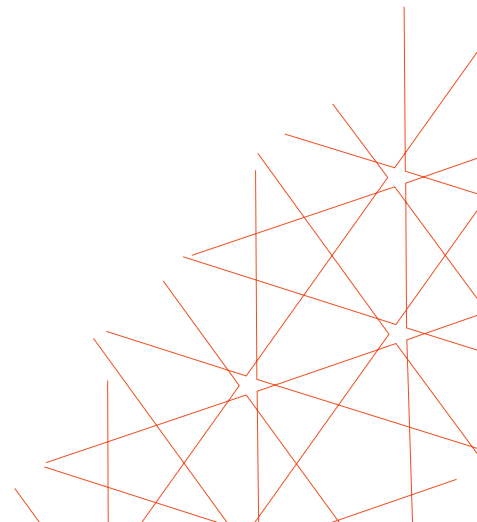


IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS IN THE 'YELLOW VEST' MOVEMENT

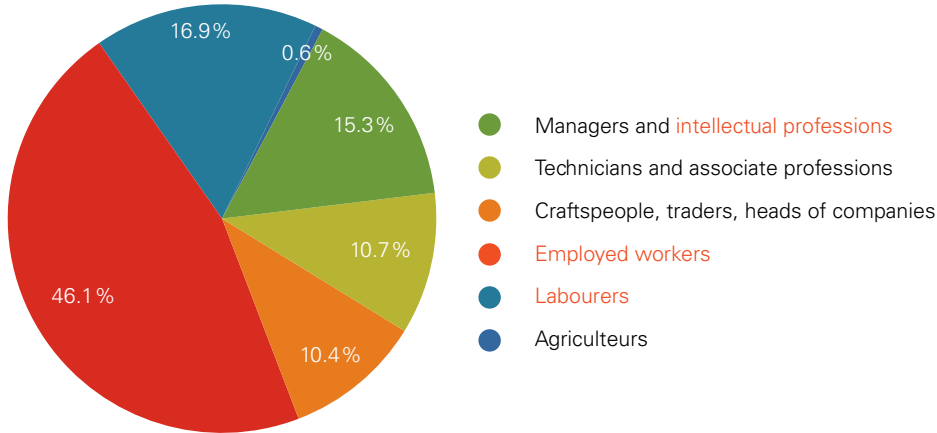


The ongoing mobilisation of yellow vest adherents is arguably the most enduring and significant social movement in France since May 1968. It will have profound political consequences, though it is still too early to gauge their extent. Today, one of the most pressing questions for understanding what these long-term consequences might be is the political direction taken by the movement.

This article highlights the atypical, even paradoxical political profile of this movement, which is caught in a dilemma between unifying its demands, and the strength in numbers this gives it, and the deep ideological differences that continue to divide it. We will begin by reviewing the mainly material factors underpinning the yellow vests' need for unity. Next, we will examine the ideological fault lines running through the movement, in particular its penetration by the far right. Finally, we will outline some thoughts on how this influence could be countered and challenged.

These thoughts will be based mainly on the results of a survey conducted by our research group *Quantité Critique* (Critical Mass) among groups of yellow vests organising actions via social media on Facebook. The survey was carried out in the first two weeks of December and involved six Facebook groups spanning the entire country. A digital copy of the questionnaire was distributed among these groups. Participation in the survey was voluntary. In all, 572 responses were collected, providing extensive information about the yellow vests, their life circumstances (family and economic situation, socio-demographic data, etc.) and political opinions (commitments to political parties, trade unions or associations, voting habits, political views and values). We will also refer to the findings of other surveys and national polls, by way of comparison.

PROFESSIONS AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES



A GRASS-ROOTS MOVEMENT BORN OUT OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

In social terms, our respondents constitute a relatively homogeneous group. They point to a movement made up of working people enduring considerable economic precarity and experiencing a profound sense of being undervalued that makes them feel left behind and unfairly trapped at the bottom of the social ladder.

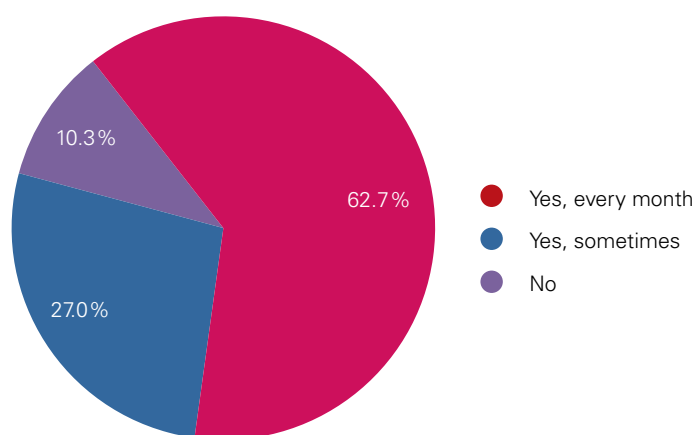
In terms of socio-professional categories, the working classes (both *labourers and employed workers*) are heavily over-represented, accounting for two-thirds of the sample. *Employed workers* are particularly over-represented, comprising 46% of our sample, compared with a national average of 27%. This is primarily a movement of low-paid workers in low-skilled and socially undervalued jobs. The *employed*

workers category also has by far the highest proportion of women (nearly three-quarters), making it more vulnerable to precarity.

Furthermore, these workers are at high risk of poverty, with an overwhelming proportion reporting varying degrees of financial hardship. Just 10% of our sample said they do not experience money problems.

This obviously ties in with the movement's number one priority, which is to protest against poverty and inequalities and vent a sense of fiscal injustice. For the yellow vests feel they are being unfairly taxed, while the richest members of society benefit from the government's generosity.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOU HAVE TROUBLE MAKING ENDS MEET?



However, the yellow vests' mobilisation is not simply the result of feeling undervalued due to economic hardship and being unjustly targeted by an unequal system of taxation. Contrary to what media commentators may have said during the first months of the protest, the yellow vest movement is not a revolt against taxation, but rather the expression of a deeper and more general malaise centred around the issue of inequality. So the yellow vests' fiscal discontent is more a call for justice than a rejection of taxation¹.

On the other hand, contrary to what some people claim, the alleged opposition between urban and rural areas was clearly not a decisive factor in the emergence of the yellow vest movement. Its protests are affecting all parts of France, and 'town versus country' does not seem to be an underlying principle of the yellow vest mobilisation. As the geographer Aurélien Delpirou notes², 92% of French people live in or near urban centres and two-thirds of households living below the poverty line are in densely populated urban areas. Accordingly, social inequalities are most apparent in cities, where the richest and poorest people live side by side. So the yellow vest movement is not a movement of left-behind rural dwellers but a mobilisation of disadvantaged citizens from all over the country.

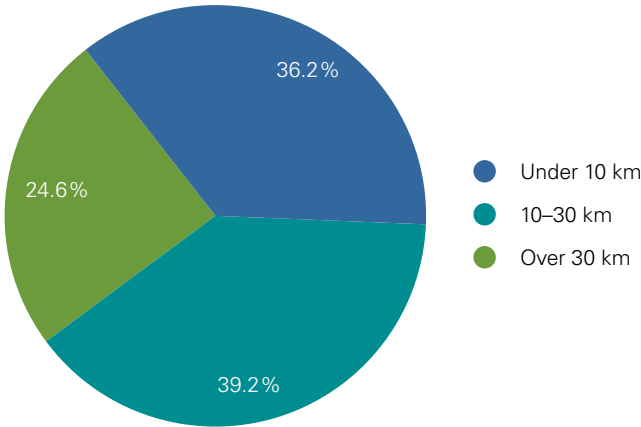
Because the movement began as a protest against the carbon tax, the idea of car dependency has also been much discussed. There can be no doubt that this plays an extremely important role in the yellow vests' actions. However, a motorists' protest movement is not necessarily a protest movement of country dwellers. Car dependency is not necessarily at its highest in the countryside.

1 Alexis Spire, *Le Monde*, www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/11/16/gilets-jaunes-il-n-est-pas-surprenant-que-le-mouvement-ait-pris-dans-les-zones-rurales-ou-les-villes-moyennes_5384202_3224.html.

2 Aurélien Delpirou, *La Vie des idées*, laviedesidees.fr/La-couleur-des-gilets-jaunes.html.

For example, residents of Île-de-France (Paris and the surrounding area) spend an average of 75 minutes in their vehicle every day, compared with 45 minutes for people living in rural areas³. The distance variable cannot be understood independently of the time variable, and of considerations regarding transport infrastructure. Although Île-de-France is far better served by public transport, its inhabitants use cars just as much as people living in other regions, mainly because public transport is very overcrowded, but also because of urban sprawl.

HOW FAR DO YOU LIVE FROM YOUR PLACE OF WORK?



Our survey results do not indicate any definite link between membership of the yellow vest movement and distance travelled to work, suggesting that car dependency – while a crucial issue – is not as important a criterion as the precarity and in-work hardship outlined above. There is undoubtedly a link here to the gradual expansion of the yellow vests’ demands, from fighting the carbon tax to challenging wealth distribution in general. Rather than resolving inequalities between prosperous and ‘left-behind’ areas, it is social inequalities that the yellow vests wish to tackle. What is more, this claim is borne out by a representative national survey conducted by the Elabe Institute⁴, which concludes that “the French are angrier about pay (37%) and social (29%) inequalities than about regional disparities (6%)”.

This economic hardship is also reflected in the world of work, an area in which our respondents report a very deep sense of being undervalued. Only a quarter say that they feel valued for the work they do. The very high rate of negative responses points to a widespread feeling among the working classes that their work is not worthwhile, either because it is insufficiently remunerated (yellow vests commonly cite the issue of purchasing power, with many saying they earn just enough to get by, but not enough to have the quality of life they would like), or because it is not rewarding or empowering (many report feelings of absurdity and alienation at work, as if they are interchangeable cogs in a machine).

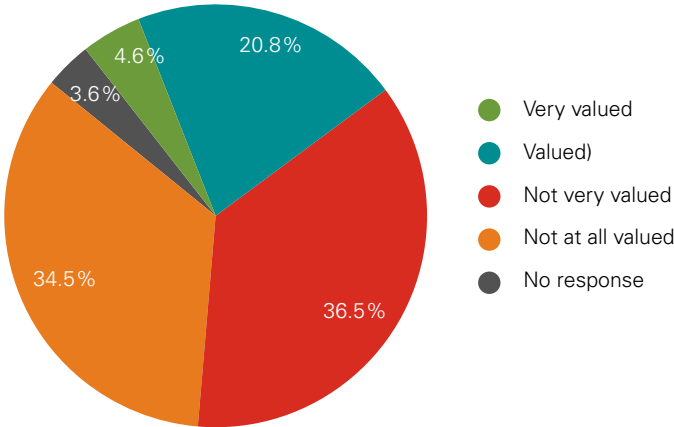
This experience of financial hardship, unrewarding work and fiscal injustice is what all yellow vests have in common. Another thing they share is that they have correctly identified what is to blame, namely the neoliberal policies pursued by right-wing and left-wing governing parties alike over the last 40 years, policies that favour the concentration of wealth and the unbridled commodification of social relations

3 According to the *Enquête Nationale Transports et Déplacements* (National Transport and Travel Survey) conducted by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and the Ministry for the Ecological Transition in 2007–2008.

4 Cécile Crouzel, *Le Figaro*, www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2019/02/19/31003-20190219ARTFIG00255-la-sociologie-plus-que-la-geographie-explique-les-gilets-jaunes.php.

to benefit a small base of supporters⁵. This forms the logical basis for their other shared characteristic: a rejection of the policies of Emmanuel Macron and his government, and more broadly a populist rejection of neoliberal elites (populist in the sense of pitching the people against the governing elite). It is unsurprising, then, that the ideological polarisation within the movement is largely between the two major parties positing analyses of this kind.

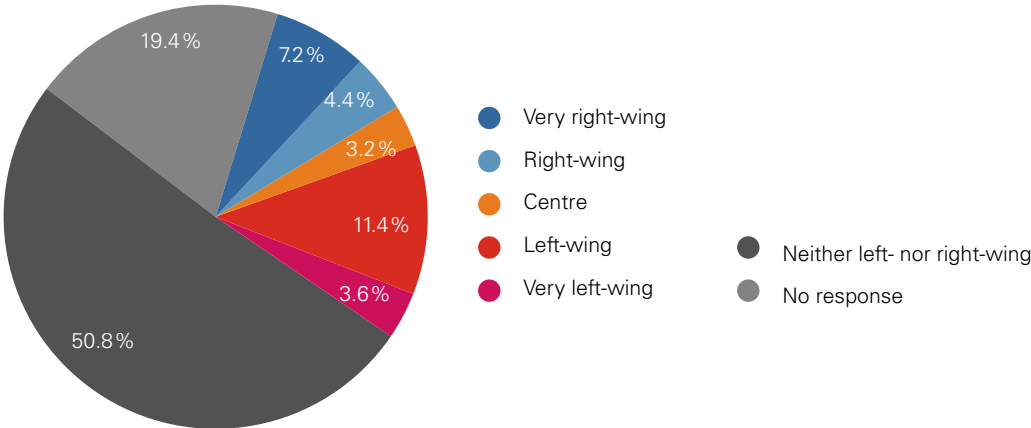
DO YOU FEEL VALUED FOR THE WORK YOU DO?



POLITICAL POLARISATION PRIOR TO THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT

It is important to bear in mind that our survey results date from December 2018, which means that they reflect the early days of yellow vest mobilisation. Consequently, they give us an insight into our respondents’ political leanings prior to joining the movement, based on their position on the left-right spectrum (as indicated when completing the questionnaire) and how they voted in the 2017 presidential election.

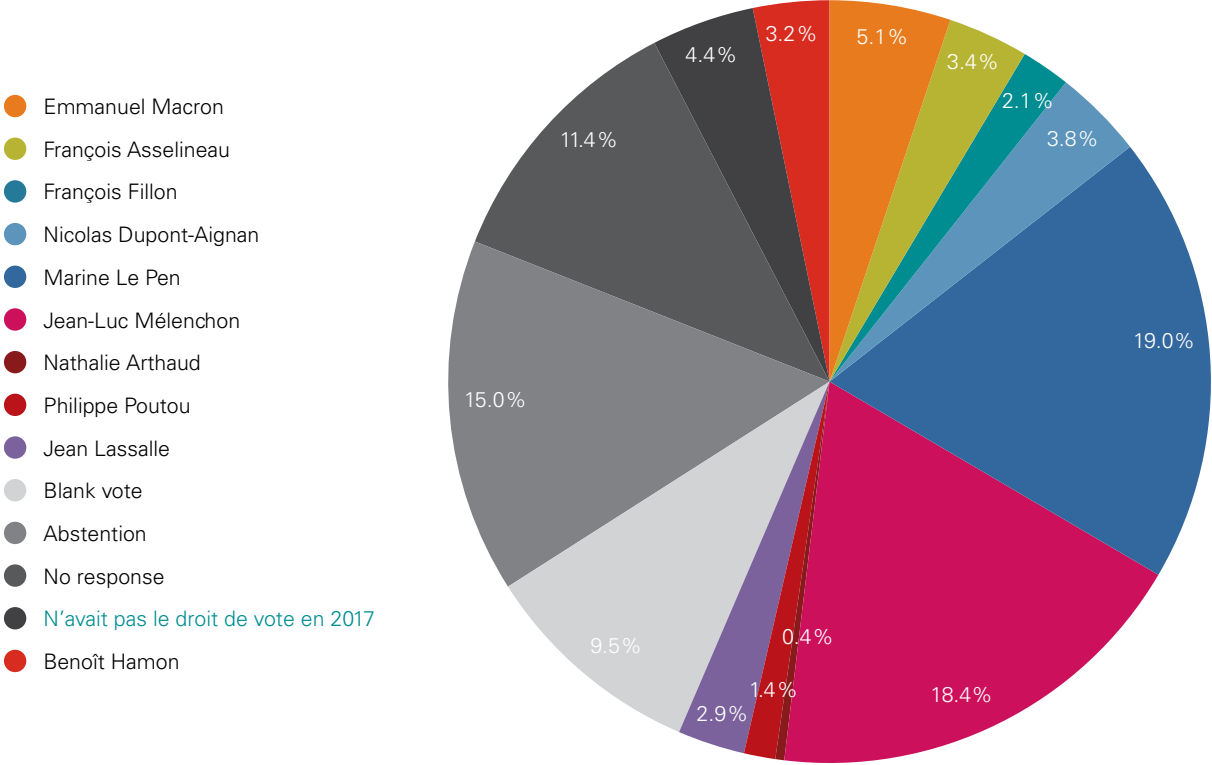
STATED POLITICAL POSITION



5 Bruno Amable, Stefano Palombarini, *L'illusion du bloc bourgeois*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2018.

The results of the respondents' self-positioning on a political scale reveal a significant departure from traditional distinctions. Over half our sample refused to position themselves on the left-right spectrum. Indeed, just 30% opted to do so. Of those who did, slightly more were left-leaning. The least popular position was the centre, which is associated with the government. These results no doubt reflect the fact that the alternation of right-wing and left-wing governments has had little impact on the overall neoliberal course pursued by the State over the past 40 or more years. They also constitute a rejection of the representative system that makes the left-right clash in elections the be-all and end-all of political expression. Viewed this way, claiming to be 'neither left- nor right-wing' is all about avoiding the trap of being 'dispossessed' by political bodies which, in the eyes of the protesters, are merely pursuing the same old policies under different political labels. That said, care must be taken not to treat the 51% of respondents who described themselves this way (neither left- nor right-wing) as a unified block. For such a response may also have been given by far-right voters keen to avoid the social stigma of describing themselves as 'very right-wing'. Bear in mind, too, that 'neither left nor right' has recently become a slogan of the far-right Rassemblement National (National Rally) party.

While this result conceals a multitude of political outlooks, one aspect they all share is a rejection of neoliberal centre parties. This will become apparent when we examine how respondents say they voted in the 2017 presidential election.



The two most popular candidates among the sample were Marine Le Pen (leader of National Rally (RN), then known as the National Front) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (representing left-wing political platform La France Insoumise (Unbowed France)). This points to very strong political polarisation, despite the majority's refusal to position themselves on the left-right spectrum. Aside from these two blocks with diametrically opposed values, united only in their denunciation of the ruling elite, a high proportion of the sample either did not vote at all or cast a blank vote.

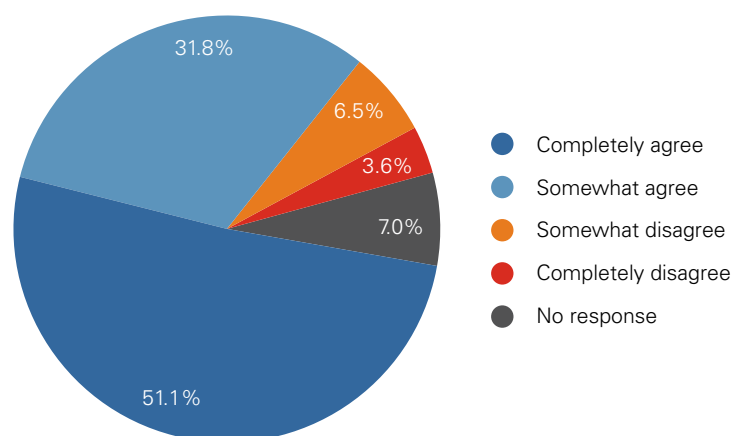
Consequently, we can identify three main voting blocks of similar weights: a left-wing block (Mélenchon/Hamon/Poutou/Arthaud – 123 respondents), a far-right block (Le Pen/Dupont-Aignan –

120 respondents), and an abstention/blank vote block (130 respondents). This shows the yellow vest movement to be a battlefield for three roughly equal forces: two groups of 'militants' either side of a third group disengaged from the electoral game.

This polarisation is also reflected at the ideological level. We asked our respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with various statements on issues such as the environment, immigrants and the unemployed. The latter two indicators served as points of comparison with other opinion polls carried out on less specific target groups. However, their main purpose was to gauge the prevalence of xenophobic and individualistic/liberal views among the yellow vests, in order to better understand the ideological orientations of this politically diverse movement.

Before moving on to the more divisive issues, we should first note that the environment does not seem to be a topic of debate within the yellow vest movement. Despite attempts to portray the yellow vests as a movement of consumers putting their own comfort ahead of environmental considerations, or even as a movement of climate sceptics, an overwhelming majority of our respondents said they were aware of the danger posed by climate change.

“IF THINGS CARRY ON THE WAY THEY ARE, WE WILL SOON BE EXPERIENCING A MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE.”



These findings belie attempts to set the yellow vest movement against the current climate movement. Their social profiles may be very different (with the climate movement predominantly a phenomenon among the higher social classes⁶), but their goals are in no way contradictory.

The yellow vests' eco-awareness is apparent in their consumption habits, though these are in many ways forced on them by their circumstances: many pay attention to their energy consumption (93%) and buy local produce (63%), yet many also have no choice but to travel by car (83%) because of where they live (67% live in towns or villages with under 20,000 inhabitants, often on the outskirts of cities, and 36% live in rural areas).

These statistics mirror findings by researchers at Sciences-Po Grenoble⁷, which suggest that 31% of yellow vests would be willing to accept a reduction in their standard of living in order to protect the environment.

6 See our survey on this other mobilisation: reporterre.net/Qui-manifeste-pour-le-climat-Des-sociologues-repondent.

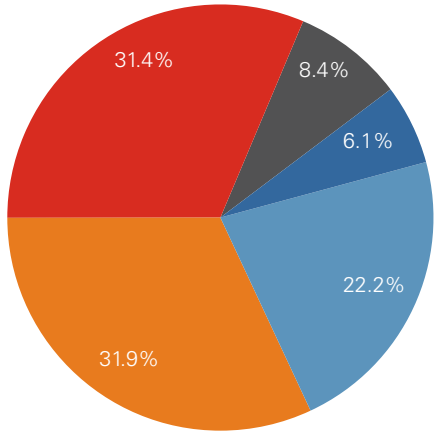
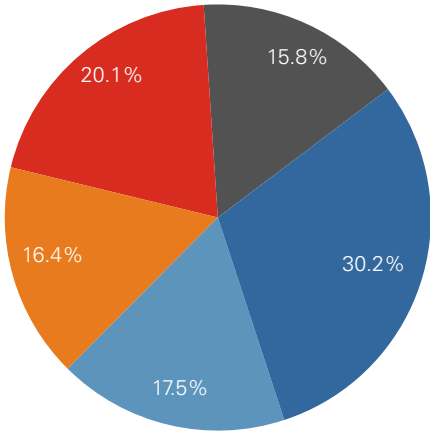
7 T. Guerra, F. Gonthier, C. Alexandre, F. Gougou und S. Persico, *Le Monde*, www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/01/26/qui-sont-vraiment-les-gilets-jaunes-les-resultats-d-une-etude-sociologique_5414831_3232.html.

This is a very significant proportion, especially given the great economic hardship many of them face and their demand that the wealthiest people should do more to address the problems facing society.

The other two ideological positions we tested proved more divisive within the yellow vest movement.

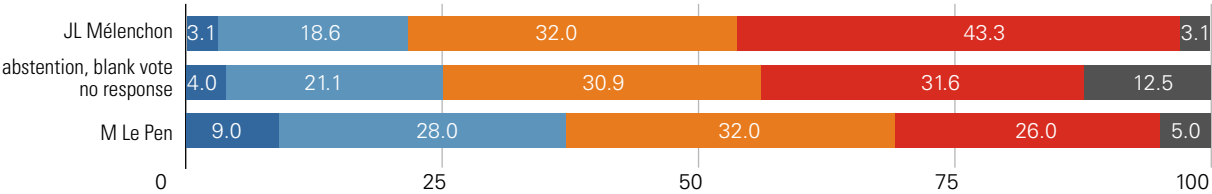
“When it comes to jobs, a French person should be given priority over a legal immigrant.”

“Unemployed people could find work if they really wanted to.”

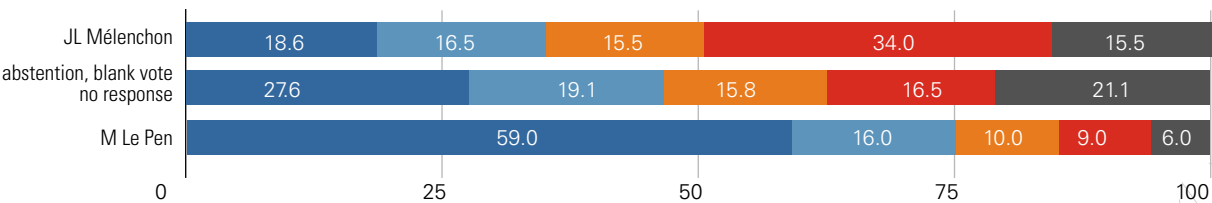


At first sight, opinions seem rather mixed, but the xenophobic outlook (measured in terms of supporting priority recruitment of French citizens rather than foreigners) comes out slightly ahead, while the liberal outlook (measured by the attribution of personal responsibility to the unemployed) is a view held by a minority, albeit a significant one. On the face of it, the pairing of xenophobic with anti-liberal tendencies makes little sense, since surveys on values have found that xenophobia and liberalism (as well as authoritarian tendencies) tend to be correlated. To resolve this puzzle, we need to cross-reference the split with electoral data showing the starting positions in the ideological battle that was taking shape in the movement’s early days.

“Unemployed people could find work if they really wanted to.”



“When it comes to jobs, a French person should be given priority over a legal immigrant.”



● Completely agree ● Somewhat agree ● Somewhat disagree ● Completely disagree ● No response

As we can see, there are substantial ideological differences between Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing voters and Marine Le Pen's far-right voters, which is hardly surprising. Between the two lies the undecided third, whose responses, when given, are positioned mid-way between the two 'militant' groups. However, this third group also has a far higher 'no response' rate.

Today, almost five months on from our survey, and despite a significant presence of far-right elements within the movement, it is clear that the yellow vests have not been politicised around xenophobic subjects. Their demands remain resolutely geared towards fair taxation, the redistribution of wealth through public services, and the democratisation of institutions by means of citizens' initiative referendums. If anything, these are left-wing demands.

That is not to say they cannot be taken up by far-right movements, but the fact that only these demands are being heard is significant and points to the lack of traction of xenophobic discourse within the movement.

WHAT IS THE EXPLANATION FOR THE FAR RIGHT'S RELATIVE FAILURE IN THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT?

A Kantar Sofres survey⁸ for *Le Monde* published on 12 March 2019 found that 36% of yellow vests supported the ideas of National Rally (RN), compared with 26% of the public as a whole, and that 28% said they had voted for its leader Marine Le Pen (compared to 21% of the French public). These differences are small enough to be attributed solely to the over-representation of the working classes (manual and non-manual workers) among both the yellow vests and RN voters.

For example, according to an Ifop survey⁹ published on 29 March, 33% of working-class respondents thought that "Marine Le Pen would be doing a better job than Emmanuel Macron if she was in power today", while an Elbe poll¹⁰ published on 27 March found that 25% of non-manual workers and 40% of manual workers planned to vote for Le Pen in the European elections. In other words, interest in the far-right party is no greater among the yellow vests than among national samples of the social categories to which they are most likely to belong.

The primary reason why far-right issues do not feature in the yellow vests' general demands has to do with the grass-roots nature of the movement's organisation and the desire to maintain unity. This is illustrated by the work of Raphael Challier¹¹, who conducted an ethnographic study in a village in Lorraine that has a high proportion of yellow vest activists. He quotes Baptiste, a temporary worker and La France Insoumise activist, who keeps his political opinions quiet because "not everyone agrees, and that creates problems", and Pascal, a manual worker and local National Rally official, who supports the movement but keeps his distance because he fears "getting into an argument with people if he expresses his views". Local leaders favour consensual demands in order not to create political divisions that would be detrimental to a movement whose main strength lies in numbers (resulting in high levels

8 Lucie Soullier, *Le Monde*, www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/03/12/marine-le-pen-ne-realise-pas-l-opa-esperee-sur-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes_5434643_823448.html.

9 Ifop, *Balises d'opinion #61*, www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/116084-Rapport-CN-SR-N61.pdf.

10 Elabe, *Les français et les élections européennes*, elabe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/20190327_elabe_bfmtv_les-francais-et-les-elections-europeennes-1.pdf.

11 Jean-Marc B, *Mediapart*, blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-marc-b/blog/080319/la-mobilisation-des-gilets-jaunes-dans-un-bourg-rural-de-lorraine.

of public support and a nationwide presence, as well as the strong legitimacy stemming from its diverse membership). For example, this is why the call for a citizens' initiative referendum is so successful: because it can be all things to all people.

A second reason, which has gradually emerged in the course of the movement's protests, is widespread criticism of the violent police crackdown seen every Saturday in the course of demonstrations by the yellow vests. This violence immediately established a parallel between the yellow vest movement and the left-wing social movements that have elicited similar responses from the government, such as the Labour Law protests in 2016. Generally speaking, this situation puts the far right in an awkward position, because it cannot simultaneously defend the yellow vests' right to demonstrate, and – as it would normally do – the hard-line response by the police (the security forces constituting a vital share of its electorate). On 28 April, this denunciation of police violence resulted in the formation of the association 'Mutilés pour l'exemple'¹² (Maimed To Set an Example) by a number of yellow vests injured during protests, including Jérôme Rodrigues, one of the movement's leaders. The group gave its first press conference in a room provided by the communist-run municipal government in Gennevilliers, in the presence of a communist member of parliament, proving the ease with which the movement can cosy up to the left on this issue.

Statements made by the movement's leaders should also be noted. Despite spanning a wide range of positions, all seem committed to adhering to the consensual demands outlined above as well as criticism of the government and an avowed determination not to be 'appropriated'. Indeed, attempts to forge ties with political parties have gone down very badly with the movement, resulting in various instances of back-peddling. One notable example was the yellow vest list for the European elections, which initially split over a possible tie-up with the Italian government and was subsequently shelved altogether following grass-roots accusations of 'political hijacking'¹³.

In fact, the movement still offers considerable scope for challenging the far right, especially in the run-up to the European elections, which will constitute a high point for Marine Le Pen's National Rally. The yellow vests' ability to remain united and resist the lure of the Le Pen vote will undoubtedly be tested in these elections. How well they succeed will become clearer in the coming weeks. For the time being, rejection of the government remains the movement's dominant theme, but its future direction remains wide open.

12 Le Monde with AFP, *Le Monde*, www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/04/28/gilets-jaunes-un-collectif-de-victimes-de-violences-policieres-appelle-a-une-manifestation-nationale_5455937_3224.html.

13 Le Figaro with AFP, *Le Figaro*, www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/gilets-jaunes-dialoguer-avec-di-maio-a-ete-une-erreur-ingrid-levavasseur-20190401.

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Zakaria Bendali

Gala Kabbaj

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