The Health Minister's Spring: Alain Berset, Covid-19 and Swiss Parties and Politicians on Facebook, 2015 to 2020

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Abstract

Switzerland is governed by a collegial Federal Council drawn from the main parties, and some of its members run their own Facebook pages. I use 11,126 posts from eleven Swiss pages, those of the SP, FDP and SVP, five party presidents and three federal councillors, from May 2015 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle. Before the pandemic the SVP and SP party pages drew most interactions; the three party pages' shares matched their vote closely before the 2019 federal election but not in 2015. In March to May 2020, the page of Alain Berset, the federal councillor responsible for public health, drew 50% of all interactions on these pages, up from 13% in the previous twelve months and more than the three party pages combined. His median post drew about 15 times as many interactions as before, though he posted no more often, and his page likes rose from about 20,000 in February to 47,000 in June. By late summer the SVP page was again the most engaged, and in the four weeks before its Limitation initiative was put to the vote in September 2020 it drew 62% of interactions. Across 2015 to 2020, engagement rose far more in the weeks before federal elections than before popular votes, and the rise before votes went with extra posting. With few pages, and no Green or Green Liberal party page, the results describe these pages, not the Swiss party system.

Keywords: Switzerland; Facebook; Covid-19; federal council; direct democracy; popular votes; political parties; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Swiss politics has two features that set it apart from most European cases studied with Facebook data. The government is a collegial body: the seven members of the Federal Council come from the main parties, head one department each and are expected to defend the Council's decisions in public (Wikipedia contributors 2026e). And voters decide national questions directly several times a year in popular votes (Wikipedia contributors 2026f). A collegial government can give individual ministers a public profile of their own, and frequent popular votes give parties campaigns to fight between elections.

In 2020 the first feature became unusually visible. Alain Berset, a Social Democrat, headed the Federal Department of Home Affairs, which includes the Federal Office of Public Health, and he was one of the

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leading figures in the government's response to the pandemic (Wikipedia contributors 2026c). Studies of the first wave found that trust in government and political institutions rose during the lockdowns, for example in Denmark and the Netherlands (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Schraff 2021). This paper asks whether attention on Facebook moved in the same direction, towards the government's messenger and away from the parties.

I ask three questions. **RQ1.** How was engagement divided among the main parties' pages, and how did it compare with their vote at the federal elections of 2015 and 2019? **RQ2.** Did Alain Berset's page become the centre of attention in the first wave of Covid-19? **RQ3.** Was engagement higher in the weeks before popular votes, and before elections?

2 Data and method

Pages and posts. The posts come from a CrowdTangle list of Swiss political pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). The export has 20,324 posts from 15 pages. I drop 149 posts made after 30 September 2020. Four pages are not Swiss domestic politics and I exclude them: those of Michelle Bachelet (1,846 posts), the Colombian politician Everth Bustamante (1,670), Alessio Tacconi, an Italian politician (1,217), and the European Union delegation to Switzerland and Liechtenstein (990). No duplicate posts were found. Interactions are the sum of all reactions, comments and shares. CrowdTangle records times in UK time, and I add one hour to give Swiss time.

Capture change. Across the European pages in my data, CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts changed in May 2015, when photo posts rose sharply in almost every country at once while link posts did not (Hotham 2026b). On the Swiss pages active at the time, photo posts rose from an average of 14 a month in January to April 2015 to 42 a month in May to August 2015, 2.9 times as many, while link posts rose only from 53 to 65 a month. Part of this may reflect the election campaign and the start of Rösti's page, but earlier counts are not safely comparable, so I drop the 3,326 posts made before 1 May 2015. The sample is 11,126 posts with 2.17 million interactions from eleven pages (Table 1).

Table 1. Pages in the sample, May 2015 to September 2020. Median is the median number of interactions per post.

Page	Posts	Interactions	Median	Posts from, to
SP Schweiz (party)	2,025	532,727	141	May 2015 to Sep 2020
FDP (party)	2,653	180,752	40	May 2015 to Sep 2020
SVP Schweiz (party)	2,007	750,728	202	May 2015 to Sep 2020
Christian Levrat (SP president)	1,115	36,575	16	May 2015 to Sep 2020
Albert Rösti (SVP president 2016 to 2020)	1,152	240,715	159	May 2015 to Sep 2020
Petra Gössi (FDP president from 2016)	348	31,027	68	Oct 2016 to Sep 2020
Regula Rytz (Greens president to June 2020)	156	8,316	35	Jun 2019 to Sep 2020
Marianne Streiff (EVP president)	23	98	4	Jun 2015 to Sep 2019
Alain Berset (federal councillor, SP)	1,318	363,816	65	Jun 2015 to Sep 2020
Ignazio Cassis (federal councillor from Nov 2017, FDP)	326	25,721	51	May 2015 to Sep 2020
Karin Keller-Sutter (FDP, page active 2018 only)	3	452	122	Sep 2018 to Dec 2018
Total	11,126	2,170,927		

The list is uneven. It has party pages for the SP, FDP and SVP but none for the Centre (CVP), the Greens or the Green Liberals. The Greens appear only through the page of their president, Regula Rytz, which begins in June 2019 (Wikipedia contributors 2026b). Of the seven federal councillors in 2020,

only Berset and Ignazio Cassis have active pages. Because the Greens gained 6.1 points and the Green Liberals 3.2 in 2019 (Wikipedia contributors 2026b), the absence of their party pages means the data cannot speak to the "green wave" of that year.

Comparisons. For RQ1, I compare each party's share of interactions on the three party pages in the 30 days before the federal elections of 18 October 2015 and 20 October 2019 with its share of the three parties' vote (Wikipedia contributors 2026a,b). For RQ2, I compare shares, posting and the median interactions per post in three periods: the twelve months before the pandemic (March 2019 to February 2020), the first wave (March to May 2020, after the first confirmed case on 25 February and including the "extraordinary situation" from 16 March) and the summer (June to September 2020) (Wikipedia contributors 2026d). As a check, I regress log interactions per post on an indicator for Berset's posts in the first wave, with page and calendar-week fixed effects, using posts from March 2019 to May 2020. For RQ3, I build a page-week panel for the eight pages with regular posting (the three party pages, Levrat, Rösti, Gössi, Berset and Cassis) and regress the log of weekly interactions on indicators for the four weeks ending on the day of each of the 16 national popular votes between June 2015 and September 2020 (Wikipedia contributors 2026f) and for the four weeks ending on each election day, with page-by-year fixed effects. The vote planned for 17 May 2020 was cancelled because of the pandemic, so there was no popular vote between February and September 2020. Standard errors are clustered by page. With eight to ten pages, these standard errors are rough guides only, and for RQ3 I also report wild cluster bootstrap p-values (Webb weights, 9,999 draws). Effects are reported in log points and converted to percentages as $100(e^b - 1)$.

3 Results

3.1 Parties at elections

Between May 2015 and September 2020 the SVP party page drew 751,000 interactions, the SP page 533,000 and the FDP page 181,000 (Table 1). The SVP did not lead every year. Among the three party pages, the SP drew the largest share in 2016 (57%), 2017 (64%) and 2018 (44%), and the SVP in 2015 (58%), 2019 (54%) and 2020 (68%). The FDP page posted the most, 2,491 times from 2016 to 2020, but its median post drew 39 interactions, against 145 for the SP and 209 for the SVP.

In the 30 days before the 2019 election, the three party pages' shares of interactions were close to their shares of the three parties' vote: 48% against 44% for the SVP, 26% against 29% for the SP, and 27% against 26% for the FDP (Table 2). In 2015 the match was poor: the SP page drew 51% of interactions against 29% of the vote, and the FDP 10% against 25%. One close match in two elections is not evidence that engagement tracks the vote. Regula Rytz's page, the only Green page, drew 2.1% of interactions on all pages from its start in June 2019 to December 2019; in October 2019 the Greens won 13.2% of the vote.

3.2 The health minister's spring

In the twelve months before the pandemic, Alain Berset's page drew 13% of interactions on the eleven pages, against 33% for the SVP party page and 15% for the SP page. In March to May 2020 it drew 50% (Figure 1, left): 49% in March, 53% in April and 47% in May. In these three months it drew 1.09 times as many interactions as the three party pages combined, against 0.21 times in the previous year. It was

Table 2. Share of interactions on the three party pages in the 30 days before each federal election, and share of the three parties' vote (%). The ratio in brackets for 2019 adds the party presidents' pages.

	2015			2019		
Party	Facebook	Vote	Ratio	Facebook	Vote	Ratio
SVP	39	46	0.86	48	44	1.07 (1.20)
SP	51	29	1.75	26	29	0.88 (0.70)
FDP	10	25	0.39	27	26	1.02 (0.99)

the most engaged page in every month from February to May 2020; in every other month of 2019 and 2020 that was the SVP page, or Rösti's in November and December 2019.

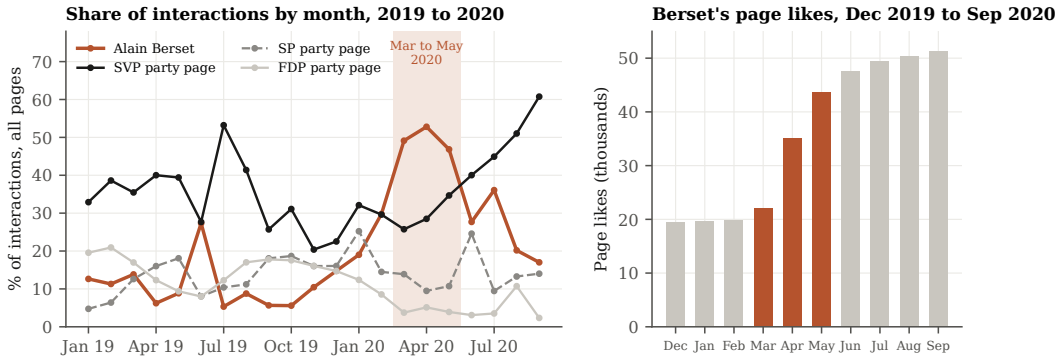


Figure 1. Left: monthly share of interactions on all eleven pages, January 2019 to September 2020; shaded band, March to May 2020. Right: median recorded page likes on Berset's page by month.

The rise came from what each post drew, not from posting more. Berset's page posted 90 times in March to May 2020, about 30 a month, much as in the year before (354 posts, about 30 a month). Its median post drew 1,088 interactions, against 75 before, 14.5 times as many. For the other pages with at least ten posts in both periods, the ratio of medians ranged from 0.48 (FDP) to 2.15 (SVP). Comparing posts in the same week, and each page with itself, Berset's posts in the first wave drew about 2.7 log points more than would otherwise be expected (SE 0.34), about 15 times as many interactions. With one page treated, this is a description of the size of the change, not a test. The rise was not the work of a few posts: the five most engaged posts made up 21% of the page's interactions in the first wave, and without them the page still drew 1.31 times as many as the SVP page.

The page also gained followers. Its median recorded page likes rose from 19,868 in February 2020 to 47,484 in June, and to 51,273 by September (Figure 1, right). Most of the increase came in April and May. In June to September its median post still drew 1,183 interactions, but its share fell to 25% as the SVP page's rose to 49%. A smaller version of the same pattern appears in 2018, the year Berset was President of the Confederation (Wikipedia contributors 2026c): his page posted 402 times, against 94 in 2017, and drew 14% of interactions on all pages, up from 1%.

3.3 Popular votes and elections

Engagement was higher before popular votes, but much more so before elections (Figure 2). Compared with the same page in other weeks of the same year, weekly interactions on the eight regularly posting pages were about 0.32 log points higher in the four weeks before a popular vote (SE 0.11, wild bootstrap

$p = 0.01$), about 38%, and about 1.22 log points higher in the four weeks before a federal election (SE 0.20, $p = 0.001$), more than three times as high. On the three party pages alone the figures were 0.40 (SE 0.13) and 1.40 (SE 0.21), though with three pages the bootstrap gives $p = 0.11$ and $p = 0.09$. Starting in 2016 gives 0.32 and 0.85.

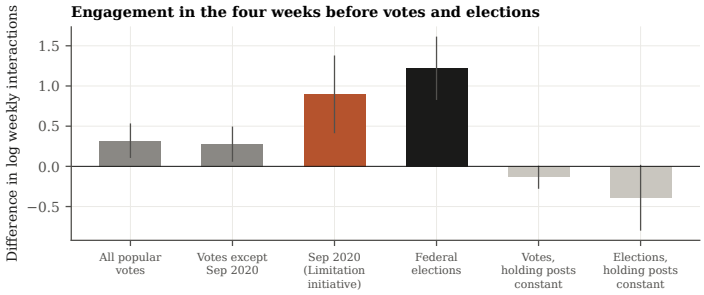


Figure 2. Difference in log weekly interactions in the four weeks ending on a popular vote or federal election day, compared with the same page in other weeks of the same year; eight pages, May 2015 to September 2020, 2,179 page-weeks. The last two bars hold the number of posts constant. 95% confidence intervals clustered by page.

The extra engagement before votes went with extra posting. Pages posted about 22% more in the four weeks before a vote and about twice as much before an election. Holding the number of posts constant, weekly interactions were not detectably higher before votes (-0.14, SE 0.07, $p = 0.10$) or before elections (-0.39, SE 0.21, $p = 0.11$). The rise was clearest on the SP page (0.59) and Levrat's (0.82), and smallest on the SVP page (0.15, SE 0.13) and Rösti's (-0.11), whose engagement was high in most weeks. In the four weeks before 27 September 2020, when the SVP's initiative "for moderate immigration", known as the Limitation initiative, was rejected with 38% voting yes (Wikipedia contributors 2026f), interactions were about 0.90 log points higher (SE 0.25), about 145%, against 0.28 for the other votes. In those four weeks the SVP party page drew 62% of all interactions, and Berset's page 16%.

4 Discussion

The clearest finding is that in the first wave of Covid-19 the page of the minister responsible for public health became the centre of engagement on these Swiss political pages, drawing more than all three party pages together. This fits the evidence that trust in government rose in the first wave (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Schraff 2021). In a collegial system, that attention went to one member of the government rather than to his party: the SP page's share did not rise in the spring. It also fits the earlier finding that party and leader pages gain followers fastest around moments of high political salience, such as elections (Hotham 2026a); here the gains lasted, and Berset's page kept growing through the summer. The 2018 rise, in his year as President of the Confederation, suggests that office, not only the pandemic, drew attention to the page, though in 2018 the page also posted four times as often as in 2017. Nor did the party pages fall quiet: even with the May vote cancelled, they drew more interactions a month in March to May 2020 than in the previous twelve months (about 41,000 against 22,000), so attention to Berset came alongside attention to the parties, not in place of it.

The attention did not last as a share. As the first wave ended, the SVP page returned to the top, and before the Limitation initiative vote it drew a larger monthly share than in any month since January 2019. Popular votes were smaller moments on Facebook than elections, and much of the extra engagement before them went with extra posting (Larsson 2016; Stier et al. 2018).

The design has clear limits. There are eleven pages, three of them party pages, and none for the Centre, the Greens or the Green Liberals, so the results describe these pages, not the Swiss party system, and say nothing about the green wave. Only two federal councillors have active pages, so the Berset result is one page, and a comparison with other ministers is not possible. Standard errors clustered on eight to ten pages are unreliable, and wild bootstrap p-values only partly address this. CrowdTangle's capture changed in 2015 and its historical coverage is not guaranteed to be complete. Interactions are not support: they include opponents and people outside Switzerland, and may reflect paid promotion. Page likes are recorded only when a page posts. Nothing here shows that engagement caused votes or that the pandemic caused the rise, only that they went together.

5 Conclusion

On the Swiss pages in this list, the parties led engagement in ordinary times, with the SVP and SP ahead of the FDP, and elections brought much larger rises than popular votes. In the spring of 2020 that changed: Alain Berset's page drew half of all interactions, more than the three party pages together, and more than doubled its following. By September the SVP page was back on top, campaigning for its own initiative. In a consensus system, the first wave of the pandemic briefly made the page of a member of the government, not of a party, the most engaged of these Swiss political pages on Facebook.

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 and 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 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 and compile the dates of elections, popular votes and offices. 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 Swiss political parties and politicians, analysed only as counts of interactions and page likes aggregated by page, week, month and year. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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