

The Party, Not the Leader: Sweden's Party Leaders on Facebook, 2015 to 2020

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Abstract

How much of a party's Facebook engagement comes through its leader? I use 33,958 posts from the pages of Sweden's eight parliamentary parties and seven of their leaders, from January 2015 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle. The answer differed sharply between parties and over time. Jimmie Åkesson's page drew 41% of the engagement on the two Sweden Democrat pages in 2015, but only 13% to 16% from 2018 to 2020, as the party page grew into the largest political page in the data. Annie Lööf went the other way: her share of the Centre Party's engagement rose from under half to 57% to 68% from 2018. Stefan Löfven drew about half of the Social Democrats' engagement until 2017 and between 25% and 42% afterwards. Åkesson's page still drew more interactions than the prime minister's in every year. At the 2018 general election and the 2019 European election, the Sweden Democrats' party and leader pages together drew 46% and 52% of interactions on the party and leader pages, against 18% and 16% of the vote among the same parties, while the Social Democrats drew 0.64 and 0.41 times their vote share. Counting leader pages changes some comparisons a great deal: the Centre Party's ratio is 0.13 to 0.16 on its party page alone and 0.52 to 0.77 on Lööf's page alone. Parties differed in whether their engagement ran through the leader or the party page.

1 Introduction

Swedish parties choose their own leaders, and elections are fought on party lists. On Facebook, however, the leaders of Swedish parties have their own pages, and some of them have large audiences. In an earlier paper using the same data I compared the Sweden Democrats' party page with the polls ([Hotham 2026b](#)). This paper turns to the leaders. I ask how much of each party's engagement came through its leader's page rather than its party page, how that changed between 2015 and 2020, and how counting leader pages changes the comparison between engagement and votes at the 2018 general election and the 2019 European election.

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](#)).

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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 their communication through their leaders. In Britain I found that the leader’s share of a party’s engagement ranged from about three-quarters for some leaders to a quarter or less for others (Hotham 2026c). Sweden offers a contrast: a party-centred system, a large radical-right party, and leaders who, except in the Moderates and Liberals, stayed in post for the whole period.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Pages and posts

The data come from two CrowdTangle lists of Swedish pages, one of parties and one of politicians, exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020). I use the national pages of the eight parliamentary parties and the pages of seven people who led six of them: Stefan Löfven (Social Democrats, S), Jimmie Åkesson (Sweden Democrats, SD), Jonas Sjöstedt (Left Party, V), Annie Lööf (Centre Party, C), Anna Kinberg Batra and Ulf Kristersson (Moderates, M) and Jan Björklund (Liberals, L). The lists do not include pages for the leaders of the Christian Democrats (KD) or the Greens (MP), and Björklund’s page begins only in October 2017. I start in January 2015, because the Sweden Democrats’ party page only begins in the data in December 2014, and end in September 2020. After removing posts with the same page, time and text (2 in the study period), the sample is 33,958 posts with 48.9 million interactions (Table 1). Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares. Timestamps are in UK time, one hour behind Sweden, which moves window edges slightly. The Greens have two joint spokespeople rather than a single leader.

Table 1. Pages in the sample, January 2015 to September 2020. Counts are for the whole page in the period, including posts from outside a person’s time as leader.

Page	Posts	Interactions (m)	Median per post
Socialdemokraterna, S (party)	2,785	4.71	1,174
Stefan Löfven (S leader; PM from October 2014)	966	3.15	2,341
Sverigedemokraterna, SD (party)	5,671	18.89	2,499
Jimmie Åkesson (SD leader)	1,683	4.51	1,802
Moderaterna, M (party)	3,487	4.34	697
Anna Kinberg Batra (M leader 2015–2017)	1,298	0.69	327
Ulf Kristersson (M leader from October 2017)	1,019	0.86	469
Vänsterpartiet, V (party)	2,686	3.45	925
Jonas Sjöstedt (V leader)	2,905	2.81	665
Centerpartiet, C (party)	2,643	1.08	292
Annie Lööf (C leader)	1,734	1.35	469
Liberalerna, L (party)	2,783	1.08	264
Jan Björklund (L leader to June 2019; page from October 2017)	317	0.17	376
Kristdemokraterna, KD (party)	2,236	0.99	251
Miljöpartiet, MP (party)	1,745	0.84	352
Total	33,958	48.9	

3.2 Leaders

For each of the six parties with a leader page, 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. Kinberg Batra led the Moderates from January 2015 to October 2017 and Kristersson from October 2017. Björklund led the Liberals until June 2019. The other four led their parties throughout.

3.3 Elections

I compare each party's share of interactions in the 30 days before the general election of 9 September 2018 and the European election of 26 May 2019 with its share of the vote among the eight parties (Valmyndigheten 2019). The main comparison counts each party's page and its leader's page where one is in the data. As checks, I use party pages only, leader pages only (for the six parties with one), and windows of 14 and 60 days. Because KD and MP have no leader pages, the main comparison understates them relative to the others, so the party-pages-only check is the fairest across all eight.

4 Results

4.1 Leaders' shares differed by party and moved in opposite directions

Table 2 and Figure 1 show each leader's share. The clearest change is for the Sweden Democrats. Åkesson's page drew 41% of the engagement on the two SD pages in 2015 and 32% in 2016 and 2017. From 2018 it drew between 13% and 16%. His page did not shrink: it drew between 0.6 and 0.9 million interactions every year. The party page grew much faster, from 0.9 million interactions in 2015 to 4.2 million in 2018 and 5.9 million in the first nine months of 2020. It posted far more (from 319 posts in 2015 to more than 1,300 a year from 2018), and from 2018 its median post also drew more.

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. *2020 runs to September. Part-years: Kinberg Batra and Kristersson 2017 (split on 1 October), Björklund 2017 (from 24 October) and 2019 (to 28 June). Löf's 2020 share rests on 81 posts.

Leader	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Löfven (S)	45	52	51	25	39	42
Åkesson (SD)	41	32	32	16	14	13
Sjöstedt (V)	29	42	45	43	50	53
Löf (C)	48	47	49	57	68	60
Kinberg Batra (M)	32	34	41	–	–	–
Kristersson (M)	–	–	20	14	24	26
Björklund (L)	–	–	33	29	22	–

Löf went the other way. Her share of the Centre Party's engagement was 47% to 49% from 2015 to 2017 and then 57% in 2018, 68% in 2019 and 60% in 2020. Her median post drew more interactions than the party page's in every year, and from 2019 about three to six times as many. Sjöstedt's share of the Left Party's engagement rose from 29% in 2015 to about half by 2019 and 2020. Löfven drew 45% to 52% of the Social Democrats' engagement from 2015 to 2017 but only 25% in the 2018 election year, when the party page posted 962 times, and 39% to 42% afterwards. The Moderate leaders drew

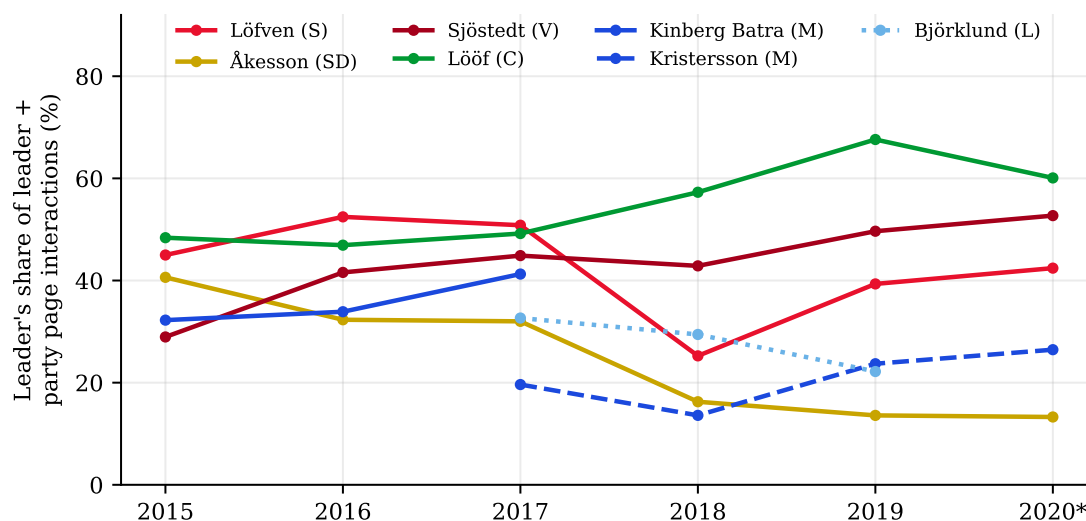


Figure 1. Leader's share of the interactions on the leader's page and the party page together, by year.

less of their party's engagement: Kinberg Batra 32% to 41%, and Kristersson between 14% and 26%. Björklund drew 22% to 33% of the Liberals' engagement.

Although Åkesson's share of his party's engagement fell, his page drew more interactions than Löfven's in every year, from 0.60 million against 0.38 million in 2015 to 0.90 million against 0.69 million in the first nine months of 2020. The two pages had similar numbers of likes, rising from about 90,000 to 100,000 in 2015 to about 160,000 in 2020.

4.2 Elections

At both elections the Sweden Democrats' pages drew far more than the party's share of the vote (Figure 2, Table 3): 46% of interactions against 18% of the vote in 2018 and 52% against 16% in 2019, ratios of 2.6 and 3.3. The Left Party drew a little more than its vote share (1.24 and 1.34). Every other party drew less. The Social Democrats drew 0.64 times their vote share in 2018 and 0.41 times in 2019, the Moderates 0.76 and 0.91, the Centre Party 0.32 and 0.29, and the Greens 0.42 and 0.24.

Which pages are counted matters for some parties more than others (Table 4). The Sweden Democrats' ratio is between 2.3 and 3.3 under every check. The Centre Party's is 0.16 and 0.13 on its party page alone but 0.77 and 0.52 on Lööf's page alone, because most of the party's engagement ran through her. The Moderates' ratio in 2019 ranges from 1.20 on the party page alone to 0.14 on Kristersson's page alone. Comparing party pages alone, as in my earlier paper (Hotham 2026b), would understate the Centre Party and the Left Party and overstate the Moderates.

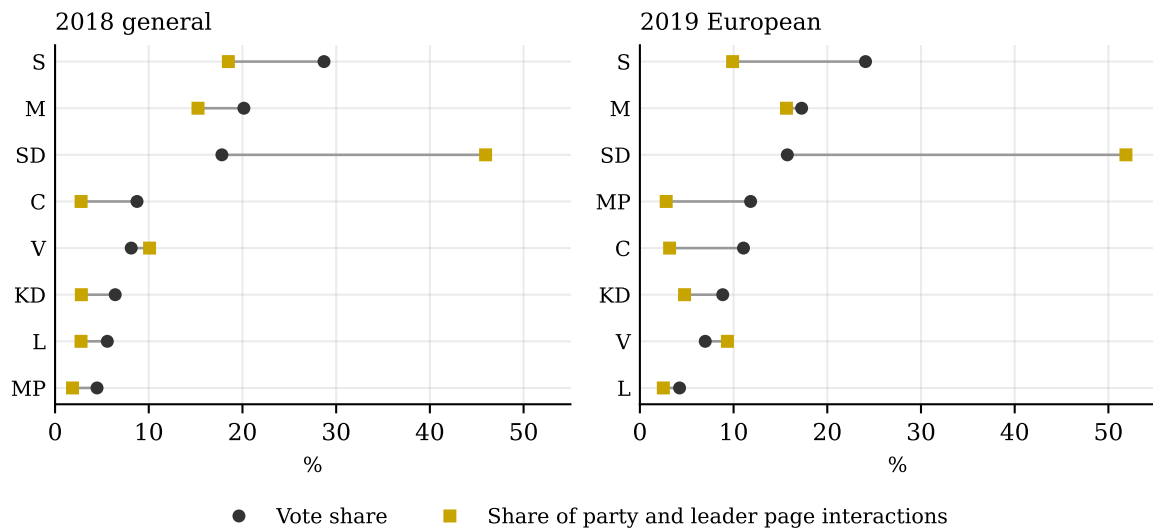


Figure 2. Share of interactions on each party's page and its leader's page in the 30 days before each election, and vote share among the eight parties. KD and MP have no leader page in the data.

Table 3. Facebook and vote shares in the 30 days before each election, counting each party's page and its leader's page where one is in the data. Vote % is renormalised among the eight parties. Ratio is Facebook % divided by vote %.

Election	Party	Posts	Facebook %	Vote %	Gap (points)	Ratio
2018 general	S	312	18.5	28.7	-10.2	0.64
	M	244	15.3	20.2	-4.9	0.76
	SD	440	45.9	17.8	+28.1	2.58
	C	140	2.8	8.7	-6.0	0.32
	V	266	10.1	8.1	+2.0	1.24
	KD	80	2.8	6.4	-3.6	0.44
	L	176	2.8	5.6	-2.8	0.50
	MP	96	1.9	4.5	-2.6	0.42
2019 European	S	147	9.9	24.1	-14.2	0.41
	M	131	15.6	17.3	-1.6	0.91
	SD	311	51.9	15.7	+36.1	3.30
	MP	105	2.8	11.8	-9.0	0.24
	C	121	3.2	11.1	-7.9	0.29
	KD	70	4.8	8.8	-4.1	0.54
	V	204	9.3	7.0	+2.4	1.34
	L	127	2.5	4.2	-1.7	0.59

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

Election	Party	Main (30 days)	Party pages only	Leader pages only	14 days	60 days
2018 general	S	0.64	0.66	0.53	0.68	0.65
	M	0.76	0.86	0.36	0.69	0.77
	SD	2.58	2.56	2.35	2.63	2.48
	MP	0.42	0.53	–	0.35	0.47
	C	0.32	0.16	0.77	0.33	0.36
	V	1.24	1.03	1.77	1.25	1.34
	L	0.50	0.43	0.65	0.48	0.51
	KD	0.44	0.56	–	0.37	0.41
2019 European	S	0.41	0.47	0.21	0.39	0.47
	M	0.91	1.20	0.14	1.10	0.76
	SD	3.30	2.95	3.29	3.15	3.29
	MP	0.24	0.33	–	0.24	0.24
	C	0.29	0.13	0.52	0.28	0.32
	V	1.34	0.99	1.74	1.08	1.53
	L	0.59	0.58	0.48	0.75	0.55
	KD	0.54	0.76	–	0.60	0.50

5 Discussion

Swedish parties did not route their Facebook presence through their leaders in the same way. The Sweden Democrats' party page drew five to six and a half times as much as their leader's page from 2018, even though Åkesson's page drew more interactions than any other leader's page in the data. The Centre Party went the other way, with Löf's page carrying most of its engagement. The Moderates relied on their party page under both leaders. Shares also moved with circumstances: Löfven's fell in the 2018 election year as his party page posted heavily.

For comparisons of engagement with votes, the lesson is practical. The radical right's large share is robust to how pages are counted. The relative position of the other parties is not: a comparison that leaves out leader pages understates parties like the Centre Party whose engagement runs through their leader, and one that leaves out party pages understates parties like the Moderates whose engagement runs through the party.

6 Limitations

The lists do not include the leaders of KD or the Greens, so their parties appear through party pages only, and Björklund's page begins in October 2017. CrowdTangle's coverage of the Sweden Democrats' page is clearly incomplete in 2014, which is why I start in 2015, and I cannot check coverage in later years against another source. Interactions are not support: they include engagement from opponents, from outside Sweden and possibly from paid promotion. Two elections are too few to say whether the ratios are stable, and the 2018 comparison repeats, with leader pages added, a comparison I made in an earlier paper on party pages ([Hotham 2026b](#)).

7 Conclusion

Parties in the same political system differed in whether their Facebook engagement ran through the leader or the party page. In Sweden between 2015 and 2020, the Sweden Democrats' engagement shifted towards their party page, the Centre Party's towards its leader's, and the Moderates' stayed mainly on the party page. The radical right's large share of engagement survives every way of counting pages; the position of other parties depends on which pages are counted.

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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