The Quiet Centre: Portuguese Parties and Politicians on Facebook, 2010 to 2020

Tristan Hotham*

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Abstract

Portugal's two main parties, the Socialists (PS) and the Social Democrats (PSD), won 70% of the vote among the parties studied here in 2019, but drew much less of the engagement with Portuguese party and politician pages on Facebook. I use 153,649 posts from 12 party pages and 63 politicians' pages, collected through CrowdTangle, and compare each party's share of interactions in the 30 days before the 2015 and 2019 national elections and the 2019 European election with its share of the vote. Because capture of photo posts rose about fivefold in May 2015, comparisons start in June 2015. In 2015 the PS and the PSD-led alliance drew 70% of interactions against 77% of the vote; in 2019 they drew 43% against 70%, and 32% against 62% before the European election. In the month before the 2019 election, small parties drew between 2.5 and 10 times their vote share, whether they entered parliament in 2019 (PAN, Liberal Initiative, LIVRE) or not (the far-right PNR, Nós, Cidadãos and Aliança), so engagement did not separate winners of seats from the rest. Chega, which did enter, has no page in the data. The Left Bloc was loud through its politicians: its eight politicians' pages, an eighth of all politicians' pages, drew 43% of the interactions on politicians' pages from 2016 to 2020, and its MPs other than the leader drew slightly more than the 26 PSD politicians' pages together. On Facebook, the centre of the Portuguese party system was quiet.

Keywords: Facebook; political parties; Portugal; Left Bloc; small parties; engagement; elections; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Between 2015 and 2019 Portugal was governed by a minority Socialist government supported in parliament by the Left Bloc (BE) and the Communist-led CDU, an arrangement known as the *geringonça* (Fernandes et al. 2018). In 2019 the Socialists gained votes and the centre-right PSD lost them, PAN grew from one seat to four, and three parties entered parliament for the first time with one seat each: Liberal Initiative (IL), LIVRE and the radical-right Chega (Wikipedia contributors 2026c; Mendes and Dennison 2021). Portugal is therefore a case where small parties broke through in a system long dominated by two large ones.

*Independent researcher. ORCID 0000-0003-4931-9349. Correspondence: contact@tristanhotham.com. The views expressed are the author's own and do not represent those of any employer.

This paper asks how the Portuguese party system looked on Facebook. Parties use Facebook continuously (Larsson 2016), and politicians use their own pages to reach audiences directly (Stier et al. 2018). In earlier work I found that engagement often runs well ahead of the vote for some kinds of party (Hotham 2026). I ask three questions. **RQ1.** How did each party's share of Facebook interactions compare with its share of the vote at the 2015 and 2019 elections? **RQ2.** Did Facebook engagement single out the small parties that entered parliament in 2019 before the vote? **RQ3.** Who carried each party's engagement: its party page, its leader or its other politicians?

2 Data and method

Posts. The data are all posts from two CrowdTangle lists of Portuguese political pages that I built for my doctoral research, exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). One list has 12 party pages and the other 68 politicians' pages, mostly members of parliament and party leaders. The export has 157,163 posts. I removed 2,020 posts after 30 September 2020 and 4 duplicates (same page, time, text and link). I left out three pages run by supporters rather than by the politician (1,431 posts), one of them the page under the name of the PSD leader Rui Rio; the page of an MP who had left his party's parliamentary group and sat as a non-attached member for the whole period in which the page posted (58 posts); and a page whose only post was not by the politician (1 post). The sample is 153,649 posts from 75 pages, January 2010 to September 2020, with 24.1 million interactions (reactions, comments and shares). I assigned each politician's page to their party using parliamentary records, Wikipedia and press reports, checked against the page's own posts. An MP elected as an independent on the Socialist list in 2015 is coded to the PS. Party pages are grouped by electoral list: the PCP, Os Verdes and CDU pages count as CDU, and in 2015 the PSD and the CDS-PP count together as the Portugal Ahead (PàF) alliance.

The list is uneven (Table 1). The Left Bloc has no party page in the list; its page is Esquerda Net, the Bloco's online news site. The CDS-PP has no party page, only its leader Assunção Cristas and five MPs. The Socialist leader António Costa's page posted only from August 2015 to February 2016 and from July to October 2019 (840 posts in all). The PSD leader from 2018, Rui Rio, and the PCP leader have no official page in the sample. Chega, founded in 2019, has no page in the list, and nor does its leader.

Table 1. Pages and posts by party, June 2015 to September 2020. Share is the party's share of all interactions in the sample. [a]Party page is Esquerda Net, the Bloco's news site. [b]PCP, Os Verdes and CDU pages. [c]No party page.

Party	Party pages	Politicians' pages	Posts	Interactions (m)	Share (%)
Socialist Party (PS)	1	19	17,325	3.36	14.9
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	1	26	25,736	3.46	15.3
Left Bloc (BE)[a]	1	8	34,300	4.80	21.2
CDU (PCP and PEV)[b]	3	2	13,096	1.50	6.7
CDS-PP[c]	0	6	4,637	1.17	5.2
People-Animals-Nature (PAN)	1	1	8,826	4.04	17.9
Liberal Initiative (IL)	1	0	1,454	1.78	7.9
LIVRE	1	0	2,179	0.26	1.1
Aliança	1	0	1,584	0.21	0.9
Nós, Cidadãos	1	0	2,265	0.63	2.8
National Renovator Party (PNR)	1	0	9,830	1.39	6.2
Total	12	62	121,232	22.60	100.0

A break in capture. The number of photo posts in the data rose sharply in May 2015, across most pages at once, which points to a change in what CrowdTangle captured rather than in what pages posted. Across these pages, photo posts rose from 147 in April 2015 to 609 in May, and from an average of 141 a month in January to April to 729 a month in June to December, while link posts rose only from 385 to 489 a month, partly because of the September campaign. Photos made up 18% of posts in early 2015 and 47% later in the year. Posts before June 2015 are 21% of the sample but only 6% of interactions. I therefore start all comparisons over time in June 2015 (121,232 posts, 22.6 million interactions), use shares of the national total within the same window or quarter, and compare posts of the same type within the same month. The 2011 election and the 2014 European election fall before the break and are not analysed.

Comparisons. For each election I compare each party's share of interactions in the 30 days before polling day with its share of the vote, renormalised among the parties in the data (Wikipedia contributors 2026a,c,b). These parties won 96% of the valid vote at each election; the parties left out include Chega (Basta at the European election), the PDR and the PCTP/MRPP. I report the ratio of the two shares: above 1, a party drew more than its share of the vote. As checks, I use windows of 14 and 60 days, and party pages only. To see whether differences come from how much posts drew rather than how many there were, I regress the log of interactions per post on party group with fixed effects for month and post type, with standard errors clustered by page, and convert coefficients to percentages as $100(e^b - 1)$.

3 Results

3.1 The large parties drew less than their vote

In the month before the October 2015 election, the PS and PàF pages drew 70% of interactions among the parties in the data, close to their 77% of the vote (Figure 1, Table 2). By 2019 the gap was large. Before the European election in May 2019, the PS and PSD drew 32% of interactions against 62% of the vote. Before the national election in October they drew 43% against 70%. The PSD drew 0.38 times its vote share and the PS 0.80 times, a figure that owes much to Costa's campaign page, which drew 45% of PS interactions in the window; before the European election, when it did not post, the PS drew 0.45 times its vote.

The decline is not only a matter of which pages were in the list. Among the 38 pages that posted in both the 2015 and 2019 national windows, the PS, PSD and CDS share of interactions fell from 69% to 55%. With party pages only, the PS and PSD share fell from 59% to 32%. Figure 2 (left) shows the same pattern quarter by quarter: the PSD and CDS share fell from between 27% and 44% in 2015 and 2016 to between 10% and 18% from mid-2018. The PS share stayed between 5.5% and 16.6% outside the 2015 and 2019 campaign quarters.

3.2 Small parties drew far more, whether they won seats or not

Every small party drew more than its vote share before the 2019 national election, and all but LIVRE did so before the European election. Together the six small parties in the data drew 31% of interactions before the national election against 8% of the vote, and 33% against 13% before the European election. In the year before the 2019 national election, PAN drew 4.5 times its eventual vote share and IL 6.1 times; IL entered parliament and PAN grew. But the far-right PNR drew 16.7 times its share, Nós, Cidadãos

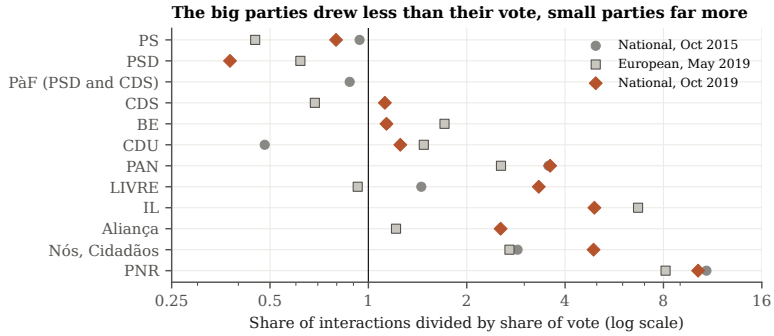


Figure 1. Share of interactions in the 30 days before each election divided by share of the vote, among the parties in the data. In 2015 the PSD and CDS ran together as PàF. Aliança and IL did not stand in 2015.

Table 2. Share of interactions (FB) in the 30 days before each election, share of the vote among the same parties (%), and their ratio. Votes from Wikipedia contributors (2026a,c,b).

	National, Oct 2015			European, May 2019			National, Oct 2019		
Party	FB	Vote	Ratio	FB	Vote	Ratio	FB	Vote	Ratio
PS	32.9	35.0	0.94	16.8	37.3	0.45	31.7	39.8	0.80
PSD				15.2	24.5	0.62	11.5	30.4	0.38
PàF	36.6	41.8	0.88						
CDS				4.7	6.9	0.69	5.2	4.6	1.12
BE	12.5	11.0	1.14	18.8	11.0	1.71	11.9	10.4	1.14
CDU	4.3	8.9	0.48	11.4	7.7	1.48	8.7	7.0	1.25
PAN	5.4	1.5	3.56	14.5	5.7	2.55	13.1	3.6	3.60
LIVRE	1.1	0.8	1.45	1.9	2.0	0.93	4.0	1.2	3.32
IL				6.6	1.0	6.69	6.9	1.4	4.92
Aliança				2.5	2.1	1.22	2.1	0.8	2.54
NC	1.2	0.4	2.86	3.2	1.2	2.70	1.3	0.3	4.89
PNR	5.9	0.5	10.83	4.4	0.5	8.12	3.6	0.4	10.21

10.1 times and Aliança 3.5 times, and none won a seat. LIVRE, which did win one, had the lowest ratio of the small parties over that year, 1.6, though in the final month it drew 3.3 times its vote. Facebook engagement was high for small parties in general, not only for those about to break through.

PAN is the clearest case of a party large on Facebook long before it was large at the polls. From 2016 to 2018 its pages drew 26% of all interactions in the data, more than any other party (the Bloco drew 22%), at a time when it held one seat won with 1.4% of the vote. In September 2019 its party page had about 161,000 likes, more than the PSD's 150,000 and the PS's 85,000. Its vote rose to 3.3% in 2019. Chega, the most consequential of the 2019 newcomers, cannot be assessed because it has no page in the data. The PNR, on the same far-right flank, drew 3.6% of interactions before the election and won 0.3% of the vote.

Small parties' party pages did not draw more per post than those of the large parties. Comparing party

pages' posts of the same type in the same month, posts on small parties' pages drew about as much as posts on the PS and PSD pages (−3%, SE 0.32 log points). Across all pages, including politicians', small parties' posts drew about 140% more (0.87 log points, SE 0.40), which may reflect the many low-engagement MPs' pages in the large parties' lists. From 2018, when page likes are recorded, the difference between small parties and the PS and PSD is 65% holding page size constant, but imprecise (0.50, SE 0.31).

3.3 The Left Bloc was loud through its politicians

The Left Bloc drew more than its vote share at every election: 1.14 times in 2015, 1.71 times before the European election and 1.14 times in October 2019. Together with the CDU, the parties of the *geringonça*'s left drew 17% of interactions in 2015 against 20% of the vote, and 21% against 17% in 2019; their quarterly share rose from about 20% in 2015 to between 33% and 41% in 2020 (Figure 2, left).

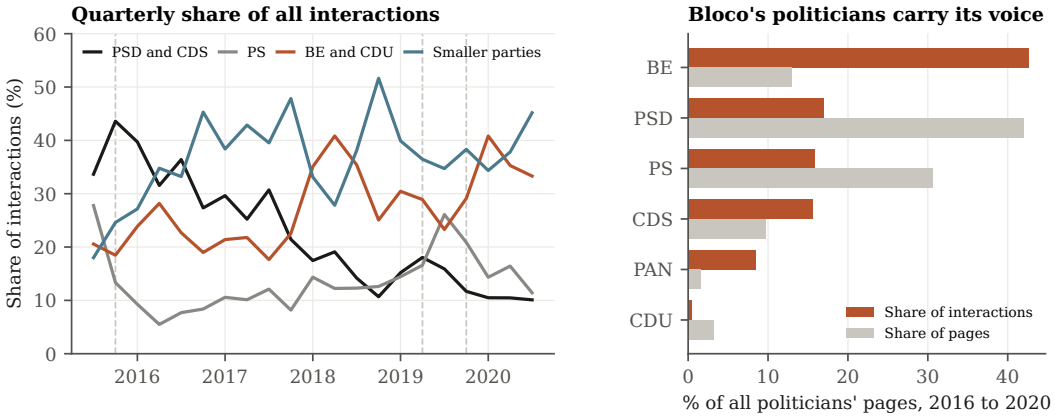


Figure 2. Left: share of all interactions by quarter, July 2015 to September 2020, including party and politicians' pages; smaller parties are PAN, IL, LIVRE, Aliança, Nós, Cidadãos and PNR. Dashed lines mark the 2015 national, 2019 European and 2019 national elections. Right: each party's share of all interactions on politicians' pages, and of politicians' pages, 2016 to 2020.

What sets the Bloco apart is where its engagement came from. From June 2015, 64% of its interactions came from its politicians' pages, against 42% for the PS and 34% for the PSD. From 2016 to 2020 politicians' pages drew 32% of all interactions in the data. The Bloco's eight politicians' pages, 13% of all politicians' pages, drew 43% of the interactions on politicians' pages (Figure 2, right). Its leader, Catarina Martins, drew 23% on her own. Its other MPs drew 19%, slightly more than the 26 PSD politicians' pages together (17%) and the 19 PS pages (16%). Comparing posts of the same type in the same month, posts on Bloco politicians' pages drew about two and a half times as much as those on PS and PSD politicians' pages (155% more, 0.94 log points, SE 0.45), though the estimate is imprecise. Esquerda Net, by contrast, posted many news links that drew less per post than the PS and PSD party pages (−65%, −1.06 log points, SE 0.14).

Leaders mattered most where the party page was weak or missing. Cristas's page drew 90% of CDS interactions from 2016 to 2020, as the party had no page in the list, and Costa's page drew 88% of PS interactions in the 2015 campaign window. PAN's leader André Silva drew 15% of his party's interactions, and the new parties' engagement came entirely from their party pages. The PSD's came from its party page (58%) and its MPs (42%).

4 Discussion

On Facebook, Portugal's party system looked very different from its vote. The two parties that won seven in ten votes among the parties studied in 2019 drew well under half of the engagement, and the small parties and the radical left drew far more than their vote. The gap widened between 2015 and 2019, mainly through a fall in the PSD's share, which is consistent with the party's electoral decline but much steeper. This fits the idea that engagement may track the intensity of committed audiences more than the breadth of a party's support (Hotham 2026).

For RQ2, the answer is mixed. Facebook marked PAN and IL as large presences before 2019, and both won seats. But it marked the PNR and Nós, Cidadãos even more strongly, and they won almost nothing, while LIVRE entered parliament with the weakest signal of the small parties over the preceding year.

For RQ3, the Bloco stands out. Its engagement came largely from its leader and its MPs, several of whom drew more than most MPs of the large parties, though the lists hold different numbers and kinds of MPs for each party. The large parties had many MPs' pages, most of which drew little. In Portugal the party most carried by its politicians was a party of the radical left, not one built around a single leader.

The design has clear limits. The lists are uneven: the Bloco is represented by a news site rather than a party page, the CDS has no party page, the PS leader's page posted only around the two national elections, the PSD leader has no official page in the sample, and Chega is absent. The politicians' pages are those I chose for my doctoral research, not a census of MPs, so the shares of each party's politicians partly reflect that choice. CrowdTangle's historical capture is not guaranteed to be complete, the May 2015 break shows that it changed over time, and Esquerda Net's posting rose from 582 posts in 2017 to 3,164 in 2018, which may reflect behaviour or capture. Interactions are not support: they include opponents, people outside Portugal and possibly paid promotion. Three elections are too few to generalise, and nothing here shows that engagement caused or reflected votes.

5 Conclusion

Across 75 Portuguese party and politician pages, engagement on Facebook ran against the shape of the vote. The PS and PSD drew close to their vote in 2015 but well under it by 2019. Small parties drew several times their vote whether or not they broke through, and the Left Bloc's voice was carried by its politicians more than by any party page. On Facebook, the centre of the Portuguese party system was the quietest part of it.

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 with their party coding and page-level 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 election results and party coding. 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 and politicians, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by page, party and period. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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