



# From Yellow Vests street protest to city council: when social movements run for office

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## Abstract

How the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) faced the electoral dilemma? Despite their rejection of political institutions, the French municipal elections of 2020 led some of the participants to embrace conventional politics. Under which circumstances can a social movement lead to political participation and eventually obtain electoral success? Relying on quantitative and qualitative data, this article provides an explanation of the electoral participation of social movement activists and the different outcomes of local elections in Bordeaux, one of the major sites of Yellow Vests' mobilization in 2018–2019. The article contends that far from allowing marginalized groups to enter the political arena, these elections seem to confirm the “iron law of oligarchy”. Two lists of candidates both claiming to be part of the Yellow Vests movement competed with each other. While “Bordeaux Democracy” rejected partisan support failed to stand, “Bordeaux in Struggle” could rely on organizational support and was able to maintain itself and achieved unexpected electoral success with three local councillors.

**Keywords** Social movement · Yellow vests · Municipal election · Politics · Mixed methods

## Introduction

28 June 2020, a year and a half after the outbreak of the Yellow Vests protest, the 28-year-old Yellow Vest, Antoine Boudinet, was elected municipal councillor for Bordeaux, a city of 260,000 inhabitants in South West France.

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The eruption of the Yellow Vests (YV) movement surprised many observers by its magnitude, its forms and its length. The movement started in the autumn of 2018 with an online petition launched by a young entrepreneur from the outer suburbs of Paris, Priscillia Ludosky, and with a “cry of anger” from Jacline Mouraud, a former security company employee. Quickly, different groups and individuals took to the social networks. Facebook pages became rallying points. 17 November 2018 was chosen for a blockade of roads and tolls. The mobilization went on for several weeks at a high level of intensity. Researchers estimate that nearly three million people took part, occasionally or regularly, in a YV protest (Dormagen et al. 2021). Even after President Emmanuel Macron’s re-election in May 2022, the YVs are still active in Saturday demonstrations, on some roundabouts or in associations. In spite of a strong degree of wariness towards conventional politics and failure in the European elections (Godefroy 2020), the French municipal elections of March 2020 led some of the participants to embrace electoral politics. Under which circumstances can a social movement characterized by its political heterogeneity and strong distrust of leaders and institutions lead to political participation? In Bordeaux, the YV movement produced two electoral lists, meeting different fates and bringing to light new hints on how a social movement can lead to a movement party and the valuable resources, including specific leadership, for electoral success.

This article provides a fresh analysis of social movements and electoral participation through the observation of the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels 1912) during a local election in Bordeaux, where two self-proclaimed citizen’s and Yellow Vests list engaged in municipal elections and met different fates. If this concept has been intensely discussed by scholars of social movements, movements that combine “old social movement” focused on “bread and butter” issues, with “new social movement” emerging on post-materialist issues (Giugni and Grasso 2016), as does the YV, are intriguing. Whereas the capacity of social movement to enlarge political participation for deprived social groups has been noted, scholars pointed the unequal capacity to acquire or mobilize resources that lead to internal hierarchies. In the YV case, the horizontal structure, without strong organization and weak leadership was an attempt to overcome the emergence of a political elite and confiscation of grass-roots’ power by a bureaucracy. Facing the electoral dilemma, in a phase of attrition, some YV seize the election as an institutional strategy to bolster its demands. In so doing, the social movement is put to the test by the rules of representative democracy. Only a minority engages in the electoral joust, forming two potential lists, thus revealing the tensions within the heterogeneous movement.

Although social movements have been conceptualized as non-conventional or, more accurately, non-institutional politics, some scholars have introduced a more complex view of the issue, stating that social movements are part of “normal politics” (Goldstone 2010). In this context, movement parties may emerge to espouse the claims of social movement. According to Kitschelt’s definition, movement parties “are coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition”(Kitschelt 2006, 280). Typically, movement parties are identified as belonging to the liberal-left or the ecological spectrum in the United States. More recently, anti-austerity protests in Southern Europe led to



the creation of movement parties which met electoral success in European, general and local elections. In Spain, the Indignant Citizens' movement evolved into Podemos, a movement party; in Greece, the political party SYRIZA is part of the global justice movement whereas the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle seems to be more a reaction to a crisis in the party system (Della Porta et al. 2017). Such protests also occurred in 2016 in France with "Nuit Debout" occupations, with rhizomatic structures, networks and gatherings in city centres to contest the socialist neoliberal reform of the labour market (Guionnet et al. 2021). But France seems to be an exception to the transformation of social movements into movement parties. More recently, the YV movement did not manage to organize nationally for the European elections, nor for the 2022 Presidential election. Nevertheless, local elections offer broader opportunities for newcomers, which explains why YVs and observers saw the 2020 French municipal elections and their "citizen lists" as a natural outcome for the social movement. Yet only ten "Yellow vests" lists registered for the elections.

We contend here that the YV movement's rhizomic and leaderless organization offered an opportunity for participants to compete in the electoral arena. The list who manage to create or rely on stable organizations could ride on the wave of anti-institutional protest, whereas the group who tried to avoid the "Iron law of oligarchy" refusing to build a formal coalition with political parties failed to present a list, acknowledging the persistence of this organizational logic. But how could this tendency occur in a weak structured and horizontal organization? Our first hypothesis is that the characteristics and values of participants can explain their reluctance or, conversely, their desire to engage in electoral competition. As noted long ago, electoral participation is linked to the social background of citizens. From the data, inferences can be made about their potential electoral participation from our data as our survey of participants provides some information about their social status, former and current participation and repertoires of action. In spite of criticisms made against representation (Bedock et al. 2020), YVs in Bordeaux see municipal elections as a possible strategy to bolster their demands. However, the elections provoked a split among participants, dividing them into two lists. These findings confirm the heterogeneity of the YV movement as regards political participation (Bedock et al. 2022).

Our second hypothesis is that this polarization reflects two different visions of the political project, collective conscience, strategy and tactics within the YV movement. According to the "Jaune vif" survey, two different clusters of values and attitudes towards political institutions characterize the Bordeaux participants. Observations and in-depth interviews with YV candidates of the two lists running—or willing to run—for municipal election, supplement insights on participant trajectories, resources and their ability to seize political opportunities.

Our third hypothesis is that these two different visions of policy and politics have consequences on leadership building and the capacity to mobilize networks within the electoral competition. Indeed, Démocratie Bordelaise (DB – Bordeaux Democracy), the Yellow Vests-only list, did not manage to compete, whereas Bordeaux en Luittes (BeL–Bordeaux in Struggle), could rely on undisputed leadership and political parties, and eventually obtained three municipal councillors. These findings tend



to confirm the classical observation of R. Michels of an “Iron law of oligarchy” produced by representative institutions.

## Contribution to existing literature

Our research sheds light on the “French exception” regarding anti-austerity protests and movement parties, providing insights on the failure of the YV movement to turn into a movement party using mixed methods and triangulation. The main contribution of this article is to re-examine the relations between social movements and political parties (Hutter et al. 2019), and more specifically with regard to political participation (Heaney 2013; Tarrow and McAdam 2013). We focus on the organization of two competing YV lists and provide a better understanding of how social movement participants enter the electoral arena and how, in return, elections affect social movements (Blee and Currier 2006). Three elements allow us to renew the analysis of these issues and to question the role and the articulation of political opportunities (Kriesi 2004), ideological cleavages as well as the mobilization of organizational resources and the construction of strong leadership (Portos 2021). First, we focus on a social movement characterized by its great distrust of political representatives and institutions, which therefore appears at first sight as fully averse to an electoral outcome. Second, mixed methods allow us to shift the focus onto local configurations, both in terms of scale and in terms of methodology. Finally, by studying two attempts at presenting a YV list at the same election, one successful and one a failure, we can make a unique comparison to test the hypotheses put forward in the literature and gain a deeper understanding of the relations between social movements and electoral politics.

## Case selection

The case of a French city where two “citizen” lists emerged from the YV movement provides insightful views on politicization within a social movement. Based on a case study, the article analyses the internal dynamics of the social movement and those of the left-wing political parties that claimed to be part of it. In other words, the aim is to understand how activists in these parties have used the social movement to renew their framing, demands and modes of action in the electoral arena. Bordeaux was a hotspot of YV mobilization but the 2019 European elections took place in the declining phase of the mobilization. They did not result in a significant electoral participation of the YVs and no single-YV party list met with electoral success. On the contrary, the 2020 municipal elections were seen as an opportunity to give the movement an institutional opening at the local level (van Outryve 2019). In Bordeaux, two lists claiming to be from the YV clashed. Both lists can be considered as a “movement party” (Kitschelt 2006, 280) or, more accurately, a “movement party list”, defined as a coalition of YV activists trying to apply their strategy to the electoral arena. The first, “*Démocratie Bordelaise*” (DB—Bordeaux



Democracy), emerged from a Facebook YV group led by a charismatic leader with a tiny, closely-knit network of people sharing similar views on French sovereignty. On its left-wing side, “Bordeaux en Luttés” (BeL – Bordeaux in Struggle) assumed several features of “social movement partyism” (Almeida, 2010), including a coalition with left-wing political parties (La France Insoumise or LFI – France Unbowed) and le Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA—New Anti-capitalist Party) that aligned with the YV movement and used their resources to engage in the 2020 elections. BeL was an attempt to realize grassroots coordination among activists from radical-left political parties and local social movements, including YV. Besides their leader and former candidate for the presidential election (Philippe Poutou), two YVs were elected, one a seasoned political activist and the other a newcomer to politics, a peculiarity for a big city.

In a first part, we will discuss the current literature on social movements and electoral participation and try to bridge the gap between these two research fields. In a second part, we will develop a case study and a research design based on a mixed methodology. Finally, we will present our findings about the participants in Bordeaux, the values and ideology of the two competing lists and their unequal capacity to seize political opportunities through the mobilization of networks and resources.

## **Moving towards electoral participation: literature review and theoretical framework**

### **Anti-austerity movements and the crisis of representation**

The YV movement can be considered a part of a broader cycle of contention which started in the 2010s (Snow 2013, 12). Occupy Wall Street (2011) and other occupations of public spaces in Mediterranean countries—Tahrir Square in Cairo (2011), Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013), the Indignant Citizens of Madrid or Athens – raised the issue of the current phase of global capitalism and neo-liberal policies. The YV shares with the anti-austerity movement its characteristic heterogeneous social base, bringing together precarious workers, employees and small business owners, but also “pink collars” –care-workers–and retirees (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019). As in Occupy Wall Street and other public space occupation protests in the 2010s (Shultziner and Kornblit 2020), online social networks played a crucial part in “connective action”, bridging groups and individuals, and eventually structured collective action. The YV movement also shares with the global justice movement a strong claim for social justice, democracy and participation, framed as a “crisis of political responsibility” (Bertuzzi et al. 2022). The YV protest explicitly questioned the role of institutions and claimed citizen participation through Citizens’ Initiative Referendums (referendums d’initiative citoyenne—RIC). Finally, the characteristics of the YV movement—no centralized leadership, horizontal structures and new political subjectivity built upon the sharing of experience – also make it part of this broader cycle of contention.



## Electoral participation and social movements

As Goldstone noted in 2003, “Social movements are not merely another forum for or method of political expression, routinized alongside courts, parties, legislatures, and elections. Rather, social movements have become part of the environment and social structures that shape and give rise to parties, courts, legislatures, and elections”(Goldstone 2003, 2). In democracies, social movements and political parties play a crucial role in democratic representation (Kitschelt 1993). As Hutter et al. (2019) recall, the participants in social movements can mobilize existing political parties to bolster their demands. For instance, Tea Party grassroots seized the primary elections to push the Republicans towards more conservative and libertarian stances (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). In France, the spectacular protests against same-sex marriages in 2012–2013 favoured the creation of “Sens Commun (Common Sense)” a political structure inside Les Républicains (the Republicans) party (Della Sudda 2020; Raison du Cleuziou 2018). Left-wing libertarian social movements transformed western social-democratic parties by putting cultural liberal demands on the agenda (Kriesi et al. 1995). In most cases, however, placing cultural liberalism at the forefront went alongside dropping their traditional support of the working class and social justice. But when participants in social movements consider that political parties do not represent their interests, they can create new parties to push their demands within institutions as the Green parties did in the 1980s. Since 2010, anti-austerity protests in Southern Europe have paved the way for movement parties to bring their demands into the institutional arena. Most of them had electoral success in general and local elections and eventually governed (Della Porta et al. 2017). But France remains an intriguing exception. There was no political party spin-off from its French anti-austerity “Nuit Debout” movement that arose in 2016 against the reform of the labour market, gathering urban, educated people in Paris and most French big cities (Collective 2017, Della Sudda & Guionnet, 2021). After November 2018, several attempts to build a YV Party failed. The French political regime does not favour such initiatives, whereas proportional systems give more opportunities to newcomers. Moreover, the strong distrust towards institutions expressed within the YV excluded this outcome from the social movement. A third possibility is the “hybrid party”, an organization that rejects the traditional political party structure but still competes in elections. In Italy, the “Movimento 5 Stelle” or M5S illustrates this evolution from a social movement to an “anti-party” organization. In France, LFI (La France Insoumise or France Unbowed) shares some features with M5S, such as the anti-party rhetoric, the “nebulous” organization, a strong charismatic leader and a certain opacity in the decision-making process. It presents itself as a conveyor of social movement issues. Indeed, LFI used the 2020 municipal elections to present “citizen lists” of political and social movement activists to bolster YV demands. The French municipal elections of 2020 took place in a specific context: after a few months of “abeyance” (Taylor 2010), the pensions reform led to strong street protests where YV participants joined with trade unions. Local meetings with trade unions and political activists did not, however, challenge the “disintermediation” of the movement (Lefebvre 2019). In fact, the March 2020 lockdown suspended the social movement and some participants moved from the street



to the digitalized political arena of social networks. The COVID19 pandemic also led to a two-month interruption of the electoral process between the two rounds of the election. The ballot was thus characterized by great uncertainty and challenged our assumptions about social movements and political elections.

### **Why local politics matter for social movements and electoral competition**

By considering this electoral development of social movements, we can further our thinking on the porosities between the political field—understood as an arena of struggle autonomized from other spheres of social activity, structured by its own considerations – and the space of the social movements in which the Yellow Vests are deployed (Sawicki 2010). Discussing “critical elections” for social movements, McAdam and Tarrow (S. G. Tarrow and McAdam 2013, 329) consider that “movement groups can be expected to contest elections in which, by virtue of low voter turnout, a mobilized minority can exercise disproportionate influence”. Local elections in France are considered more open to citizen participation. This explains that since 2000, social movements have taken the electoral option through citizen lists, however with little success (Guionnet 2002; Giraud 2007). In 2020, 384 citizen lists joined a national network for the municipal elections (Faburel and Giard 2020). The YV movement followed the same pattern. Firstly, the movement needs to be understood in a deep, although not very visible dynamic of “reterritorialization” of collective action (Jeanpierre 2019; Raimbault 2021). YV participants debated proactive municipal electoral mobilization in 2020 during the YV Assemblies of Assemblies. Secondly, the movement called for better representation. Faced with an unsatisfactory response from the government, a plea for deliberative local assemblies, outside institutions or political parties, was put forward by some YVs. The movement was thus defined as citizen-based, launched and organized outside of partisan, associative or trade-union organizations. After a few weeks, the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC) became a central issue in this self-proclaimed leaderless movement (Godefroy 2020). The presentation of citizen lists, some of which claim to be from the YV movement, is therefore the result of a favourable institutional context and an internal dynamic of a strongly territorialized movement (Ludosky and Gourgues 2020). The French local elections of 2020 favoured electoral participation as a tactic of the movement. But not all YV participants chose to engage with local politics. And when they did so, strategic dilemmas led to splits within the movement. We consider three hypotheses to explain the electoral outcome of this social movement. First, former political experience favours current electoral participation. Our second hypothesis considers that the subjectivity and collective conscious expressed in the two groups strongly shaped alliances and their capacity to seize political opportunities. Thirdly, we assume that some organizational as well as individual resources are crucial for building networks around a shared political platform and acknowledged leadership.



## Case study and mixed methods

### A social movement in a local context: the case of a gentrified city and the election of Yellow Vest citizens as local councillors

In order to study the relationship between the YV movement and electoral competition, we decided to examine the case study of an intriguing municipal campaign election in a French city, Bordeaux. It is a critical case to study the possibility for participants in a social movement to engage in political competition for several reasons. Bordeaux is a gentrified and prosperous city of 250,000 inhabitants in southwest France (Victoire 2014). Over the last decade, national and political policies have transformed the former industrial port into an attractive city for the upper classes, graduates and managers. Policies of expansion and gentrification have led to rising inequalities and a satellization of the surrounding urban areas (Ferret 2019). Not all the inhabitants and territories of the region have benefitted from this gentrification policy (DITP et al. 2021). Indeed social and territorial inequalities are still blatant and the YV movement was particularly strong in this regional capital. The case of “Bordeaux” is emblematic of the growing inequalities between social groups that benefit from urban policies and those that find themselves economically, spatially and symbolically marginalized. The southwestern “capital” thus became a hot-spot of protest with more than 7,000 participants on 17 November 2018 according to the local press and the French Ministry of Interior. According to our on-site questionnaires, people from the whole region converged on the city. Several groups of Yellow Vests coalesced based on affinities discovered during protests, as well as on the basis of pre-existing networks (Della Sudda and Guionnet 2021). Despite these sociological changes, the city was ruled for almost 75 years by a right-wing majority, with strong mayors relying on local networks (Lagroye 1973). Unexpectedly, Mayor and former Prime Minister Alain Juppé resigned in 2019 and left an unprecedented opportunity for political change. Bordeaux offers an insight to observe how participants in a strong and long-lasting social movement can seize this opportunity for political challengers and newcomers.

In this context, two citizen lists claiming to be Yellow Vests appeared at the end of 2019. One was supported by a YV Facebook group formed in January 2019, “*Démocratie Bordelaise*”<sup>1</sup> (DB—Bordeaux Democracy), the other by “*Bordeaux en Lutttes*” (BeL—Bordeaux in Struggle). While the first did not see through the candidacy, the second met with electoral success by getting through to the second round. Against all odds, BeL eventually had three councillors elected to the City Council. One of them is an emblematic figure of the Yellow Vests movement and a spokesperson for a national collective of people wounded—“mutilated”—by the police. The first reason to focus on the local configuration is to provide fine granularity of the movement. The political timeline is important. The approaching municipal elections of March 2020 had the effect of restructuring some groups around the

<sup>1</sup> The authors thank the reviewers for their comments and challenging critics, as well as Amy Mazur and the editorial board for their support and their work. The article was translated by Mrs Fauchadour.



electoral campaign. This shaped the interactions within and among the local Yellow Vests groups, but also with political parties, as they organized themselves to present “citizen lists”. We can thus observe the differences emerging within a social movement across time and space, and how they translate into the local political arena. Bordeaux is a critical case as regards the issue of social movements and electoral competition since the two lists with a “YV label” resulted in a different outcome. A comparison of the two lists within the same social movement reveals their different capacities to engage with electoral competition, allowing us to identify the explanatory variables and refine the current hypothesis on resource theory.

### **A plea for mixed methods**

This article is on the result of a collective project based on “methodological pluralism” (Della Porta 2014). Our case study triangulates quantitative data collected by the “Jaune Vif Survey” team and qualitative material in order to provide an accurate description of the local YV movement. In the face of an unexpected social movement, we wanted to provide a better understanding of the current mobilization by mixing methods, including triangulation which provides complementary points of view (arrow 2019; Klandermans et al. 2002). This case study is based on a quantitative analysis of a survey, protest event analysis, in depth interviews and observations (Tarrow 2019; Ayoub et al. 2014). Our case study, therefore, offers a contextualized, “holistic understanding” (Trom and David A. Snow 2002) of the transformation of social participation into political participation.

The study of social movements in France has long been qualitative (Fillieule 2017). As regularly noted, quantitative approaches are less used in France than in the United States (Lewis-Beck and Bélanger 2015; Mayer 2008). In the face of an unexpected eruption of a social movement, our research team decided to provide basic information about participants, their demands and former experience of participation through a survey, despite the difficulties and inherent limitations of collective research with no material support (Klandermans and Smith 2002). The nationwide “Jaune Vif” survey ( $n=1477$ ) lasted from 24 November 2018 until 16 March 2019. But lack of financial support, exhaustion of the research team and the growing risks in demonstrations altered the quality of the data (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019). We consider this survey to be a “quantitative monography” comparing different sites, rather than a representative and exhaustive survey of the movement. Each researcher or local research team completed the survey data with local monographs based on different materials.

We also used in-depth interviews of list candidates to analyse processes and mechanisms on the local level. The corpus of in-depth interviews consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with the BeL list between July 2020 and September 2021 ( $n=7$ ). They focus on life stories and include more specific questions about the municipal campaign. The interviews with “DB” members began in September 2021 ( $n=9$ ). The responses of “BeL” interviewees were partly influenced by the timing of the collection: the period of summer 2020 followed a victory that was the prelude to other citizen candidacies standing for LFI and NPA. Comparison of the two groups



during the electoral sequence allows us to describe the characteristics of the styles of each Yellow Vests group in a context where competition exacerbates differences within the movement. Participant observations of weekly demonstrations and meetings were carried out between 24 November 2018 and March 2020, and between September 2021 and January 2022. They were supplemented by the viewing of participants' Facebook public accounts, thus bringing to light the diversity that the term "Yellow Vests" as a single unit tends to obscure.

In addition to the irregular observations of the BeL list, a corpus of press articles was constituted from the Europress database and completed by manual research on local news sites. In order to trace the chronology of the campaign and the evolution of the mobilization of a small group of Yellow Vests constituting a list for the municipal elections, a manual collection of the Facebook posts from the DB public page (353 members) and its administrator, from its foundation until September 2021 was undertaken. At the time of the collection, in September 2021, some posts were no longer visible, as they had been censored or deleted. Other documents, such as leaflets or photographs of events were integrated into this corpus.

## Findings and results

### A critical election and variations in the political participation of YVs

This section addresses the first paradox in understanding how a movement characterized by distrust of political representation and the desire to maintain a horizontal form led to two attempts at candidacy in municipal elections. We will show that contextual data on the political opportunity constituted by this critical election as well as the quantitative study of the characteristics of the movement in Bordeaux provide the first clues in answering these questions.

### Sample selection and specificity

We rely on the "Jaune Vif" survey to examine the characteristics of participants mobilized during the YV movement in Bordeaux ( $n = 149$ ). Although the number is too low to make any inference, we can nevertheless describe some of their features. With only 28% of demonstrators living in the city, it is impossible for us to make a generalization of the results for all YVs in Bordeaux directly concerned by the municipal election. Nevertheless, we consider that this population, by mobilizing in Bordeaux, testifies to the political centrality of this place and their attachment to the issues at stake. The specificity of the Bordeaux sample is that interviews were conducted during mobilizations in demonstrations, rather at the beginning of the movement (84% of the sample was taken between Act 1 and Act 6 of the movement, i.e. in November and December 2018, at the height of the movement).

The Bordeaux demonstrators are fairly similar to the respondents as a whole but differ from the YVs mobilized on roundabouts. They are slightly younger (only 18% are over 60, compared to 27%) and have a slightly higher level of education (65%



have at least the baccalaureate, compared to 57%). Among the working population, there is a higher proportion of employees (35% vs. 28%) and an underrepresentation of blue-collar workers (21% vs. 29%). With regard to employment status and sector of activity, the first results based on the entire database (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019) had highlighted the overrepresentation of the unemployed, but also of artisans, public service employees, industrial workers and the transport sector among men on roundabouts, and that of caregivers among women. Our sample shows that the care sector, including health and social workers, was particularly over-represented in the population mobilized in Bordeaux (21% compared to 16% in the whole sample).

### Nuanced mistrust

In Bordeaux, in the same proportion as for all the YVs interviewed, many believe that political parties and unions have no place in the movement (73% and 58% respectively) and that the movement should not have spokespersons or representatives (35% agree and 18% have no opinion or a mixed opinion). In the *verbatim*s, distrust of institutions and representation prevails. The legitimacy of the spokespersons is most often questioned. Nevertheless, some YVs mention the need to structure the movement further in order to make its demands heard, or else state that they are aware that, over time, this question will eventually arise. This explains that after the summer of 2019, when the movement had reached a state of attrition, the possibility offered by the local elections aroused enthusiasm, despite initial fears about institutionalization of the movement.

### Quite a legalistic profile

The Bordeaux YVs' repertoire of actions is more legalistic than the YVs as a whole. On average, more of them are prepared to undertake, or have already undertaken, the more traditional actions (demonstrating, signing a petition, boycotting supermarkets, alternative consumption, going on strike), but are less inclined to participate in more radical actions against the State or the police (occupying an administrative building, painting slogans on walls, not paying taxes, causing material damage).

When asked if they consider voting as a means of action to make their ideas heard, 82% of the YVs in Bordeaux agree, which runs counter to the idea of a total break with the space of traditional, representative politics as a place to defend their ideas. However, a significant minority categorically rejects this path, revealing the tensions among the participants and eventual polarization. This presages the classical distinction between radicalization and institutionalization at this stage of the movement.

If distrust and the will to break with the classic forms of representation are central to understanding the movement, the YVs in Bordeaux have not however abandoned the vote as a means of defending and promoting their ideas, and testify to a firm attachment to the classic forms of political participation, which partly explains why the electoral opening appeared as a possible solution. According to a BeL



anti-capitalist activist, the list was an opportunity “to represent the struggles and to change power relations at the electoral level in Bordeaux. And as one DB leader stated, “with the Yellow Vests, there is hope”.

### **An unequal seizing of political opportunities**

We contend here that participants’ views on politics and their conception of the political subject shape their perception of political opportunities, strategy and tactics. Although they both refer to the YV movement, the two lists present opposite visions of politics and strategy. This section, based on interviews and a quantitative analysis of the ideological cleavages within the Bordeaux YVs, shows different capacities of appropriation of political opportunities. It offers a preliminary framework for understanding the success of the BeL list and the incapacity of the DB list to stand for the election.

### **Two configurations for one political opportunity**

Firstly, constitutional reform proposals are at the heart of local initiatives such as the local group, “On-the-RIC”, in 2019. This strategy makes it possible to break with a violent repertoire of action: “*rather than walking the streets [of the city] with the sole objective of being gassed or flashed, let’s arm ourselves with pens and use our energy to get people to sign a petition calling for a referendum on issues that we ourselves will have chosen*” (“Les Gilets jaunes c’est la Démocratie”, 8 February 2019, leaflet distributed during the demonstration). The first conference organized by the local YV committee and the March for the Climate in December 2018 was about the RIC. Alongside Climate activists, a citizen participation activist, Etienne Chouard, proposed a participatory workshop. The objective of these initiatives was to propose constitutional reforms to improve democratic functioning and to respond to a demand for “feral” participation (Gourgues 2020; Della Sudda 2022), not channelled by institutions, outside the instituted forms of the “participatory imperative” (Pateman 1970).

The political strategy was to set up a programme and articulate the different demands in order to structure citizen lists for the municipal elections in the short term and for the presidential elections in the long term. Two options emerged, one based on Yellow Vests-only candidates, the other on social movement activists and radical left “movement parties”. As we will see, the organization of a movement party, and thus its capacity to stand for the election, depends on its relation with the party system and the social movement field (Della Porta et al. 2017:21), but also on its values.

### **Démocratie Bordelaise, populism “in the true sense of the word”**

The existence of these political spaces within the movement gave an opportunity for the DB list to impose itself as a possible way to make democratic demands at the local level; as stated by the DB leader, “*with the Yellow Vests, there is hope,*



*we can try to create something*". As is the case for many citizens in France and in other democracies, the group advocates a rejection of partisan politics and of its professionalization, which leads to the general interest being subverted by elites at the expense of the people. As one of the potential candidates explained in an interview: *"I claim to be a populist in the true sense of the word. I challenge the ways of the elites. And populism is exactly the opposite of the ways of the elites. It's not demagoguery as most of the media would have us believe"*. Indeed, if most of the DB group base their claim on "the people" against the elite, they do not necessarily endorse nationalism. These Yellow Vests claim a politics that posits the sovereignty of the people. Their main demand is the RIC as a means of participation in the affairs of the city to avoid "adversary politics" based on self-interest and parties, to promote "a form of democracy based on common interest" (Mansbridge 1981, 140). This conception influences the contours of the group and the interactions within it, proscribing any partisan proselytizing or "political hijacking". They are also distrustful of their immediate competitors, whom they consider to be under the sway of NPA or LFI.

### **Bordeaux en Lutttes, horizontality combined with class struggle**

Bordeaux en Lutttes shares with *Démocratie Bordelaise* a critique of the verticality of power, reinforced by the President of the Republic (Le Bart 2020). But it is based on an understanding of the political field as the translation of a social world shaped by class conflict. BeL claims to better represent the people because of its social background. *"A worker for a change!"* and *"Vote for [us], vote for you"*, claimed their leaflet. In February, their platform included most of the left-wing Yellow Vests' institutional reforms (Alexandre et al. 2021): the local RIC, a recall procedure and an independent commission on police violence.

"Citizen" personalities likely to make good candidates for a citizen list were then approached. The prospect of a coalition was in line with a political organization whose hopes for an electoral breakthrough thanks to the Yellow Vests movement were dashed in the European elections (Planche 2020, 65). For this LFI MP at the bottom of the list: *"Building a Popular Federation was our national strategy. And we tried to implement it with people, "citizens", activists of all kinds in relation to causes that are close to us"*.<sup>2</sup> For LFI, it is a matter of supporting "citizen municipalism" echoing the popular mobilizations of the Yellow Vests among others (Lefebvre2020).

### **The fractured base of the Bordeaux YVs**

Echoing these two strategies, Alexandre et al. (2021) stated that the YV movement is polarized between *disillusioned left-wing activists* who *"support political institutions allowing a better distribution of political power and participation of citizens"* and *angry first-time activists* who *"reject party politics for creating unnecessary*

<sup>2</sup> Interview of 11 July 2020, 51-year-old man, technician on leave and Member of Parliament.



*divisions and preventing the implementation of policies supported by “the people”*“. Similarly, the YVs in Bordeaux show heterogeneous paths of involvement, which allow us to sketch out different ways of engaging with the movement, as well as the various expectations of the demonstrators regarding outcomes, given the weak reaction of the public authorities. In a quantitative and cross-national survey of first-timers’ participation in social movements, Stefan Walgrave and Joris Verhulst (2011) show that first-timers are more likely to be optimistic about the outcome of the mobilization, and therefore more likely to be frustrated when the movement’s demands are not satisfied as compared to more experienced activists. We hypothesize here that first-time activists were enthralled by the exceptionality of the YV movement, the hope that it carried and the wish to obtain a global victory here and now. But seasoned activists having acquired a long-term logic were better able to seize specific opportunities, such as a local election, and to make concessions in order to advance their cause.

On the one hand, as we have seen, the BeL list is more favourable to political parties and relied more on past social struggles. This position was largely found among the YVs in Bordeaux, politically self-positioned on the left and showing a political commitment prior to the movement. Indeed, the left of the movement, more willing to rely on organizations, first prioritized material constraints via calls for an increase in salaries and pensions and then turned to democratic demands, while maintaining a class logic in the political conflict and the desire for a democratic overhaul through a new republic and a new constitution. As conceived by the BeL list, the RIC was thus a strategic tool to implement social justice rather than a political aim per se.

On the other hand, according to our qualitative data, the DB list attracted more first-time protesters and YVs who refused to position themselves on the left–right scale. Like most Bordeaux YV demonstrators, they expressed a reluctance to rely on political organizations and to express party preferences in the survey (see Figure). For these YVs, the practice of avoiding politics (Eliasoph 1998), in the sense of refusing to conform to the classic benchmarks of political debate for fear of splitting the “people”, contributed to isolating the DB list and made working with existing political organizations supporting the YV movement impossible.

This bipolarization—admittedly simplified—of the different aspirations within the movement allows us to better understand the divisions in terms of electoral opportunities during the municipal elections in Bordeaux. To summarize this part, the quantitative data allow us to see that the YVs of Bordeaux are characterized by a marked split, as much from the point of view of political experience as from ideological positioning or demands of the movement. Bipolarization of the mobilization space led to the existence of two lists in Bordeaux, both supporting different issues and revealing different splits but also adopting different strategic postures, with isolation on one side and partisan support and a greater capacity to seize the political opportunity on the other.



## Failure and success: resources, networks and leadership

### Building networks in demonstrations and local assemblies

Both BeL and DB started in YV demonstrations in Bordeaux. The YV ‘Acts’ were a rallying point for former networks of activists. For instance, radical left activists organized themselves during the demonstrations. As stated by trade-unionist YV and BeL candidate, Evelyne Cervantès, “*we started out precisely from the people who crossed paths in the protests, who were always on the streets and it was our municipal council*”.<sup>3</sup> “*In fact, we had lots of opportunities to meet in the street. The discussions about the list took place in the street and in the demonstrations*” also stated the head of the BeL list.<sup>4</sup> That is where YV Antoine Boudinet was approached by Philippe Poutou. That is where he also met Myriam Eckert, YV and founder of the Collective against Police violence,<sup>5</sup> and most of the candidates on the list. Pascal Chauvet, leader of *Démocratie Bordelaise*, also gathered support from people at the Saturday demonstrations and relied on his teammates to seek out potential candidates.<sup>6</sup> The Facebook group and the website were the virtual meeting points of the candidates whereas demonstrations were an opportunity to publicize the list and recruit candidates on the spot. As for example on Saturday 28 January 2020, when a very involved Yellow Vest “Street Crier” observed the preparation of the municipal elections during a demonstration: “*As has been the case for the past few Yellow Vests demonstrations, a sound system is installed on the fountain and an organizer, while waiting for the procession to set off, delivers his speeches and brings in other Yellow Vests. One of them comes to present us the DB list for the municipal elections*”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, many of the local organizers of the YV protests were involved in the DB list, revealing a strong connection between online and on-site activism. “*We had to keep a link with the movement at all costs*”, confirmed the founder of the list, a former local personality.<sup>8</sup>

### DB, Yellow Vests and anti-EU party-movements

The head of the DB list was 60 years old when the Yellow Vests were founded. As a sales representative, he travelled throughout the southwest of France for a wine merchant. He stopped at every traffic roundabout and met the Yellow Vests, playing the role of broker in the mobilization (Diani 2003). His personality and his know-how, acquired in his youth in the Communist Party, where he became an activist at the age of 14, established his leadership in the group he founded around the

<sup>3</sup> Interview of 10 September 2020, 57-year-old woman, agent of a public transport company.

<sup>4</sup> Interview of 12 September 2020, 53-year-old man, unemployed factory worker.

<sup>5</sup> Interview of 9 September 2021, 49-year-old woman, artist and assistant of BeL municipal councillors.

<sup>6</sup> Interview of 23 September 2021, 56-year-old man, civil servant on leave, DB campaign director.

<sup>7</sup> Original manuscript, p.140.

<sup>8</sup> Interview of 13 November 2021, 74-year old man, retired.



Démocratie Bordelaise Facebook page. He does not hide the fact that he is also the president of RPS-FIER. This sovereignist association founded in 2015 is closely linked to the Popular Education Movement (Mouvement Politique d'éducation populaire–M'PEP), which embodies a “sovereignist” – i.e. nationalist – left attached to the nation, to social justice, to public services and firmly opposed to the European Union. In addition to the RPS-FIER and MPEP activists, a former Independent Workers' Party (Parti Ouvrier Indépendant) activist participated in drawing up the list and directed the campaign. A member of “Solidarité et Progrès”, the French section of Lyndon Hermyle LaRouche's political action committee, was the campaign treasurer. The Pole of Communist Revival in France (Pole de Renaissance Communiste en France) with whom he had once made common cause, and the national founders of RPS-FIER, were also approached. After two meetings, however, the militants of the Pole decided not to join the list but, instead, to concentrate on other issues: social struggles.<sup>9</sup> None of these small political groups were known to the general public and the common denominator of their activists was that they wore Yellow Vests and had cast off their political banner, thereby making their allegiances less visible than that of other groups with a much more recognizable style. Party activists were welcome on the list, provided that they showed “discretion” (Godefroy 2021). As observed by Theiss-Morse and Hibbing in the US context (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2007), parties are viewed as divisive. As the DB leader stated during an interview: *“In the Yellow Vests you find all sorts! They range from the extreme right to the extreme left in the Yellow vests. [...] The Yellow Vests stand for all the people. But we don't want to be taken over by anyone”*. However, the weakness of the organization was criticized for its inefficiency, and the refusal to join the BeL coalition combined with the presence of strong personalities led first-timer Yellow Vests to drop out. The difficulty in gathering sixty-five names on a list can be explained by the attractiveness of the other two lists which – admittedly—gained more local media attention: the citizen and Yellow Vests list “BeL”, and the Green-Left coalition list “Bordeaux Respire”. In February, the filing deadline was approaching. *“Seven candidates are needed to complete the list and allow a plurality of opinions to be expressed”* (DB website, February 2020). In addition, the tightening of the parity rule did not facilitate the constitution of a list, because of the lack of women candidates. On 5 February 2019, the Facebook pages relayed this call to women: *“To contribute to raising the awareness of Bordeaux residents to the need for more justice – social, fiscal, environmental and democratic – a list has been created for the next municipal election in Bordeaux. It is a citizen list, totally non-partisan. Women living in Bordeaux are needed to complete the list.”* Some Yellow Vests men tried to persuade women onto the list but most women newcomers refused to sign up.

The DB post was followed by a brief exchange between a member of BeL, calling to join its leader, and a DB activist whose leadership was unanimously recognized by the regional groups—inviting BeL to merge with the DB list to represent all of the movement. This call for unity around the DB list was not followed up, primarily

<sup>9</sup> Informal interview, Anti-Pass Demonstration, Saturday 4 September 2021.



because the DB conception of citizen politics was incompatible with the politics of dissent claimed by BeL. But DB continued its activity beyond the municipal campaign, refocusing on participation in demonstrations that resumed in the spring of 2020, and in social mobilizations. The list was only one step in a context marked by the health crisis, lockdown and the suspension of certain fundamental freedoms. In the summer of 2021, the demonstrations were followed by new, one-off, occupations of traffic roundabouts, while the partisan coupling of BeL was put to the test in the elections.

### How a political party harnessed the BeL social movement

The BeL list was led by Philippe Poutou, a former candidate of NPA (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste—New Anti-Capitalist Party) in the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections. Aged 55, this worker is also a figure of social movements. The local dynamic of coalition between different left-wing organizations—including LFI, Ensemble! and le Parti de Gauche—encouraged him to stand: “*we were approached by LFI comrades who said ‘why don’t we do something together with you as head of the list?’*”<sup>10</sup>

The core of the list announced its candidacy at the end of October as a citizen list, the composition of which had yet to be defined.<sup>11</sup> On 15 November, a programmatic general assembly (GA) defined the major themes to be put on the agenda: housing, transportation and education. The GAs were convened by political activists, unconnected with the Yellow Vests’ actions, and took place according to the usual practices of radical left organizations. They were thus distinct from the grass-root assemblies of the left-wing “Yellow Etc.” Facebook group that joined the BeL list. As stated by a Yellow Vest activist who joined the list: “*We used to have general assemblies after each demonstration so that people could talk and share ideas for action, etc. So the assemblies turned into regular GAs once a week at the [self-run bar close to the NPA headquarters]*”.<sup>12</sup>

BeL, which also claims the “citizen” label, is a coalition that includes political parties, LFI and NPA, two groups of Yellow Vests, Jaunes Etc. and “YV Citizen’s group”, the “Mutilated for the Example”, an association founded by Yellow Vest victims of police violence, a local association fighting police violence and other activists. It presents itself as a sounding board for social movements that have been active in the country for several years, with a marked intensity in the city during the Yellow Vest movement, as stated during our interview: “*We were still in the period of the Yellow Vests period, even if it was less strong, obviously. And then we were*

<sup>10</sup> Interview of 12 September 2020, 53-year-old man, unemployed factory worker.

<sup>11</sup> The narrative diverges on the way in which the leader is associated with it: a LFI member is said to have played the role of broker with a NPA member, based on a shared affinity and non-institutional logics, but another explanation is evoked: that of a joke which turned into a concrete proposal to associate NPA with the list.

<sup>12</sup> Interview of September 2021, 49-year-old woman, artist and assistant to the Municipal councillors.



*starting a battle against the pension reform*". It is also a way to address the issue of representation during a local election (Sauger 2016).

They campaigned in an agonistic style, relying on a team of skilled young LFI and NPA activists. They put the Yellow Vests to the forefront. Despite proclaimed horizontality, the leadership was rooted in established political resources, a political background and union activism. Taking the leadership of the list seemed obvious for Philippe Poutou – *"Without my name, without me it seemed almost... It was not possible"* –, and for his running mates: *"It was really obvious. Because I mean, we needed someone who really represents our struggles [...] In addition, he had run for office in presidential campaigns. It gave him a political background and political experience that could be very useful"*. Since he had become well-known for his engagements in a car factory strike and a local social movement, the leader also played a determining role in the solicitation of candidates. He acted as a "broker" between political organizations and activists. The political parties negotiated the positions on the list which only included one eligible position for a Yellow Vest.

Party networks were fundamental in the development of the BeL platform. The programme was formed in these local general assemblies and presented at public meetings with importance given to issues unevenly.<sup>13</sup> Commissions worked on formulating concrete proposals, in which striking a balance between the political apparatus and the "unaffiliated" was the object of a specific task. Some of the demands were identical to those of the DB list, reflecting, on the one hand, the demand for social justice called for by the Yellow Vests and by the radical left, and on the other hand an appropriation of the causes supported by the social movement, like police repression and violence, although they do not fall directly within municipal competence.

## Conclusion

At the end of an intense campaign carried out in the street and on social networks, the first round of the municipal elections of 2020 caused a sensation with the BeL list qualifying for the second round with 11.77% of the votes. The Covid crisis and the lockdown then moved the campaign online where the activist skills acquired during the Yellow Vests movement were put to good use. The very high abstention rate in the poll made the election unpredictable and the sitting candidate, allied to the presidential majority, was defeated. The victory of the environmentalist candidate was accompanied by the election of three people

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<sup>13</sup> Observation of BeL campaign meeting, 3 March 2020, "Housing and Education", Municipal Athenaeum.

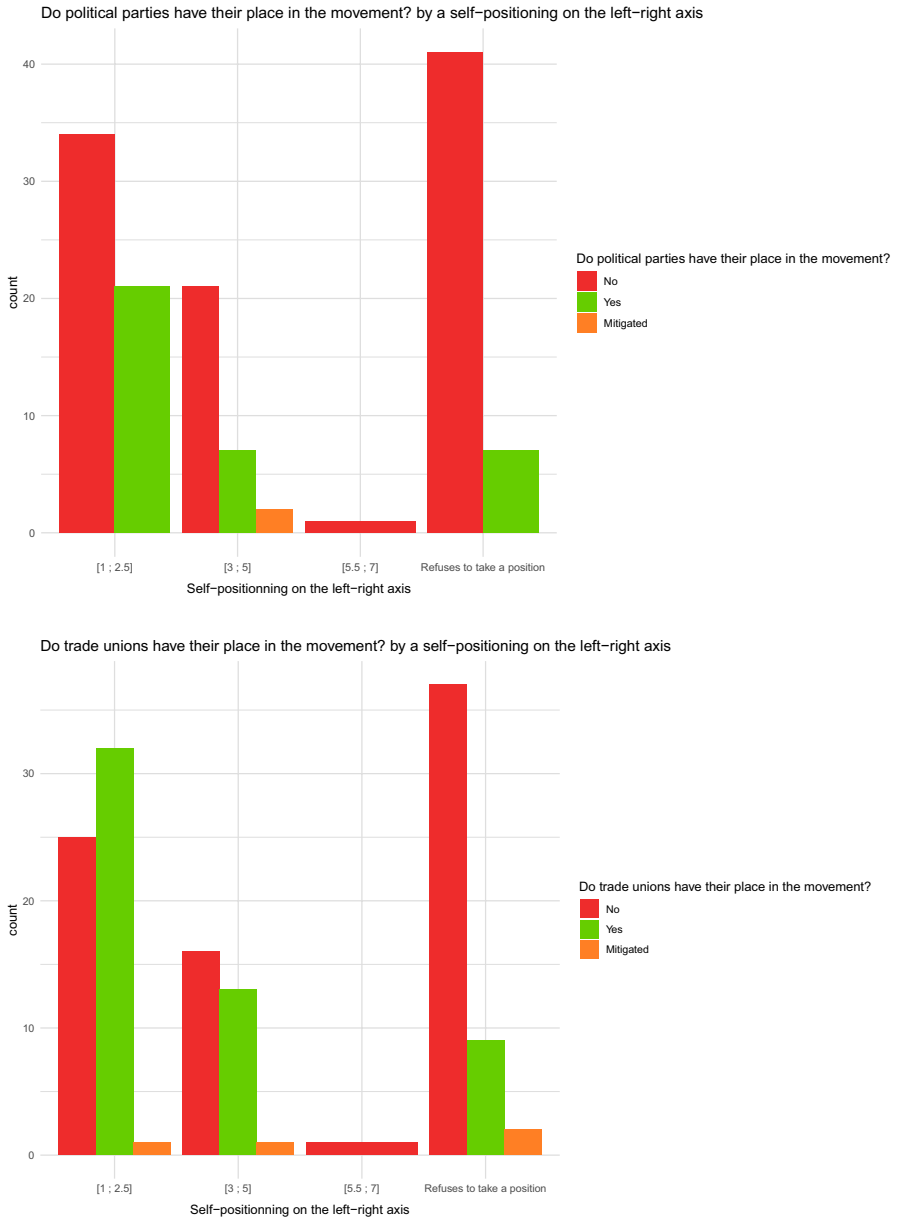


from the BeL list: a manual worker, an office worker and a Yellow Vest were admitted to the City Hall. For the latter, who was not an activist before the Yellow Vests movement, the exercise of a municipal mandate is an intense politicization process in which the activist network played an important role until he resigned due to internal divisions.

The social movement of the Yellow Vests, strongly rooted in the working classes, is characterized by the wide political heterogeneity of its participants. In Bordeaux, YV participants tended to be more inclined to electoral participation, despite a general distrust in institutions. In the run-up to the European elections, and then during the municipal elections, different “group cultures” and conceptions of democracy emerged, especially in Bordeaux where two lists claiming to be part of the Yellow Vests competed with each other. While the first, composed of small organization political activists and committed first-timers failed to stand, the second, boosted by the social capital and resources of its members, was able to maintain itself and achieve unexpected electoral success. This re-politicization of the local vote, combined with the presence of local personalities in social and environmental struggles, as well as the strong reputation of the head of the list, contributed to the success of the BeL list. In contrast, DB emphasized the “Yellow Vests people”, excluding partisan divisions and support. The group shared a strong suspicion towards those institutions that endanger national sovereignty and viewed non-partisan leaders as a necessity. Not having access to local media, it essentially addressed the Yellow Vests through social networks or in weekly demonstrations (Baisnee et al. in this volume). But it is precisely the partisan marginality and the absence of an organizational dynamic beyond the Yellow Vest movement that hampered the DB list’s ability to stand for the election. This dilemma between the desire to maintain horizontality and the need to rely on the resources of organizations to perform in the electoral arena tends to confirm the inescapable nature of Michel’s “Iron law of oligarchy” to move from the street protest to the elections.

To further this discussion, it appears necessary to consider the long-term dynamics of interactions between social movements, political parties and the political system. In the case of Bordeaux, the opposition in the city council put the movement’s demands on the agenda, in particular the RIC, which was taken up by the parties of the governing coalition in their programme. But it should be noted that two years after this election, BeL became fragmented with a clear separation between the militant fringe and the YVs Table 1. Thus, although the resources of political organizations were needed to secure victory in the election, the local electoral agreement between left-wing YVs and radical-left parties did not stand the test of time and did not prove sufficient to maintain the political line Fig. 1.





**Fig. 1** Do trade unions and political parties have their place in the movement? by a self-positioning on the left-right axis, Data: YVs in Bordeaux (N= 149)



**Table 1** Here are some ways that people sometimes use to express their opinions or demands. Can you tell me if you have or would be willing to... comparing YVs in Bordeaux and in the whole sample, Data: Jaune Vif survey (N= 1477 for the whole sample and N= 149 for the YVs in Bordeaux)

	Demonstrate		Sign a petition		Vote		Boycott super-markets		Consume differently		Go on strike		Occupy an administrative building		Paint slogans on the wall		Not to pay taxes		Cause material damage	
	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)	Will-ing to (%)	Al-ready done (%)
Whole sam-ple	9	89	15	74	9	77	32	47	21	61	27	47	50	22	18	12	32	8	13	5
Bor-deaux	2	<b>97</b>	15	<b>79</b>	4	<b>78</b>	26	<b>57</b>	19	<b>69</b>	27	<b>58</b>	52	17	17	10	32	6	10	2

**Bold in the table refers to the population with the highest practice rate**



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