Who Keeps the Crowd? Party Splits and Facebook Engagement in Europe, 2011 to 2019

Tristan Hotham*

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Abstract

When a faction or a prominent figure leaves a party to found a new one, does the party's online audience follow the breakaway or stay with the parent? Screening splits in 20 European countries in CrowdTangle data on 1,712 Facebook pages, I found ten, in seven countries from 2011 to 2019, in which the parent's page and the breakaway's pages (new party or departing figure) are observed around the split. I compare each side's share of all interactions with tracked party and leader pages in the country in the 12 months before and after. The parent's share fell in six cases and rose in four. The breakaway's share rose in nine cases, but the typical breakaway held only about 5% of national interactions afterwards, and its median gain equalled about two fifths of the parent's pre-split share. The combined share of parent and breakaway rose in five cases and fell in five, with a pooled change of 2.6 percentage points (SE 3.2), so there is no consistent sign of new energy. Four parents saw falls in the bottom tenth of normal 12-month changes for party pages. Where the parent's share fell, the breakaway made up most of the loss in three cases and little or none in three. These are descriptive patterns from few cases. Breakaways' gains were mostly modest, and the only large breakaway audiences, around Farage and Gyurcsány, were ones those leaders had already built on their personal pages before the split.

Keywords: party splits; breakaway parties; Facebook; engagement; personalisation; political parties; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Parties split. Factions fall out over strategy, leaders lose leadership contests, and prominent figures leave to found new parties. Research on splits and on legislators' moves between parties has asked why they happen and how the resulting parties compete at the next election (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013; Ibenskas 2020). Splits also divide something newer: a party's audience on social media. A parent party keeps its official page and its followers; the breakaway must build an audience from nothing, unless the departing figure already has one on a personal page. Work on the personalisation of politics (Rahat and Kenig 2018) suggests that some of a party's online following may in fact belong to its prominent figures and leave with them.

*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 uses splits observed in Facebook data to ask three questions. **RQ1.** When a party splits, does the parent lose engagement, and how much of its share moves to the breakaway? **RQ2.** Does the combined share of parent and breakaway rise (new energy), stay flat (redistribution) or fall? **RQ3.** Does the breakaway's engagement match its later electoral support? With few cases, I present them as a set of case comparisons with a simple pooled summary, not as causal estimates.

2 Data and method

Pages and posts. The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of party, leader and politician pages in 20 European countries that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). I use the 186 party and leader pages analysed in my earlier work and the 41 raw country and topic exports, which cover 1,712 pages and 2,505,426 unique posts from January 2010 to September 2020 after removing 267,515 posts that appeared in more than one export. I use only counts of posts and interactions (reactions, comments and shares) aggregated by page and month.

Screening splits. I checked candidate splits in every country, using Wikipedia for dates (Wikipedia contributors 2026). A case qualifies if the parent party's page posts throughout the 12 months either side of the split and the breakaway camp, meaning the new party's page, the departing figure's personal page, or both, posts after it. Ten cases qualify (Table 1): UKIP to the Brexit Party (Farage), Podemos to Más País (Errejón), the French Socialists to Génération.s (Hamon), Les Républicains to Agir, the Spanish People's Party to Vox, the Hungarian Socialists to the Democratic Coalition (Gyurcsány), LMP to Dialogue for Hungary, the Finnish National Coalition to Liike Nyt (Harkimo), the Portuguese PSD to Aliança (Santana Lopes) and Sinn Féin to Aontú (Tóibín). The event date is the departure where it is documented (for Harkimo, his resignation from the National Coalition on 19 April 2018, the day after Liike Nyt was registered as an association) and otherwise the founding or announcement of the new party. For LMP the breakaway camp is the Dialogue for Hungary page, which began as a platform inside LMP in November 2012, and the page of Gergely Karácsony, one of the departing MPs; the movement's first leader, Benedek Jávor, has no page in the data. Many other candidates failed because one side has no page in the data: among them Les Patriotes, Blue Reform and the Finns Party, Mi Hazánk, Pro Romania, Change UK and the Alternative for Sweden. I also set aside one case that is a defection rather than a split: in June 2019 Veronika Remišová and four other MPs left OL'aNO in Slovakia to join Za ľudí, a new party founded by the former president Andrej Kiska (The Slovak Spectator 2019; Wikipedia contributors 2026). I report it only as a check.

Measures. For each case and month I divide each side's interactions by the total for the tracked pages in its country: the 186 pages plus the case pages, which gives 6 to 25 pages per country. Shares within a country-month remove national news cycles, and no window spans the May 2015 change in CrowdTangle's capture of photo posts. I average shares over months -12 to -1 and 1 to 12, leaving out the month of the split. A new party's share before it existed is zero. A departing figure's personal page is measured before the split as well, so its earlier audience counts in the breakaway's starting share, not as a gain and not as the parent's. The parent's relative change is its change in share as a percentage of its pre-split share; the breakaway's gain is its change in share as a percentage of the parent's pre-split share. I also report raw totals in log points, a pooled regression of monthly shares on an after-split indicator with case fixed effects and standard errors clustered by case (ten clusters, so they are rough), and a benchmark: the distribution of the same relative change for 87 other party pages (leaving out all parent and breakaway pages), over all 12-month windows from 2011 to 2019 with a pre-split share of at

least 1% (6,904 overlapping windows). As robustness checks I use a wider denominator, all pages in the country's raw exports; a six-month window; a benchmark limited to windows with a pre-split share of at least 4%, the size of the smallest parent; and, for personal pages that began inside the pre-split window, a starting share averaged only over the months since the page's first post.

3 Results

Table 1. Shares of national interactions (%) in the 12 months before (months −12 to −1) and after (months 1 to 12) each split. Gain: change in the breakaway pages' share as a percentage of the parent's pre-split share. Pctile: percentile of the parent's relative change among 6,904 comparable 12-month windows for 87 other party pages. Vote: breakaway's first national result standing alone (%; EP: European Parliament, GE: general election; n/a: joint lists only). The OL'aNO defection to Za l'udí is excluded (see text).

		Parent		Breakaway		Change			
Case	Split	Before	After	Before	After	combined	Gain	Pctile	Vote
UKIP to Brexit Party	Dec 2018	5.6	7.9	19.6	24.7	+7.4	91	76	31.6 EP19
Podemos to Más País	Jan 2019	33.5	24.9	4.1	1.9	−10.8	−7	32	2.4 GE19
PS to Génération.s	Jul 2017	4.3	1.9	0.0	5.2	+2.8	122	10	3.3 EP19
LR to Agir	Nov 2017	14.4	7.5	0.0	0.3	−6.6	2	14	n/a
PP to Vox	Dec 2013	16.0	6.6	0.0	1.4	−8.0	9	8	1.6 EP14
MSZP to DK	Oct 2011	12.2	14.6	23.2	38.0	+17.3	121	66	9.8 EP14
LMP to PM	Jan 2013	5.5	1.2	4.2	7.2	−1.2	55	2	n/a
Kokoomus to Liike Nyt	Apr 2018	13.6	19.8	0.0	5.0	+11.2	37	78	2.2 GE19
PSD to Aliança	Aug 2018	16.1	6.4	0.0	6.8	−2.9	42	8	1.9 EP19
Sinn Féin to Aontú	Nov 2018	51.6	67.1	0.0	1.6	+17.0	3	72	1.9 GE20
Median of 10 cases		14.0			5.1	+0.8	39		

3.1 Some parents lost heavily, not always to the breakaway

The parent's share of national interactions fell in six of the ten cases and rose in four (Table 1, Figure 1). The median change was −37% of the pre-split level, but with ten cases split six to four the median is unstable. The falls were large for LMP, the Portuguese PSD, the Spanish People's Party and the French Socialists, whose changes were in the bottom tenth of the benchmark distribution of 12-month changes for other party pages (where the median change is −5%, and 10% of windows fall by more than 54%); the French Socialists sat just inside it. If each case had a one in ten chance, four or more such cases would occur with probability 0.013. Against the benchmark limited to larger pages, three of the four stay in the bottom tenth and the French Socialists move just outside it. For at least two of these parents the fall reflects more than the split: the French Socialists collapsed in the 2017 elections, and the Spanish People's Party's share fell mostly from five months after the split, around the 2014 European election and after the new Podemos page entered the data. Where the parent's share fell, the breakaway's gain made up most of the loss for the French Socialists (more than all of it), LMP and the PSD (about 70% each), but little or none of it for Les Républicains (4%), the People's Party (15%) and Podemos, where the breakaway camp's share also fell. In the other four cases the parent's share rose, most clearly for Kokoomus and UKIP, and also for Sinn Féin and the Hungarian Socialists, all above the benchmark median.

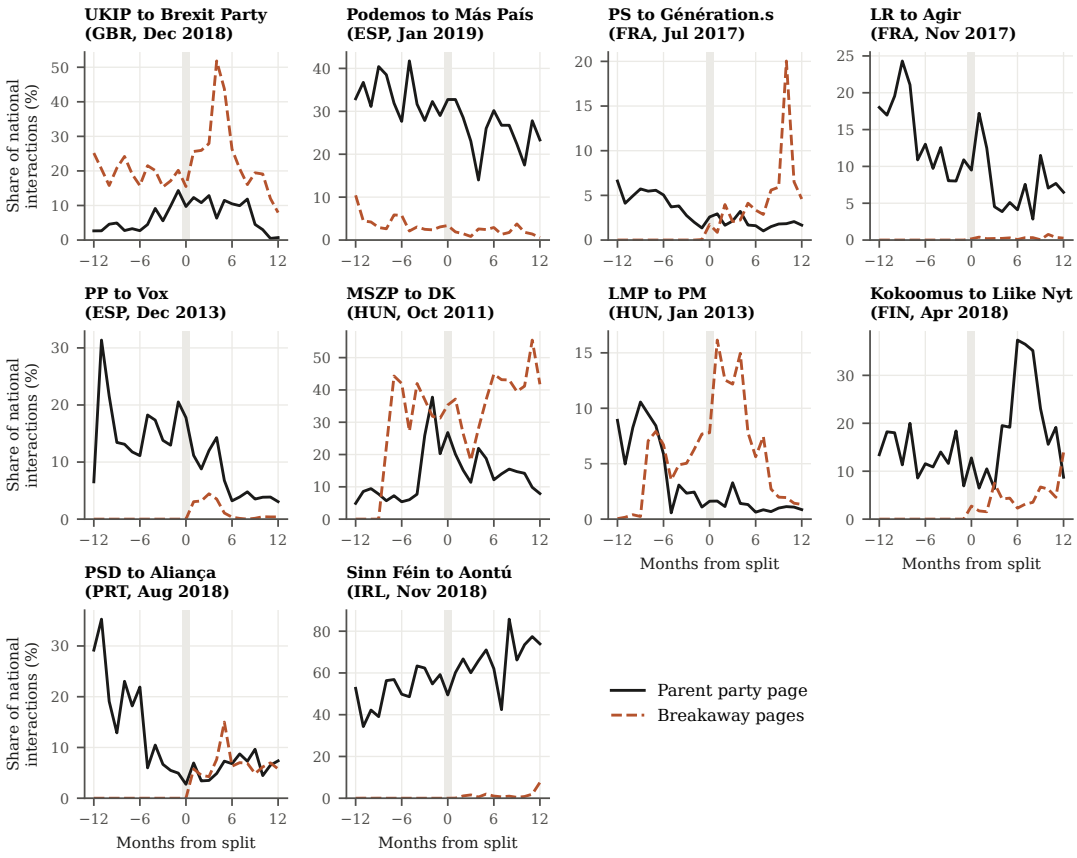


Figure 1. Monthly shares of national interactions with tracked party and leader pages, 12 months either side of each split. Solid: the parent party's page. Dashed: the breakaway's pages (new party page and, where present, the departing figure's personal page). The shaded band marks the month of the split.

3.2 Breakaways gained, but rarely much

The breakaway's share rose in nine cases. Yet the median breakaway held only 5.1% of national interactions in the year after the split, and its median gain equalled 39% of the parent's pre-split share (mean 47%). Vox, Agir and Aontú captured almost nothing on Facebook in their first year, under 2% of national interactions each. The two cases where the breakaway camp was large, UKIP to the Brexit Party and the Hungarian Socialists to the Democratic Coalition, are those in which the departing leader's personal page already held about a fifth or more of national interactions before the split (19.6% for Farage, 23.2% for Gyurcsány). Gyurcsány's page began in February 2011, eight months before the split; averaged only over those months, his pre-split share was 34.7%, and his camp's gain falls from 121% to 27% of the parent's pre-split share. The audience was there before the party. Where the departing figures' pages were smaller, as for Errejón and the LMP dissidents, the breakaway camp's share moved by three points or less. Across cases the breakaway's share rose by 4.1 percentage points in the pooled regression (SE 1.5), and its share of posts by 10.0 (SE 4.0): breakaways posted far more than their engagement share.

3.3 No consistent new energy

The combined share of parent and breakaway rose in five cases and fell in five, with a median change of 0.8 percentage points and a pooled change of 2.6 (SE 3.2). Without the UKIP case the median change is -1.2. The combined share fell for Podemos, LMP and the centre right parties in France, Spain and Portugal. It rose for the UKIP and Gyurcsány camps, the French Socialists and Génération.s, Kokoomus and Sinn Féin, though for the last two the rise came mainly from the parent. The data thus show no consistent burst of new energy: in most cases the breakaway was small, and the parent's share moved for reasons that probably had as much to do with elections and other events as with the split. Raw totals tell a similar story: national interactions grew by a median of 52 log points between the two years, so parents' raw interactions rose in five cases, including some where their share fell.

The results hold in direction with the wider denominator, which gives the same sign of combined change in all ten cases and a median combined change of 0.7 points. With six months either side, the combined share rose in six cases (median 2.7), the parent's share fell in seven (median -21%), and the median breakaway gain was 23% of the parent's pre-split share. Measuring Gyurcsány's starting share only from his page's first month lowers the median gain to 32% and leaves the median combined change at 0.8. Adding the OL'aNO defection as an eleventh case gives a median parent change of -26%, a median gain of 37% and a median combined change of 2.8 points.

3.4 Engagement and votes

Where the breakaway stood alone in a national or European election, its engagement share in the year after the split ranked with its first vote share (Spearman's $\rho = 0.77$, $n = 8$). The Brexit Party, with the largest engagement share after the Gyurcsány camp, won 31.6% in Great Britain in the 2019 European election; Vox, Aontú, Aliança and Más País, with small engagement shares, won 1.6% to 2.4%. The ranking rests on a few cases and the levels differ: Gyurcsány's camp drew 38% of Hungarian interactions with tracked pages, but the Democratic Coalition won 9.8% when it first stood alone, in the 2014 European election. Engagement shares exceeded first vote shares for four of the eight breakaways.

4 Discussion

The question in the title has a qualified answer. In these splits the breakaway usually built only a modest audience, even where it later won seats. Some parents lost heavily; in three of the six cases where the parent's share fell the breakaway picked up most of the loss, but in absolute terms these gains were a few points of national interactions. The exceptions were splits led by politicians with large personal followings: Farage and Gyurcsány took audiences with them, but those audiences had been on their own pages, not on the party's. This fits the view that part of what looks like a party's online audience is attached to its leading figures (Rahat and Kenig 2018), and earlier findings from the same data that leaders' pages grew their followings faster than party pages (Hotham 2026a) and that page size accounts for much of the engagement gap between parties (Hotham 2026b). Nor did splits reliably add engagement to the camp as a whole.

The design has clear limits. There are only ten cases, in seven countries, chosen by what the data contain: splits whose breakaway has no page in the data are missing, which may exclude the least successful breakaways or those whose figures were not tracked. The breakaway camps differ in kind, from a new party page alone to a long-standing personal page, and the measure of gain depends on that: a personal page's earlier audience is counted as the breakaway's starting point, while a new party page starts from zero, and a page that began only shortly before the split counts its earlier months as zero. Event dates are approximate, and several windows contain elections, leadership contests or a European election, so the before and after comparison mixes the split with other events; it is descriptive, not causal. The benchmark windows overlap and include many pages smaller than the parents. National totals are sums over tracked pages, not all political pages, and the wider check uses lists of uneven coverage. Interactions measure engagement with pages, not the number or identity of people, so I cannot tell whether the same users moved from one page to the other. The vote comparison rests on eight cases and different kinds of election.

5 Conclusion

Across ten party splits in seven European countries between 2011 and 2019, breakaways usually gained only a few points of national Facebook engagement, except where the departing figure already had a large personal following. Some parents lost heavily, sometimes to the breakaway and sometimes not, and the combined share of the two sides showed no consistent rise or fall. On Facebook, the large breakaway audiences followed a person who had drawn them before the split, not the new party.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages and cases, and page-month aggregate data are available from the author.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and compile the dates of the splits. 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 posts and interactions aggregated by page and month. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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