

Who Carries the Party on Facebook?

Leaders, Party Pages and the Polls in Britain, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Is a British party's Facebook audience built around its leader or its party page, and does either track the polls? I use 89,110 posts from the pages of eight parties and eighteen of their leaders between June 2010 and October 2020, which drew 218 million interactions, and match them to monthly averages of 2,767 national voting-intention polls. Leaders carried very different shares of their party's engagement. Nigel Farage at the Brexit Party took 79%, Leanne Wood 75%, Jeremy Corbyn 74% and David Cameron 71%, while most Liberal Democrat and Green leaders took a quarter or less. Facebook's audience was a poor picture of the electorate. UKIP and the Brexit Party each took about a third of interactions in the months they were active while polling under 10%, and the Conservatives took a fifth while polling 36%. Within a party, engagement and polls moved together: month-on-month changes in a party page's interactions went with same-month changes in its polling (0.43 points per log point), and higher-engagement months within a party and year went with higher polling. I find no evidence that engagement moved first, though I cannot rule out a short lead. Leader pages added nothing to the party page as a signal, and in periods when more of a party's engagement went to its leader the party polled lower, by 0.7 points for every 10 points of leader share. This association is slow-moving and depends on Labour under Corbyn and the Brexit Party. Election campaigns lowered the leader's share by about 6 points, because party pages doubled their output, although each leader post gained more than each party post. Changes of leader did not reliably lift the party page. Leader posts drew more love reactions and fewer comments and shares than party posts. Facebook engagement in this period tracked a party's standing at the time; it was badly calibrated across parties, and leader-centred engagement went with weaker polling.

Keywords: personalisation; party leaders; Facebook; UK politics; opinion polls; digital trace data; election campaigns

1 Introduction

British politics has been described as increasingly presidential, with leaders more prominent than the parties they lead (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Garzia 2011). Social media should be where this shows most clearly. A leader's page speaks in the first person, travels on the leader's name and face, and does not need the party's permission (Enli and Skogerbo 2013; Metz et al. 2020). Yet most work on

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personalisation online looks at what politicians post, not at where the audience goes, and almost none follows the same parties and leaders across a decade.

A second question is whether this audience means anything for votes. Claims that social media activity predicts elections have a poor record (Tumasjan et al. 2010; Jungherr et al. 2012; Gayo-Avello 2013), and the Facebook audiences of insurgent parties and leaders have often been much larger than their vote (Gerbaudo 2018). That does not settle whether changes in a party's engagement over time track its standing. A thermometer can be uncalibrated across parties and still move with the temperature.

I use a decade of Facebook data for the main British parties and their leaders, from June 2010 to October 2020, matched to a monthly average of national voting-intention polls, to answer five questions. **RQ1.** How much of each party's Facebook engagement did its leader carry, and how did that vary across leaders and over time? **RQ2.** How closely did engagement shares match poll and vote shares? **RQ3.** Within a party, did engagement move with the polls, and did it lead them? **RQ4.** Was leader-centred engagement a sign of strength or weakness in the polls? **RQ5.** Did election campaigns and changes of leader shift engagement between leader and party?

Leaders varied enormously, from Farage, Wood, Corbyn and Cameron, who took most of their party's engagement, to Liberal Democrat and Green leaders, who took very little. Within parties there was no upward trend in the leader's share over the decade. Engagement shares were badly calibrated against the polls. Within a party, engagement and polls moved together in the same month, and I find no evidence that engagement led. The party page carried this signal; the leader page added nothing, and periods in which a party's engagement leaned on its leader were periods of weaker polling. Campaigns shifted engagement towards the party page.

This paper extends my doctoral research on how British parties use Facebook (Hotham 2021) and three preprints on Facebook and YouTube data (Hotham 2026b,c,a). The earlier papers looked at single pages, single campaigns or single elections. This one covers all the main parties over a decade.

2 Background

Personalisation. Personalisation means that individual politicians become more important relative to parties, in institutions, in the media and in the minds of voters (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010). Leader evaluations have long been shown to shape vote choice (Bittner 2011). On social media, personalisation can take two forms: politicians present themselves as people (Metz et al. 2020), and audiences follow individual politicians rather than parties (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). The second is what this paper measures. If personalisation is the long-run trend, leader pages should take a growing share of each party's engagement, and campaigns, when attention concentrates on the leaders, should take it further.

Facebook audiences and votes. Engagement on a page depends on how many people follow it, how often it posts and how much its followers interact (Larsson 2016; Bene 2017; Stier et al. 2018). None of these is a sample of the electorate. Insurgent and populist parties tend to have large, active audiences (Gerbaudo 2018), and studies that try to predict results from social media activity usually fail once they are tested out of sample (Gayo-Avello 2013; Cameron et al. 2016). Changes within a party are a different matter. A party's existing supporters are its likeliest engagers, so when the party gains support its pages may gain interactions too. That relationship, not the cross-party level, is the one I test.

Britain, 2010 to 2020. The decade had four general elections, three referendums and five changes of

Conservative or Labour leader. Parties also changed how they used Facebook, moving money and effort from organic posting to advertising and to satellite campaign pages (Dommett and Temple 2018). My doctoral research compared how parties used leader and party pages in the 2015 and 2017 elections (Hotham 2021). This paper asks the question across a decade and all the main parties.

3 Data

3.1 Facebook pages

The post-level data come from CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team 2020), collected on 28 October 2020. They cover the public posts of 28 pages: the national pages of the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Brexit Party, the Green Party of England and Wales, the SNP and Plaid Cymru, the personal pages of their leaders over the decade, and Momentum. For each post the data give the date, format, follower count at the time of posting and the counts of reactions, comments and shares. I sum these into interactions. I use posts from 1 June 2010 to 28 October 2020.

I assign each leader page to its party only for the period in which that person led it, using the dates on which leaders took and left office. Posts from leader pages outside these periods, such as Boris Johnson's page before July 2019, are excluded from the leader measures. Nigel Farage's page is assigned to UKIP from November 2010 to September 2016 and to the Brexit Party from March 2019. The Greens had co-leaders from 2016, and I sum the pages of both. Momentum is a campaign group, not a party, and I leave it out of the main analysis. This gives 57,075 party-page posts and 32,035 leader-page posts during leaders' tenures, which drew 91 and 127 million interactions.

The data have gaps. There is no page for Nick Clegg, who led the Liberal Democrats until July 2015, or for Ed Davey, who was acting co-leader from December 2019 and leader from August 2020; no page for the UKIP leaders after Farage; and David Cameron's page starts in September 2013. Months without a leader page are excluded from the leader analyses. CrowdTangle holds the posts that were still public when the data were collected, so posts deleted before October 2020 are missing, and interaction counts are as of that date. Before February 2016 Facebook had only the Like button, so reaction types are analysed from March 2016.

3.2 Polls

The poll data are national Westminster voting-intention polls by members of the British Polling Council, as tabulated on Wikipedia for each parliament (Wikipedia contributors 2026). I take every poll with Conservative and Labour figures from the national tables, 2,767 in all from May 2010 to October 2020, and exclude sub-national polls. The parser skipped about 130 rows, about 4% of the total, because of irregular layouts, missing party figures or because they were election results. For each month I average each pollster's polls first and then average across pollsters, so that firms that polled daily do not dominate. The number of polls per month ranges from 3, in the summer after the 2015 election when pollsters cut back, to 69 in the 2015 campaign; the monthly averages are noisiest where few firms polled. I use the published shares for the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and the Brexit Party. The SNP's national share is reported from May 2015. The tables report shares for Great Britain or the UK depending on the pollster; I use them as published. Plaid Cymru's national share is too small to analyse.

3.3 The panel

The polling analysis uses a party-month panel of seven parties. UKIP enters from May 2011, when its page starts, to December 2019, and the Brexit Party from April 2019. The panel has 687 party-months. The main engagement measure is the log of total interactions on the party page in the month. I also use the leader page’s interactions during the leader’s tenure, the leader’s share of the two together, the median interactions per post, the number of posts, and each party’s share of all interactions on the panel’s pages that month.

4 Empirical strategy

Engagement and polls. The main model is

$$\text{Poll}_{pt} = \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \beta \log(\text{Interactions}_{pt}) + \varepsilon_{pt}, \quad (1)$$

where α_p are party fixed effects and γ_t month fixed effects. Party effects remove each party’s typical level of both polling and engagement, and month effects remove everything common to all parties in a month, including Facebook’s changes to its ranking algorithm, growth in platform use and news events. β is identified from months in which a party’s engagement was high or low relative to its own usual level and to other parties that month. Standard errors are [Driscoll and Kraay \(1998\)](#) errors, which allow for correlation across parties within a month and for serial correlation up to four months. With seven parties, clustering by party is not credible.

Because both series move slowly, I put most weight on two stricter versions: party-by-year fixed effects and month-on-month changes. I also check the result five ways: with party-specific linear and quadratic trends, which remove slow divergences such as UKIP’s rise; with party-by-year fixed effects, which compare months within the same party and year; with a permutation test that shifts each party’s engagement series in time by at least 12 months, which keeps the series’ autocorrelation and breaks its link to the polls; by dropping one party at a time; and with party-by-party regressions. The permutation test breaks each party’s trend as well as its link to the polls, so its null distribution is narrower than it should be and I treat it as a weak check. To test timing, I regress month-on-month changes in polls on changes in engagement at leads and lags from minus four to plus four months, and I run two panel Granger-style models: does this month’s change in engagement predict next month’s change in the polls, and the reverse?

Leader share. For party-months with a leader page, I estimate the same two-way model with the leader’s share of leader-plus-party interactions as the regressor, with leader rather than party fixed effects as a check.

Campaigns. I compare party-weeks overlapping in the official campaigns of the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general elections, from the dissolution of Parliament to polling day, with other weeks, with leader and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by week. At the post level, I estimate the leader page’s premium in log interactions over the party page in the same party-month, and whether it differs during campaigns, with format controls.

Changes of leader. For fifteen changes of leader, I compare the party page’s log monthly interactions in the month of the change and the twelve months after (seven for Starmer, whose window ends in October 2020) with the twelve months before, relative to the mean of parties without a change of their own in the

Table 1. Leader and party pages during each leader’s tenure. Months are months in which the leader page posted during the leader’s tenure. Share is the leader’s percentage of leader-plus-party interactions over those months. Medians are interactions per post.

Leader	Party	Tenure in data	Months	Leader posts	Party posts	Share (%)	Median, leader	Median, party
David Cameron	Con	2013–2016	35	942	962	71	4,883	1,971
Theresa May	Con	2016–2019	37	1,019	1,989	40	2,823	1,919
Boris Johnson	Con	2019–2020	16	1,629	2,482	65	7,484	2,880
Ed Miliband	Lab	2010–2015	54	895	2,460	26	200	155
Jeremy Corbyn	Lab	2015–2020	56	4,839	4,963	74	5,802	2,111
Keir Starmer	Lab	2020	7	530	788	40	2,616	2,519
Tim Farron	LD	2015–2017	25	288	1,024	9	154	554
Vince Cable	LD	2017–2019	25	1,413	2,149	23	131	279
Jo Swinson	LD	2019	6	72	1,035	4	403	603
Nigel Farage	UKIP	2010–2016	71	2,975	5,721	42	345	692
Nigel Farage	Brexit	2019–2020	20	1,190	1,406	79	13,047	3,080
Caroline Lucas	Grn	2010–2018	47	728	2,099	25	202	277
Natalie Bennett	Grn	2012–2016	49	6,713	2,768	30	68	538
Jonathan Bartley	Grn	2016–2019	34	467	1,882	4	94	597
Siân Berry	Grn	2018–2020	26	324	1,453	3	55	458
Alex Salmond	SNP	2013–2014	8	127	1,730	17	2,214	804
Nicola Sturgeon	SNP	2014–2020	72	1,565	6,149	41	2,867	1,179
Leanne Wood	PC	2012–2018	67	5,942	4,676	75	73	36
Adam Price	PC	2018–2020	25	377	1,453	14	124	165

Lucas’s tenure covers 2010 to 2012 and 2016 to 2018. Salmond’s page starts in November 2013 and Cameron’s in September 2013.

same window. UKIP and the Brexit Party are excluded from the comparison groups, because their pages rose and fell with Farage. Each event is weighted equally. With fifteen events the test can detect only large average changes, of about 0.6 log points or more.

Reactions. For posts from March 2016, I compare the shares of love, angry and haha reactions, comments and shares on leader and party posts in the same party-month, with format controls and standard errors clustered by page.

5 Results

5.1 Leaders carried very different shares of their party’s engagement

Figure 1 shows monthly interactions on each party page and each leader’s page during their tenure. Engagement rose by two to three orders of magnitude over the decade, with peaks at the 2015 and 2019 elections. Leader pages ran above their party’s page for the Conservatives under Cameron and Johnson, for Labour under Corbyn, for the Brexit Party and for Plaid Cymru under Leanne Wood. They ran well below it for the Liberal Democrats and the Greens.

Table 1 and Figure 2 give the leader’s share of leader-plus-party interactions over each leader’s tenure. Five leaders took more than 60%: Farage at the Brexit Party (79%), Wood (75%), Corbyn (74%), Cameron (71%) and Johnson (65%). Eight took a quarter or less: Lucas, Cable, Salmond, Price, Farron, Swinson, Bartley and Berry, between 3% and 25%. The same leader could sit in different places. Farage took 42% of UKIP’s engagement and 79% of the Brexit Party’s, a party built around him from the start.

Share partly reflects how much each page posted. Wood and Bennett posted far more than their parties’ pages; Bennett’s 6,713 posts drew a median of 68 interactions, against 538 for the Green Party page. The

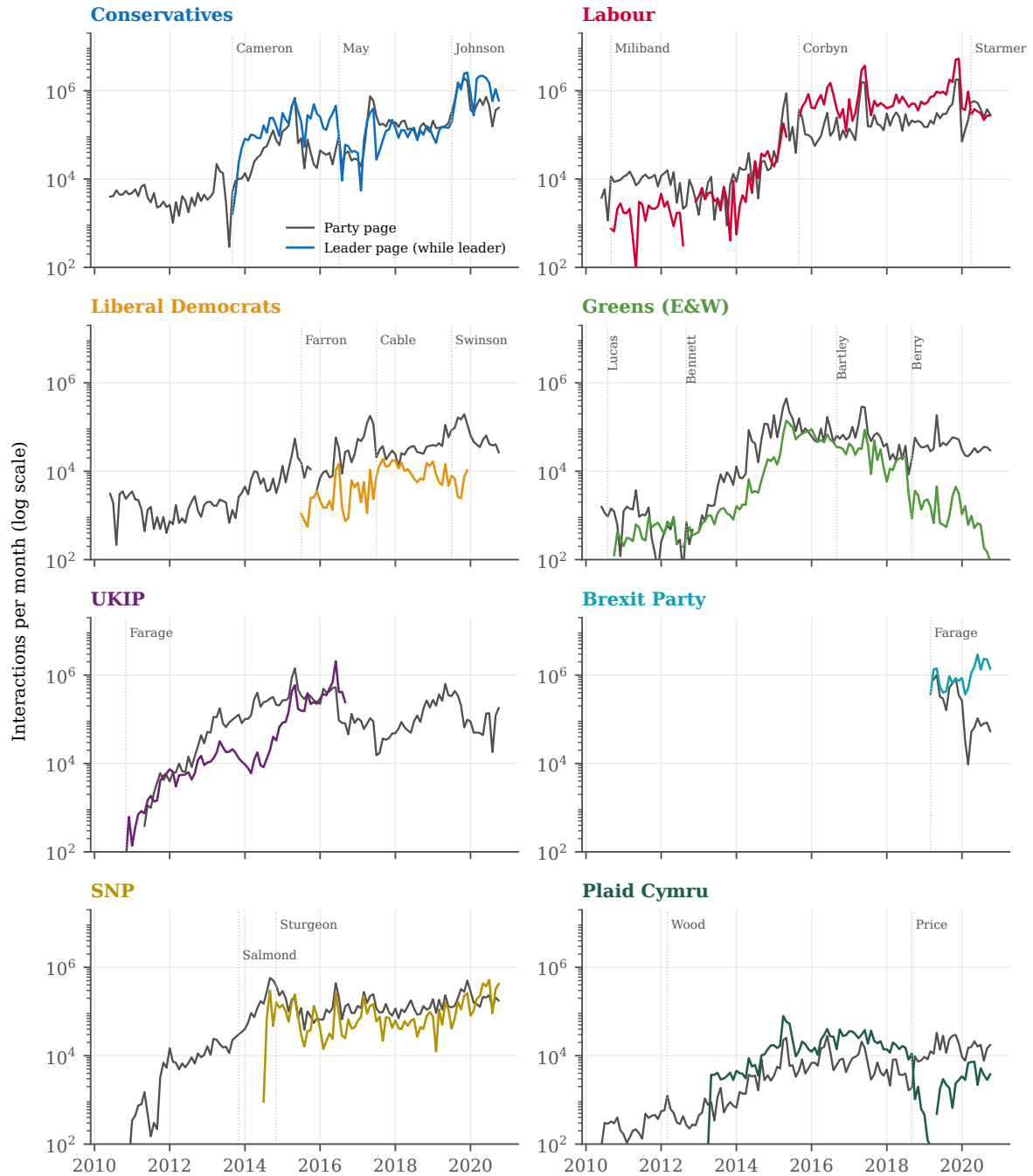


Figure 1. Monthly interactions on party pages and on leader pages during each leader's tenure, June 2010 to October 2020. Dotted lines mark changes of leader. Log scale.

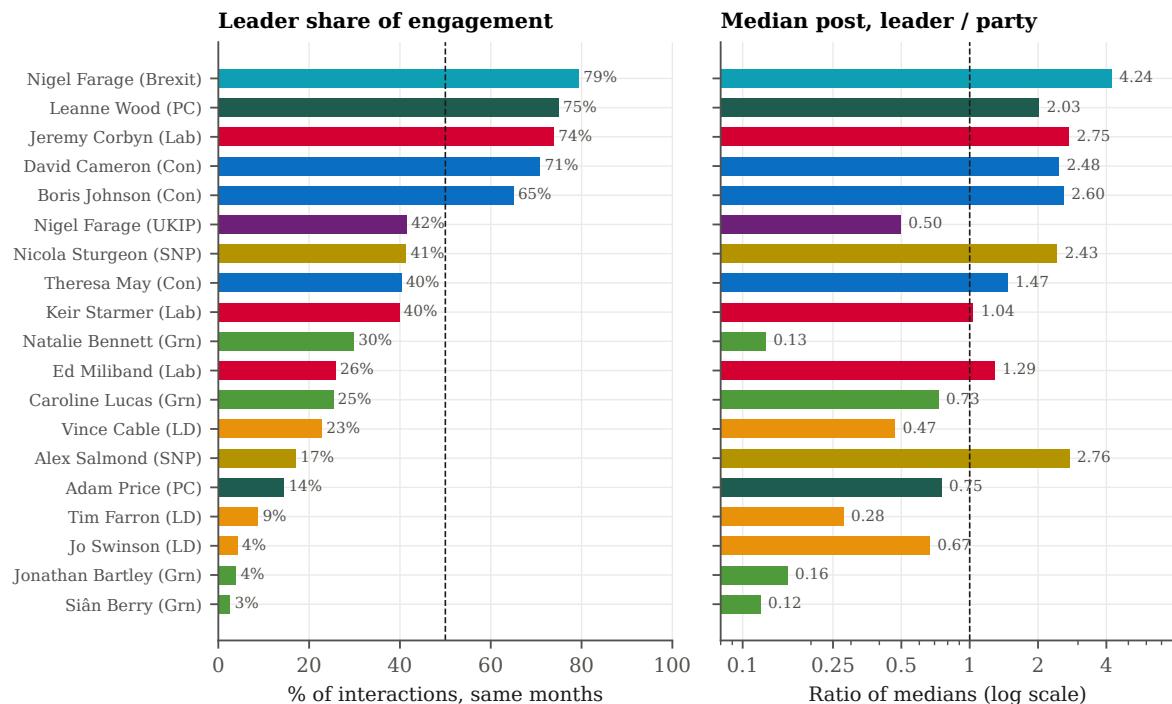


Figure 2. Left: the leader’s share of leader-plus-party interactions over the leader’s tenure. Right: the ratio of the median leader post to the median party post over the same months. Leaders with at least five months in the data.

per-post ratio in the right panel of Figure 2 removes volume. Its median leader post drew more than twice the party’s for Farage at the Brexit Party (4.2 times), Salmond, Corbyn, Johnson, Cameron, Sturgeon and Wood, and less than half for Farron, Cable, Bennett, Bartley and Berry. Farage’s UKIP-era posts drew half the median of UKIP’s own page. These are differences between leaders. Within the Conservatives the share went from 71% under Cameron to 40% under May and 65% under Johnson; within Labour, from 26% under Miliband to 74% under Corbyn and 40% under Starmer. Across all parties the leader share of interactions rose from 15% in 2010 to 76% in 2020, but that rise comes from which leaders had pages and which parties drew most engagement. Within parties, a regression of the monthly leader share on time with party fixed effects gives 1.0 points a year (standard error 1.3), with no clear trend.

5.2 Facebook’s audience was a poor picture of the electorate

Figure 3 plots each party’s share of interactions on the panel’s pages against its share of the poll among the same parties, by year. Over the panel, UKIP took 33% of interactions in the months it was in the panel while polling 9% among these parties, and the Brexit Party 30% against 7%. The SNP took 11% against 4% and the Greens 6% against 4%. The Conservatives took 21% against 38% (36% in the raw polls), and the Liberal Democrats 3% against 10%. Labour was close on average (33% against 37%), but only because its share was below its polling before Corbyn (25% against 40%) and above it after (41% against 35%). Across party-months, a 10 point higher share of interactions went with a 3.1 point higher share of the poll ($R^2 = 0.16$).

The same pattern holds in the election campaigns (Figure 4). In 2015 UKIP took 34% of the interactions on these pages during the campaign and won 13% of the vote among these parties. In 2017 and 2019 Labour took 69% and 55% of interactions and won 41% and 33%. The Conservatives’ shares of interactions were 25%, 18% and 32% against 38%, 44% and 45% of the vote. The Liberal Democrats’

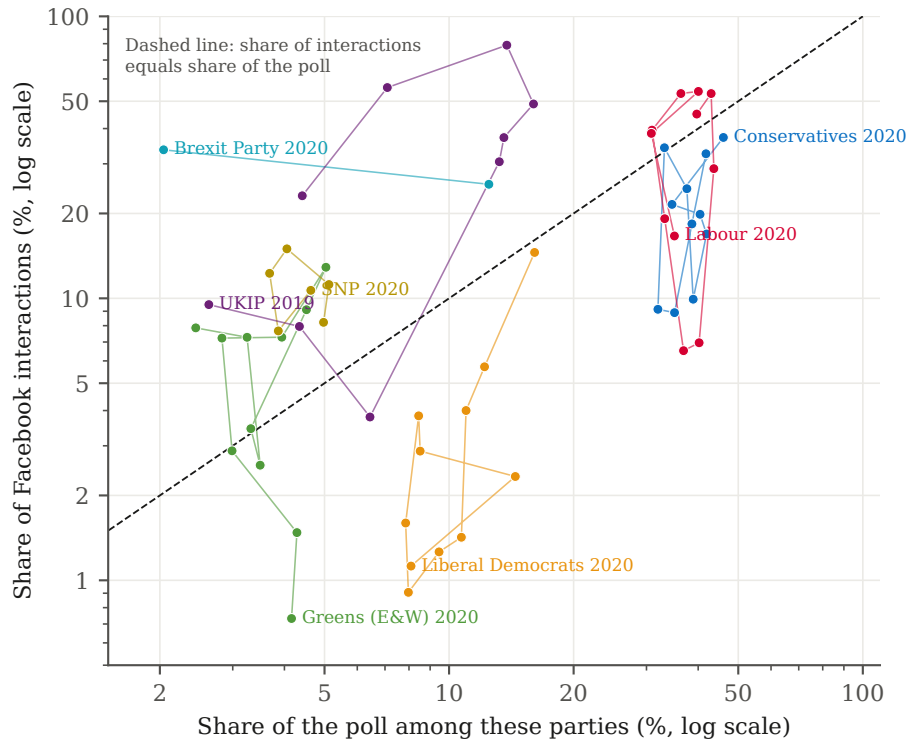


Figure 3. Each party's share of interactions on the panel's party and leader pages against its share of the poll among the same parties, yearly means. The dashed line marks equal shares. Log scales.

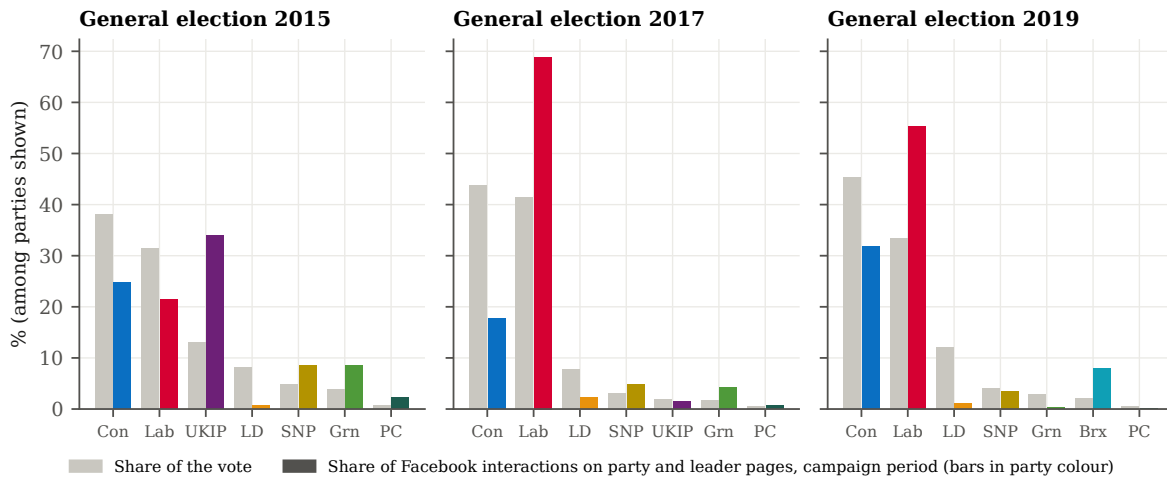


Figure 4. Share of interactions on party and leader pages during the campaign, from dissolution to polling day, against share of the UK vote, among the parties shown, at the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general elections.

2015 figure is understated because Clegg's page is missing, but their party page drew under 5% of party-page interactions in every campaign. On these numbers, Facebook engagement would have predicted a UKIP surge in 2015 and a Labour win in 2017 and 2019.

Table 2. Engagement and voting intention, party-month panel, June 2010 to October 2020. Outcome: poll share (points) unless stated. All models include party and month fixed effects unless stated. Driscoll–Kraay standard errors in parentheses.

Model	Estimate	95% CI	N
<i>Levels: log party-page interactions</i>			
Two-way fixed effects	1.83 (0.31)	1.22, 2.43	687
+ party linear trends	1.46 (0.26)	0.95, 1.97	687
+ party quadratic trends	0.90 (0.35)	0.22, 1.59	687
Party-by-year and month fixed effects	0.80 (0.33)	0.16, 1.44	687
Permutation test (500 time shifts), p	< 0.002	null: -0.76, 0.52	687
Leave one party out, range	1.24 to 2.40		
Serial correlation up to 12 months	1.83 (0.40)	1.04, 2.61	687
Outcome: log poll share	0.23 (0.04)	0.14, 0.31	687
<i>Party page and leader page together</i>			
Log party-page interactions	1.70 (0.37)	0.98, 2.42	687
Log leader-page interactions (with indicator)	-0.19 (0.26)	-0.69, 0.32	687
Months with a leader page: party page	2.11 (0.43)	1.27, 2.96	525
leader page	-1.04 (0.31)	-1.65, -0.44	525
<i>Changes</i>			
Δ poll on Δ log interactions, same month	0.43 (0.10)	0.23, 0.62	666
Δ poll next month on Δ log interactions (and Δ poll)	0.12 (0.15)	-0.17, 0.42	666
Δ log interactions next month on Δ poll (and Δ log interactions)	-0.018 (0.018)	-0.054, 0.017	666
<i>Shares (points on points)</i>			
Poll share on interaction share, party and leader pages	0.078 (0.025)	0.030, 0.126	687
Poll share on interaction share, party pages	0.130 (0.021)	0.089, 0.171	687

5.3 Within a party, engagement moved with the polls

The level of engagement says little about a party's standing. Changes in it say more. Table 2 and Figure 5 give the estimates. In the simplest two-way model, months in which a party's page drew more interactions than usual, relative to other parties that month, were months in which it polled higher: 1.83 points per log point (95% CI 1.22 to 2.43), or 1.3 points for a doubling. Much of this is slow co-movement, such as UKIP's rise on both measures from 2012 to 2015. The stricter versions are smaller and still clear. Comparing months within the same party and year gives 0.80 (0.16 to 1.44), and month-on-month changes give 0.43 (0.23 to 0.62). I treat these as the main estimates.

Party trends shrink the level estimate to 1.46 (linear) and 0.90 (quadratic). Allowing for serial correlation up to twelve months widens the interval to 1.04 to 2.61. With the log of poll share as the outcome, a log point of interactions goes with polling 23% higher in relative terms (0.14 to 0.31). Dropping any one party leaves the estimate between 1.24 (without UKIP) and 2.40 (without the Greens). Both parts of engagement contribute: the median post (2.59 points per log point) and the number of posts (1.66), entered together.

The parties differ (Table 3). In changes, the relationship is clearest for UKIP (0.60 points per log point) and Labour (0.38), smaller for the Liberal Democrats (0.20) and the Greens (0.14), and absent for the Conservatives, the SNP and the Brexit Party. In levels with a party trend, UKIP dominates and Labour's estimate is negative, because Labour's engagement grew under Corbyn while its polling fell. The pooled

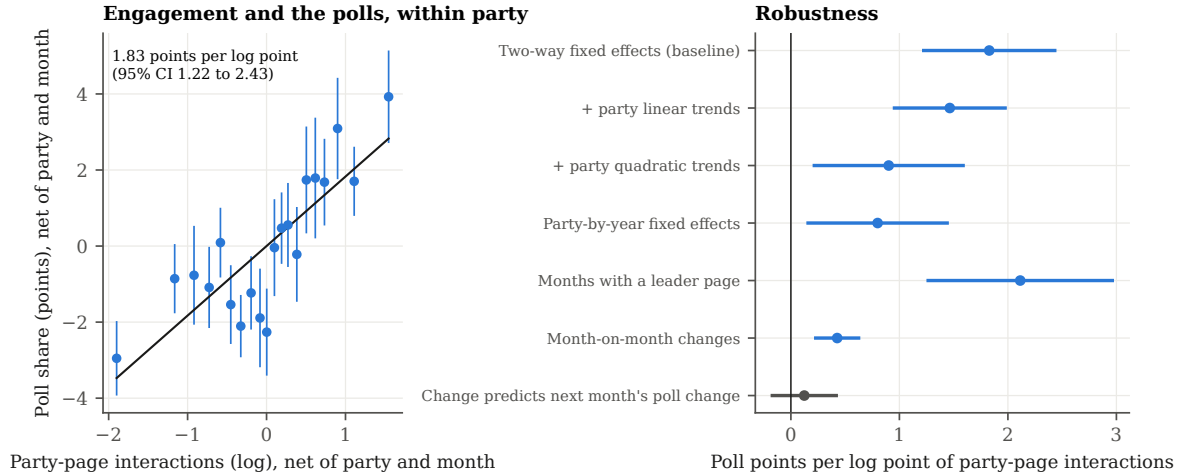


Figure 5. Left: binned scatter of poll share against log party-page interactions, both net of party and month fixed effects, 20 bins with 95% intervals. Right: estimates across specifications, with 95% confidence intervals. The last two rows are month-on-month changes.

Table 3. Party-by-party estimates. Levels: poll share on log party-page interactions with a linear trend. Changes: month-on-month change in poll share on change in log interactions. Newey–West standard errors (four lags) in parentheses.

Party	Months	Levels, with trend	Changes
Conservatives	125	0.28 (0.65)	−0.02 (0.27)
Labour	125	−0.70 (0.37)	0.38 (0.16)
Liberal Democrats	124	0.88 (0.49)	0.20 (0.12)
UKIP	104	2.90 (0.27)	0.60 (0.30)
Greens	124	0.25 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)
SNP	66	0.26 (0.16)	−0.04 (0.10)
Brexit Party	19	0.67 (0.79)	0.05 (0.21)

result is a general tendency, not a law that held for every party.

On timing (Figure 6), only the same-month estimate is clearly positive. This month’s change in engagement did not predict next month’s change in the polls (0.12, −0.17 to 0.42), and this month’s change in the polls did not predict next month’s change in engagement. The interval for the lead is wide enough to include an effect as large as the same-month one, and monthly averages cannot detect a lead of a week or two, so the evidence is that engagement did not lead by a month or more, not that it never led. I do not read anything into the negative estimate for the previous month’s poll change (−0.26).

The leader page added nothing to this signal. With both pages in the model, the party page keeps its estimate and the leader page has none (−0.19, −0.69 to 0.32). In the months that have a leader page, the leader page’s estimate is negative (−1.04, −1.65 to −0.44) once the party page is held fixed.

5.4 Leader-centred engagement went with weaker polling

That negative estimate points to the leader’s share. Within a party, and relative to other parties that month, months in which more of the party’s engagement went to its leader were months in which the party polled lower: −0.73 points for every 10 points of leader share (−1.06 to −0.40; Figure 7). It holds with party trends (−0.54), with leader instead of party fixed effects (−0.57), with the party page’s own

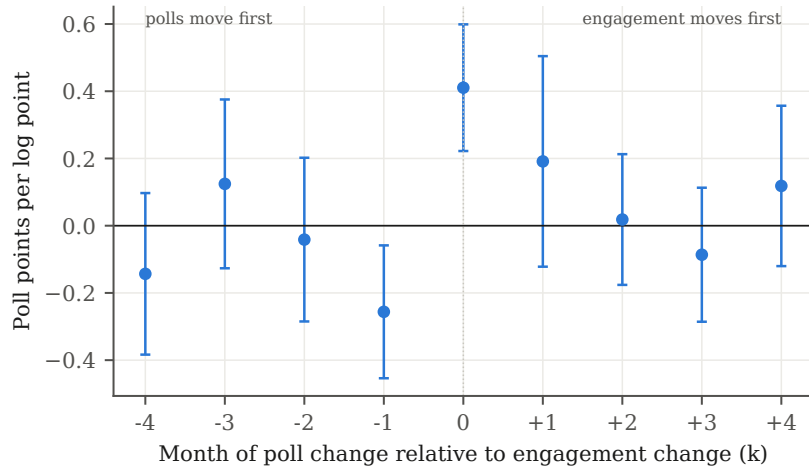


Figure 6. Month-on-month change in poll share at month $t + k$ on change in log party-page interactions at month t , with party and month fixed effects and 95% confidence intervals.

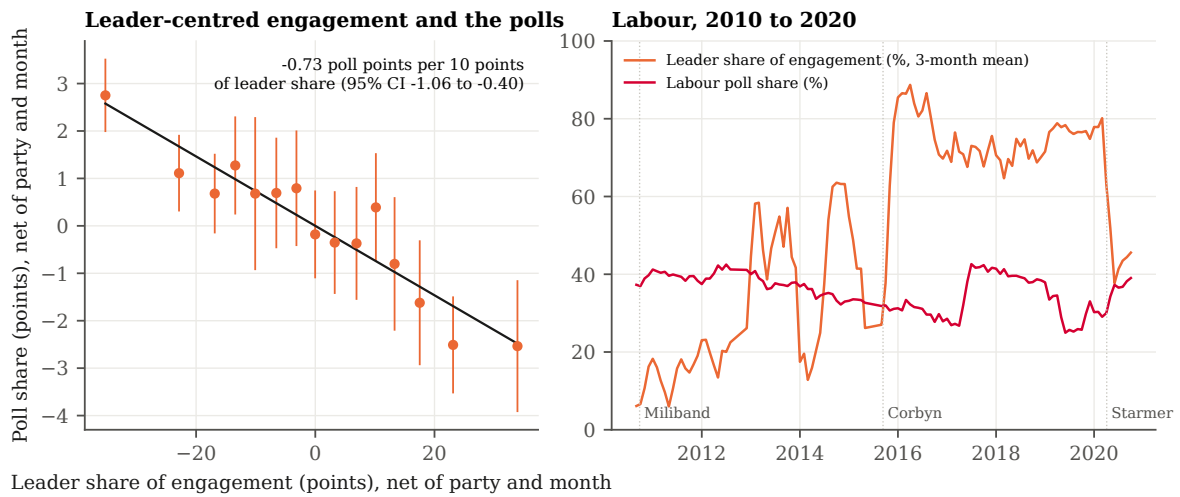


Figure 7. Left: binned scatter of poll share against the leader’s share of leader-plus-party interactions, both net of party and month fixed effects, 15 bins with 95% intervals. Right: Labour’s leader share (three-month mean) and poll share.

engagement held fixed (-0.58 , -0.94 to -0.21) and without the Brexit Party’s months in 2020, when its page was nearly dormant (-0.66). It is weaker with party-by-year fixed effects (-0.25 , standard error 0.09) and without Labour (-0.37 , standard error 0.21 , $p = 0.08$), and without both Labour and the Brexit Party it is not distinguishable from zero (-0.28 , standard error 0.24). Month-on-month changes in leader share did not move with poll changes, and neither predicted the other. The association describes periods, not months, and it rests mainly on two parties.

Labour is the clearest case. Under Corbyn, his page took a median of 75% of Labour’s engagement each month, between 57% and 94%. Labour’s polling rose sharply in the 2017 campaign and then fell through 2019, while the leader’s share stayed high and rose again in 2019. Under Starmer the share fell to about 40% as Labour recovered in the polls. The Brexit Party shows a similar pattern: Farage’s share was around 60% while the party polled in double figures in 2019, and above 90% from February 2020, when it polled around 2% and its own page had nearly stopped posting. One reading is that the leader’s page held a loyal following that kept engaging as wider support fell away, while the party page tracked

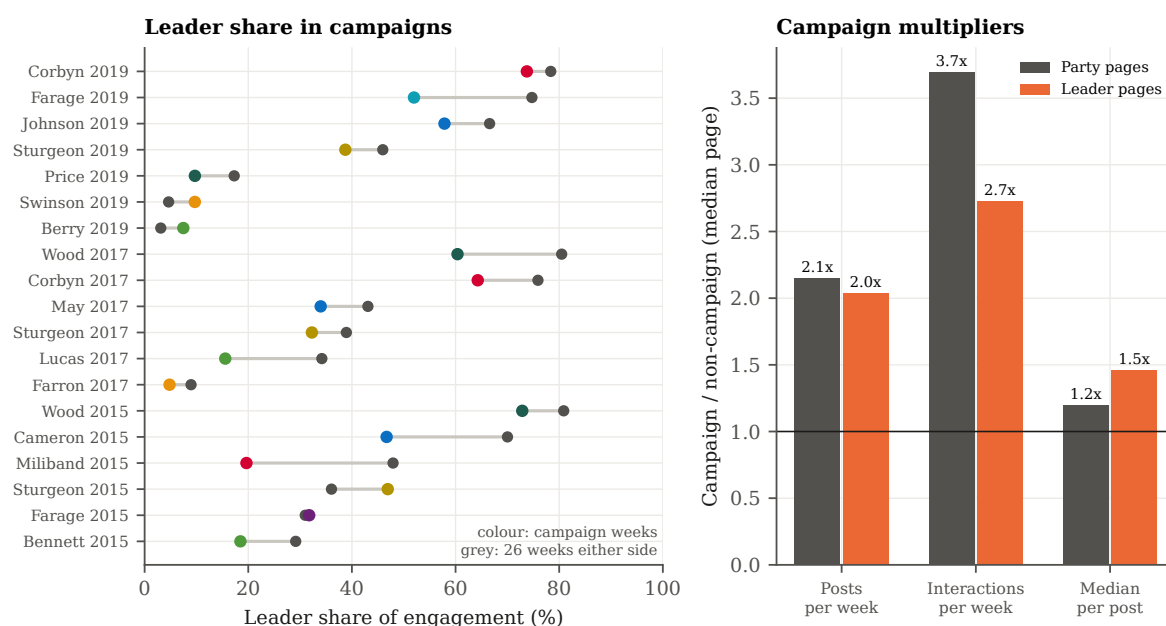


Figure 8. Left: leader’s share of leader-plus-party interactions during each general election campaign and in the 26 weeks either side, for leaders with at least four campaign weeks. Right: median ratio of campaign weeks to the 26 weeks either side, across pages.

the broader audience. The data cannot separate that from the party page simply losing its audience, so I offer it as an interpretation.

5.5 Campaigns lowered the leader’s share

If campaigns personalise politics, the leader’s share should rise between dissolution and polling day. It fell (Figure 8). Across party-weeks with a leader page, the leader’s share was 6.1 points lower in weeks overlapping general election campaigns than in other weeks with the same leader (95% CI 9.4 to 2.7 points lower). It was lower in 15 of 19 leader-campaigns with at least four weeks of data. Cameron’s share fell from 70% to 47% in 2015, Miliband’s from 48% to 20%, May’s from 43% to 34% in 2017 and Farage’s from 75% to 52% in 2019. The EU referendum campaign shows no clear change.

Volume explains most of this. In campaigns the median party page posted 2.1 times as often as in the surrounding weeks and drew 3.7 times the interactions; leader pages posted 2.0 times as often and drew 2.7 times the interactions. Per post, the leader page gained more: the median leader post rose by 1.5 times and the median party post by 1.2 times, and at the post level the leader’s premium over the party page in the same party-month was 0.39 log points larger during campaigns (standard error 0.14). Campaigns made each leader post more valuable, which fits personalisation at the level of the post. Parties posted much more from their own pages, and may also have paid to promote them, which I cannot see in these data, so the party page took a larger share of the whole.

5.6 New leaders did not reliably lift the party page

Across fifteen changes of leader, the party page’s log interactions in the months after the change were 0.18 higher than before, relative to other parties (standard error 0.21; Figure 9). Ten of fifteen were positive. The average is not distinguishable from zero, and per-post engagement did not change (−0.10,

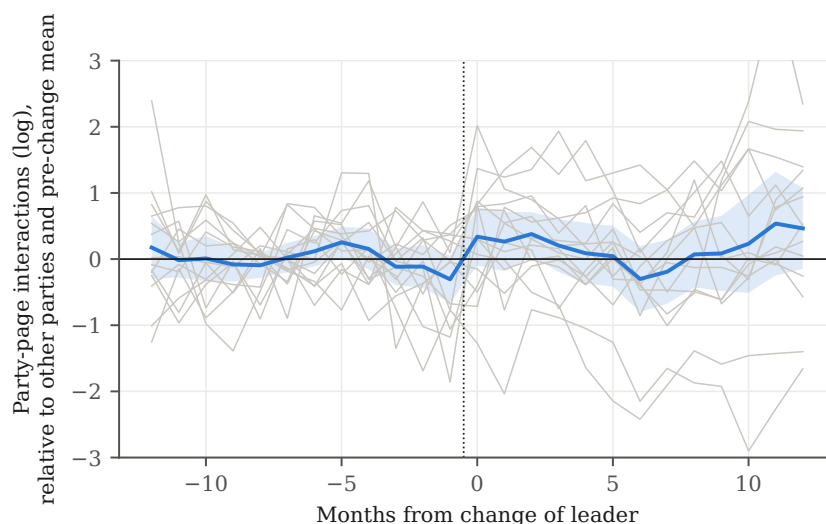


Figure 9. Party-page log interactions relative to other parties and to each party's pre-change mean, around fifteen changes of leader. Grey lines are single events. The blue line is the mean, with a 95% interval.

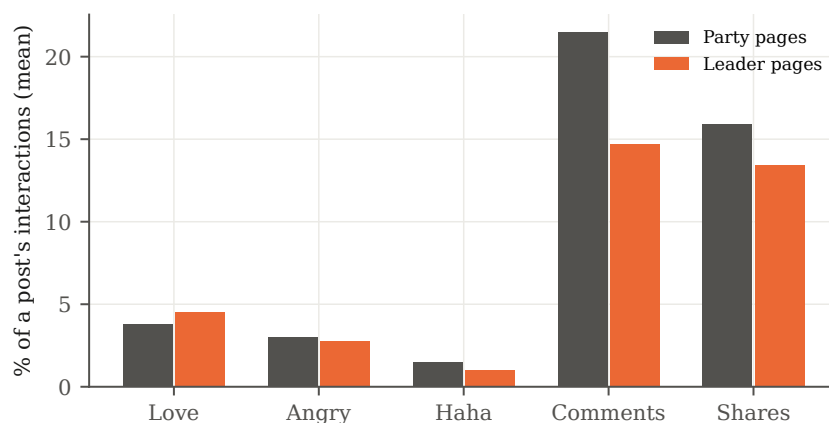


Figure 10. Mean share of a post's interactions by type, leader and party pages, posts from March 2016.

standard error 0.11). The variation is large. Miliband (1.31), Bennett (1.11) and Johnson (1.03) brought large rises; Farage's departure from UKIP (-1.67) and Sturgeon's succession (-1.27) were followed by large falls. Sturgeon's figure reflects the comparison with the Scottish independence referendum campaign in the months before, and several windows include elections. A new leader was not, on average, a reliable reset for the party page, though the test cannot rule out moderate effects.

5.7 Leader pages drew affection, party pages drew discussion

Leader and party posts drew different kinds of engagement (Figure 10). Among posts from March 2016, love reactions made up 3.7% of a party post's interactions on average, and 1.6 points more on a leader post in the same party-month (standard error 0.2). Comments made up 22.6% of a party post's interactions and 6.4 points less on a leader post (standard error 1.4); shares made up 16.1% and 3.4 points less (standard error 0.6). Angry reactions did not differ. Leader posts drew more expressions of support and less discussion and sharing, which means less of the engagement that carries a post beyond its followers.

6 Discussion

Within parties, the decade shows no steady personalisation of British party engagement on Facebook. The aggregate leader share rose because the biggest pages of the late 2010s belonged to Corbyn, Johnson and Farage. Within each party, leader shares moved with particular leaders rather than with time, and campaigns moved engagement towards the party page even as each leader post gained value. Personalisation online was something a few leaders achieved, through large followings, rather than a condition of the system.

The polling results separate two things that are often run together. As a cross-party measure, Facebook engagement was badly calibrated. It overstated insurgent and left parties and understated the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, in ways that would have produced wrong forecasts in 2015, 2017 and 2019. As a within-party measure it carried some information. When a party's standing rose, more people engaged with its page that month, relative to other parties, most clearly for UKIP and Labour. I find no sign that engagement moved before the polls, so it adds little for anyone who already has the polls.

The leader-share result is the most suggestive finding, and the least settled. Over the decade, periods in which a party's engagement leaned on its leader were periods in which the party polled worse, mostly because of Labour under Corbyn and the Brexit Party after its peak. Month-to-month changes in the share did not track the polls, so the share is not a useful real-time signal. What it does show is that leader-page engagement should not be read as a measure of a leader's popularity in the electorate.

6.1 Limitations

Coverage. The data lack pages for Clegg, Davey and UKIP's later leaders, and Cameron's and Salmond's pages start late. Posts deleted before October 2020 are missing. **Composition.** Follower counts and posting volumes changed over the decade, and Facebook changed how it ranked page posts. Month fixed effects remove changes common to all parties but not changes that hit some parties more than others. **Polls.** The monthly averages use the tables on Wikipedia, which may miss some polls, and mix Great Britain and UK figures. Monthly averages are noisy where few firms polled, as in mid-2015. **Few parties.** The panel has seven parties, so between-party variation is limited and inference relies on the time dimension. **Leader share.** The leader-share result depends on Labour and the Brexit Party and on low-frequency variation, and I cannot separate a leader drawing a loyal following from a party losing its wider audience. **Timing.** Monthly averages cannot detect leads of a week or two. **Campaigns.** Paid promotion of party posts may explain part of the campaign shift. **Description.** Nothing here identifies an effect of engagement on support or the reverse.

6.2 What would strengthen the design

Five additions would help: weekly poll averages by fieldwork date, to test short leads; leader approval ratings, to test whether leader-page engagement tracks the leader's own standing even where it does not track the party's; the missing leader pages; the content of posts, to see whether leader-centred periods were also periods of different messaging; and advertising data from the Facebook Ad Library from 2018, to separate paid from organic reach. A comparison with other countries in the same period would show whether the British pattern is general.

7 Conclusion

Over the decade, some British party leaders carried most of their party’s Facebook engagement and others carried almost none, with no upward trend within parties. Facebook’s audience was a poor picture of the electorate, but within a party engagement moved with the polls in the same month, and I find no evidence that it moved first. The party page carried that signal and the leader page did not. Periods in which a party’s engagement leaned on its leader were periods of weaker polling, though that rests mainly on two parties. Campaigns gave each leader post more reach, but parties posted so much more from their own pages that the leader’s share fell. Engagement is best read as a measure of how a party is doing now, not as a forecast.

Data and code availability

The Facebook data were exported from CrowdTangle, whose terms do not allow redistribution of post-level data. The monthly poll averages, the party-month panel without message text, and the code are available on request.

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Provenance and AI use

Note added in 2026 to version 2 of this preprint. The rest of the paper is unchanged from version 1.

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). An earlier version was presented at the Political Studies Association conference in 2019 (Hotham 2019), and the analysis develops Chapter 4 of the thesis. The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

References for this note

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