

Who Gets to Be in the Picture?

Political Identity Ownership on Labour and Conservative Facebook Pages at the 2015 and 2017 General Elections

Tristan Hotham*

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Abstract

Parties do not only tell voters what they will do. They also show voters who they are for. Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor call this *political identity ownership*: the work a party does to be seen as the natural home of particular groups of people. I test the idea with 1,208 Facebook posts from the Labour and Conservative party pages and the pages of their leaders in the month before the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections, hand coded for who appears in each post and which groups' issues it raises. Three findings stand out. First, the parties spoke to the broad public and almost never to smaller groups: the 13 codes for religion, sexuality, disability and ethnic minority politicians were applied 39 times in total across 1,208 posts. Second, the parties swapped places. In 2015 Conservative posts pictured members of the public more often than Labour's (40% against 25%) and pictured young people more often (17% against 8%), with smaller leads on older people, public-service workers and ethnic minority citizens. In 2017 Labour led on all of these: it pictured members of the public in 48% of posts against the Conservatives' 32%, and young people in 23% against 3%. Labour's lead on showing the public grew by 32 percentage points between the two elections. The swap appears on the party pages and on the leader pages, but with only eight pages the evidence for any single group other than the public as a whole and young people is uncertain once differences between pages are allowed for. One measure moved the other way: by 2017 the Conservatives let members of the public speak in their own words as often as Labour did. Third, the 2017 Conservative campaign gave much more room to the leader and the nation: 88% of its posts put Theresa May centre stage and 19% used patriotic imagery. Identity ownership on Facebook was not a fixed asset that each party carried from one election to the next. It was contested, and the advantage moved between elections.

Keywords: identity ownership; social identity; Facebook; election campaigns; Labour Party; Conservative Party; visual communication; personalisation

1 Introduction

A campaign post on Facebook usually has a picture. Someone is in it: a leader, a nurse, a pensioner, a group of students holding placards, a family at a kitchen table, or nobody at all. These choices are cheap

*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.

to make and easy to overlook, but they tell the viewer something that the text often does not. They say who the party thinks it is for.

Kreiss et al. (2020) call this *political identity ownership*. By analogy with issue ownership, in which a party tries to make an election turn on issues it is trusted to handle (Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013), identity ownership is the work a party does to be seen as the natural representative of particular social groups. Campaigns perform group identities through the people they show, the people they speak for and the people they set themselves against. The idea draws on a now large body of work that sees voting as an expression of group loyalties more than a choice between policy packages (Achen and Bartels 2016; Mason 2018; Huddy et al. 2015) and on social identity theory, in which leaders gain influence by appearing to embody the groups they lead (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Hogg 2001; Haslam et al. 2011). Kreiss and colleagues developed the concept mainly from American cases. It has rarely been measured directly, and almost never across two elections for the same parties.

This paper measures it. I use a hand-coded dataset from my doctoral research (Hotham 2021a): 1,208 posts from the Facebook pages of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and their leaders in the month before the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections. Each post was coded for whether it pictured or mentioned members of the public, public-service workers, party members, ethnic minority citizens, young, middle-aged and older people and children, smaller groups defined by religion, sexuality or disability, and the issues associated with these groups. I ask three questions. **RQ1.** Did the parties use Facebook to show the broad public or to reach smaller groups? **RQ2.** Did each party consistently “own” the groups one might expect from its voter base, or did ownership change between elections? **RQ3.** When a party did not put the public in its posts, what did it put there instead?

The answers are clear. The parties showed the broad public and almost never smaller groups. Ownership was not stable. In 2015 the Conservatives, under David Cameron, pictured members of the public and young people clearly more often than Labour did, and older people, public-service workers and ethnic minority citizens somewhat more often. In 2017 Labour, under Jeremy Corbyn, pictured all of these groups more often than the Conservatives, mostly by large margins. The Conservatives’ 2017 campaign gave much more room to Theresa May and to the nation.

The paper adds to a series of preprints in which I return to my thesis data and to other data on British parties online (Hotham 2026d,b,e,c,a) and to earlier work on Labour’s satellite campaign through Momentum (Hotham 2021b).

2 Identity ownership and British campaigns

From issues to identities. Issue ownership theory holds that parties have reputations for handling particular problems and that campaigns try to make those problems salient (Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013). Identity ownership shifts the focus from problems to people. In the group theory of democracy, voters ask less “which party has the best policies?” than “which party is for people like me?” (Achen and Bartels 2016). Partisanship becomes a social identity that bundles other identities together (Mason 2018) and that campaigns activate through emotion and belonging (Huddy et al. 2015). Kreiss et al. (2020) argue that candidates therefore try to be seen as prototypical members of the groups whose votes they want, and that their communication should be read for its identity value as well as its information value.

Showing, not just saying. Social identity theory gives a reason to expect that pictures matter. People hold groups in mind as prototypes, bundles of looks, behaviour and values, and leaders gain support

when they seem to fit the prototype (Hogg 2001; Haslam et al. 2011). A party can claim a group by showing its members, by showing its leader among them, and by attaching the group's concerns to its own policies. Representation of a group can raise its members' identification with a candidate, as studies of women candidates have shown (Plutzer and Zipp 1996). On social media, images carry much of the message and are tied to how users respond (Farkas and Bene 2021). Facebook adds a further reason to expect identity work. Its users are organised into networks of friends and followers who share characteristics, so content that says "this is for people like you" fits the way the platform spreads material (Bene 2017; Kreiss 2016).

Trespassing and retreat. Ownership is not permanent. Kreiss et al. (2020) note that candidates sometimes try to trespass on groups associated with their opponents. The idea of trespassing implies its opposite: a party can withdraw from a group, or from the public altogether, and put something else at the centre of its campaign, such as its leader (Enli and Skogerbo 2013) or the nation.

The British cases. The two elections offer a good test because the parties' situations changed. In 2015 Cameron led a Conservative Party that had spent a decade trying to look more modern and more representative of contemporary Britain (Bale 2016), while Labour under Ed Miliband fought a defensive campaign. In 2017 the Conservatives under May called an early election to strengthen her hand in the Brexit negotiations, and Labour under Corbyn fought a campaign aimed at mobilising the young and people new to politics, supported by Momentum and other satellite campaigns (Dommett and Temple 2018; Hotham 2021b). The voting patterns changed too. Age became one of the strongest predictors of the vote in 2017 (Heath and Goodwin 2017; Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Survey estimates put Labour's lead among 18 to 24 year olds at 16 points in 2015 and 35 points in 2017, and the Conservatives' lead among those aged 65 and over at 24 points in 2015 and 36 points in 2017 (Ipsos MORI 2015, 2017). Whether there was a youth turnout surge is disputed (Prosser et al. 2020; Sloam and Henn 2019), but the age gap in party choice is not.

Expectations. If identity ownership is a stable feature of parties, each should picture its own groups at both elections: Labour more of the young, ethnic minority citizens and public-service workers, the Conservatives more of older people. If it is a campaign choice, the pattern can change with the leader and the strategy. I expect (E1) that both parties use broad groups far more than narrow ones, because their pages speak to large and mixed audiences; (E2) that Labour's lead on its expected groups is larger in 2017 than in 2015; and (E3) that a campaign built around the leader shows fewer members of the public.

3 Data and method

Posts. The data are the second of the three datasets in my thesis (Hotham 2021a). I collected all posts that could be retrieved through Netvizz from four pages in two periods: the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, the Conservative Party and David Cameron from 8 April to 6 May 2015, and the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, the Conservative Party and Theresa May from 3 May to 7 June 2017. That gives 1,208 posts: 641 in 2015 and 567 in 2017, 737 from Labour pages and 471 from Conservative pages (Table A1 in the appendix gives the count for each page). Facebook limited the posts that tools such as Netvizz could return, favouring each page's most engaged posts, so the data are best read as the posts most people saw rather than a guaranteed census.

Coding. I coded every post by hand using a scheme of over 800 binary codes. Most codes were recorded twice: once for the text of the post and once for its image or video. The codes used here record

whether a post pictured or mentioned members of the public; ethnic minority members of the public; a public-service worker relevant to the issue raised, such as a nurse or teacher; ordinary party members and ethnic minority party members; young people, middle-aged people, older people and children; women's issues and the issues of each age group; and, for smaller groups, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism, LGBT people, issues and politicians, disabled people, issues and politicians, and ethnic minority politicians. I also use codes for whether the public spoke in their own words, for patriotic imagery, and for whether a post positively personalised the party leader by putting them at its centre. Age groups were judged from appearance, so the age codes record how people looked rather than their actual age.

Reliability. A paid second coder independently recoded a 10% sample of 121 posts. Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff 2004) across all binary codes was 0.81. For the depiction codes analysed here alpha was between 0.65 and 1.00 (for example 0.65 and 0.77 for the two young-people codes, 0.82 and 1.00 for the two older-people codes and 0.80 and 1.00 for the two children codes). Patriotic imagery had an alpha of 0.64 and the leader-centred code (a post that positively personalises the leader) 0.65. Both are just below the level of 0.67 that Krippendorff (2004) treats as the lowest acceptable for tentative conclusions, so I read results for them with caution. I do not analyse the code for middle-aged people's issues, whose reliability was low (0.51).

Analysis. The unit is the post. For each code I report the share of posts that carry it for each party and year, with Wilson intervals. To compare parties within a year I report the difference in percentage points with Newcombe's interval for a difference between two proportions (Newcombe 1998) and Fisher's exact test. The main question is whether the gap between the parties changed between 2015 and 2017. I test it with a binomial regression on the eight page by year cells,

$$\text{logitPr}(\text{code} = 1) = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Labour} + \beta_2 2017 + \beta_3 (\text{Labour} \times 2017) + \beta_4 \text{Leader page},$$

where $\exp(\beta_3)$, which I call the *reversal odds ratio*, measures how much Labour's position relative to the Conservatives improved from 2015 to 2017. A value above one means Labour gained ground. Because odds ratios can look dramatic when a share is close to zero, I also report the same change in percentage points: Labour's lead in 2017 minus its lead in 2015, with a normal-approximation interval. I adjust the regression *p*-values for the fifteen group codes with Holm's method (Holm 1979).

These post-level tests treat posts as independent. They are not fully so, because posts come from only eight pages and pages differ in ways the model does not capture: the extra variation between pages is two to five times what the binomial model allows for most codes. I therefore also report a page-adjusted test that inflates the standard errors by this extra variation (a quasi-binomial model, with the inflation factor set to at least one) and uses a *t* distribution with the three remaining degrees of freedom. This test is closer to the right one for claims about pages, but with three degrees of freedom it is noisy and has little power. Because neither test is fully satisfactory, I put most weight on a simpler kind of evidence: whether the same change appears separately on the party pages and on the leader pages, and across many groups at once.

What the data cannot do. The counts in my archive are summaries by page and code, not post-level records, so I cannot combine codes within a post or link depiction to engagement. Labour's 2017 party page posted almost only video, much of it infographic video, which differs in format from the other pages; I return to this in the limitations. I do not share the posts themselves, in line with the platform's terms, but I share the counts by page and code with this paper.

4 Findings

4.1 Broad groups, not narrow ones

The parties used Facebook to show the broad public, not to reach smaller groups (E1). Across all 1,208 posts, the 13 codes for religion, sexuality, disability, minority issues and ethnic minority politicians in images and video were applied 39 times in total. No page pictured Judaism or LGBT people in an image in any post, and no page pictured a disabled politician. The most common of these codes, Islam, disabled people and disabled people's issues and ethnic minority politicians of the party, were each recorded six times in 1,208 posts. By contrast, members of the public appeared in the images or video of 38% of posts, and young people, older people and children each in between 11% and 15%. In the language of identity ownership, both parties tried to own large groups defined by age, work and ordinary citizenship, not smaller communities. They broadcast rather than narrowcast. This is consistent with what I found in my thesis about the organic communications of party pages generally (Hotham 2021a), and with my finding that the parties' targeted advertising repeated a few broad messages thousands of times rather than tailoring them to groups (Hotham 2026b).

4.2 The great swap

Figure 1 shows the main result. Each row is a group. The hollow circles show Labour's share of posts minus the Conservatives' in 2015, and the filled circles show the same difference in 2017. In 2015 almost every circle sits to the left of zero: the Conservatives pictured members of the public, ethnic minority citizens, public-service workers, party members and every age group more often than Labour did. In 2017 almost every circle sits to the right. The parties swapped places.

Table 1 gives the numbers. In 2015, 40% of Conservative posts pictured members of the public against 25% of Labour posts, a gap of 15 points (95% CI 8 to 22). In 2017 Labour led by 17 points, 48% against 32% (CI 7 to 25). The same reversal appears in the text of posts: the Conservatives mentioned members of the public in 37% of posts in 2015 against Labour's 22%, and Labour led in 2017 by 51% against 35%. The reversal odds ratio is about 4 for members of the public, whether pictured or mentioned. It is between 2.7 and 6.5 for ethnic minority citizens, public-service workers, party members and ethnic minority party members.

The age groups show the swap most clearly (Figure 2). In 2015 the Conservatives pictured young people in 17% of posts, more than twice Labour's 8%. In 2017 Labour pictured young people in 23% of posts and the Conservatives in 3%. The Conservative party page pictured young people in one post out of 95. Labour also led in 2017 on middle-aged and older people, groups the Conservatives had shown more often in 2015. The only group with no reversal is children, who appeared in roughly one post in ten for both parties at both elections. Children seem to be a common resource, shown by everyone to signal family and future, rather than a group either party tried to own.

Labour did not just show more people in 2017. It tied them to issues. Labour posts raised young people's issues in images or video in 24% of posts in 2017, against 4% for the Conservatives, and older people's issues in 17% against 3%. In 2015 the parties had been level on both. In 2017 Labour showed the groups and their concerns together, which is the core of what Kreiss et al. (2020) mean by identity ownership: picturing the group and claiming its interests at the same time.

These differences are large and point the same way. Fourteen of the fifteen group codes in Table 1 move

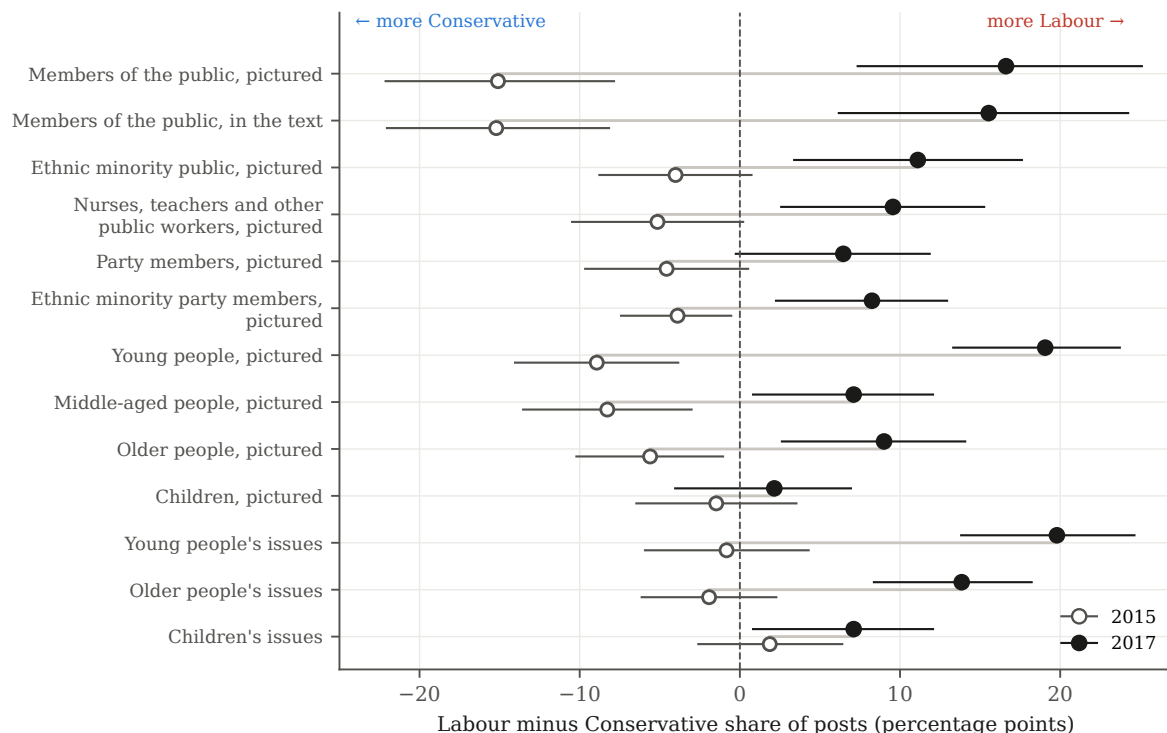


Figure 1. Labour’s lead over the Conservatives in the share of posts showing each group, 2015 and 2017. Points are differences in percentage points between the share of Labour posts and the share of Conservative posts (party and leader pages together) carrying each code; lines are 95% Newcombe intervals. Negative values mean the Conservatives showed the group more often. 2015: 315 Labour and 326 Conservative posts. 2017: 422 Labour and 145 Conservative posts.

in Labour’s direction, and ten of these changes are statistically significant in the post-level test after Holm adjustment. The exception, the public speaking in their own words, moved towards the Conservatives and is discussed below. The swap appears on party pages and on leader pages separately (Section 4.4). Table 2 sets the age groups the parties pictured against how each age group voted. In 2015, when Labour already led among the young, the Conservatives showed more young people and more older people than Labour. In 2017, when the age gap in voting widened, each party’s pictures leaned towards its own voters: Labour’s towards the young, although it also pictured older people twice as often as the Conservatives did, and the Conservatives’ towards older people, although they pictured both age groups less often than in 2015.

The same pattern holds for ethnic minority citizens. Survey estimates put Labour’s share of the ethnic minority vote at 65% in 2015 and 73% in 2017 (Ipsos MORI 2015, 2017). Yet in 2015 the Conservatives pictured ethnic minority members of the public somewhat more often than Labour (12% against 8%, a difference whose interval includes zero) and pictured ethnic minority party members more often (7% against 3%). All of the Hindu and Sikh imagery in the dataset comes from the 2015 Conservative pages, most of it from Cameron’s own page. This looks like what Kreiss et al. (2020) call trespassing: a party showing groups that mostly voted for its opponent, as part of a long effort to look more like modern Britain (Bale 2016). In 2017 Labour pictured ethnic minority members of the public in 26% of its posts against the Conservatives’ 14%, and ethnic minority party members in 14% against 6%. The Conservative shares changed little between the elections on these two codes; the change came from Labour.

Table 1. Share of posts showing each group, by party and year, and the change in the party gap between 2015 and 2017.

Share of posts (%)	2015		2017		Change in Labour lead, 2015 to 2017			
	Lab	Con	Lab	Con	Points [95% CI]	OR	p_{Holm}	p_{pages}
<i>Pictured in images or video</i>								
Members of the public	25.1	40.2	48.3	31.7	+31.7 [+20.3, +43.2]	4.0	<0.001	0.042
Ethnic minority public	8.3	12.3	25.6	14.5	+15.1 [+6.6, +23.6]	3.2	0.013	0.142
Public-service workers	11.1	16.3	19.9	10.3	+14.7 [+6.5, +22.9]	3.3	0.013	0.221
Party members	9.8	14.4	16.1	9.7	+11.0 [+3.2, +18.8]	2.7	0.051	0.088
Ethnic minority party members	2.9	6.7	14.5	6.2	+12.1 [+6.0, +18.3]	6.5	0.006	0.042
Young people	7.9	16.9	22.5	3.4	+28.0 [+20.9, +35.1]	18.9	<0.001	0.028
Middle-aged people	9.2	17.5	14.7	7.6	+15.4 [+7.8, +22.9]	4.2	0.006	0.236
Older people	6.7	12.3	16.6	7.6	+14.6 [+7.4, +21.8]	4.7	0.005	0.119
Children	10.8	12.3	10.4	8.3	+3.6 [-3.7, +10.9]	1.4	0.436	0.630
<i>Issues tied to a group, in images or video</i>								
Young people's issues	11.7	12.6	23.9	4.1	+20.6 [+13.4, +27.9]	9.1	<0.001	0.072
Older people's issues	6.7	8.6	17.3	3.4	+15.8 [+9.6, +22.0]	8.9	0.001	0.077
Children's issues	9.8	8.0	14.7	7.6	+5.2 [-1.8, +12.3]	1.8	0.396	0.549
Women's issues	1.6	2.5	5.7	2.8	+3.8 [-0.3, +7.9]	3.6	0.324	0.295
<i>In the text</i>								
Members of the public	21.9	37.1	50.7	35.2	+30.8 [+19.3, +42.2]	3.9	<0.001	0.049
Public's own words	6.3	1.2	9.2	9.7	-5.5 [-11.8, +0.7]	0.2	0.039	0.193
<i>Nation and leader</i>								
Patriotic imagery	4.8	7.7	5.2	19.3	-11.2	0.3	–	0.104
Leader centre stage (positive)	34.9	59.5	32.5	88.3	-31.2	0.1	–	0.063
Posts	315	326	422	145				

Notes: Shares pool each party's main page and leader page. Points: Labour's lead over the Conservatives in 2017 minus its lead in 2015, in percentage points, with a 95% interval. OR: the reversal odds ratio $\exp(\beta_3)$ from a binomial regression with party, year, their interaction and a leader-page indicator; values above one mean Labour gained ground. p_{Holm} : post-level p -value adjusted for the fifteen group codes (all rows except the last two). p_{pages} : page-adjusted p -value that allows for extra variation between the eight pages (quasi-binomial, t with 3 degrees of freedom), not adjusted for multiple testing.

4.3 Leaders and the nation

What did the Conservatives show more of in 2017? Their leader. In 2015, 60% of Conservative posts positively personalised the leader, putting Cameron at the centre of the post. In 2017 the figure was 88%. On May's own page it was 98%, and on the Conservative party page it was 83%. Labour's figures were about a third in both years. Figure 3 places each page by how often it centred its leader and how often it pictured the public. Labour's 2017 pages sit at the top: many posts with members of the public, and on the party page relatively few centred on the leader. The Conservative party page in 2017 sits at the bottom right: most posts centred on the leader, with the public pictured in about one post in four.

May's own page is different: it pictured members of the public in 42% of posts, about as often as Cameron's page had (43%). The fall in Conservative pictures of the public came on the party page, which carried most of the party's posts, from 38% of posts in 2015 to 26% in 2017.

The Conservatives also turned to the nation. Patriotic imagery, such as flags and national symbols, appeared in 19% of Conservative posts in 2017, up from 8% in 2015, and in 30% of posts on May's page. Labour used it in about 5% of posts in both years. Labour's posts depicted social groups more often; Conservative posts more often depicted the nation and the leader. Both are forms of identity work: one

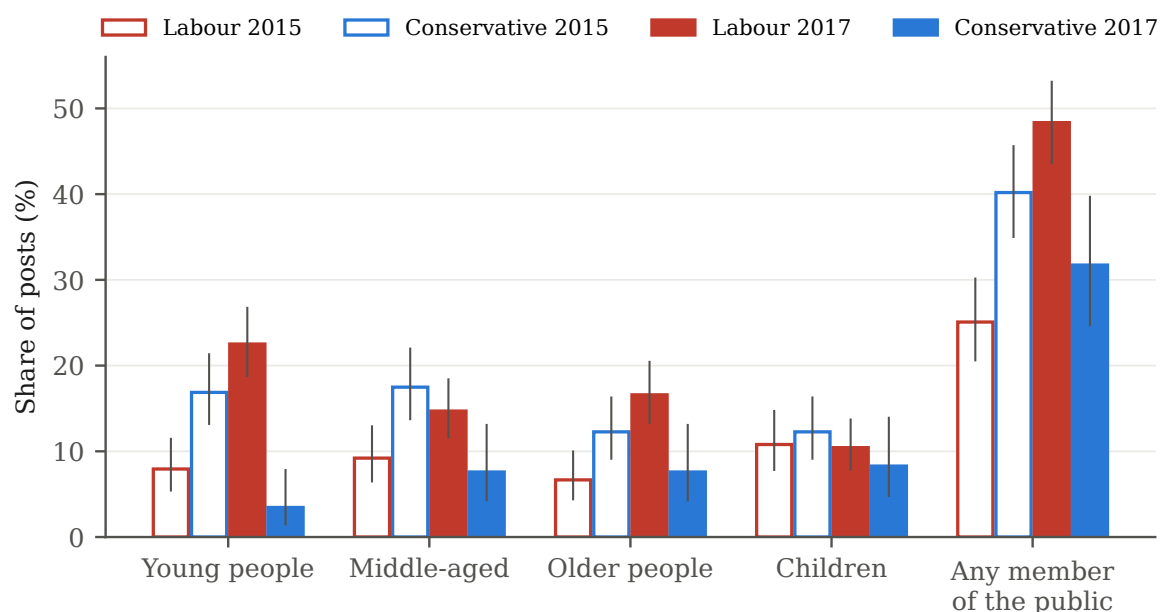


Figure 2. Share of posts picturing each age group and any member of the public, by party and year. Bars pool party and leader pages; lines are 95% Wilson intervals.

Table 2. Age groups pictured in posts and how each age group voted.

	Pictured in posts (%)		Vote share (%), Ipsos MORI	
	Young people	Older people	Aged 18–24	Aged 65+
Labour 2015	7.9	6.7	43	23
Conservative 2015	16.9	12.3	27	47
Labour 2017	22.5	16.6	62	25
Conservative 2017	3.4	7.6	27	61

Notes: Pictured shares pool party and leader pages. Vote shares are survey-based estimates by age from Ipsos MORI (2015, 2017).

presents the party as representing particular groups, the other as representing the country as a whole.

Labour’s group claims were also written into its language. A party catchphrase appeared in 80% of posts on Labour’s 2017 party page and 69% on Corbyn’s page, against 27% on the Labour page in 2015. Conservative catchphrase use was steadier: 27% of party page posts in 2015 and 28% in 2017, and 26% of posts on May’s page. Labour’s slogan that year, “For the many, not the few”, is itself a statement about which group the party speaks for.

One change went clearly the other way. In 2015 Labour’s party page let members of the public speak in their own words in 8% of posts, while the Conservative pages almost never did (1%). By 2017 the two parties were level at about 9–10%. This change towards the Conservatives is statistically significant in the post-level test after Holm adjustment ($p = 0.04$; odds ratio 0.18) and on the party pages (–8 points) it is similar in size to some of Labour’s smaller gains. Even as the Conservatives pictured the public less often on their party page, they gave the public more of a voice.

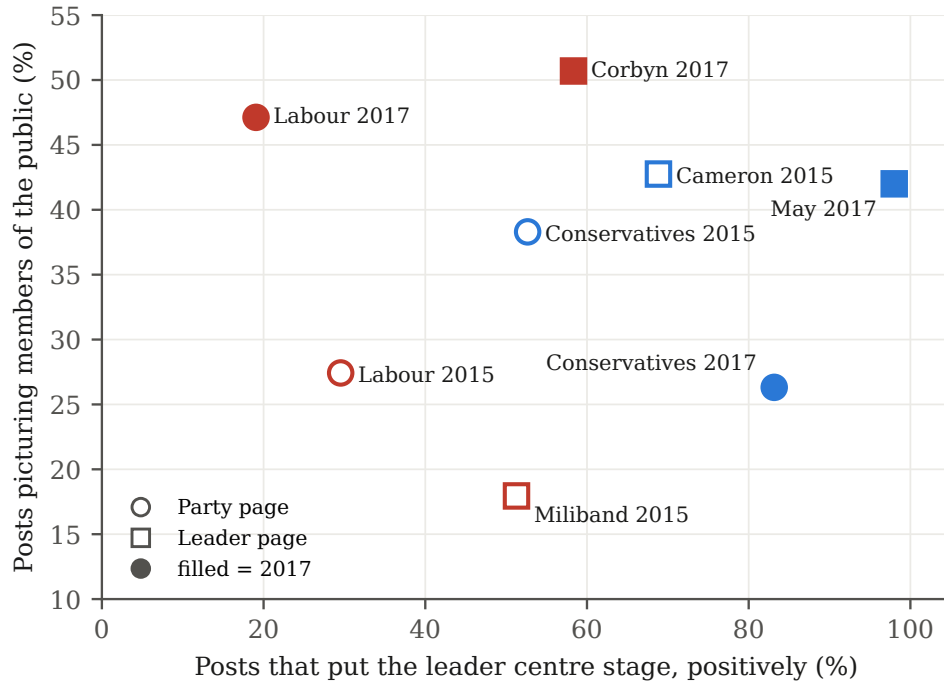


Figure 3. Leader-centred posts and posts picturing the public, by page. Circles are party pages and squares are leader pages; hollow markers are 2015 and filled markers are 2017. Red is Labour and blue is Conservative.

4.4 How robust is the swap?

I put most weight on the first of four checks. First, the swap is not driven by one page. Table A2 in the appendix gives the change in Labour’s lead, in percentage points, separately for party pages and leader pages. On the party pages Labour’s lead grew on all nine people codes and all four issue codes. On the leader pages it grew on seven of the nine people codes; the exceptions are middle-aged people (–3 points) and children (–5 points). The largest changes appear on both types of page: for members of the public pictured, Labour’s lead grew by 32 points on the party pages and 34 points on the leader pages, and for young people by 32 and 20 points. The party pages swapped places on members of the public (Labour 27% against Conservative 38% in 2015, 47% against 26% in 2017), and so did the leader pages (Miliband 18% against Cameron 43%; Corbyn 51% against May 42%).

Second, leader pages were not more likely than party pages to picture the public once party and year are taken into account (odds ratio 1.11). The model assumes that this leader-page difference is the same for both parties and years, which Table A1 shows is only roughly true.

Third, in the post-level test the change survives multiple testing. After Holm adjustment across the fifteen group codes, it is significant at the 5% level for members of the public in pictures and text, ethnic minority citizens, public-service workers, ethnic minority party members, young, middle-aged and older people, and the issues of young and older people.

Fourth, and least favourable, the page-adjusted test treats the extra variation between the eight pages as real uncertainty and leaves only three degrees of freedom. Under that test the change is significant at the 5% level, before any adjustment for multiple testing, for members of the public in pictures ($p = 0.04$) and in text ($p = 0.05$), young people ($p = 0.03$) and ethnic minority party members ($p = 0.04$). For the other people codes and the age-related issue codes, except children, the direction holds but the evidence is weaker (p between 0.07 and 0.24). If the page-adjusted p -values were also corrected for fifteen tests,

none would remain significant. I read this as follows. The overall swap is well supported, because it appears for nearly every group and on both types of page, and the probability that so many separate codes would all move the same way by chance is small even though the codes are related. But with eight pages, the size of the change for any single group is not precisely estimated, and the result for a single group should not be leaned on alone.

5 Discussion

Identity ownership is usually described as something a party has. These data show it as something a party does, and can do more or less of. The Conservatives under Cameron did a great deal of it on Facebook in 2015. They showed young people, older people, nurses and teachers, party members and ethnic minority citizens more often than Labour, including groups that mostly voted Labour. Two years later, under May, the Conservative party page showed members of the public, young people and older people much less often, while Labour's pages showed them much more. Labour under Miliband showed most of these groups less often than the Conservatives did; Labour under Corbyn showed them more often than any of the other pages.

Three points follow. First, ownership on social media is cheap to claim and cheap to give up. A party does not need a new policy or a new reputation to show a different set of people in its posts. It needs a different campaign strategy. This makes the visual side of identity ownership more fluid than the reputations that issue ownership describes ([Petrocik 1996](#)).

Second, the 2017 shift is consistent with what is known about the campaigns. The Conservative campaign was built around May's leadership and Brexit, and its Facebook posts gave more space to the leader and the nation and less to the public. Labour's campaign was built around mobilising the young and new voters, around a manifesto with offers to specific groups and around a movement of activists ([Hotham 2021b](#); [Dommett and Temple 2018](#)), and its posts showed more young people, more party members, more ethnic minority citizens and more of these groups' issues. In separate work I look at how much of each party's Facebook presence ran through its leader over a decade ([Hotham 2026d](#)). These results add what Corbyn's large audience saw in 2017: a page full of people who looked like Labour's new voters.

Third, the absence of narrow groups is itself a finding. Facebook let parties target small audiences through advertising, but the organic posts on their main pages spoke to the broad public. Religion, sexuality and disability were almost never visible. Identity ownership, as these parties practised it, worked on large groups such as the young, the old, workers and the public, not on smaller communities. This may reflect caution, since main pages are watched by journalists and opponents, and a division of labour in which narrower appeals moved to adverts and satellite pages ([Hotham 2026b](#), [2021b](#)).

The data cannot say whether showing a group won its votes. The age gap in voting widened in 2017 and Labour's pictures moved in the same direction, but voters were also moved by Brexit, the manifestos and the leaders, and the direction of influence could run either way: a party may picture the groups it already expects to win. What the data do show is that the parties made different choices about whom to show, and that those choices changed sharply between two elections two years apart, in line with the different campaigns the two parties chose to run.

6 Limitations

The study has five main limitations. First, it covers two parties, eight pages and two months, so the comparisons between pages rest on few units, as the page-adjusted test makes clear; the 2017 Conservative pages contribute only 145 posts. Second, my archive holds counts by page and code rather than post-level records, so I cannot study combinations of codes within posts or the engagement each post received. Third, format differs between pages. Labour’s 2017 party page posted almost only video, and 58% of its posts were infographic videos, while about 40% of Conservative posts in 2017 were videos. Videos can show more people than still images, so some of Labour’s lead on that page may reflect format. The swap also appears on the leader pages, which suggests format is not the whole story, but leader page formats also differed (in 2015, 5% of Miliband’s posts were videos against 20% of Cameron’s), so I cannot rule it out. Fourth, the age and ethnicity codes record how people appeared to a coder, which is what viewers see but not who they were, and reliability was lower for some age codes than others. Patriotic imagery and the leader-centred code had alphas just below 0.67. Fifth, the data are not a full census. Facebook limited the posts that could be retrieved, favouring each page’s most engaged posts, and the windows differ in length (29 days in 2015, 36 in 2017). If posts showing people were engaged with more on some pages than others, the retrieval limit could exaggerate or hide differences, although for one month of posting most pages are likely to be close to complete. I also cannot see the advertising that ran alongside these posts, which I study separately ([Hotham 2026b](#)).

7 Conclusion

Political identity ownership is a useful idea because it asks who a campaign is for, not only what it promises. Measured through the people parties put in their Facebook posts, it turns out to be contested and mobile. In 2015 the Conservatives showed more members of the public than Labour did. In 2017 Labour showed more of them than the Conservatives, while the Conservatives gave more space to their leader and the nation and gave the public more of a voice in words. Both parties spoke to large groups and almost never to small ones. For campaign researchers, the lesson is that the pictures are data: who is in them, and who is missing, says a good deal about whom a party thinks it is for.

Provenance and AI use

The data were collected with Netvizz for my doctoral research, before Netvizz closed in 2019. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021a](#)). The analysis develops Chapter 6 of the thesis. The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

Version 4 (October 2026) corrects the reliability statement (the leader-centred code’s alpha is 0.65, not the 0.72 reported for the personalisation codes as a group, and the thesis does not say the reliability sample was random), removes two illustrative quotations from the discussion of patriotic imagery that were not slogans used by either party, and removes a sentence on group labelling that rested on a code with low reliability. The findings are otherwise unchanged.

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.

Data availability

The counts of posts carrying each code, by page, are shared with this preprint. The posts themselves are not shared, in line with the terms under which they were collected.

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Appendix

Table A1. Share of posts carrying each code, page by page (%).

Posts	2015				2017			
	Labour 237	Miliband 78	Con. 188	Cameron 138	Labour 278	Corbyn 144	Con. 95	May 50
Members of the public	27.4	17.9	38.3	42.8	47.1	50.7	26.3	42.0
Ethnic minority public	9.7	3.8	9.6	15.9	27.0	22.9	12.6	18.0
Public-service workers	11.4	10.3	14.4	18.8	21.2	17.4	4.2	22.0
Party members	8.4	14.1	13.8	15.2	15.8	16.7	9.5	10.0
Ethnic minority party members	3.4	1.3	5.9	8.0	15.8	11.8	7.4	4.0
Young people	7.2	10.3	18.1	15.2	22.3	22.9	1.1	8.0
Middle-aged people	6.8	16.7	16.0	19.6	16.9	10.4	3.2	16.0
Older people	5.9	9.0	10.6	14.5	18.3	13.2	4.2	14.0
Children	10.1	12.8	10.6	14.5	10.1	11.1	3.2	18.0
Young people's issues	13.9	5.1	13.8	10.9	30.2	11.8	3.2	6.0
Older people's issues	8.9	0.0	9.6	7.2	21.2	9.7	3.2	4.0
Children's issues	10.1	9.0	7.4	8.7	18.7	6.9	5.3	12.0
Women's issues	1.7	1.3	2.1	2.9	7.6	2.1	2.1	4.0
Members of the public (text)	22.4	20.5	39.9	33.3	48.9	54.2	28.4	48.0
Public's own words (text)	8.4	0.0	1.1	1.4	8.6	10.4	9.5	10.0
Patriotic imagery	4.6	5.1	7.4	8.0	4.0	7.6	13.7	30.0
Leader centre stage (positive)	29.5	51.3	52.7	68.8	19.1	58.3	83.2	98.0

Notes: "Con." is the Conservative Party page. Codes are for images or video unless marked as text. 2015 posts are from 8 April to 6 May; 2017 posts are from 3 May to 7 June.

Table A2. Change in Labour's lead over the Conservatives from 2015 to 2017, by type of page (percentage points).

Change in Labour lead, 2015 to 2017 (points)	All pages	Party pages	Leader pages
Members of the public	+31.7	+31.7	+33.5
Members of the public (text)	+30.8	+38.0	+19.0
Ethnic minority public	+15.1	+14.2	+17.0
Public-service workers	+14.7	+20.0	+3.9
Party members	+11.0	+11.7	+7.8
Ethnic minority party members	+12.1	+10.9	+14.5
Young people	+28.0	+32.2	+19.9
Middle-aged people	+15.4	+23.0	-2.7
Older people	+14.6	+18.9	+4.7
Children	+3.6	+7.4	-5.2
Young people's issues	+20.6	+27.0	+11.5
Older people's issues	+15.8	+18.8	+13.0
Children's issues	+5.2	+10.8	-5.3
Women's issues	+3.8	+5.9	-0.3
Public's own words (text)	-5.5	-8.2	+1.9

Notes: Each value is (Labour share minus Conservative share in 2017) minus (Labour share minus Conservative share in 2015). Positive values mean Labour gained ground. Codes are for images or video unless marked as text.