



Control or participate? The Yellow Vests' democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis

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Abstract

By means of an original mixed-method research design, this article analyzes the French Yellow Vests' attitudes to democracy and democratic innovations. First, we find that Yellow Vests' protesters are supportive of innovations aiming at controlling elected representatives, and that populist attitudes enhance support for direct public control. Second, we provide evidence of two different discourses about democracy coexisting within the movement: one, stemming from inexperienced first-time activists, is centered on the control of political elites; the other, coming from more politicized Yellow Vests, rather advocates for direct citizen participation. This article therefore contributes to bridging the literatures on democratic issues in social movement, process preferences, and populism. In particular, we highlight that within 'populist' social movements, various democratic aspirations may cohabit, depending on how protesters define 'the people' and their experience of political protest.

Keywords Yellow Vests · Populism · Democratic attitudes · Politicization · Control · Participation

Introduction

In a context of strong political distrust that singles out French citizens from their European neighbors (Grossman and Sauger 2017), the Yellow Vests movement (hereinafter referred to as YV) caused a stir among political commentators—pundits and academics alike—when it first materialized in November 2018. Rarely in recent years has a movement sparked such heated debates, whether on the grounds of its

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supporters, its central demands, or its expectations. The movement started as a reaction against a fuel tax and initially revolved around purchasing power. Yet democratic aspirations in general and the CIR in particular (Citizens' Initiative Referendum, *référéndum d'initiative citoyenne*) quickly made their way into the YV list of requests and gained more prominence over time (Gonthier and Guerra 2022).

Democratic demands are not new to social movements. They have been at the very heart of anti-austerity movements that flourished in the wake of the Great Recession (Della Porta 2015), and which some have labeled as 'real democracy movements' (Oikonomakis and Roos 2016) or 'pro-democracy protests' (Flesher Fominaya 2017). Still, compared to these movements whose participants were often found to be young, highly educated, and left-leaning (Grasso and Giugni 2016), the YV stand out by their specific sociological background and composite political orientations. It consisted, for the most part, of middle age members of the working and lower middle class unified by a shared experience of social insecurity and a common rejection of party politics, but the movement also mingled a large number of first time protesters with more politically experienced activists (Bendali and Rubert 2020; Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019; Guerra et al. 2019). In addition, while anti-austerity movements are known for their participatory and deliberative democratic experiments (Della Porta 2020), the YV are rather similar to 'populist' social movements (Aslanidis 2016; Bergem 2022), due to their harsh criticism of the French party system, their strong anti-elite attitudes as well as the pivotal topic of popular sovereignty.

The YV democratic aspirations have prompted diverging interpretations. Some analyzed this demand as the promotion of a permanent direct democracy which would replace traditional forms of political representation (Marlière 2019; Rouban 2019). Taking the complete opposite view, others saw in its horizontal organization and citizens' assemblies the seeds of a 'municipalist' vision of politics based on local self-government (Jeanpierre 2019; Ravelli et al. 2020). Ultimately, others have tried to reconcile the two competing perspectives, arguing that the YV actually do not demand the abolition of traditional political representation but its reorganization around three principles: control over representatives, attentiveness to citizens' claims, and proximity of elected representatives (Bedock et al. 2021). Even though all these views concur on the fact that the YV support some form of deepening of direct citizen participation, they differ on how to interpret the advocated changes.

In this article, we build on the case of the French YV to engage a dialogue with three strands of research rarely mobilized together: the literature on democratic demands in recent social movements, the burgeoning literature on process preferences, and populism studies. Whereas social movement studies usually scrutinize left-wing movements with strong deliberative and participatory political aspirations, the literature on process preferences focuses on the general public and democratic innovations that are rarely precisely operationalized. Within this literature, numerous pieces have highlighted the influence of populist attitudes on democratic preferences. We bring together these three bodies of literature to gain a deeper understanding of the YV attitudes to democracy and democratic innovations.

Democratic innovations are 'institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process'



(Smith 2009, p. 1). Some of them, such as referendums or recalls, are inspired by direct democracy but aim at establishing a more delegate and responsive model of representation by giving the means to the citizens to sanction representatives or bypass them and decide directly. Others, such as mini-publics, or citizens' initiative are inspired by a participatory and deliberative vision of democracy and aim at increasing the collaboration between elected decision-makers and citizens, with the latter expected to partake in the elaboration of a project before the final decision. Which type of innovation do the YV actually prefer? To what extent do the drivers of such democratic preferences differ among YV protesters as well as between the YV and the general population?

This article also contributes to the debates on citizens' and activists' process preferences by showing the usefulness of mixed methods to investigate such a complex issue. Notions of democracy are increasingly accounted for as a dependent variable (Zmerli 2021). Still, previous research has stressed the difficulty to grasp democratic preferences through exclusive reliance on survey data and quantitative analysis, due to the inherent complexity of this topic (Bengtsson 2012). Scholars have called for methodological approaches giving citizens 'the opportunity to speak or write freely about formal politics without being guided by tightly worded survey instruments' (Clarke et al. 2018, p. 179). We therefore use a combination of quantitative analysis of survey data, quantitative textual analysis and in-depth interviews to address our research question.

We find strong evidence that the levels of populism and of politicization are key in explaining preferences for different types of democratic innovations, both within and outside the movement. In particular, quantitative analyses show that compared to the French population, the YV are more supportive of democratic innovations designed to control and discipline elected representatives, and that a higher level of populism increases support for democratic innovations based on public control rather than on civic participation. Quantitative textual analysis and analysis of the in-depth interviews allow us to further evidence the key role of politicization. They converge in highlighting contrasted discourses about democracy within the movement. The first discourse comes from inexperienced first-time activists: Concerned about socioeconomic hardship and dissatisfied with the political system, they support democratic innovations aiming at controlling and disciplining political elites. The second discourse emanates from more experienced and politicized YV, promoting democratic innovations that enhance direct citizen participation.

Theoretical framework

Democratic demands in social movements

Social movements and democratic innovations contribute to democratic life in distinct ways. In a context of growing stress on representative democracy in Europe, social movements pay increasing attention to deliberative and participatory practices, not just for internal purposes, but also to engage with the society at large (Della Porta and Felicetti 2022). Thus, democratic innovations and movements'



mobilization can be depicted as efforts to run counter the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracies and the disappointment of a large number of citizens with the representative model (Della Porta 2020).

A wide range of social movements have flourished in the aftermath of the Great Recession, such as the Forum of the Global Justice Movements and anti-austerity protests. They have developed deliberative democracy practices and participation ‘from below,’ and a model of grassroots democracy with participatory and deliberative values operating as substitutes for representative and majoritarian models of democracy seen in a deep crisis. Accordingly, scholars have highlighted how democratic practices and innovation issues permeated the demands of social movements (Della Porta 2013, 2020; Talpin 2015), also reflecting the specific sociology of anti-austerity movements bringing together individuals with high levels of education, often experiencing economic and social precariousness, and clearly leaning towards the left (Collectif d’enquête et al. 2017; Grasso and Giugni 2016; Hylmö and Wennerhag 2015).

Social movement studies have long demonstrated that collective action involves a process of political identity building that affects political behavior (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). More recently, scholars have coined the notion of ‘populist action frame’ to also account for some particularities of anti-austerity protests. The latter indeed tend to build a collective and inclusive identification of individual subjectivities with the figure of ‘the people’ as the sole source and agent of political authority (for an overview, see Bos et al. 2020; see also Aslanidis 2017, 2018). This encompassing identity of ‘the people as sovereign’ operates as the primary mobilizing and commitment factor, providing protesters with an undisputed sense of moral legitimacy (Canovan 2005; Westlind 1996) and enabling them to put aside their potentially competing social identities (Aslanidis 2020). Theoretically, this identity framing relates to the populist ideology that advocates for a direct linkage, based on the putative ‘will of the people,’ between citizens and decision-making—whether through representatives or not (Caramani 2017). As Aslanidis forcefully puts it:

‘The strong formal elements of populist collective identity render it a compelling force and facilitate capturing a high moral ground against counterframing activity by opponents. Furthermore, participants are empowered by anchoring their diagnosis of the situation upon the legitimizing values of majority rule and popular sovereignty, which no opposing agent can carelessly defy without being labeled undemocratic’ (2016: 306).

Social movements studies have also long addressed discontinuities in the frequency and in the intensity of protest, more often through survey data (e.g., Oliver 1984; Saunders et al. 2012), but also by ways of case-control designs in intriguing movements such as homeless mobilizations (Corrigall-Brown et al. 2009). They have demonstrated the transformative nature of participation in certain social movements, which can alter the social destiny and the political attitudes and practices of individuals even decades after (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Giugni and Grasso 2016; McAdam 1989). Although this field of research is not very developed yet, some studies have established a link between previous political and protest experiences and attitudes towards democracy among activists. For instance, in their study of the 15-M protest campaign in Spain, Portos and Masullo (2017) highlighted that



democratic dissatisfaction is significantly associated with multi-time participation, and suggested that democratic discontent is a central unifying factor of the 15-M movement. Studying the same movement, Nez (2020) emphasized that participants formulate different conceptions of political representation that can be related to their previous experiences of political protest and may exacerbate tensions between participants who do not all share the same democratic aspirations.

Explaining support for democratic innovations of control and participation

In the last decade or so, there has been a fast-developing strand of research on citizens' process preferences, with an increasing focus on the determinants of support for various democratic innovations. Previous research has found that citizens disenchanted with the current functioning of their democracy are particularly prone to support various kinds of democratic innovations: the increased use of direct democracy (Bowler et al. 2007; Schuck and de Vreese 2015; Werner 2020); consultative and binding mini-publics (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Jacquet et al. 2020) or even the full replacement of elected politicians by citizens drawn by lot (Bedock and Pilet 2021). Dissatisfied citizens can also support enhancing the role of experts over traditional representation (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Webb 2013). Otherwise put, individuals who experience dissatisfaction with the democratic system tend to prefer any alternative to status quo.

Among these dissatisfied citizens, various studies show that participatory democrats are usually found among people with higher levels of education (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Dalton 2017; Webb 2013), political efficacy and political interest (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Neblo et al. 2010). Others, on the contrary, find that citizens who are less educated, less affluent and less politically interested citizens are more supportive of reforms giving more weight to direct democracy (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Coffé and Michels 2014; Rojon and Rijken 2021), or reforms disrupting the traditional representative model to replace political representatives by citizens drawn by lot (Bedock and Pilet 2021; Jacquet et al. 2020; Pilet et al. 2022). Indeed, these reforms challenge political elites and enable citizens to have more control over their political decisions. These contradictory results can be explained by the way in which these various alternatives to representative democracy are defined. In particular, the decisional v. advisory nature of the democratic innovations at stake has an influence on the factors explaining the preferences of various groups of citizens (Rojon et al. 2019; Rojon and Pilet 2021). This calls for a clearer definition of the democratic innovations that are pitted against one another, which is often lacking.

Within this field of research, numerous studies have analyzed specifically the link between populist attitudes and preferences for direct democracy. Populist attitudes are associated with stronger preferences for referenda (Goldberg et al. 2020; Jacobs et al. 2018; Mohrenberg et al. 2019; Werner and Jacobs 2021). Some have found that even though citizens with populist attitudes are more supportive of referendums, they are also less likely to take part in protest events and to vote in referendums (Zaslave et al. 2021). This apparent paradox is due to the fact that individuals who are more populist also tend to be more disengaged politically and



therefore less likely to take part in low-intensity as well as high-intensity forms of political participation, even though they want to control political elites through referenda.

In a nutshell, although democratic dissatisfaction feeds into popular support for various democratic innovations, the profile of those who support these innovations is highly contingent upon the alternatives. Populist attitudes also tend to play a key role, in particular in explaining support for direct democratic reforms.

Hypothesis and mixed method design

Hypotheses

Our research hypotheses draw on the previous literature review. More specifically, we address whether commitment to the YV movement, populist attitudes and political experience are likely to influence preferences for various types of democratic innovations.

The first key contextual element to bear in mind is the high level of public resentment towards the French democratic system among YV protesters, in a country where citizens are already disgruntled with their democratic institutions (Grossman 2019). Throughout the weeks during the YV movement, the idea of the CIR became central and progressively unified the demands of its participants (Gonthier and Guerra 2022). Two claims have been at the forefront: the willingness to claim power back from the ruling political elites, and the need to reinstate popular sovereignty. The CIR became the most identifiable motto of the movement, and acted as a rallying flag. Discourses on CIR revolved around the necessity to control political representatives (Bedock et al. 2021). Consequently, we hypothesize that participation in the YV movement has operated as a politicizing factor for demonstrators, making them more sensitive to certain forms of democratic innovations. Hence our first hypothesis:

H1 Compared to the rest of the population, individuals who identify with the Yellow Vests movement and Yellow Vests activists are more supportive of democratic innovations that aim at controlling political representatives.

Our second hypothesis relates to the populist nature of the YV movement. Various scholars have argued that the YV can be characterized as a ‘populist’ social movement due to the widely shared anti-elite/pro-people views (Bergem 2022; Hamdaoui 2021). Typically, 63 percent of the YV strongly agree that ‘the people and not political leaders should take the most important decisions for the country,’ as opposed to 28 percent for the French population (Guerra et al. 2019). Drawing on the link between populist attitudes and preferences for referenda as a way to control political elites and bypass their political decisions, we formulate the following hypothesis:



H2 The more individuals hold populist attitudes, the more they are likely to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling elected representatives. This applies within the general population as well as within the YV movement.

Finally, a striking feature of the YV movement is the fact that it has gathered individuals with varying politicization levels. First-time protesters with a remote relationship to politics rubbed shoulders with experienced activists, often with a left-leaning background (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019; Reungoat et al. 2020). Consequently, we hypothesize that experienced activists are more likely to support participatory and deliberative mechanisms, since they are used to—and keen on—taking part in complex, cognitively-demanding and time-consuming collective mobilizations involving debates and compromises (Ravelli et al. 2020). Conversely, first-time protesters are less acquainted with the workings of public life, have a distant history with politics (Reungoat et al. 2020) and little experience of political participation. As a result:

H3 First-time activists are more prone to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling political representatives, whereas experienced activists are more prone to support participatory and deliberative mechanisms.

Mixed method design

The above-mentioned hypotheses were tested using the combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Mixed methods are a fruitful gateway to the understanding how competing models of democracy can arise and coexist. Thus, by contrasting and expanding quantitative findings with qualitative results, our methodological approach is based on both triangulation (i.e., convergence and correspondence of quantitative and qualitative results) and complementarity (i.e., clarification and elaboration of quantitative findings with qualitative findings) (see Aguilera and Chevalier 2021; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011; Green 2007). Moreover, our design develops an integrative mixed-method approach which is ideal to study factorially complex constructs, such as democratic aspirations (Castro et al. 2010).

We draw on three complementary data sources. First, to put the preferences of the YV in perspective with those of the French population, we use two mirror surveys: the *Populism in Europe Survey* (PopEuropa) conducted in April 2019 among a national representative sample and a convenience sample of Yellow Vests interviewed between September and December 2019 (*Yellow Vest Values Survey*, hereinafter YVVS) (Guerra et al. 2021). With this material, we analyze the influence of commitment to the YV movement and populist attitudes on preferences for various democratic innovations, comparing YV participants and their French counterparts. Additional data sources are then used to understand how internal political differences within the YV movement translate into competing discourses on elected representatives and democratic institutions. For this purpose, we take advantage of an open-ended question administered in the YVVS survey to perform an inductive quantitative textual analysis and disentangle the varieties of discourses about



ordinary citizens, their democratic aspirations and the relationship with the political elites. Finally, we supplement this textual analysis with a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with YV activists in Spring 2019 within the *Research Collective on the YV* (hereinafter RCYV) so as to better delineate ideal–typical discourses on political institutions and democracy.

Comparing the Yellow Vests and the French population: between and within variations in democratic preferences

Methodology

In this section, we draw primarily on quantitative statistical data from PopEuropa and YVVS surveys to compare the YV’ democratic preferences to the rest of the French population. PopEuropa quantitative data were collected online through a national representative sample of 1313 French in April 2019. Fifty-nine percent of the sample supports the YV movement, whereas 13 percent have taken part in a YV protest action—which complies with statistics provided by polling agencies (Hoibian 2019; Moati 2019). YVVS data are made up of a sample of 1910 YV protesters, recruited through the 250 most active Facebook groups at the national and local levels between September and December 2019.¹ Most of them (76 percent) support the movement and participated in a protest action. Twenty-four percent are supporters of the movement but not activists.

In addition, the two surveys contain the same set of behavioral and attitudinal variables. Further detailed in online Appendix A), the questionnaires of the two surveys included an identically worded item tapping support for democratic innovations. Respondents were first presented with a randomized list of ‘reform proposals on the way to make political decisions’ they could be supportive of. They were asked to choose up to two of the following six innovations: recall referendum, legislative referendum, sortition (i.e., selection by lot), public consultation, citizen initiative (i.e., ‘enable civil society associations to make law proposals and referendum proposals’), or municipalist initiative (i.e., ‘shift power to localities where constituents could debate and organize themselves’).²

One of the key issues of the existing literature on democratic preferences is the lack of distinction between different instruments, which can affect profoundly the profile of the supporters of given democratic innovations (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Rojon et al. 2019). For this reason, our survey item is an attempt to refine measurements and capture more nuanced preferences. The six innovations that we targeted are evaluated separately, but also can be broadly dichotomized into control vs. participatory mechanisms. Yet, we are aware that this distinction is not always clear-cut. Some democratic innovations, such as CIR can tap into both dimensions,

¹ A first round was fielded at the early stage of the movement, between December 2018 and April 2019 ($n=4643$), with no items about democratic preferences.

² Respondents also had the possibility to answer that they only had one preference, or no preference.



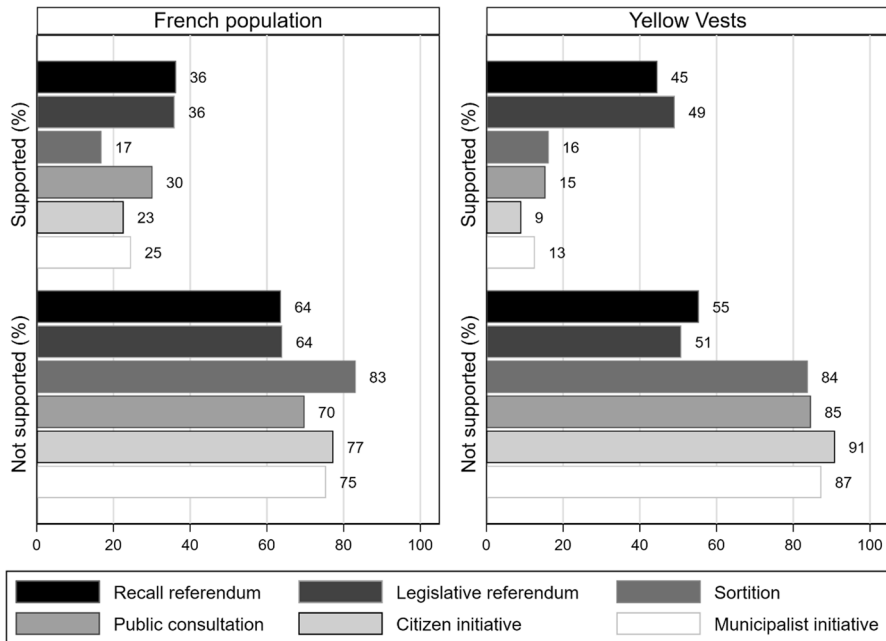


Fig. 1 Support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests. *Note:* Entries display the percentage of respondents selecting (or not) a democratic reform among the French population (left panel—results weighted by sex, age and education) and among the YV movement (right panel)

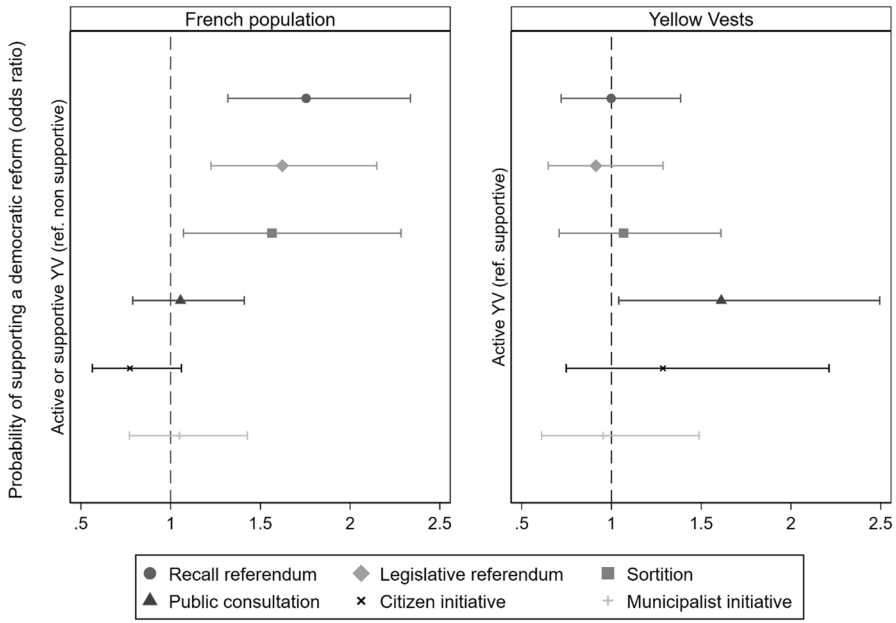
by providing opportunities of participation for the most motivated during its initiative phase and a veto power for all citizens through a final referendum. Similarly, even though it gives the chance to deliberate and participate to a limited number of citizens, sortition can also be conceived as an institution controlling political representatives by bypassing them.

Diverging views on democratic innovations

The six items mirrored in the two quantitative studies allow to cross-check democratic preferences and investigate whether certain types of democratic reforms are more popular among the YV activists and supporters than in the general public. Figure 1 displays the percentage of respondents who support or do not support each proposed democratic innovation across the two samples. Our first result confirms that the YV (right panel) are more supportive of democratic reforms that aim at controlling and disciplining elected representatives. Forty-nine percent choose the legislative referendum and 45 percent the recall referendum, compared to 36 percent in the French population (left panel) (H1).

Conversely, democratic innovations that are more resource-demanding for ordinary citizens and necessitate to collaborate with representatives (i.e., public





Controlled for sex, age, education, income, professional situation, main residence, political interest and support for redistribution

Fig. 2 Effect of commitment to the YV on support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests. *Note:* Entries are predicted probabilities (odds ratio) from two sets of six binary logistic regressions estimating variations in support for democratic preferences between YV supporters and non-supporters among the French (left panel), as well as between active and supportive YV within the movement (right panel), with 95 percent confidence intervals. Models adjust for sociodemographics and political characteristics

consultations, citizen initiative and municipalism) are half as popular among the YV than in the general public. This is particularly true of citizen initiative that is supported by less than one YV in ten. Opinion gaps are less clear-cut with sortition, which is as likely to be chosen by the YV than by the French population. Descriptive results thus lend some first empirical credence to the hypothesis that in combining popular sovereignty, direct democracy and democratic control—as illustrated in the famous motto ‘*RIC en toutes matières*,’—the collective action frame from the YV movement echoes the democratic preferences of its sympathizers.

We then performed binomial logistic regressions comparing the probability of supporting each democratic innovation, depending on the level of commitment to the movement. Models control for usual sociodemographics, as well as for confounding factors (i.e., political interest and support for redistribution) that may also influence democratic preferences (see online Appendix B for detailed results). Predicted probabilities plotted in Fig. 2 (left panel) confirm that those French who take side with the YV movement are significantly more inclined to support a repertoire of democratic innovations based on public control than the rest of the population. More specifically, in the general public, sympathizing with



the YV increases the probabilities of supporting recall referendum, legislative referendum and sortition by 75 percent (1.75; $p < 0.01$), 60 percent (1.59; $p < 0.01$) and 57 percent (1.57; $p < 0.05$), respectively.³

Within the YV movement (Fig. 2, right panel), with the exception of public consultation that is more supported by the most active YV (1.61; $p < 0.05$), all YV—whether active and only supportive—turn out to share the same level of support for democratic reforms. Altogether, our findings suggest that what matters most for democratic preferences is whether the French support or oppose the YV movement rather than the intensity of their commitment when they are sympathizers.

Variations between the YV and the French are greater than variations within the YV movement

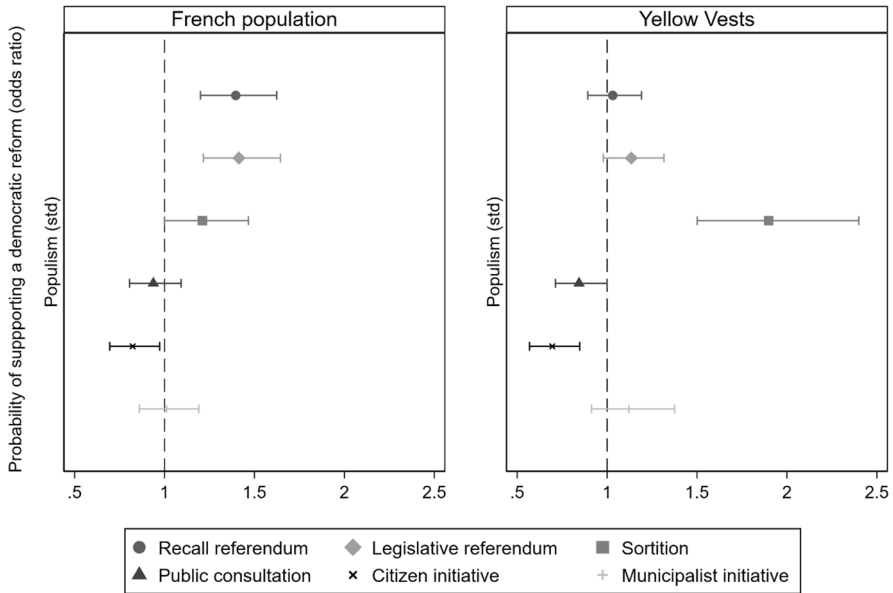
Next, we addressed our second hypothesis by adding populist attitudes in the logistic regressions. To be sure that the effect of populism was measured net of that of political preferences, we also introduced vote choice in the last presidential election as an additional control. Results for the general population are displayed in the left panel of Fig. 3 (full models are presented in online Appendix B). They substantiate the notion that populist citizens, whether or not YV, are more prone to favor democratic innovations based on control than on participation. In particular, a one standard deviation increase in populism amplifies the probability of supporting recall referendum by almost 40 percent (1.39; $p < 0.01$). The impact of populism is of 41 percent on legislative referendum (1.41; $p < 0.01$) and of 21 percent on sortition (1.21; $p < 0.05$).

The right panel of Fig. 3 shows limited differences within the YV movement. Sortition is all the more popular since the YV endorse a populist mindset (1.9; $p < 0.01$). Yet the most populist YV are not more supportive of recall and legislative referenda. This could be explained by the fact that most of the YV have greater and more homogeneous populist scores than the general public (mean = 0.88; sd = 0.13 v. mean = 0.66; sd = 0.19), which mechanically results in moderate statistical variations. All in all, when examining the influence of populist attitudes on democratic innovations, we find strong commonalities between the general public and YV protesters. In both cases, populism increases the probability of supporting reforms that ensure strict control and punishment of elected officials (H2).

To sum up, quantitative results demonstrate that as far as democratic innovations are concerned, variations between the YV and their French counterparts are much larger than variations within the YV movement, which suggests that despite large differences in political values, the YV are quite homogeneous concerning their democratic preferences. In the next section, we take advantage of qualitative data also

³ We conducted additional logistic regressions (not displayed here) to gauge possible differences between active YV (i.e., participating in protest actions) and supportive YV (i.e., supporters but not activists). In the French population, legislative referendums appear to be a little more popular among supportive YV, and sortition among active YV. The two subgroups do not, however, differ significantly from each other.





Controlled for sex, age, education, income, professional situation, main residence, vote choice, political interest and support for redistribution

Fig. 3 Effect of populist attitudes and voting on support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests. *Note:* Entries are predicted probabilities (odds ratio) from two sets of six binary logistic regressions estimating the impact of populist attitudes and voting in support for democratic preferences among the French (left panel) and within the YV movement (right panel), with 95 percent confidence intervals. Models adjust for sociodemographics and political characteristics

collected in the YVVS to make sense of how internal political differences within the YV movement shape competing views about democracy. Thus, following triangulation and complementarity principles, we aim at corroborating our quantitative results with qualitative findings but also seek a finer-grained qualitative description of the underlying process. Most notably, we shed light on the role of politicization whose influence is not that straightforward when looking at the YV only through a quantitative lens.

Discourses about the people and democratic aspirations among the Yellow Vest: a textual analysis

Methodology

To address the reasoning of YV protesters on democratic innovations, we analyzed a corpus of 1262 YV responses to an open-ended question asked in the fall of 2019 within the YVVS. The wording of this question was intentionally simple and explicit: ‘What do you think of the Yellow Vest movement?’.

Using the IRaMuTeQ software, an open-source textual statistics software, we worked on a principle of classifying lexical forms present in the corpus to highlight



its specific semantic structures and to identify statistically different discourse among YV activists. We then used the descending hierarchical classification method described by Reinert (1990) to classify the YV responses in distinctive groups (see online Appendix C for a full description of the method). The respondents' preferences in terms of democratic innovations, as well as characteristics related to their social and political backgrounds, are introduced as auxiliary variables to help qualifying the cluster obtained, and ultimately to verify our hypotheses (see online Appendix D for an exhaustive overview of auxiliary variables).

To value the singularity of each answer, we chose to make a simple classification on text. This method proved to be relevant as it allowed us to classify about 96 percent of the texts in the corpus in three clusters equal in size.⁴ Our results highlight two large distinctive discourses that cut across the YV movement (see Fig. 4).⁵ First, we found a set of discourses structured by the social concerns of the respondents, through the evocation of their lack of material security and the financial difficulties they face in their daily life (Cluster 1). Second, another collection of texts gathers the very protest experience induced by the mobilization, as well as the political values they attribute to the social movement (Clusters 2 and 3). Indeed, the first cluster is opposed to the latter two on the first horizontal axis, deriving from the correspondence analysis on which the clustering algorithm is performed (Fig. 4, bottom panel).

In the subsequent analysis, we present the distinctive groups identified by the clustering method. To answer our research hypotheses in a more formal way, we inductively report the content of the most representative verbatims associated with each cluster (see online Appendix E), as well as the democratic and political preferences significantly associated with a cluster.

Struggling to make ends meet, blaming the elites

The first cluster clearly brings together texts centered upon the social difficulties respondents face in their everyday life: paying bills, taking care of children, being able to take care of oneself, housing issues, living decently, having access to leisure activities, are all unbearable realities from which the arguments for commitment to the YV movement are crystallized. Their support for the YV builds upon the evocation of a feeling of deep injustice and a great anger towards political elites considered as 'privileged' and 'corrupted.' There is almost no mention of alternative mechanisms that could improve the functioning of democracy. The respondents are under such social difficulties that they do not spontaneously place alternative democratic mechanisms at the center of their discourse. Rather, they focus on denouncing

⁴ The discourses identified are not overlapping in such a way that answers in the same cluster are more similar to each other than to those in the other clusters.

⁵ For the dendrogram classification scheme (Fig. 4, top), we focus on the height at which any two branches are joined together that indicate dissimilarity between clusters. For the correspondence analysis (Fig. 4, bottom), the distance between any words gives a measure of their similarity (or dissimilarity) along the two main dimensions (i.e., the principal components).



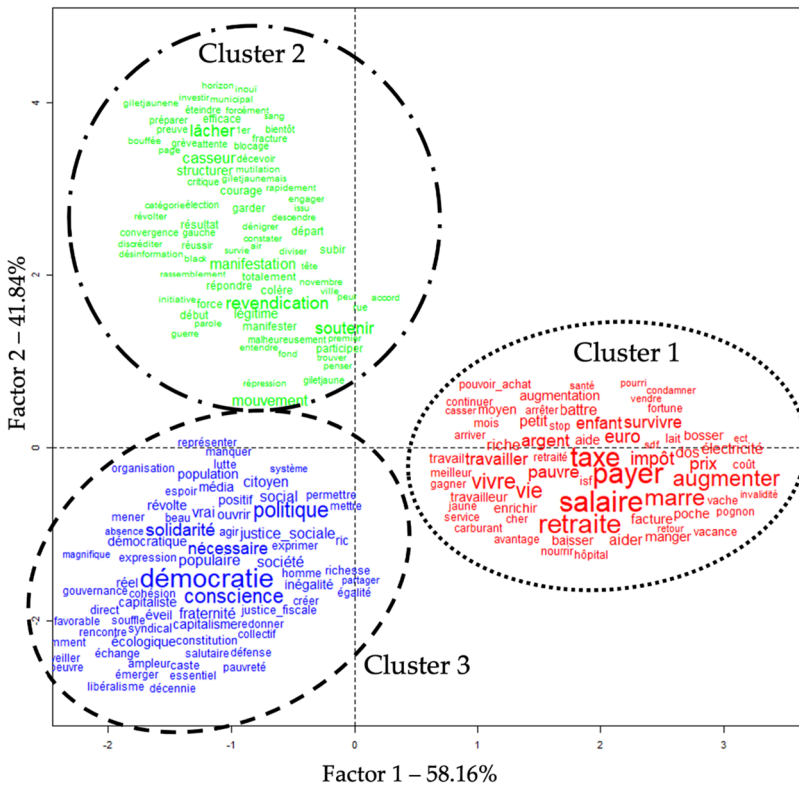
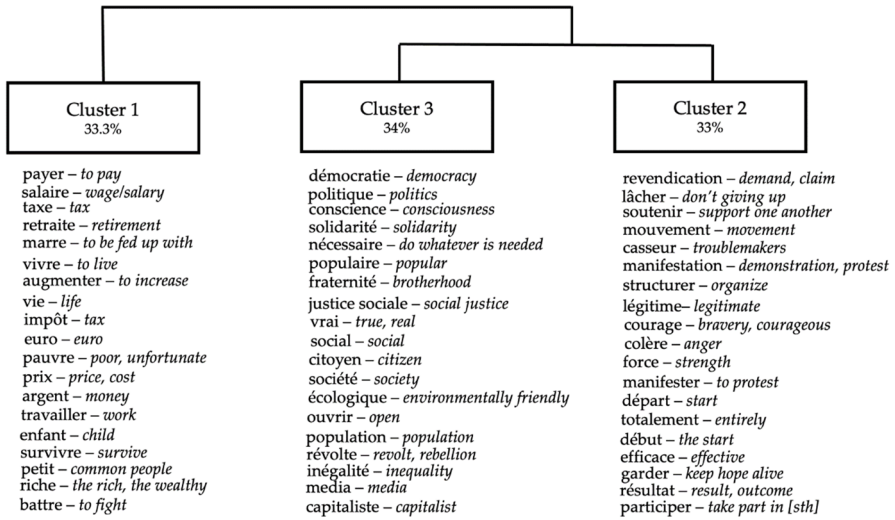


Fig. 4 Cuts in the dendrogram tree and most specific terms of the three-classes clustering (top panel) and two-dimensional representation of the correspondence analysis (bottom panel)



social injustices with anger. However, the texts often emphasize the need to hold political leaders accountable for the harshness of their life, thus corroborating H1.

Among the most contributing texts of this cluster, we find many statements that combine a set of three distinct elements: a raw denunciation of social reality, the attribution of a very strong responsibility to political leaders, and thus a need to blame them. The verb 'to live' is particularly evocative, as it refers more to a situation of 'survival' than general life aspirations or constructed values. The commitment to or the support of the YV movement seems to be a reaction to one's life situation. Besides, and quite unsurprisingly, this cluster has a strong populist overtone, as these YV mobilize a full-fledged anti-elitist discourse.

What also characterizes this cluster is the low politicization of its respondents. YV categorized in this group are more often women than men ($p < 0.05$), have a lower level of educational attainment ($p < 0.001$), have not been involved in other movements ($p < 0.001$). Consequently, they are not very familiar with politics and describe themselves as not interested in politics ($p < 0.01$). When they do vote, they tend to support the radical right ($p < 0.001$). The YV in this cluster are also more in favor of the recall referendum ($p < 0.05$), and do not seem to express a preference for more participatory mechanisms, such as municipal initiative ($p < 0.05$) or the citizens' initiative ($p < 0.05$). Their preferences for democratic innovations provide additional confirmation of our hypothesis (H3) about the support of the less politicized YV for the idea of dismissal and punishment of elected officials and political elites.

Deepening democracy by supporting innovations enhancing citizen participation

More direct references to the YV movement and protest experience can be found in the second and third clusters, with Cluster 2 referring to the evocation of actions and claims, and Cluster 3 echoing the values, grievances, and core principles of the YV. In particular, the topic of democratic innovations turns out to be more present in this last cluster.

Cluster 2 is organized on arguments supporting the claims of the YV movement. It gives an account of the experience of the respondents within the movement. It is a textual class that values emotions and feelings, while reflecting on their commitment to the movement (e.g., staying mobilized, collectively pursuing the actions). The movement is seen as a struggle that comes from 'the people,' and that intends to make the government bend to give citizens the possibility to seize their decision-making power. Protest actions are seen as the way for citizens to act to find their place in the democratic arena.

Cluster 2 is also based on two feelings related to the way of conceiving the relationship to democracy: legitimacy and anger. Legitimacy relies on the citizens who are the bearers and actors of claims to be defended. Anger comes from the fact that citizens face the contempt of the governments who forget them and do not involve them in any decision. However, this anger is based on the feeling of the confiscation of political power by the rulers, not from deteriorated living conditions (cluster 1). The YV classified in this cluster have an intermediate level



of education ($p < 0.01$) and are particularly committed to the movement, as we found more activists in this group ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, they overreport their grassroots experience and testify to their commitment in movement. Of special interest for us, this cluster is not distinguishable in terms of specific democratic preferences.

Finally, the third cluster is the one that explicitly refers to the universe of values at the core of the YV grievances: democracy, solidarity, fraternity, citizenship, and social justice. These values constitute the very foundations of their relationship to democracy and show that in terms of democratic innovations, these respondents are clearly advocating for the improvement of the degree of direct citizen participation in an all-new institutional setting. It comes as no surprise that *democracy* is the most representative term associated with this class ($p < 0.001$). Many respondents in this cluster say that France is not—or no longer—a democracy, precisely because representative democracy and the institutional setting of the country contradict their orientations toward more direct democratic preferences. The most significant verbatims connect the engagement within the movement and the support for a more direct, local, solidary, and fraternal functioning of democracy.

We notice two important characteristics in terms of both form and content that are specific to this cluster. On the one hand, the respondents' remarks are expressed in a particularly constructed style with a rather precise and rich vocabulary. On the other hand, one of the recurrent topics associated with this class is a specific democratic innovation, namely the CIR. Indeed, the CIR is presented as a credible alternative to the current functioning of representative democracy in France: a mechanism of citizen involvement that allows 'real' democracy to function. YV in this group hold political and general reflections on the relationship of citizens to institutions and rulers.

The fact that Cluster 3 is marked by substantiated reflections on democracy is undoubtedly linked to the social and political profile of the respondents overrepresented in this group. Indeed, protesters in this cluster are more often male ($p < 0.001$) and more politicized. They are very interested in politics ($p < 0.001$) and tend to vote for the radical left ($p < 0.001$). They are not first-time protesters ($p < 0.001$), which means that they took part in other social mobilization in the past. They are overrepresented among the YV with a university background ($p < 0.05$) and encounter fewer professional difficulties since they are employed ($p < 0.05$).

Concerning their attitudes to democratic innovations, and in line with H3, they prefer direct democracy mechanisms that strengthen direct citizen participation, such as sortition ($p < 0.01$) or municipalist initiatives ($p < 0.01$). In contrast to the first cluster, they are less likely to choose the recall referendum ($p < 0.01$). They do not intend to sanction political elites but support a greater involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. Therefore, the terms 'CIR' and 'direct' are positively associated with this cluster ($p < 0.001$), which reflects this interest in direct democracy itself. This vocabulary emerged from respondents with a high level of political sophistication and some knowledge of direct popular participation mechanisms. At last, in terms of populist appeal, the YV in Cluster 3 hold another side of populist beliefs: they emphasize people-centrism/popular sovereignty, while YV in cluster 1 hold more common anti-elitist attitudes (belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty is



another crucial facet of populist attitudes—Wuttke et al. 2020), even if, similarly to Cluster 1, they share a conflicting relationship with political elites.

Overall, the classification of the responses to our open-ended question sheds light on an internal divide in the values and arguments mobilized by the YV to explain their support for the movement. Our analysis reveals two main discourses about democratic aspirations among protesters (H3). The first discourse supports sanction and control over political leaders and is mainly carried by first-time YV activists facing economic and social difficulties. Another discourse is more popular among highly experienced and politicized protesters who support democratic innovations with a stronger emphasis on direct citizen participation. Both discourses highlight different facets of populist beliefs, which are quite widespread among the YV. While the former carries very strong anti-elitist attitudes, the latter conveys a desire for unrestricted popular sovereignty. The subtleties of these two distinct representations of democracy among the YV are even better captured with in-depth interviews.

Two cohabiting representations of political institutions among the Yellow Vests

Methodology

Even though YV activists share a large number of views, there are also crucial differences in terms of democratic aspirations. The analysis of semi-directed interviews conducted with participants in the YV movement enables us to clarify the meaning and internal logic of the two discourses identified in the three clusters in the previous section, especially on why YV activists differ in terms of preferences on democratic innovations. The profile of the interviewees closer to these ideal–typical discourses confirms the characteristics identified in the previous section. It also provides further empirical evidence of the crucial role of politicization to differentiate these two discourses on political institutions (H3).

The following findings are based on the inductive coding with the software NVivo of thirty-three semi-directed interviews conducted mostly in Spring 2019 (see online Appendix F on the selection of interviewees and coding process) dealing with the conceptions of the political system of YV participants. By broadening the focus beyond the preferences for different types of democratic innovations, our analysis allows us to understand which definitions of politics, process preferences, visions of elected officials, characterizations of the French political system and definition of the people structure representations of desirable democratic mechanisms. The following analyses are based on the most frequent codes out of the forty-two that we used to investigate these five themes.

Redistributing power: the discourse of disillusioned left-wing activists

The first ideal–typical discourse is centered around inclusiveness and political participation, giving the citizen a central stage in the political system. It is



typically held by experienced political activists with a left-wing background, who are used to intensive—and often conflictual—forms of political participation in various organizations.

It is first characterized by a particular sensitivity to the issue of political pluralism, considering that although citizens do not all share similar ideas, the YV movement in particular and politics in general should strive to overcome these different aspirations and act for the common good. This discourse insists on the importance of counterpowers, and considers that one of the main issues of the French political system is the excessive concentration of powers in the hands of a single ‘monarch,’ without any ability for citizens to interfere and participate in between elections. For instance, according to François, (male, 62, former manager in civil engineering),

[when you vote] you give a blank check to your president, well to your monarch, to MPs, and then after five years nothing happens, that’s quite embarrassing, it would be quite normal for things to be interactive.

The interviewees who are closer to this discourse consider that all political opinions should be represented in the Parliament through proportional representation (PR), or even through more complex and sophisticated proposals such as compulsory voting or majority judgment vote. When it comes to direct democracy and the CIR, these activists are in favor of direct democracy as a way to allow citizens to participate in the political process, but they are not supporters of all forms of direct democracy. Several of them even mention the risk of ‘populism.’ For instance, Amani (male, artist, 58), argues:

The CIR is something that I can defend to a certain extent, but there is an aspect that I like a little less, which is the mistrust of all political representatives. (...) The ‘all rotten’ notion can lead to a certain populism that is a bit dangerous.

These activists insist on the need to ‘raise awareness’ on the topics at stake and to develop political education. Some prefer to prevent certain topics from being subject to referenda (such as death penalty or gay marriage for instance), even though they admit that citizen initiated legislative referendums are an instrument of political participation. Activists with an anarchist activist background express reservations about the CIR, as they consider it insufficient to achieve self-government. According to Aurélien (male, 32, unemployed, active in student circles):

The CIR is totally insufficient, but it carries within itself the seeds of a desire for self-government. So that’s what I say to people who defend the CIR, I say, ‘yes, it’s good, you want to take control of your daily life

As most French citizens (Grossman and Sauger 2017), the experienced activists who hold this discourse are critical of their representatives and consider them as disconnected from citizens’ needs. This disconnection mainly derives from the lack of concreteness and awareness about the everyday concerns of the citizens, in particular at the national level. For Murielle (female, 64, former schoolteacher):



The national level is terribly inaccessible and terribly detached from the realities of the people of the country. Whereas at the local level (...) the actions are targeted and concrete and still respond to local needs.

In this first ideal–typical discourse, interviewees are very critical of the figure of Emmanuel Macron, but equally skeptical about the opportunity to call for his resignation, as it would not resolve the poor functioning of the French democratic system. Their criticisms revolve around the personalized and authoritarian view of the political power of Macron rather than on his person itself. Sylvie (female, 60, former schoolteacher) considers that Macron is ‘a caricature of the Fifth Republic.’

These YV frequently refer to ‘the people’ in their discourses, with a strong dichotomy between the people and political elites. The most politicized and experienced YV activists often tend to position themselves alongside the people rather than within them, as an enlightened vanguard. Jean-Claude (male, 68, former points-man) is the one who expresses this idea most directly:

As soon as the people are in the street and they protest, all my commitment, both trade union and political, is in line with that! Even if this people is multiple and diverse! (...) Lenin had said an extraordinary sentence: (...) You don’t make a revolution only with enlightened people! (...) And today I’m in the street with my comrades who are a little less enlightened, or revolted. To see that you have revolted to the point of taking to the streets is great, (...) you’re in the street and you have demands, and I’ve been supporting them for 20 years!

These activists therefore define ‘the people’ as an abstract political subject and collective entity. The idea of popular sovereignty and self-government of the people, in particular among those who are active in anarchist circles, transpires through this definition.

Punishing and controlling the political elites: the discourse of the angry first-time activists

In this second archetypal discourse, the YV insist on the fact that there are ‘good ideas everywhere’ in all parts of the political spectrum. As already evidenced by other authors specializing either on the US (Hibbing et al. 2021) or the UK (Clarke et al. 2018), these interviewees reject party politics as it allegedly creates unnecessary divisions and prevents the implementation of policies supported by ‘the people.’ They support the inclusion of the blank vote in the votes cast, as a ‘signal’ to the political elites, to show them how unrepresentative they actually are. This discourse is particularly widespread among first-time activists with a limited previous involvement in all political activities, including voting.

The same way as more experienced left-wing activists, interviewees closer to the second discourse insist on the importance of counterpowers, but believe that these counterpowers will come from the ability to recall and admonish political elites in general and the president of the Republic in particular, ‘to undermine Macron’ and force him to listen to the people. The ‘employer’s rhetoric’ is pervasive: interviewees



insist on the fact that politicians should be treated ‘just as any other worker.’ Estelle (female, 42, school auxiliary) argues:

my son, who is eight years old, said to me one day (...), but why doesn't the president have a trial period, like at work in fact? And yes, I think it's not that stupid. (...) Because in five years we can make so many bad choices. So there you have it. Removable. Representatives, but who can be recalled at any time.

Isabelle (female, 45, youth worker in a local authority) defines recall votes as such:

the revocation is like the sword of Damocles, listen to the people, the sword of Damocles is put on your head, you have to do as you are told.

Direct democracy is not conceived as a permanent, interactive and participatory process, but rather as a means for ‘the people’ to counteract the government and the president. In this second discourse, interviewees consider that politicians do not represent the people because they do not share their living conditions and financial constraints. Unlike experienced left-wing activists, first time activists express criticisms of the political representatives that are extremely personalized and centered on Emmanuel Macron. Interviewees make frequent mention of the various benefits enjoyed by current and former presidents and ministers: chauffeurs, very high retirement pensions, lifelong salaries, official accommodations, etc. These financial privileges are sometimes exaggerated. For instance, Jean-Bernard (Male, 70, former technician) is convinced that ‘if [he] had gotten into politics, [he] would drive a Rolls Royce.’ Estelle (female, 42, school auxiliary) argues that the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (the political elites) is just too wide to comprehend:

for us 100 Euros.... For them it's maybe... I don't know, a million euros.

Several interviewees refer to the *Elysée* and describe it as a ‘something all in gold.’ This wealthy and inaccessible universe is opposed to ‘the people’ as a whole, defined as the reverse mirror of this world of privileges. Macron epitomizes these privileges and aloofness. Various interviewees resent his ‘contempt,’ his collusions with the financial world and powerful interests, or his divisiveness for the country. These activists construe ‘the people’ as being diametrically opposed to the privileged, distant and self-serving political elites. Some define the people as the ‘Third Estate,’ others as ‘people who suffer,’ ‘the workers,’ the ‘lower class,’ but the majority of these first-time activists define the people as all of those who do not share the same privileged lifestyles as the political elites.

Discussion and conclusion

The French Yellow Vests do not form a homogenous group, but a complex movement penetrated by numerous cleavage lines. The combination of survey analysis, quantitative textual analysis and in-depth interviews bears out the relevance of an integrated mixed method design based on triangulation and complementarity. It



helps to evidence, in particular, the key role of populism and politicization, and to better make sense of how internal political differences within the YV movement can translate into competing discourses on elected representatives and democratic institutions.

With this in mind, our research brings a twofold contribution. First, compared to the general population, it highlights the stronger support of the YV for democratic innovations controlling and disciplining political elites, most notably among the most populist protesters. Second, we stress the divide in terms of democratic preferences between YV who got involved for the first time in a social movement and left-wing experienced activists. The former tend to frame their participation within the movement based on their economic and social difficulties, and develop a discourse on the political system based on a strong rejection of political elites. Democracy is not at the very heart of their activism, and when mentioned, what they plebiscite are democratic innovations designed to discipline and admonish political representatives, such as recall or legislative referendums. These activists typically share a non-pluralist and a unitary vision of 'the people' (Caramani 2017).

On the opposite, their more experienced counterparts have a politicized discourse based on their deeper knowledge of the political system. Democracy is much more pivotal in their discourse, which puts a strong emphasis on participation. They have a pluralist vision of politics inherited from their previous politicization and favor all sorts of democratic innovations, including more time-demanding ones resulting in a greater degree of citizen involvement. Our findings fully corroborate studies stressing that the representation of the general interest (pluralist, or unitary) is one of the most structuring lines to analyze the democratic aspirations of French citizens (Bedock 2020).

Our mixed-method analysis suggests that democratic aspirations feed into democratic practices, and not only the other way around: Activists who have experienced various forms of political participation (vote, strike, demonstrations, public meetings, etc.) also support an active role of the citizen within the political system. Direct democracy is only one of the various democratic innovations they support, in particular when it involves citizens' initiatives. By contrast, first-time activists who feel very remote from politics have a very negative and monolithic view of the political class, which they dismiss as distant, privileged, self-serving, and contemptuous. Their aspiration is not so much to participate or deliberate more extensively than to be able to sanction political elites when they do not pay enough attention to ordinary citizens.

More generally, our article contributes to current debates on citizens' process preferences, democratic aspirations and populist attitudes within social movements. By focusing on an intriguing populist social movement with strong democratic demands, we show the importance of not treating democratic demands within social movements and support for democratic innovations as monolithic. 'The people' can serve as a unifying factor to unite multiple and potentially conflicting identities and demands within the same movement (Aslanidis 2017). However, it is necessary to dig deeper into the characteristics of the supporters of various democratic innovations and into the discourses of activists to avoid an all-encompassing vision that may conceal cleavages on democracy that run through contemporary social



movements. Our study also speaks to the process preferences literature, by demonstrating that supporters of institutions controlling and sanctioning politicians clearly differ from those who support participatory and deliberative mechanisms giving a more active role to citizens in decision-making. The impact of the participation in previous protests and its effect on democratic aspirations has been downplayed and should be further investigated. Finally, our article opens a dialogue with the populism literature, by showing the importance of analyzing the different conceptions of ‘the people’—one predominantly anti-elitist, and another insisting on popular sovereignty (Schulz et al. 2018; Wuttke et al. 2020)—which likely nurture distinctive democratic aspirations.

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