



United in diversity: understanding what unites and what divides the Yellow Vests

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Abstract

This paper stems from the first sampled and representative survey carried out on the Yellow Vests movement in the French region of Occitania. While scientific literature mainly explores the drivers of internal—social and ideological—cohesion in social movements, our study sheds light on the internal diversity of the Yellow Vests' mobilisation. Our findings reveal the unprecedented scale of the movement in relation to the French population. They confirm and document its social and political heterogeneity. We confirm that the working and lower middle classes are over-represented in the movement. But our study also highlights the diversity of the coalition formed by the Yellow Vests who are, in fact, fairly representative of the French working and middle classes in all their diversity, including the upper-middle class. Only the upper classes are not part of the movement. In part two, we explore the cleavages that unite the Yellow Vests as well as those that divide them. While they are cohesive on economic issues and their strong rejection of political elites, the Yellow Vests are highly divided on identity and cultural issues. The results allow us to shed light on the forms and dynamics of the movement. Indeed, the variety of ideological and social profiles, as well as grievances, is reflected in the partially differentiated spatial distribution of the participants across the various protest sites. Our analysis also offers keys to understanding the process by which demands were generated and framed, the reasons for the mistrust shown towards would-be spokespeople and the difficulty in translating the movement into the political and electoral arena. Our study underlines the processual nature of any social movement and prompts us not to overestimate the unity, uniformity, and similarity of its participants, since many Yellow Vests probably rallied not so much together as alongside each other.

Keywords Social movement · Yellow Vest · Value survey · Internal cleavages · Diversity

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Introduction

Very little has been written about internal diversity and internal cleavages within collective movements. Social science literature has largely focused on why and how individuals become involved or not by exploring individual or structural drivers of engagement. As such, many studies assume that individuals engaged in collective action are united by a common goal and driven by shared grievances. As a result, collective movements are perceived through the lens of what draws people together into groups that supposedly share common interests and motivations, and therefore exhibit a degree of uniformity: 'workers', 'nurses', 'farmers', 'the working class', 'pensioners', 'homosexuals', etc. Researchers' attention is thus focused primarily on external cleavages between groups or movements. The way in which the opposition between 'New Social Movements' (NSM) and 'traditional movements' has been expressed is typical of this approach to conceptualising collective movements. It confronts movements marked by a high degree of social and cultural homogeneity which is supposedly reflected in the values and demands that lie at the heart of collective action. Accordingly, movements involving members of the educated middle classes are said to pursue post-materialist demands, whereas those involving the working class are seen as perpetuating materialist demands (Cotgrove and Duff 1980; Kriesi 1989; Melucci 1989).

Yet such homogeneity is by no means obvious. Studies carried out on trade unions, partisan organisations and interest groups have shown that, behind the efforts of spokespersons to ensure representation and homogenisation, collectives are actually diverse in their makeup and marked by major internal cleavages. Beginning in the 1980s and following on from Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu 1981), a series of studies focused, for example, on the issue of internal heterogeneity in farming (Maresca 1981; Muller 1984; Suaud 1984), showing that behind the apparent unity of the farming community developed through agricultural representation, 'there is probably no social group today that is as fragmented as farmers are' (Champagne 1984, p. 21). So far, this kind of issue seems to have been relatively unexplored in relation to protest movements. In this respect, it is rather telling that neither the *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux* (Mathieu et al. 2020) nor *The Oxford Handbook of Social movements* (Della Porta and Diani 2015) features any entries that directly address the issue of diversity and internal cleavages.

It seems to us that this conceptual framing has been aided by a 'strange lacuna' in research on social movements (Andretta and Della Porta 2014; Favre et al. 1997). Curiously, up until the end of the 1990s, there was a distinct lack of quantitative studies carried out during social movements on protest groups in situ and in context, thereby preventing any objectivation of the sociology of collective action at a 'micro' level. Until then, quantitative data produced on collective action was generally highly decontextualised, stemming from wider surveys asking people, amongst other things, about their views on collective action in general, and possibly about whether they had themselves been involved in such action. Based on samples of the population as a whole, such data helped to highlight the social determinants of involvement in collective action (e.g. Verba and Nie 1987) and



the social propensities to take part in a particular type of movement. However, it could not provide researchers with information on the movements' diversity and internal cleavages. It is therefore revealing that POS (Political Opportunity Structure) approaches have focused primarily on cleavages within the elites as explanatory factors for mobilisation without either examining possible internal cleavages within protest groups or looking at their consequences on the dynamics of collective action (Eisinger 1973; McAdam et al. 1998).

The start of the 2000s saw the emergence of qualitative studies based largely on direct observation of protest movements, which highlighted these issues of internal diversity and challenged the alleged uniformity of such collectives. Some essays on specific social movements have stressed, with varying degrees of emphasis, their internal heterogeneity, and the effect this has on the dynamics of protest. Examples include L. Mathieu's work on prostitutes in France (Mathieu 2001) or, more recently, M. Avanza's research on pro-life movements in Italy (Avanza 2018). These issues also began to be addressed with the first contextual surveys carried out in the 2000s (Fischer et al. 2019). For example, using quantitative surveys of demonstration participants, some studies investigated the effects of the political environment on the internal diversity of mobilisations against the second Gulf War in eight different countries (Walgrave and Verhulst 2009), while others challenged the relevance of the opposition between NSM and 'traditional movements' (Eggert and Giugni 2012, 2015) by comparing climate demonstrations with May Day marches.

With the normalisation of protest action, such approaches have become particularly relevant. Two different assumptions can indeed be made about the impact of this normalisation process. It is likely to result in the development of multiple movements embracing increasingly diverse and specific causes, thus increasing the external diversity of collective action. But it is also possible that normalisation will result in the emergence of broad social movements pursuing very general (or even unclear) goals that could bring together a wide range of people who are likely to be divided, or at least at odds, on many issues. This is shown, for example, by T. Likki in her quantitative survey of the Spanish 'Indignados' movement, which reveals the coexistence of different profiles among participants with different value systems (Likki 2014).

Being wary of homogenising tendencies seems particularly relevant when tackling a movement such as the French 'Yellow Vests'. This mobilisation is indeed very different from traditional and largely standardised collective actions such as 'May Day' or demonstrations with clearly established themes such as 'climate marches' or 'Gay Pride' events. The Yellow Vests movement was the expression of a largely unforeseen social upheaval, with no recognised leader or spokesperson, and with demands and values that were difficult to identify. The uniqueness of its form of action—roundabout occupation in particular—may have further complicated the process of framing the movement within well-established boundaries. The duration of the movement, which lasted several months, might also have spurred a wide range of involvements. Finally, its scale must also be factored in: initially, the Yellow Vests were supported by nearly three quarters of the population and, according to our estimates, nearly three million people (see below) took part in roundabout rallies



or demonstrations. Given the magnitude and nature of the movement, the issue of diversity and internal cleavages simply cannot be ignored.

Early studies suggest that this is the path to follow. For example, initial qualitative findings reveal the tensions that may have shaped relationships between roundabouts with very different social and political profiles within the same town (Bonin and Liochon 2020; Devaux et al. 2019). Others show the extent to which the Yellow Vests were aware of the cleavages that were likely to divide them and how they resorted to strategies aimed at avoiding divisive political issues in order to maintain the movement's unity (Reungoat et al. 2020 and in this special issue). Early quantitative surveys also confirm the relevance of this issue. While emphasising what distinguishes and unifies them—being wage earners marred by insecurity and displaying populist views—a Facebook survey of 5,000 Yellow Vests also shows a great diversity of profiles, particularly in terms of electoral leanings. Though not related to this issue, the other large quantitative survey available, conducted in situ at roundabouts and in demonstrations, also confirms the variety of the profiles identified within the movement (Collectif d'enquête sur les gilets jaunes 2019). Finally, a study on the relationship between the Yellow Vests and the environment reveals the extent to which they are divided on green issues, showing that the movement includes both the most environmentally minded and the most global-warming sceptics segments of the population (Dormagen et al. 2021).

Our article offers an in-depth exploration of the strong internal social and political diversity of the movement. Does diversity outweigh homogeneity in terms of social and political profiles? If so, how did the movement manage to last for several months? To further explore this diversity issue, we used the first—to our knowledge—sampled and representative survey conducted in France on a regional scale (Occitania, population 5.924 million) on the Yellow Vests movement (see below).¹

Based on the data from this study, this paper aims to explore two broad sets of issues. The first one looks at the social dimensions of involvement, seeking to establish the extent to which the movement is socially homogenous or whether a diversity of profiles prevails. From this observation, we try to determine whether the movement can be construed as operating according to a class logic. Political orientations are also analysed from the same angle, i.e. with a view to establishing the greater or lesser degree of heterogeneity among the protestors. We show that the diversity of the Yellow Vests' social and political profiles does not reveal any class logic. We then bring in a second set of issues dealing with the Yellow Vests' ideological views. The aim here is to identify which cleavages are likely to unite the Yellow Vests by pitting them against other social circles or groups (external cleavages), but also which ones are likely to divide them or prevent their mutation into a sustainable political offer (internal cleavages).

The results allow us to shed light on the forms and dynamics of the movement. Indeed, the variety of ideological and social profiles, as well as grievances, is reflected in the partially differentiated spatial distribution of the participants across

¹ This survey stems from the BAROC (Baromètre opinion Occitanie) research programme funded by the Occitania region between 2018 and 2021 and led by Jean-Yves Dormagen.



the various protest sites. Our analysis also offers keys to understanding the process by which demands were generated and framed, the reasons for the mistrust shown towards would-be spokespeople and the difficulty in translating the movement into the political and electoral arena. Finally, by focusing on heterogeneity and questioning the cohesion of those mobilised, our study underlines the processual nature of any social movement and prompts us not to overestimate the unity, uniformity, and similarity of its participants, since many Yellow Vests probably rallied not so much together as alongside each other.

This quantitative survey was carried out in two successive waves. It was based on a sample of 2,000 representative individuals selected at random from the electoral rolls of the Occitania region. Testing this sampling process using demographic, territorial and voting variables confirms that the random method achieved a satisfactory level of representativity, despite the inherent sampling biases in any survey of this type (see 'sample representativeness' in the Appendix). All 2,000 interviews were performed face-to-face at home between 27 May and 10 July 2019. As a result of the unexpectedly high proportion of people who actively took part in the movement, a significant sub-sample of Yellow Vests can be compiled: 243 respondents (i.e. around 12%) stated that they had attended a roundabout rally and/or taken part in a 'free toll operation', a blockade or a demonstration. This sub-sample is large enough to produce results that meet the requirements of statistical significance. Given the extreme fragmentation of a movement that played out on thousands of roundabouts and through thousands of demonstrations, over several months and often in rural and peri-urban areas, we believe that this random sampling approach is the best way to produce data allowing for an objectivation of the Yellow Vests movement that meets the requirements of statistical representativeness. It must also be emphasised that the chosen sampling method and the fact that questionnaires were administered face-to-face and at the respondent's home helped to avoid a number of biases usually associated with telephone or online surveys: in particular, a better representation of senior citizens and the more 'working-class' categories, which are important when studying this kind of mobilisation.² The fact that the active Yellow Vests sub-sample is drawn from a larger sample of all registered voters offers another important methodological advantage: it allows comparisons between participants and the rest of the population, and therefore helps to identify any social and ideological drivers that might account for this unprecedented social movement.³ Ultimately, the studied sample has two main limitations. It only includes French citizens registered on the electoral roll and therefore ignores those not registered (6% of the population) and foreigners. It is compiled on a regional basis and can therefore be affected by contextual issues. Given the studied population, the patterns we are about to describe

² Executives tend to be over-represented in online surveys, while senior citizens, particularly the oldest among them, are strongly under-represented (Dormagen and Michel 2018).

³ A second wave of surveys was carried out during the first lockdown, between the 28th of April and the 2nd of June 2020. The protocol involved, as part of a *panel* approach, reinterviewing—this time by telephone—those individuals who had agreed during the first wave to be called back (974 out of 1998). As a result, 528 people were reinterviewed. In this second questionnaire, new questions were asked about the Yellow Vests movement and some of the data collected in the first wave was checked.



apply to the electorate of a large French region, but would obviously need to be confirmed on a nationally representative basis that includes foreigners in order to be applicable to all individuals living in France.

Part I: A broad social and political coalition

An exceptionally large movement, driven by many first-time protesters

The first major finding of our study is the extent of the movement, which confirms the exceptional nature of this 'Yellow' mobilisation. In our sample population from the southern French region of Occitania, around 12% of those registered on the electoral roll said that they had 'taken part in Yellow Vests initiatives' at least once, whether on a roundabout, during a blockade or in a demonstration. This empirical result underlines the extent to which the scale of the movement may have been underestimated by both media and government assessments.⁴ This figure challenges the sometimes-prevailing image of a rather small, radical and minority mobilisation. After extrapolating this result to the entire French population, the number of people who took part in the movement by attending a Yellow Vests event at least once between November 2018 and July 2019 can be estimated at 3 million, i.e. around 7% of the population on the electoral roll (this estimate accounts for variations in mobilisation between regions).⁵

On a similar scale, our study also enables us to assess the extent to which individuals actively supported the movement by placing a yellow vest on the dashboard of their vehicle.⁶ Again, after extrapolating to the whole of France's population, we estimate that around 13 million people did, at one point or another, show support for the movement in this way. Active involvement and support are not stable practices that are established once and for all. On a personal level, they changed as the movement progressed and evolved.

Our study also highlights the changing makeup of the movement over time as well as its initial diversity. Some individuals who originally supported the movement subsequently distanced themselves from it, while others, far fewer in number, who were initially indifferent or defiant, joined it (Table 1). Almost a third (32%) of active participants were no longer supporting the Yellow Vests campaign when we interviewed them between late May and July 2019. Such loss of support was much

⁴ Public authorities often focus solely on demonstrations. According to the French Ministry of the Interior, 282,000 demonstrators attended the first day of the protest on 17 November 2018, which marked the height of the mobilisation. Based on the map produced by Hervé Le Bras and published in the media, involvement in the movement is estimated at between 1.8% and 6.8% of the population in the most active regions.

⁵ J-Y, Dormagen and G. Pion, "Gilets jaunes, combien de divisions ?", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2021. This estimate was produced by developing regional mobilisation metrics based on the ratio between the number of Yellow Vests registered on Facebook groups or the number of participants in demonstrations by region and the number of people on the electoral register.

⁶ This practice is described as active support by the respondents themselves.



Table 1 Supporting or having supported the Yellow Vests movement based on active involvement

	You've never supported it (%)	You supported it at first, but not anymore (%)	You support it now, but you didn't initially (%)	You've always supported it (%)	No answer (%)	Total (%)
Active Yellow Vests	0	32	2	66	0	100
Rest of the population	19	46	1	30	4	100
	16	44	1	35	4	100



lower among Yellow Vests who voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the 2017 presidential election than among those who voted for Benoit Hamon or Marine Le Pen, which could suggest that those Yellow Vests who identify with the radical left felt more in tune with the way the campaign was developing, having in some cases probably joined it after an initial period of suspicion.

To begin with, we feel it is also important to mention another significant feature that undoubtedly sets this movement apart, namely the high percentage of first-time protestors. In our survey, 45% of respondents said it was their first involvement in collective action.⁷ Those first-timers also rubbed shoulders with seasoned activists previously involved in partisan, trade union or community action and who, although not prevalent in numbers, were allegedly over-represented in the campaign according to some surveys.⁸ This first sign of internal diversity raises questions as to why these profiles, whose attitudes towards the specialist field of politics and activism are often disparate or even conflicting, were able to stand shoulder to shoulder.

This large proportion of 'uninitiated' protesters sheds some light on the movement's innovations in terms of places and forms of action. By occupying roundabouts, introducing weekly 'acts' (protest marches), and avoiding any kind of centralisation, the Yellow Vests broke away from the standardised and institutionalised practices (in terms of forms of action) typical of late twentieth century social movements in Western Europe, whether they were 'new social movements' (Touraine 1978; Ollitrault 2008) or movements focused on issues of wealth redistribution. To what extent do they also stand out from the sociology of early twenty-first century social movements marked by an over-representation of the upper-middle classes? (Eggert and Giugni 2015).

A movement built on a class cleavage?

A number of studies carried out in the 1990s and 2000s have shown that demonstrations on cultural issues—so-called new movements—tend to mobilise middle-class activists while the demonstrations on redistributive issues—"old" movements—tend to attract the working class (Kitschelt 1988; Kriesi 1989; Norris et al. 2005). However, more recent research based on field surveys shows that 'old' and 'new' movements—May Day and Climate Change Demonstrations—now present a similar class structure, in which the educated middle classes are over-represented, which casts some doubts on the traditional distinction (Eggert and Giugni 2012, 2015).

In order to better understand the Yellow Vests movement, shed light on its makeup and understand what kept it going, we sought to identify the main drivers of involvement and to establish an overall picture of the participants' profiles. To

⁷ This figure is close to that measured by the field survey carried out among early protestors (those who were involved before 8 December 2018), after which the campaign was largely dominated by activists who were more familiar with the practice of collective action, in Collectif, "Enquêteur insitu par questionnaire sur une mobilisation. Une étude sur les gilets jaunes", *op. cit.*, p. 883.

⁸ Among the Yellow Vests interviewed in the early months of the movement, 17% belonged or allegedly belonged to a political party, 32% to a trade union and 38% to an association. Collectif 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



this end, we followed a two-pronged strategy. Using statistical regressions, we first looked at the factors that contributed to people's involvement in the movement. We then drew up a descriptive picture of the overall makeup of the movement. The issue here was to test the premise that 'yellow' mobilisation had operated on the basis of a class cleavage, whether that cleavage was viewed through objective social status—based on job status, socioprofessional category, assets, income and academic qualifications (see Table 2)—or subjective identifications.

As far as objective social variables are concerned, our study confirms that the Yellow Vests are a movement in which working-class profiles are slightly over-represented: those individuals most deprived of economic capital, but also most vulnerable in terms of professional status and most devoid of academic qualifications, are the most likely to have been involved in the movement. The regression analysis identifies the factors that increased this likelihood versus those that reduced it (controlling for demographic, socioeconomic and political variables (see Table 2 'model 1' & 'model 2')).

According to the regression analysis, the most predictive factors for active involvement are job insecurity, low net worth⁹ and living outside large cities (especially in suburban parts of large and medium-sized cities as well as in small towns) (see Table 2). Being young is another factor in this involvement. By contrast, having a high level of education (4 to 5 years of higher education) reduces the chances of 'wearing the Vest'. But it is important to stress that by far the most significant factor stems not so much from what the individual 'objectively' is, but from their subjective social class, the one to which they feel they belong. Identifying with the lower strata of social space significantly increases the chances of having taken part in the campaign (see Table 2).

For illustration purposes, we have drawn up two opposite profiles: on the one hand, that of an individual with the highest chances of having taken part in the Yellow Vests movement and, on the other, that of an individual who, on the contrary, combines all the factors working against such an involvement. These are not real case studies, but they represent two 'ideal archetypes' whose attitudes towards the Yellow Vests movement are diametrically opposed (Table 3).

It is also important to mention the complete absence of individuals identifying with the 'upper class' from roundabouts or demonstrations (see Table 4). But this is not enough to define the Yellow Vests as a movement whose main rationale would have been to operate on the basis of a 'class cleavage'.¹⁰ There are two main reasons for this. First, this 'sociological model' is relatively poor at predicting involvement in the Yellow Vests movement, as shown by the relative weakness of the pseudo-R2s related to model 1 (cf. Table 2). The second reason, which is closely linked to

⁹ Net worth is calculated on the basis of the combined total (or absence) of the following three assets: life insurance, shares, and second home in addition to main home.

¹⁰ Although some of these factors meet the conditions for statistical significance, they remain ultimately insufficiently predictive. The 'sociological model' (model 1) only explains a relatively small part of the variance, as shown by the pseudo R2s: the Cox & Snell R2 is only 0.09 and the Nagelkerke R2 is 0.169, which means that the variables included in the 'sociological model' only explain a fraction of the variance (Table 2).



Table 2 Logistic regression models 1 and 2 about involvement in the Yellow Vests movement

Equation variables	Sociological' model 1				Sociological and political' model 2'			
	B	E.S	Sig	Exp(B)	B	E.S	Sig	Exp(B)
Male	0.592	0.092	0	1.807	0.57	0.095	0	1.767
Female benchmark			0				0	
Under 30 years	2.045	0.36	0	7.733	2.029	0.372	0	7.604
30-39	1.841	0.348	0	6.301	1.788	0.36	0	5.976
40-49	1.707	0.344	0	5.51	1.527	0.355	0	4.604
50-59	1.702	0.334	0	5.484	1.531	0.345	0	4.624
60-69	1.576	0.277	0	4.837	1.465	0.283	0	4.328
70-79	1.429	0.28	0	4.175	1.27	0.287	0	3.562
Over 80 years old-benchmark			0				0	
Without qualifications	0.478	0.26	0.066	1.612	0.454	0.272	0.094	1.575
Below Bacalaureate level	0.801	0.189	0	2.228	0.811	0.198	0	2.251
Vocational Bacalaureate	0.452	0.229	0.048	1.571	0.351	0.237	0.139	1.42
General Bacalaureate	-0.114	0.231	0.622	0.892	-0.178	0.239	0.456	0.837
2 to 3 years higher education	0.456	0.192	0.018	1.578	0.433	0.2	0.031	1.542
4 to 5 years higher education/PhD benchmark			0				0	
Sole trader	-2.295	0.928	0.013	0.101	-2.118	0.933	0.023	0.12
Fixed term contract	0.542	0.279	0.052	1.719	0.655	0.291	0.024	1.926
Permanent contract	0.255	0.221	0.249	1.29	0.312	0.232	0.179	1.366
Business owner	-1.012	0.477	0.034	0.363	-0.831	0.487	0.088	0.436
Unemployed	0.776	0.248	0.002	2.174	0.746	0.26	0.004	2.109
Student	-0.49	0.313	0.117	0.612	-0.511	0.323	0.113	0.6
Civil servant	0.162	0.236	0.492	1.176	0.094	0.247	0.705	1.098
In Training	-0.136	0.644	0.833	0.873	-0.235	0.65	0.718	0.791
Housewife/husband	0.88	0.339	0.009	2.412	0.88	0.351	0.012	2.411
Temporary workers	0.148	0.364	0.685	1.159	0.03	0.377	0.936	1.031
Disabled	0.731	0.275	0.008	2.077	0.754	0.286	0.008	2.125



Table 2 (continued)

Equation variables	Sociological ¹ model 1				Sociological and political ¹ model 2 ^a			
	B	E.S	Sig	Exp(B)	B	E.S	Sig	Exp(B)
Freelance professionnal	-1.392	0.707	0.049	0.248	-1.317	0.716	0.066	0.268
Self-employed	-0.866	0.369	0.019	0.421	-0.694	0.382	0.069	0.5
Retired benchmark			0.159				0.14	
did not answer income tax	-0.28	0.286	0.328	0.756	-0.286	0.288	0.321	0.751
does not pay income tax	-0.189	0.103	0.066	0.828	-0.202	0.106	0.056	0.817
pay income tax benchmark			0.007				0.003	
0 asset	0.347	0.182	0.056	1.415	0.378	0.188	0.045	1.459
1 asset	0.528	0.181	0.004	1.695	0.591	0.188	0.002	1.806
2 assets or more (excluding main house) - benchmark)			0				0	
2. Medium size city	1.451	0.269	0	4.268	1.31	0.275	0	3.707
3. Medium size suburbs and large city	1.926	0.245	0	6.864	1.749	0.252	0	5.749
4. Small town	1.885	0.242	0	6.588	1.766	0.248	0	5.849
5. Small town outskirts	1.127	0.29	0	3.085	0.799	0.299	0.008	2.224
6. Rural area	1.523	0.243	0	4.586	1.404	0.249	0	4.073
1. large city-benchmark			0				0	
1. Underprivileged working class	3.255	0.811	0	25.931	2.821	0.815	0.001	16.789
2. Working class	2.867	0.798	0	17.578	2.496	0.801	0.002	12.134
3. Lower middle class	2.553	0.793	0.001	12.841	2.26	0.797	0.005	9.58
4. Upper middle class	2.353	0.792	0.003	10.522	2.125	0.796	0.008	8.376
Upper class benchmark					0			
1. Abstention					1.982	0.407	0	7.258
2. Blank vote					2.566	0.466	0	13.016
3. Communist Party with Ian Brossat					3.582	0.446	0	35.933
4. La France Insoumise with Manon Aubry					3.247	0	0	25.705

Table 2 (continued)

Equation variables	Sociological' model 1			Sociological and political' model 2'			
	B	E.S	Sig	B	E.S	Sig	Exp(B)
5. Generation.s. with Benoît Hamon				2.58	0.523	0	13.191
6. PS/Place Publique avec Raphaël Glucksmann					1.984	0	7.272
7. EELV with Yannick Jadot				2.502	0.432	0	12.202
8. Republicains with François Xavier Bellamy					1.872	0	6.5
9. Debout la France with Nicolas Dupont Aignan					2.758	0	15.764
91. RN with Johan Bardella				2.653	0.412	0	14.201
92. Other				2.735	0.451	0	15.413
93. Does not know				1.9	0.441	0	6.688
La République En Marche Benchmark							
Constant	-8.872	0.87	0	-9.221	0.939	0	9.894E-05
Summary	Sociological' model 1			Sociological and political' model 2			
Step	Log de vraisemblance-2	R-deux de Cox et Snell	R-deux de Nagelkerke	Log de vraisemblance-2	R-deux de Cox et Snell	R-deux de Nagelkerke	
I	3609.416a	0.09	0.169	3419.470a	0.121	0.228	

The notion of underprivileged working class, working class, middle and upper class etc. refers to subjective perceptions of the yellow vests interviewed



the first one, is that the Yellow Vests movement is in actual fact highly diverse in social and cultural terms. This observation leads us to underline the extent to which the diversity of positions and social statuses is one of the major features of this movement.

Indeed, the participants make up a highly diverse coalition, with generational and gender diversity (although men predominate), but also social and political diversity, as shown in Table 4. The participants who felt they belonged to the working classes rubbed shoulders with a large number of Yellow Vests who defined themselves as being part of the 'middle classes', especially the 'lower' ones, which were largely dominant in the movement. Regardless of the chosen criteria, the makeup of the movement is fairly representative of that of Occitania's population. Only the highest segments of the population are under-represented, if not absent from the movement: high school graduates (more than 3 years higher education), people with more than 4,600 euros monthly income, those who own more than 3 assets (in addition to their main home), people living in large cities and, to a lesser extent, individuals falling under the 'executives and higher intellectual occupations' category and students (see Table 4). By contrast, blue-collar workers are over-represented (20% amongst the Yellow Vests versus 10% of Occitania's population), as are individuals with few qualifications and employees with precarious employment contracts. But whilst the more working-class groups may be over-represented in the movement—regardless of whether this is measured in an objective or subjective way—the fact remains that the Yellow Vests movement rallied almost the entire social pyramid, except for its top, on roundabouts and in demonstrations.

In other words, the makeup of the Yellow Vests movement clearly breaks with the logic of over-representation of the educated middle classes in contemporary social movements, whether these movements are concerned with issues of wealth redistribution or cultural issues typical of new social movements. (Eggert and Giugni 2015). This particular movement shows an unusually diverse sociological profile, including an over-representation of the working classes who are usually heavily under-represented in demonstrations. This over-representation of the working classes must be emphasised, as unusual as it is in the context of contemporary collective actions where middle-class graduates are largely dominant. The high proportion of first-time participants is a further sign that the movement engaged audiences far beyond those usually involved in collective action. This specificity also remains true when compared to the 2011 city square occupation movements such as 'Occupy' in the US, 'Indignados' in Spain or 'Nuit debout' in France in 2016. These movements also featured a large number of first-time protesters, but most of the participants were highly educated (there were also young adults who struggled to enter the labour market in the US and French movements) (Ancelovici et al. 2016; Milkman et al. 2013). As a body, the Yellow Vests are in fact fairly representative of the working and middle classes, including part of the 'upper-middle' classes, mostly salaried, especially when they come from 'peripheral' and rural France.

In light of these results, should the Yellow Vests be considered as a movement that operated on the basis of a 'class cleavage'? One cannot help but notice here the absence of the usual social drivers of involvement in social mobilisations—whether redistributive or cultural—in which the educated middle classes are over-represented



Table 3 Typical profiles of participants and non-participants in the Yellow Vests movement

This profile is 66% more likely to be a Yellow Vest	This profile was not part of the movement (0% chance of being a Yellow Vest)
Feels part of the underprivileged working class	Feels part of the upper class
Under 40 years old	Over 80 years old
Lives on the outskirts of a large or medium-sized city or in a small town	Lives in a large city
Educated to below Baccalaureate level (below A-level/High School diploma)	Holds a higher education qualification (4 to 5 years in higher education)
Has little or no assets	Has significant assets
Out of work (housewife, unemployed, disabled) or on fixed-term contract	Self-employed: business owner, freelance professional, sole trader, artisan
Male	Female

and the working classes poorly represented. Here, by contrast, not only are these popular segments in evidence, but there is even, as we have seen, a (slight) influence from the objective social status and even more so the subjective status on the likelihood of getting involved. However, this only explains a small part of the phenomenon. It is therefore inappropriate to speak of a class logic since the movement is much broader and only the top of the social pyramid is not represented. Involvement becomes extremely low among the highest income earners and those with significant economic capital (Table 4). Logically, the effect is even more pronounced when taking into account subjective identification: those who rank themselves in the 'upper classes', i.e. 5% of Occitania's voters, did not take part in the movement at all. In this respect, it is the internal diversity of social profiles that prevails, since the movement brought together unemployed and vulnerable people, but also large segments of the salaried middle classes, including, in no small measure, individuals falling under the 'executives and higher intellectual occupations' category.

How should this be interpreted? At least two assumptions can be made at this stage. The first one relates to the evolution of social structures and, even more so, to the way they are perceived by the participants themselves, i.e. to the objective and subjective forms that social conflicts take in today's societies. From this perspective, a conflict such as the Yellow Vests movement could be construed as the expression of a contentious relationship between a large 'averaged' body on the one hand and a small elite on the other, this elite being perceived by the former as monopolising resources and manipulating the 'system' to its own exclusive benefit.¹¹ In

¹¹ This assumption echoes that of Raphaël Challier on the potential decline, within the movement, of the triangular understanding of the social world in favour of a more protest-based awareness, in *Rencontres aux ronds-points. La mobilisation des gilets jaunes dans un bourg rural de Lorraine*, La vie des idées, February 2019. It is however important to point out that the roundabout rally studied by R. Challier seems more 'popular' and less socially 'diverse' than the Yellow Vests movement as a whole. His analysis of the social dynamics at work during the campaign must therefore be viewed in the context of this specific setting.



Table 4 The makeup of the Yellow Vests movement

	Yellow Vests from Occitania (%)	Total Occitania population (%)
Female	41	53
Male	59	47
1. Under 30 years old	17	17
2. Between 30 and 39 years old	18	14
3. Between 40 and 49 years old	16	15
4. Between 50 and 59 years old	19	17
5. Between 60 and 69 years old	16	16
6. Between 70 and 79 years old	12	13
7. Over 80 years old	2	9
1. Without qualifications	7	7
2. Below Baccalaureate level (below A-level/High School diploma)	50	38
3. Vocational Baccalaureate	10	8
4. General or technological Baccalaureate	7	13
5. 2 to 3 years higher education	21	21
6. 4 to 5 years higher education/PhD	6	13
Farmers	2	2
Retailers, artisans, business owners	5	6
Executives and higher intellectual professionals	5	8
Middle managers and professionals	12	12
Employees	26	22
Blue collar workers	20	10
Pensioners	25	30
Other economically inactive	6	10
Retired	27	34
Permanent contract	26	22
Unemployed	11	6
Civil servant	10	10
Fixed-term contract	7	4
Student	5	9
Disabled	4	2
Housewife/husband	3	2
Temporary worker	2	1
Self-employed	2	3
Business owner	1	2
Freelance professional	1	2
Sole trader	1	2
In training	0	1
1. Large city	3	14
2. Medium-sized city	9	9
3. Medium-sized suburbs and large city	23	18
4. Small town	30	23



Table 4 (continued)

	Yellow Vests from Occitania (%)	Total Occitania population (%)
5. Small town outskirts	5	7
6. Rural area	29	29
1. Less than 800 euros a month	4	4
2. Between 800 and 1,300 euros a month	14	13
3. Between 1,300 and 1,900 euros a month	19	17
4. Between 1,900 and 2,300 euros a month	22	16
5. Between 2,300 and 3,100 euros a month	21	20
6. Between 3,100 and 4,600 euros a month	17	20
7. Over 4,600 euros a month	4	10
1. 0 asset (excluding main house)	58	54
2. 1 asset (excluding main house)	35.5	34.5
3. 2 assets (excluding main house)	6	9
4. 3 assets (excluding main house)	0.5	2.5
1. Underprivileged working class	9	5
2. Working class	22	17
3. Lower middle class	44	40
4. Upper-middle class	26	34
5. Upper class	0	3
6. Privileged upper class	0	2

this regard, it should be noted that 74% of Occitania's population identifies with the 'middle classes' and that this is also the case for 70% of the Yellow Vests (see Table 4). Whether this 'averaging' reflects an averaging of the actual standards and lifestyles of the many is a complex issue, and we shall leave the matter open here, as it goes far beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is against this background that we see the emergence of new classifications which contribute to defining and therefore building new divides. This is the case, for example, with Joseph Stiglitz's famous indictment of the '1%' in a *New York Times* editorial that deeply influenced the *Occupy Wall Street* movement. Such reasoning amounts to drawing the dividing line between a very small elite—the famous '1%'—and the rest of the population, i.e. the remaining 99%.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, qualitative studies seem to show that protesters rarely thought in terms of the old categories of 'class', such as 'proletarians' or even simply 'working-class', to describe themselves. They chose instead to identify with the notion of 'people', a term that refers to a large majority body in opposition to 'those at the top', i.e. the elites—and in particular the political elites—who by definition make up a very narrow category, and of which President Macron is, in a way, the ideal embodiment due to his background and social attributes. The ideological divides that will be discussed in the second part of this paper also argue for such an interpretation by showing the unity of the Yellow Vests around an 'anti-system' stance. In short, if indeed there is a class logic, or if social boundaries drive the



movement, it seems to us that it must now be viewed in terms of an often radical opposition between the 'people' and 'those at the top'—meaning the 'elites' and in particular the political elites—rather than through the traditional socioeconomic categories (such as those produced by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies—INSEE—for example).

A second assumption, which is not necessarily incompatible, can also be made. It stems from the nature of the mobilisation itself. In many respects, the Yellow Vests movement was highly unconventional: it was not instigated by political or trade union organisations, it had no clear leaders, particularly in its early stages, its main form of action—meeting at roundabouts wearing a high visibility vest—was quite unprecedented, and its motives and composition were difficult to establish. In the face of such a difficult concept to grasp, everyone was able to voice different, even conflicting, demands, frustrations and anger. The reasons for such sociological diversity and initial support for the movement must undoubtedly also lie in this polysemy.

A highly mixed coalition in political terms

The diversity of the Yellow Vests' political profiles also argues for an interpretation that takes into account the diversity of subjective investments and practices that such a mass movement allows. Here we follow the same pattern used in the description of social properties, focusing first on the possible political drivers of involvement through a regression analysis, before outlining the diversity of the profiles that make up the movement.

Voting patterns are one of the statistically significant contributing factors to involvement in the movement. Their inclusion in the regression model improves the understanding of the variance, as shown by our model 2 which adds a voting variable to the previous sociological model. As a result, the Cox and Snell R² reaches 0.121 and the Nagelkerke R² rises to 0.228. This improvement is evidence of a 'political' dimension to this mobilisation.

We measure this on the basis of the 2019 European elections (Table 2, model 2). The movement has sometimes been described as attracting profiles less likely to vote than the average, non-voters for whom 'rebellion' represents an alternative to traditional forms of political participation and, in particular, to an electoral process in which the Yellow Vests no longer believe. Statistical objectivation refutes such interpretations: the Yellow Vests who were interviewed do not abstain from voting more than the average in the region and the refusal to vote is much less predictive of involvement in the movement than voting for the Communist Party (PCF), La France Insoumise (LFI), Debout la France or the Rassemblement National (RN).¹² On roundabouts or in demonstrations, the rise of a discourse critical of the institutional system via calls for the establishment of a 'RIC' (Citizens' Initiative Referendum) thus seems to accompany and complement so-called conventional political

¹² The survey carried out on Facebook provides similar results, in particular regarding the fact that the Yellow Vests do not particularly abstain from voting, in Guerra, T., Gonthier, F., Alexandre, C., "Populist Attitudes Among the French Yellow Vests", *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.



practices that are usually embraced (or dismissed) by the participants. On this point, the Yellow Vests do not seem to invalidate the traditional view (Verba and Nie 1987) that involvement in relatively costly initiatives such as demonstrations and therefore roundabout occupations, for example, mainly concerns individuals who also pay the (admittedly lower) costs associated with so-called conventional practices. We believe that this finding is significant as it refutes the view that the Yellow Vests movement is largely made up of people with alternative or unconventional political practices. However, it will have to be checked via a survey that also includes non-registered voters.

Regarding their electoral leanings, the most notable—though hardly surprising—finding is the low number of votes cast for LREM (La République En Marche, President Macron's party) in spring 2019. As a result, we have retained the fact of voting for LREM in the European elections as the benchmark modality in the regression analysis (Table 2, model 2). The results show that all other behaviours greatly increase the odds of having been a Yellow Vest. This effect is particularly pronounced in the case of voters who voted for the PCF or LFI, thus suggesting an over-mobilisation, all other things being equal, of those close to the radical left. A similar pattern is seen in the presidential elections. Votes for Debout la France, the RN or Génération-s also have a very strong influence, albeit to a lesser extent, on the likelihood of being involved, as evidenced for example by the significant presence of Marine Le Pen voters, particularly on roundabouts. Internal diversity therefore greatly outweighs uniformity in terms of political leanings.

In addition to voting behaviour, our study provides a detailed picture of the diversity of the participants' political profiles. It also provides useful insights into the relationship between the Yellow Vests and politics, and in particular on the issue of their alienation from politics. On this point, two interesting findings seem to challenge the assumption that the Yellow Vests' distancing from the field of specialised political activities is more pronounced.¹³ On the basis of two standard questions designed to assess politicisation and determine the frequency of political discussions and objective competency,¹⁴ it appears that the Yellow Vests are neither more nor less interested in politics than the rest of Occitania's population, nor more nor less knowledgeable (Tables 5 and 6). This representativeness should also raise questions: how common is it for a social movement to bring together so many individuals with little or no political involvement, to the point where more than half of them state that they rarely or never discuss politics with friends and relatives?

¹³ Please note that our survey focuses on Occitania's population registered on the electoral roll. The unregistered Yellow Vests, whose numbers cannot be determined, are therefore beyond the scope of the study. In France, an average of 6% of the voting age population are not registered to vote (source: INSEE).

¹⁴ The questions were open-ended and asked about whether respondents knew the name of the Prime Minister, the Environment Minister, the President of the Region and the President of the European Commission, as well as how often political discussions took place. They were phrased as follows: Do you discuss politics with relatives: Every day or almost every day/Several times a week/Several times a month/Rarely/Never. Name of the French Prime Minister, the President of the Region, the President of the European Commission.



Table 5 Question: Do you ever talk about politics with friends and relatives?

	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Several times a month (%)	Several times a week (%)	Almost every day (%)	Doesn't know (%)	No answer (%)	Total (%)
Non-Yellow Vests	18	46	19	10	6	1	1	100
Yellow Vests	12	44	19	14	10	0	1	100
Total	17	46	19	11	6	1	1	100

Table 6 Number of correct answers to 4 open questions about knowledge of the names of the Prime Minister, the Environment Minister, the President of the Occitania Region and the President of the European Commission

	0 (%)	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	Total (%)
Non-Yellow Vests	32	31	21	11	5	100
Yellow Vests	32	35	19	9	5	100
Total	32	32	21	11	5	100

The analysis of their positioning on a left-wing/right-wing axis also confirms the high level of internal diversity within the movement. Firstly, it leads us to challenge initial survey results which concluded that most of the Yellow Vests rejected this traditional split.¹⁵ Although our questionnaire offered the option of answering 'neither right-wing nor left-wing', only 28% of the Yellow Vests selected this category. In total, even accounting for the 'Unwilling to answer' and 'Don't know' answers, only 35% of them chose not to position themselves along this traditional divide. On this point, as on many others, they do not differ in any way from the rest of Occitania's population (see Table 7). Those who express a preference overwhelmingly claim to hold left-wing views (41%), compared to 20% for right-wing views. The left-wing bias is therefore dominant and more significant than among the population that did not take part in the movement. This finding is partly consistent with trends already identified in field and online surveys (Collectif Quantité critique 2018, 2019b; Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019; Guerra et al. 2019a).

The Yellow Vests are therefore marked by significant differences in political orientation, of which several qualitative surveys show that they are aware. This is what may have led them to develop discursive strategies aimed at avoiding debate on partisan positions and on the most divisive issues (Devaux et al. 2019; de Raymond and

¹⁵ For example, in the survey conducted by the Pacte laboratory via Facebook, 61% of the Yellow Vests who responded said they did not stand on a left-wing/right-wing axis (Guerra et al. 2019a, Guerra et al. 2019b). These widely differing results may be due to the nature of the sample and the timing of the survey, but probably also to the wording of the questionnaires.



Table 7 Political orientation of the Yellow Vests

Participation	1. Very left-wing (%)	2. Left-wing (%)	3. Rather left-wing (%)	4. Centre (%)	5. Rather right-wing (%)	6. Right-wing (%)	7. Very right-wing (%)	8. Neither left-wing nor right-wing (%)	9. Don't know (%)	Unwilling to answer (%)	Total (%)
Non-Yellow Vests	3	15	12	12	11	10	3	26	6	3	100
Yellow Vests	7	21	12	5	7	8	5	28	6	1	100
Total	4	15	12	11	10	9	3	26	6	3	100



Bordiec 2019; Reungoat et al. 2020). Considering the diversity of the Yellow Vests' social and political profiles, the extent to which involvement in the movement must cover a variety of mobilisation rationales is obvious. How, then, can we explain what kept this movement going, given that it brought together various segments of the working and middle classes—characterised by very significant differences in economic and, even more so, cultural capital—as well as individuals with mixed experiences of protest movements and sometimes conflicting electoral preferences?

The Yellow Vests' internal diversity extends into their preferred forms of action

As a first step towards a possible answer, we tested the theory drawn up while observing the movement and found in some studies¹⁶ which suggests that understanding the diversity of the chosen forms of action is key to understanding the mobilisation. It would appear that activists attending weekly demonstrations did not share the same profiles with those occupying roundabouts. The variety of protest sites and forms of action might therefore have helped disparate and sometimes potentially conflicting profiles to coexist.

When comparing the Yellow Vests who only took part in demonstrations with those who only attended roundabout rallies, the regression analysis reveals the characteristics of this division along two standard profiles. Factors such as being middle-aged (30–59), having low economic capital and living in a rural area or small town increase the likelihood of having exclusively protested on roundabouts (without ever demonstrating). By contrast, belonging to the urban middle classes is predictive of taking part in demonstrations: being older, having a higher level of education (2 to 3 years higher education), owning two or more assets, and living in a large city increase the likelihood of having only engaged in demonstrations. In other words, roundabout protesters display more popular and vulnerable profiles, which differ from the usual sociology of contemporary social mobilisations. Conversely, the profiles of those involved in demonstrations are closer to those found in traditional left-wing social movements, i.e. they tend to have more cultural¹⁷ but also economic capital.

Pure 'Roundabout' and pure 'Demonstration' Yellow Vests differ even more when considering their voting preferences. The Yellow Vests who never set foot on a roundabout tend to be overwhelmingly left-wing. The high level of mobilisation of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's supporters in 2017 is evident here since his voters make up the vast majority of them (60% vs 26% for the Yellow Vests who also attended roundabout rallies), while at the same time RN voters are strikingly and almost

¹⁶ Devaux Jean-Baptiste, Lang Marion, Levêque Antoine, Parnet Christophe, "La banlieue jaune. Enquête sur les recompositions d'un mouvement", *La Vie des idées*, 30 April 2019; Collectif 2019 op. cit.; Reungoat Emmanuelle, Jouhanneau Cecile & Buton François, "Becoming Yellow Vests: The Politicization of Ordinary Citizens (France 2018-20)", preprint, Politics and International Relations, 16.11.2020; Dormagen Jean-Yves, Michel Laura, Reungoat Emmanuelle, "Quand le vert divise le jaune. Comment les clivages sur l'écologie opèrent au sein des Gilets jaunes", *Écologie & politique*, 2021/1 (No 62), pp. 25–47.

¹⁷ Piketty, Thomas. Capital and ideology. Harvard University Press, 2020.



entirely absent (only 3%). By contrast, RN voters account for 26% of the Yellow Vests who only ever attended roundabout events.

Our study thus allows us to fine-tune our description of the Yellow Vests movement and to understand its relatively enduring nature despite its internal diversity. Analysing the Yellow Vests' social and political profiles through their forms of action reveals the link between their individual profiles and their chosen space of protest within the movement. While the Yellow Vests rubbed shoulders in all their diversity over the course of the campaign, they probably joined forces at times, clashed on occasions, but also sometimes simply rallied side by side without mixing. It is also possible to assume that not all of them rallied at the same point in the movement. Here, the analysis of the internal diversity of the movement provides a key to understanding its dynamics and longevity. Implementing multiple and innovative forms of action seems to have been one of the conditions that allowed such diverse profiles to coexist within the movement.

Roundabout rallies, sometimes associated with demonstrations, remain the most specific form of action for the Yellow Vests, enabling unfamiliar popular sociological profiles to join in. In actual fact, first-time protesters are most prevalent among Yellow Vests who only ever attended roundabout rallies. They were to be found on roundabouts in 3/4 of the cases, and only about a quarter of them engaged solely in demonstrations. In short, the roundabout is undoubtedly the outstanding feature of the 'yellow' mobilisation. It was on roundabouts that first-time protesters assembled at the start of the movement, many of them young, with little or no qualifications and few economic resources. More generally, roundabouts became gathering places for a broad and very diverse group of people, albeit slightly more working-class. This is something quite unique in relation to the sociology of collective action. By contrast, the Yellow Vests demonstrations largely reflect the universe of the educated middle classes and civil servants, i.e. populations typically involved in traditional collective action organised by the left and trade unions.

In view of these findings, referring to the Yellow Vests as a single uniform entity would amount to ignoring their internal differences, both in terms of their social profiles as well as their political leanings and mobilisation practices. Now that the composition of this 'yellow' coalition has been empirically documented and that the social and political dimensions of its diversity have been described, we need to examine what unites the Yellow Vests but also what divides them in terms of ideological sensitivity.

PART II: A movement united by social issues and a rejection of the 'system', but deeply divided on identity issues

Since the Yellow Vests movement brought together a wide variety of social and political profiles, we will now attempt to understand what brings the Yellow Vests together and what sets them apart, or even pits them against each other, in terms of their attitudes towards key and divisive issues. We will therefore look at external cleavages, those between them and other groups, while also addressing the internal divisions within the movement. To this end, we carried out a factor analysis based



on the answers provided by our sample to a series of 30 questions about policies designed to be highly divisive on key issues (see Factor Analysis section in the Appendix).

Our findings reveal that respondents are structured around three main axes.

We refer to Axis 1 as 'multiculturalists versus identitarians' in the rest of this paper. The measures that fuel this axis are primarily related to migration, Islam, and border control.

Defined as 'anti-system versus pro-status quo', Axis 2 is marked by a strain of anti-elitism aimed in particular at politicians, the rich and more broadly the prevailing system. This axis is organised around measures aimed at changing the system by restoring a more direct form of power of the people over the political elites (MPs' removal from office and wage restraint) and over the business elites (ban on offshoring, raising taxes for the wealthiest). The introduction of a universal income can also be seen by the Yellow Vests as contributing to greater tax justice.¹⁸ The axis thus divides the population between those who are more favourable to the elites and the system (pro-status quo) and those who demand radical change (anti-system).

Axis 3 is defined as 'social versus free-market' because it encompasses opposing systems of opinion on workers' rights, wealth redistribution and support for the public economic sector.¹⁹ This mostly concerns the economic and social policies of the Fordist/Keynesian compromise in France, which were challenged by the globalisation of the economy and its so-called neo-liberal turn in the 1980s: opening markets and public services to competition, reforming redistributive policies, (de)regulating the labour market. It should be stressed that this divide has long been one of the two main pillars defining the left/right opposition in France.

As we shall see, the Yellow Vests are deeply divided and polarised by the first cleavage relating to identity issues. However, they are relatively united in their views on the other two main cleavages, as they are overwhelmingly 'anti-system' and 'pro-social' on the economic front.

Radical Yellow Vests on the 'anti-system versus pro-status quo' axis (Axis 2)

The Yellow Vests do not stand out from the rest of the population in terms of the general tenor of their answers. Yellow Vests and non-Yellow Vests mainly differ in their radicalism, especially on some issues (see Fig e in the Appendix).

The most radical and consistent views expressed by the Yellow Vests relate to policies pertaining to Axis 2—anti-system versus pro-status quo—and set them apart from those who did not join the movement. The majority of the Yellow Vests are (strongly) in favour of removing from office those elected representatives who

¹⁸ Marc-Antoine Sabaté, "Revenu de base inconditionnel: quel instrument pour quelle justice fiscale ? Réflexions à partir du cas des « gilets jaunes » en France", *Éthique publique*, vol. 21, No 2 | 2019.

¹⁹ This is regardless of the policies actually pursued, for example, left-wing governments privatising companies or embracing globalisation while retaining a left-wing rhetoric, or, conversely, so-called 'free-market' governments pursuing policies aimed at maintaining social gains. See for example Jobert B., 1994, *Le tournant néo-libéral*, L'Harmattan.



fail to keep their campaign promises, capping MPs' allowances to 1,700 euros, raising taxes for the wealthiest, and banning offshoring. Differences with the rest of the population are also greatest on the first three topics and on the issue of leaving the EU. It is therefore on the key issues covered by Axis 2 that the Yellow Vests stand out the most from the rest of the population, in most cases by assuming more radical positions and displaying a stronger 'anti-system' stance based on mistrust of the political elites and calls for their supervision.

This finding reflects their voting preferences where the most radical and anti-system groups are most strongly represented. In terms of demands, a link can be drawn between this consistent axis of opinion and the criticism of politicians, which was soon embodied by the demand for a Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC), but also by the call for a reinstatement of the Wealth Tax since this axis is driven, as we have seen, by a proposal to tax the richest. The two main 'programmatic' markers of the mobilisation, which appeared to be the most widely supported, are indeed two measures that fall squarely within the cleavage defined by Axis 2. It is therefore easy to understand why President Macron was the recipient of so much hostility from the protestors: as a graduate of the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration, former investment banker and political leader, he is in a way the living embodiment of one of the pillars of Axis 2, lying precisely at the opposite end of the scale from the overwhelming majority of the Yellow Vests.

Positioning of the Yellow Vests on the pro-social side of the economic divide (Axis 3)

The protestors also stand out for their 'pro-social' stance, which is in line with the more traditionally 'left-wing' views on the issues that shape the economic axis (Axis 3). They are thus opposed to a 1% global warming tax that would be applied to all without distinction—in the same way as the carbon tax that sparked their protest. We can assume that this measure is perceived as socially unfair because it operates as a regressive tax (the wealthiest pay proportionally less). They are also more opposed than the rest of the population to measures seeking to undermine a number of social gains acquired during the Fordist regime of the so-called Trente Glorieuses (the 'Thirty Glorious Years' following WW2) or more recently. For example, they are more hostile to measures threatening protective statuses: 39% and 46%, respectively, are 'very much against' measures aimed at reducing by a third the number of civil servants and privatising the Post Office (22% and 24% are 'in favour'). This figure also reflects the large presence of public service workers in the movement. They are also more likely to reject measures that undermine labour law: 48% are 'very much against scrapping the 35-h week' (18% are 'against'). All these standpoints can be linked to the prevalence of an employed, often low-skilled, lower middle-class workforce in the movement and the over-representation of a vulnerable workforce. It is precisely because the Yellow Vests are mainly a movement of (small and medium) salary earners that they position themselves on the pro-social side of the economic axis. Contrary to some assumptions made in early media coverage of the movement, small business owners and artisans barely feature amongst the Yellow



Vests. From a sociological point of view, the Yellow Vests have nothing in common with a Poujadist-type movement led by small businessmen, shopkeepers, and artisans. It is therefore logical that this movement of 'wage earners' stands on Axis 2 in favour of measures promoting some level of regulation of the economy and the labour market.

However, the Yellow Vests appear more divided when it comes to reconsidering minimum welfare benefits. 26% of them are 'very much against' (24% 'against') restricting the duration of RSA (social inclusion benefit) payments, compared with 25% and 18%, respectively, who are 'very much in favour' or 'in favour' of such a measure. Introduced in the context of mass unemployment at the end of the 1980s, the RMI/RSA benefit is somewhat ambivalent. While it provides an alternative income to long-term unemployed individuals, this 'safety net' has also contributed to legitimise the erosion of worker protections.²⁰ Furthermore, studies carried out in the 1990s showed that it provided greater income than a part-time job paid at the minimum wage, thereby giving rise to a debate—previously non-existent in France—on the 'dependency culture',²¹ frequently expressed in terms of 'handouts'. Our assumption is that the Yellow Vests' divided position on the RSA issue partly reflects this ambivalence, alternating between support for safety nets and condemnation of their perverse effects on workers' conditions. Here, our findings can be linked to the assumptions about the working class tripartite division of social conscience (Schwartz, 2014) that may have been altered by taking part in the movement (Challier 2019). It appears that some of the protestors are still strongly distancing themselves from the most vulnerable, often through being employed and valuing work. This nevertheless leaves open the hypothesis of a stronger binary vision pitting the 'people' against the 'elites', particularly the political elites, for a number of participants. It should be pointed out that this RSA proposal, which is divisive among the Yellow Vests, also fuels Axis 1 (multiculturalists vs ethno-nationalists) on which, unlike Axes 2 and 3, the Yellow Vests seem divided. This suggests that, as mentioned above, the RSA is also perceived as financial support which, like family allowance, is seen as being of greater benefit to immigrant populations. The fact that it fuels Axis 1 reveals an 'ethnicised' view of such welfare benefits.

We assigned an average value to the Yellow Vests as a whole for comparison purposes with the general population. Figure 1 confirms that the Yellow Vests are on average much more radical on the anti-system axis than the rest of the population (upper part of the factor space). They also lie further to the left on the economic axis. By contrast, they appear divided on Axis 1.

²⁰ Palier, B. *Gouverner la sécurité sociale: les réformes du système français de protection sociale depuis 1945*, Presses universitaires de France, 2005.

²¹ Palier B., "Un long adieu à Bismarck ? Les évolutions de la protection sociale", in Pepper D. Culpeper et al., *La France en mutation. 1980–2005* Presses de Sciences Po, pages 197 to 228.



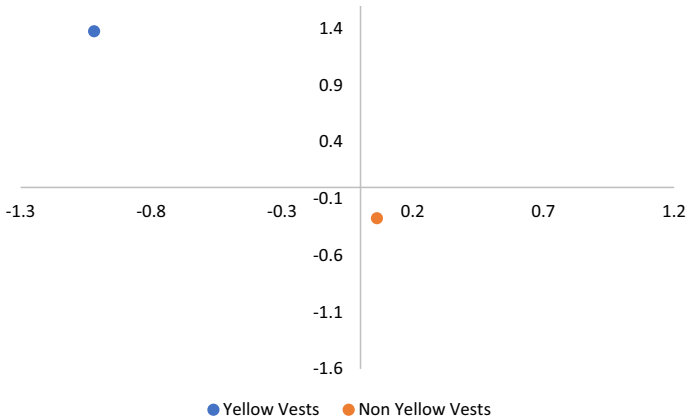


Fig. 1 Mean points—Axes 3 (X-axis) and 2 (Y-axis) Yellow Vests versus non-Yellow Vests

Divided along the identity axis (Axis 1)

Past social movement studies have tended to focus on the diversity of social movements or on external cleavages between them and other groups, rather than on the internal divisions within them (Poulard 2020). As a result, this topic remains a blind spot in scientific literature. Yet, the Yellow Vests are highly divided on the 'multiculturalists versus identitarians' identity axis (Axis 1), which reflects the main macro cleavage in today's French politics. We argue that taking this internal cleavage into account provides a better understanding of the movement's dynamics. The policies that fuel this axis divide the Yellow Vests in a highly orthogonal way. For instance, regarding the reinstatement of the death penalty for terrorists, 20% of the Yellow Vests said they were 'very much against' (19% against) and 42% 'very much in favour' (16% in favour). One can assume that terrorists are likened by some of the respondents to Islamists and that this is also an identity issue for them. They are also divided on the issue of reinstating border controls, although the majority are in favour (16% very much against and 39% very much in favour). On these two issues, the most clear-cut positions ('very much' in favour or 'very much' against) clearly outweigh the more moderate or hesitant positions (in favour, against), which once again shows how polarised views are on this axis.

Here again, the scatter plot (Fig. 2) provides a clear overview of the Yellow Vests' positioning in relation to Axis 1 (multiculturalists vs ethno-nationalists).

This shows that while Axis 2 unites the Yellow Vests and sets them apart from the rest of the population, Axis 1 (identity) divides them deeply, with one group clearly positioned to the left of this axis and another clearly to the right.

In short, the Yellow Vests are highly radical on Axis 2. They typically hold more anti-system views than the rest of the population. In fact, they feel much less attached to the EU than the rest of the population, which is another measure of their demand for systemic change. Although predominantly pro-social, they



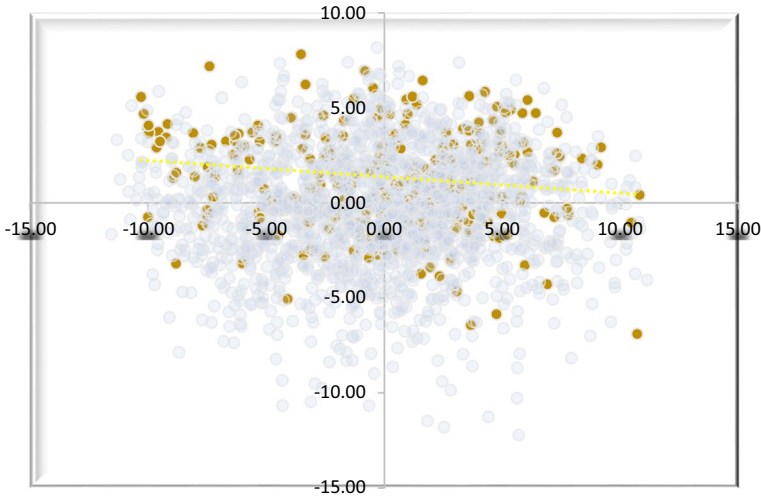


Fig. 2 Yellow Vests and non-Yellow Vests in the factor space—Axis 1 multiculturalists versus ethno-nationalists (X-axis) and Axis 2 anti-system versus status quo (Y-axis)

are nonetheless divided on a number of redistributive measures, such as the RSA. Lastly, they are deeply divided on the 'multiculturalists versus identitarians' axis.

'Roundabout' Yellow Vests and 'Demonstration' Yellow Vests do not stand on the same side of the identity divide

We have shown that the Yellow Vests' social traits vary according to their forms of action (part 1). Similarly, the Yellow Vests who gathered on roundabouts and those who only attended demonstrations position themselves differently within the cleavage system, reflecting both consensus and radical opposition in terms of attitudes, along the three axes we have identified.

Figure 3 sums up what unites 'Roundabout' and 'Demonstration' Yellow Vests. They are on average near the top and to the left of the factor space, which means that they share an anti-system and pro-social stance, although the demonstrators are slightly more radical on these two cleavages (positioned higher and further to the left). This arguably confirms the over-representation in demonstrations of the radical left, which is deeply anti-system and very left-wing in economic terms (riding society of the ruling elite, promoting redistribution, workers' rights, and public services).

However, their stance differs greatly on the identity axis (Fig. 4), with the 'demonstrating' Yellow Vests positioned firmly to the left of the axis, while those at roundabouts lie to the right. This confirms that the demonstrations brought together Yellow Vests with an ideological profile close to that of the radical left, very progressive on societal issues and highly multiculturalist. These are PCF, LFI or EELV voters, who voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon or Benoit Hamon in the 2017 presidential elections. This also explains why this segment of the Yellow Vests develops



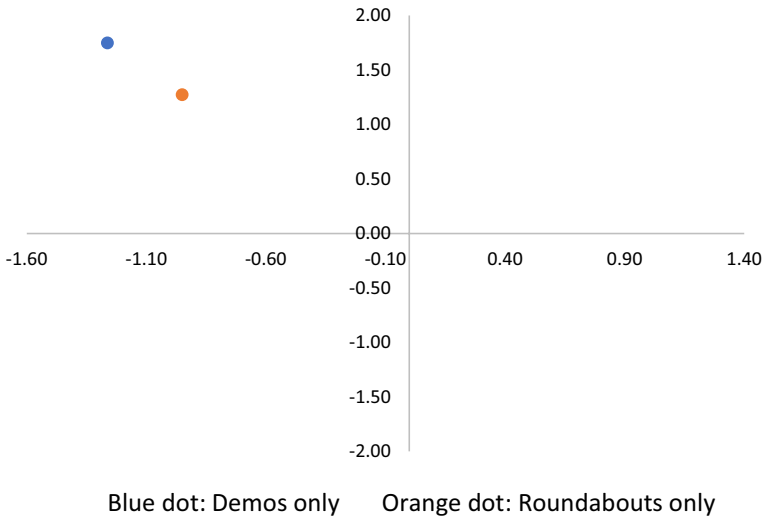


Fig. 3 Mean points—Axes 3 (X-axis) and 2 (Y-axis) Roundabout Yellow Vests versus Demos only. (Color figure online)

very environmentally conscious opinions, behaviour, and practices (Dormagen et al. 2021). Lying very much to the left on the identity axis, they seem ideologically more homogeneous and closer in this respect to the crowds usually found at demonstrations than the 'roundabout' Yellow Vests. Roundabouts, on the other hand, brought together individuals with a more right-wing profile on the identity axis, hitherto relatively unrepresented in social movements, and who emerged via a new form of action, i.e. occupying roundabouts. However, it would be simplistic and wrong to

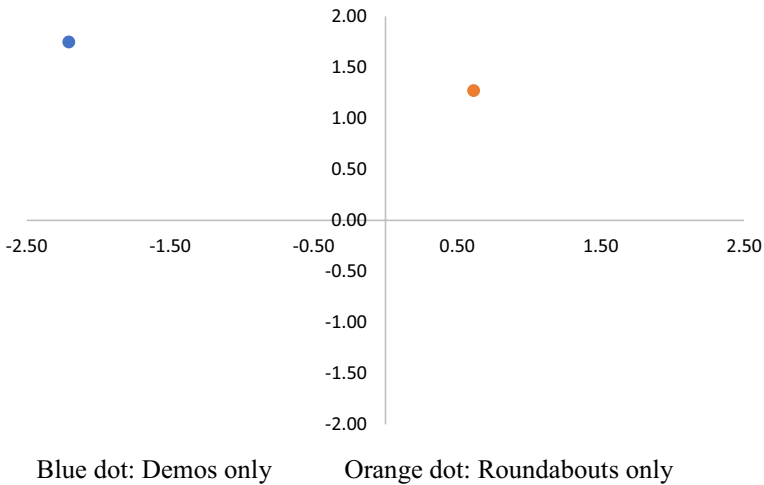


Fig. 4 Mean points—Axes 1 (X-axis) and 2 (Y-axis) Roundabout Yellow Vests versus Demos only. (Color figure online)



pit *identitarian* roundabouts against 'multiculturalist' demonstrations. While homogeneity holds true for the demonstrations, the more centred average positioning found at roundabouts does not point to a moderate position of roundabout protesters on this axis. On the contrary, roundabouts protestors turn out to be divided on this cleavage. The mean point tends to smooth out positions that are actually at odds on the identity axis among 'roundabout' Yellow Vests, who bring together multiculturalist profiles as well as often very radical identitarian profiles. This internal diversity on a fundamental cleavage was probably noticeable on roundabouts, but it may also have contributed to a kind of 'ideological' specialisation of the different roundabouts. In other words, depending on the roundabout protestors' backgrounds and their ability to maintain cohesion despite the participants' social and political diversity, these profiles seem to have rubbed shoulders and rallied together over time in the same protest space, or broke up to hold different, ideologically more homogeneous sites. Our findings also tend to confirm the coexistence (and sometimes competition) between roundabouts dominated by identitarian profiles and 'multiculturalist' roundabouts, which, by sharing the space, also avoided centripetal tensions that would have threatened the movement (Challier 2019; Devaux et al. 2019; De Raymond and Bordiec 2019; Bonin and Liochon 2020).

Conclusion

The Yellow Vests movement brings together a wide range of social, political, and ideological profiles. One of our main results highlights the over-representation of workers and more broadly of popular segments in the mobilisation. In contrast to the traditional profiles of actors in social movements since the 1960s, this significant presence of popular segments contributes to making the Yellow Vests a singular and composite movement. Another major finding in this regard is that ultimately, the movement provides a good representation of the working classes and the salaried middle classes in all their diversity. Despite their over-representation, it would be wrong to narrow it down to the poorest, the most vulnerable, the 'lowly', those who struggle to make it to the end of the month. In reality, its clearest sociological feature is the absence of individuals who identify with the 'upper classes', i.e. a tiny minority of the population representing the 'elites' against whom the movement unites. The movement is ultimately cross-cutting and multifaceted, which means that major sociological variables have little predictive power. Therefore, re-establishing the Yellow Vests' systems of opinion provides a better understanding of the movement's dynamics, as well as the centrifugal—but also centripetal—forces at work. The anti-system or anti-elite stance clearly emerges as a central feature of the Yellow Vests' mobilisation, reflecting homogeneous positions among the various participants. In light of this, it is easy to understand the centrality of criticism of President Macron, the government and, more generally, the political elites, given that such criticism is highly cohesive among protestors marked by a high level of internal diversity, but also, conversely, given the risk of division over other issues, which are therefore set aside. To a lesser extent, the Yellow Vests also share a pro-social and anti-free



market stance on economic policies, which is more pronounced than in the rest of the population. However, they are radically opposed on matters involving identity issues, particularly those related to immigration, borders, and Islam.

We believe that these findings could provide a better understanding of the movement's dynamics. Individuals with very different (and, on some issues, even clashing) social and ideological profiles took the opportunity offered by this movement to voice their views against certain elites (in particular the political establishment and the wealthiest) and against the system, giving rise, as we have seen, to an exceptionally large movement. This shared anti-system stance combined with strong ideological differences, particularly on the 'multiculturalists versus identitarians' axis, sheds light on a number of practical strategies witnessed within the Yellow Vests movement. For instance, the main proposals that emerged from the movement, such as the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC) or the reinstatement of the Wealth Tax (ISF), are part of a 'sui generis programme' consistent with an opposition to the prevailing system and a request for change (axis 2) which unites the vast majority of the Yellow Vests. By contrast, qualitative studies referred to earlier have also highlighted the avoidance strategies used by the Yellow Vests for some issues, specifically those related to cultural cleavages (axis 1) which divides the Yellow Vests, and primarily the issue related to migration policies and minorities.

Our findings are a reminder of the need not to overestimate the cohesion of social movements and to appreciate the diversity of their participants' motives and modes of engagement. While literature on protests, and in particular quantitative literature, focuses mainly on what brings individuals together within social movements, our findings prompt us not to focus exclusively on external cleavages, but to also consider the internal divisions that undoubtedly often arise in large collective movements. This approach makes it possible to go beyond the resources-based analyses for better understanding the procedural nature of a social movement, its form and its limits. Our paper highlights the interest of studying the internal heterogeneity of mobilised groups and the modalities of their cohesion. This prism offers solid tools for understanding the form and modes of action, the structure of claims and the duration of the movement, as well as the relationship maintained by those mobilised with politics and the party system. As with other post-2011 movements, the spontaneous and largely unorganised nature of the mobilisation probably contributed to this significant internal diversity, in this case through the proliferation of forms of action. The very way in which this movement was structured, with thousands of roundabout occupations and different forms of action, may have helped such diverse profiles to coexist, making it easier to understand the movement's longevity. The available qualitative literature sometimes identifies affinity groupings by roundabout. This diversity—or even radical opposition on some divisive issues—undoubtedly also explains the mistrust shown towards would-be spokespeople and the various attempts at embodiment that emerged. It was difficult to imagine that a legitimate representation could emerge from such a divided coalition on some of the most salient issues. Analysing the main cleavages in terms of systems of attitudes thus provides a better understanding as to why this social movement did not evolve into a movement organised for electoral competition, given that some of the issues that structure the partisan landscape and



electoral debates are deeply divisive among the Yellow Vests. They fought side by side but are unlikely to identify with a common electoral project.

Appendix: "Sample representativeness"

Fig. a—Living location—Comparison between registered voters in Occitania, voters registered in 100 randomly selected polling stations and individuals in the sample.

Sociospatial type	Reg/100 polling stations	Reg/Occitania	Sample individual
1. Large city	14.8	13.7	8.2
2. Medium-sized city	10.4	9.4	6.3
3. Medium-sized and large city suburbs	24.9	18.5	20.7
4. Small town	26.4	22.8	24.8
5. Small town outskirts	8.0	6.7	10.9
6. Rural area	15.3	28.9	29.1

Fig. b—Gender and age group—Comparison between registered voters in Occitania, voters registered in 100 randomly selected polling stations and individuals in the sample.

Age group	Reg/100 polling stations		Sample indiv.	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1. Under 22	3.4	3.3	3.5	3.9
2. Between 22 and 29	4.9	5.0	2.3	2.4
3. Between 30 and 39	7.1	6.8	4.9	3.5
4. Between 40 and 99	7.6	7.3	9.2	5.2
5. Between 50 and 59	8.6	8.0	12.2	9.0
6. Between 60 and 69	8.3	7.3	9.5	11.3
7. Between 70 and 79	7.0	5.8	7.9	7.6
8. Over 80	5.8	3.6	3.9	3.6
9. Does not know	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2
Total	52.8	47.2	53.5	46.5

Age group	Reg/100 polling stations		Sample individual	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1. Under 22	3.4	3.3	3.5	3.9
2. Between 22 and 29	4.9	5.0	2.3	2.4
3. Between 30 and 39	7.1	6.8	4.9	3.5
4. Between 40 and 99	7.6	7.3	9.2	5.2
5. Between 50 and 59	8.6	8.0	12.2	9.0
6. Between 60 and 69	8.3	7.3	9.5	11.3



Age group	Reg/100 polling stations		Sample individual	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
7. Between 70 and 79	7.0	5.8	7.9	7.6
8. Over 80	5.8	3.6	3.9	3.6
9. Does not know	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2
Total	52.8	47.2	53.5	46.5

Fig. c—First round behaviour in the 2017 presidential election—Comparison between registered voters in Occitania, voters registered in 100 randomly selected polling stations and individuals in the sample.

P17	Z_registered/100 voting station	Z_registered/Occitanie	Z_respondents
Abstention	19.4	18.9	6.5
Blank and void	2.0	2.0	4.6
La République en marche- E. Macron	17.2	17.6	23.5
FN - Marine Le Pen	18.7	18.2	13.8
Republicans - F. Fillon	13.2	13.5	7.3
La France Insoumise -JL Mélenchon	17.7	17.5	12.6
Socialist party- B. Hamon	4.8	5.2	7.4
Debout la France - N. Dupont Aignan	3.2	3.2	2.1
J. Lassalle	1.6	1.8	2.3
Other	2.0	2.0	2.5
Unregistered			4.8
Does not know			12.9

Fig. d—Professions and social categories.

PCS	Occitania sample (%)	Whole of France (%)
PCS 1	2	1
PCS 2	6	4
PCS 3	8	11
PCS 4	12	14
PCS 5	21	14
PCS 6	9	11
PCS 7	34	33
PCS 8	8	13

Factor analysis

Fig. e Divisive policies and systems of opinion. Synthetic approach—YV versus non-YV (score reading: between 3 and -3 (answers were coded as follows: very much in favour=3, rather in favour=1, rather against=-1, very much against=-3, no opinion=0).



We carried out a factor analysis based on the answers provided by our sample population to questions in the table below. Individuals are distributed along five axes—three of which are mainly explanatory—shown here in sequence. The issues that contribute most to each of the 3 main axes are listed below (in descending order).

Divisive measures	GJ Averages	Non-GJ averages	GJ/non-GJ differences
Offer voters the possibility of removing elected officials who do not respect their commitments by referendum	2,03	1,2	0,83
Paying MPs the median salary of the French, i.e. 1700 euros per month, as an allowance	1,95	1,25	0,7
Increase the taxes of the richest to invest in local public services	1,92	1,19	0,73
Prohibit French companies making profits from relocating	1,83	1,42	0,41
Replace prison sentences with community service for minor offenders	1,78	1,81	-0,03
Abolish inheritance tax	1,26	0,99	0,27
Ban the veil at university	1,04	0,84	0,2
Reintroduce border controls on the movement of people within the EU	0,83	0,48	0,35
Allow adoption for homosexual couples	0,73	0,41	0,32
Allow migrants fleeing war zones to enter France	0,67	0,69	-0,02
Introduce quotas for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the best high schools	0,64	0,74	-0,1
Reinstate the death penalty for perpetrators of terrorist attacks	0,61	0,37	0,24
Guarantee a universal income of €800 per month to all citizens without conditions	0,42	-0,09	0,51
Reduce subsidies to private sector schools and reserve them for public sector schools	0,41	-0,01	0,42
Reauthorise spanking	0,37	0,18	0,19
Close all nuclear power plants in the next 20 years	0,33	0,22	0,11
Create a 1% tax on all income to finance the fight against global warming	0,09	0,17	-0,08
Give the right to vote to foreigners living in France for 5 years	-0,03	-0,22	0,19
Allow pupils who wish to do so to have access to a halal menu in the canteens	-0,04	0,04	-0,08
Limit the duration of the RSA payment	-0,23	-0,08	-0,15
Establish a free trade zone with the United States	-0,38	-0,21	-0,17
Abolish the financing of health care for foreigners in an irregular situation	-0,47	-0,59	0,12
Adding a reference to France's Christian roots to the constitution	-0,54	-0,58	0,04
Exiting the European Union	-0,72	-1,48	0,76
Talk more about the history of Europe and less about the history of France in school textbooks	-0,72	-0,53	-0,19
Replace a Christian holiday such as Ascension or Pentecost with a public holiday on 9 December to celebrate the separation of church and state	-0,80	-0,71	-0,09
Reduce the number of civil servants by one third to reduce public spending	-0,80	-0,34	-0,46
Abolish the 35-hour working week and return to 40 hours	-1,07	-0,5	-0,57
Privatise the Post Office and open it to competition	-1,32	-0,78	-0,54
Authorise town halls to refuse the construction of social housing on their territory	-1,48	-1,21	-0,27

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