from 2016 to 2019. It posted a little more than the SDP, but its posts also drew more: its median post from 2016 drew 229 interactions, the highest of the eight, and it drew 1.6 times as many interactions per post as the seven-page average. The Christian Democrats drew 12% of interactions, 2.5 times their vote share, but by a different route. They posted 27% of all posts, about 105 a month from 2016, nearly twice as many as any other party, and their median post drew only 44 interactions, the lowest of the eight. Their share of interactions rose from 5% in 2016 to 16% in 2019, and in the 30 days before the 2019 parliamentary and European elections they drew 2.9 and 3.6 times their vote share. Volume alone does not reliably bring engagement per post (Hotham 2026b), and the Christian Democrats' large share rested mainly on volume. The Swedish People's Party drew less than its vote share (0.72).

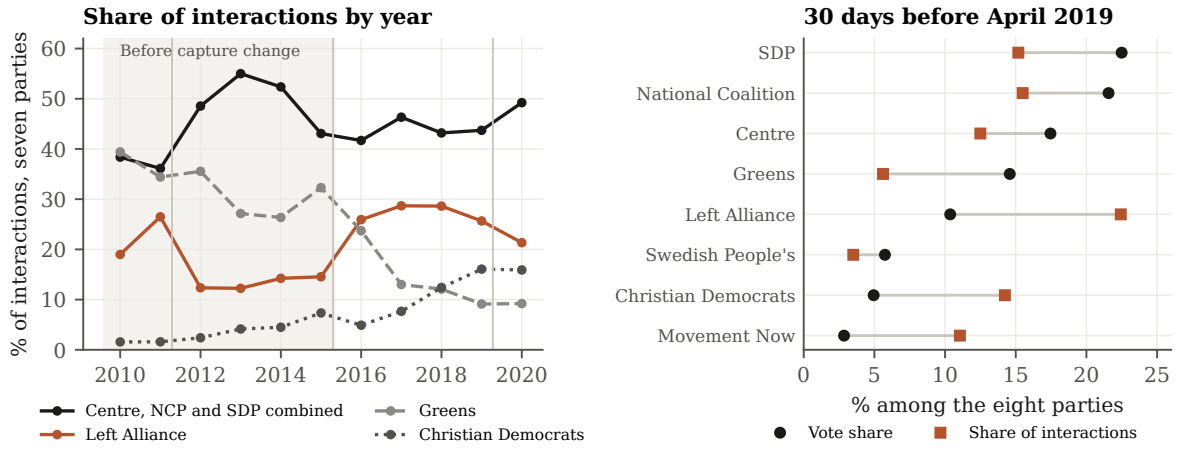


Figure 1. Left: each party's share of the interactions on the seven continuing party pages by year (Movement Now excluded). Shading marks the period before the change in CrowdTangle's capture in May 2015, so the 2015 point spans the change; vertical lines mark parliamentary elections; 2020 runs to September. Right: share of interactions and share of the vote among the eight parties in the 30 days before the parliamentary election of 14 April 2019. The Finns Party is not in the data.

Table 2. Share of interactions / share of the vote (%) in the 30 days before each election, among the parties in the data (seven, and eight in April 2019). Vote shares renormalised among the same parties. The Finns Party, not in the data, won 19.1%, 12.9%, 17.7%, 17.5% and 13.8% of the national vote at these elections. Windows before May 2015 precede the capture change. n.a.: not standing or no page.

	Apr 2011	EP 2014	Apr 2015	Apr 2019	EP 2019
Centre	12 / 20	19 / 23	16 / 26	12 / 17	12 / 16
National Coalition	3 / 26	18 / 27	22 / 23	15 / 22	12 / 25
Social Democrats	23 / 24	17 / 14	21 / 21	15 / 22	14 / 18
Greens	25 / 9	24 / 11	24 / 11	6 / 15	10 / 19
Left Alliance	34 / 10	15 / 11	6 / 9	22 / 10	21 / 8
Christian Democrats	1 / 5	4 / 6	8 / 4	14 / 5	21 / 6
Swedish People's Party	1 / 5	4 / 8	4 / 6	4 / 6	10 / 8
Movement Now	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	11 / 3	n.a.
Big three combined	39 / 70	53 / 64	58 / 70	43 / 62	38 / 59
Interactions (000s)	15	26	101	277	86

3.2 The 2019 gains were not visible in advance

The two parties that gained most in 2019 were the Greens, from 8.5% to 11.5% of the national vote and then 16.0% at the European election, and, more modestly, the Left Alliance, from 7.1% to 8.2%. Neither gain showed up on Facebook in advance. The Greens' page had drawn 24% of the seven parties' interactions in the 30 days before the 2015 election, against 11% of the vote, and 33% from June to December 2015, after the capture change. Its share then fell, to 24% in 2016, 13% in 2017 and 9% in 2019. Between April 2018 and mid-March 2019 it drew 8% of interactions, against 17% in 2016 and 2017. The fall is not an artefact of photo capture: with photo posts excluded, the share fell from 30% in late 2015 to 8% in 2019. It was relative. The Greens' mean post drew 219 interactions in 2016 and 283 in 2019, but the other six pages' rose from 121 to 305, and the Greens posted less, from 71 posts a month in late 2015 and 59 in 2016 to 37 in 2019. On a log scale, about two-fifths of the fall in share from 2016 to 2019 came from the smaller share of posts and three-fifths from lower engagement per post

relative to the other pages. In the month before the 2019 election it drew 6% of interactions against 15% of the vote, a ratio of 0.38 (0.48 and 0.40 with 14 and 60 day windows), and at the European election 10% against 19%. The Greens still had the largest page by likes in 2020, but it grew by only 35% from 2016 to 2020, as slowly as the Centre Party's (36%) and more slowly than the other five, against 133% for the Left Alliance, and its posts drew about 3.5 interactions per 1,000 page likes against about 8 to 9 for most other parties.

The Left Alliance's share was high throughout rather than rising before the election: about 28% across 2016 and 2017, and 25% between April 2018 and mid-March 2019. In the month before the 2019 election it drew 22% of interactions against 10% of the vote (2.2 times; 1.9 to 2.3 with other windows). In the 30 days before the 2015 election, before the capture change, it had drawn only 6%, less than its vote, so its large Facebook presence was built after 2015 rather than ahead of 2019.

Movement Now's page began in April 2018. It averaged 4% of the eight pages' monthly interactions from May 2018 to March 2019, already above its eventual vote. In the 30 days before the 2019 election it drew 11% of interactions with 4% of the posts, against 2.9% of the vote among the eight parties, a ratio of 3.9 (3.4 to 6.5 with other windows). Its median post in that window drew 187 interactions. It did not stand in the European election, and after April 2019 it averaged 3.6% of monthly interactions.

3.3 Government and opposition

Government status made no clear difference once the capture change is taken into account. Comparing each page with itself in other months and with other pages in the same month, posts made while a party was in government drew about 14% fewer interactions over the whole period (-0.15 log points, SE 0.05, wild bootstrap $p = 0.10$), but the estimate rests mainly on the years before 2015 (-0.34, SE 0.14). From June 2015 it was -0.13 (SE 0.17, $p = 0.50$), and a party's share of each month's interactions was no different in government (-0.7 percentage points, SE 2.3). Holding the prime minister's office went with more engagement per post from June 2015 (0.53 log points, about 71%, SE 0.13), but with only two parties holding the office the estimate is fragile ($p = 0.17$ by wild bootstrap): it reflects the SDP, whose share rose to 28% in 2020 under Sanna Marin, a year dominated by the pandemic, while the Centre Party's share stayed at about 10% while Juha Sipilä was prime minister. Under the Sipilä cabinet, from June 2015 to May 2019, the two governing parties in the data, the Centre Party and the National Coalition, drew 26% of the seven parties' interactions against 49% of their 2015 vote. Opposition did not consistently change this: the National Coalition's share stayed low after it left government in 2019 (11%), while the Centre Party had drawn more in opposition in 2013 and 2014 (25% and 28%), but those years precede the capture change.

4 Discussion

On Facebook, Finland's smaller parties looked much larger than they were at the ballot box. The Left Alliance drew more engagement than any other party in the data for four years, and the Christian Democrats and Movement Now drew two to four times their vote share. That fits the equalisation idea that online platforms give smaller parties more room than other channels (Gibson and McAllister 2015), but the routes differed. The Left Alliance drew more per post. The Christian Democrats posted far more, and Movement Now, a new movement led by a well-known public figure, drew a burst of attention as a newcomer. The big three drew less than their vote, and the Centre Party, the largest party in 2015, drew

less than half its share.

Facebook did not, however, anticipate who would gain votes. The Greens, whose page had led in the early 2010s and which still had the most likes in 2020, gained votes in 2019 while their share of engagement fell to its lowest. The Left Alliance's high share was a stable feature from 2016 rather than a sign of a coming gain. Engagement measures how active and responsive a page's audience is, and the Finnish case shows that this can diverge from the vote in both directions. The Greens' relative decline on Facebook came from posting less and from per-post engagement that stayed flat while other pages' rose, alongside slow growth in page likes. That is consistent with a page whose audience stopped growing, but it says nothing about the party's voters, whose number grew.

The design has clear limits. The most important is that the Finns Party, the main challenger of the period and a populist party of the kind that tends to draw more engagement per post (Hotham 2026a), is missing, and so is Blue Reform. All shares are among the remaining parties, so the small parties' shares would be lower, and the big three's gap perhaps larger, if it were included. Leaders' and candidates' pages, central in Finland's candidate-centred list system, are also missing. CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts changed in May 2015, and in Finland photo posts were already rising during the 2015 campaign, so the change cannot be dated exactly. Engagement also grew steeply over the decade, so the pre-2015 figures, especially the 2011 window with only 15,000 interactions, are weak. Interactions are not support: they include opponents, people abroad, and possibly paid promotion. Five elections and one series of pages are too few to generalise, and none of the associations is causal.

5 Conclusion

Across eight Finnish party pages from 2010 to 2020, small parties drew far more Facebook engagement than their votes, and the three largest established parties far less. The Left Alliance led for most of the period and the Christian Democrats posted their way to a large share, while the Greens' page faded even as their vote rose. Government made no clear difference. With the Finns Party absent from the data, these are results for Finland's other parties, and they suggest that a party's share of Facebook engagement among them was not a reliable guide to its electoral fortunes.

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 page-month 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 posts, interactions and page likes aggregated by page and period. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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