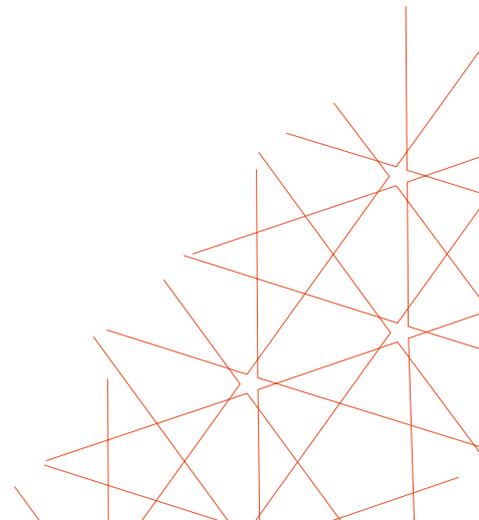


# **THE CORE OF THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT REJECTS THE FAR RIGHT**



Quantité Critique (Critical Mass) is a group of sociology lecturers, doctoral students and undergraduates who have been investigating social movements in France since September 2018. For their survey on the 'gilets jaunes' (yellow vests) movement, they distributed questionnaires in a number of national Facebook groups linked to the movement. A total of 526 questionnaires were returned, covering the respondents' degree of politicisation and links to the world of work. The group is also carrying out field work on several roundabouts occupied by yellow vest protesters in the towns of Senlis, Compiègne and Beauvais, in the Oise department in northern France. This consists of a face-to-face questionnaire survey, whose results are currently being processed, as well as a qualitative survey involving some 50 interviews with activists.

Are the yellow vests a populist movement that provides a breeding ground for the far right? It is a hard-hitting question and one that can betray a disdain for the working classes when posed by certain commentators. Nonetheless, it does need to be asked, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the evidence from all sociological surveys is that the yellow vests and their supporters include large numbers of far-right voters. While not in the majority, the presence of people espousing such political views raises questions about the yellow vests' ability to constitute a movement in defence of democracy and social progress. Secondly, five months after the movement began, polls put Rassemblement National (National Rally, the party formerly known as the National Front) far ahead of all other formations opposed to 'Macronism'. These much-trumpeted figures are encouraging parts of the media to portray the far-right party as the natural receptacle for the anger witnessed across the country. The risk of the yellow vest mobilisation veering to the far right is therefore an issue that cannot be ignored. Finally, we need to pay special attention to this question in light of the publication by Luc Rouban of a poll<sup>1</sup> whose results appear to indicate the predominance of populist political leanings among the movement's sympathisers and suggest that National Rally leader Marine Le Pen is the main beneficiary of the yellow vest movement.

This interpretation of the far-right politicisation of the movement is far from unanimously borne out by the plethora of surveys carried out since November. While they yield very similar results on some points, such as the movement's socio-professional make-up, more work is needed to analyse the political dynamics at work. The surveys sometimes suggest contradictory ideological positions, which considerably complicates the debate.

In this article, we will evaluate the hypothesis that the yellow vests embody a brand of populism favourable to the far right, taking as our starting point the analyses conducted by various teams of sociologists and political scientists. The large amount of available data can sow confusion, leading to the circulation of statistics and results that were not produced by the same methods or involving the same target groups. However, it can also be turned to advantage. Each of the methods used tends to focus on a particular dimension of the movement. For example, surveys carried out face-to-face are more likely to record the respondents' openly avowed positions, whereas anonymous online surveys may reveal opinions that people find harder to own up to. Similarly, the diversity of target groups covered by the surveys can pinpoint differences in politicisation depending on how close people are to the heart of the movement. What are the impacts of the mobilisation on these different groups? By favouring an approach that distinguishes active yellow vests from those who merely support them, we will highlight the different political subjectification processes at work at the movement's core and on its margins. This distinction will qualify the idea that the yellow vest movement has a propensity towards 'populism', of which National Rally is the primary beneficiary.

# THE PUZZLE OF THE ACTIVE YELLOW VESTS: HOW HAS THE REJECTION OF FAR-RIGHT POLITICISATION BEEN ACHIEVED?

All the studies suggest that people join the yellow vest movement from highly polarised political positions. An obvious way of characterising its adherents would be to look at where they place themselves on the left-right spectrum. However, one of the movement's defining features is the refusal by a majority of its members to refer to this type of binary opposition. The Sciences-Po Grenoble<sup>2</sup> survey conducted in late December 2018, based on an online questionnaire disseminated in yellow vest Facebook groups right across France, found that 60% of respondents did not position themselves politically, but of those that did, slightly more were left-leaning. The survey<sup>3</sup> by Quantité Critique, carried out using a similar method and at around the same time, yielded similar results, with over 50% saying they were neither left nor right, 12% positioning themselves on the right (including 7% who identified as very right-wing) and 15% on the left (3.6% very left-wing). In total, adding up the 'neither left nor right' and the non-responses, 70.2% of yellow vests in the sample did not position themselves on the left-right spectrum<sup>4</sup>.

Since the left-right opposition was a relevant frame of reference for only around a third of the sample in both surveys, another way to assess the yellow vests' political leanings is to look at who they voted for in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. The Quantité Critique survey put Marine Le Pen and left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon level-pegging, each having secured 19% of the vote among respondents. Despite significant variations, all the surveys agree that voters for Le Pen's party (then known as the National Front) are a significant presence within the movement. Given that, according to well-established evidence from electoral sociology, some of the non-responses are likely to conceal Le Pen voters, it is probable that the far right took the largest number of votes in 2017 among those surveyed.

However, these figures must be treated with caution. While they provide a valuable snapshot of the balance of power in November 2018, they do not factor in the effects of the mobilisation over time. The place of National Rally (RN) is thus a question that must be posed dynamically. How does one explain its failure to dominate the movement, given that such a high proportion of yellow vests voted for Marine Le Pen? Despite attempts by far-right activists to steer the movement, including by means of intensive propaganda around the Marrakesh Accords in November, xenophobia has remained a marginal feature of its internal discussions. Migration has never been presented as a decisive issue. Calls to curb immigration feature among the yellow vests' demands here and there, but in the vast majority of cases it is not the issue that really matters to them<sup>5</sup>.

Instead, their demands have tended to focus on reinstating the solidarity tax on wealth (ISF) and raising wages. Political scientist Samuel Hayat<sup>6</sup> has highlighted the relevance of the 'moral economy' concept developed by E. P. Thompson in interpreting the values of the yellow vests, namely that there exists a tacit consensus about what is a legitimate way to run an economy and that this has been undermined by successive reforms.

This explains why the yellow vests' demands are "the formulation of essentially moral economic principles"<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, spokespersons such as François Boulo and Jérôme Rodriguez have systematically maintained that anti-migrant demands have no place in the movement. Even those representatives identified in the early days of the movement as being close to the far right, such as Maxime Nicolle, have shown a reluctance to engage publicly in racist discourse. It is noteworthy in this regard that Benjamin Cauchy, an activist for right-wing party Debout La France, who has had little to do with the occupations and demonstrations, is one of the few to have criticised President Macron's Grand Débat (Great Debate) for censoring the issue of migration.

This stance by the movement's figureheads, whose dominant strategy is to sideline the migration issue, is very similar to the one found among many local activists protesting at roundabouts. In this respect, the roundabout leaders have played a crucial role in developing the conversations, often discouraging the yellow vests from taking up positions that would endanger the unity of the movement. Migration does not feature in its publicity material (leaflets, signs, etc.) nor among the issues raised at public debates. Indeed, surveys have found that a large majority of the yellow vests have a clear understanding of what the movement is and is not about. Migration is viewed as a 'sensitive issue', one liable to undermine the movement's other social and economic demands. Of the 700 questionnaires processed so far by researchers at the Centre Emile-Durkheim in Bordeaux, only 22 mention immigration.



Such a framing of the debate, combined with the fact that a very large subsection of yellow vests, both left-wing voters and those who don't vote at all, hold resolutely anti-racist views, has thwarted any attempts to politicise these issues. The controversy over anti-Semitism has not given rise to any regular political action on either the right or left, as it is seen by members as a media creation external to the movement.

This suppression of xenophobia among certain elements of the yellow vest movement runs very deep indeed. It leads them to self-regulate their public positions in order to preserve the unity of the movement. This includes Marine Le Pen voters, who are highly disciplined when expressing their stance in public, separating their own personal views from the opinions that can be voiced in collective discussions. In the Oise department, for example, only four of the 43 Marine Le Pen voters participating in the movement who were questioned by Quantité Critique believed that the movement should take a stance on immigration.

Obviously, the impacts of such self-regulation on political subjectivities are difficult to gauge. Does it actually devalue far-right ideas or simply mask xenophobic attitudes that remain unabated? Only future surveys on the ideological and electoral attitudes of the yellow vests will enable conclusions to be drawn about this aspect of the movement. However, it should be noted that xenophobia on the far right is not a mere adjunct, a specific, separate dimension of politicisation. On the contrary, it is the prism through which all political issues are viewed. Thus, economic problems are caused by migrant workers, insecurity by a failure to integrate, and so on.

This tendency among the yellow vests to censor any xenophobic element in their political discourse and deploy rhetoric that does not require a foreign scapegoat can only be beneficial in terms of creating alternative, emancipatory societies. It is a surprising state of affairs, given the political background of some of the participants. However, it seems to have been of little interest to the rolling news channels, which have preferred to focus on the handful of anti-Semitic and racist incidents that are, in fact, uncharacteristic of the way the movement's internal discussions are organised.

## FROM CRISIS OF WORK TO CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

By marginalising xenophobia, the yellow vest movement has been able to occupy a platform of demands centred around the 'ability to live decently', as highlighted by the Sciences-Po Grenoble survey. This *"is reflected in demands that are firmly rooted in day-to-day life (loss of purchasing power, inadequate wages and pensions, anger at high taxes, etc.) and express the yellow vests' desire 'to be able to live from their work and not just survive<sup>8'</sup> "*. The value of work is such a core issue for the movement because so many of its members come from the most precarious sections of the working classes. The Sciences-Po Grenoble researchers found that 74% of the people they surveyed could be classed as 'precarious'<sup>9</sup> while 89% of the yellow vests surveyed by Quantité Critique said they "found it difficult to make ends meet". Conversely, a poll conducted by the Elabe Institute<sup>10</sup> found that 27% of those who found it hard to make ends meet identified as yellow vests, 7% more than the average. The core of the movement is thus made up of working people (75% according to the Centre Emile-Durkheim survey, 67% according to Sciences-Po Grenoble).

While geographical location and transport were the initial triggers, the yellow vests soon took up the cause of pay and wages. What makes the movement unusual is undoubtedly the way it circumvents traditional collective bargaining mechanisms. By late November, the calls for pay increases were so loud that purchasing power had become central to the movement's demands. More surprisingly, the demands for increases were not addressed to employers or their representatives but to the state. Few commentators picked up on this, except from the well-worn angle of the crisis in trade unionism. In reality, it can be explained by the real-life experiences of employees and the crisis in established mechanisms of collective bargaining.

The mobilised workers seem to come predominantly from small companies that are less subject to industrial unrest. Indeed, the field survey carried out by Quantité Critique in the Oise found that employees of VSEs/SMEs were much more likely than average to say they were on "friendly" or "cordial" terms with their employer (over 3/4 fell into this category), with employers in such companies often being part of the workforce. Given the positive attitudes generally towards small employers and the reality of the financial difficulties facing small businesses, collective action is rarely considered in such organisations. When asked about recent requests for pay rises, those taking part in occupations in the Oise were sceptical. In response to the question "Have you asked your employer for a pay rise?", the answers included "What for?" and " We know what the answer would be...".

In such circumstances, industrial disputes take place away from the company and outside working time. The yellow vest movement thus reflects the impracticality of decentralised bargaining at company level, as conceived by the Sarkozy and Hollande governments. The state was therefore the logical target for the protesters' frustrations. However, alongside this crisis in collective bargaining was the state's refusal to offer a solution to the wage demands expressed through the broad signifier of purchasing power<sup>11</sup>. The executive's proposals in December were deemed inadequate and out of sync with the nature of

the demands. Furthermore, the Grand Débat has illustrated the government's desire to sideline the wage issue, which has not been mentioned or taken into account by a government which nonetheless repeats the mantra that "work must pay".



Distrust with those in power, and to a certain extent 'elites' in general, is therefore not necessarily an expression of hostility towards state intervention or 'populist' fervour among the mobilised working classes. It results from the government's unwillingness to address the social demands at the heart of the protest. This stalemate explains the emergence of institutional demands. Indeed, issues of democracy have come to be a central plank of the yellow vests' demands, encouraged by the militant practices that have emerged within the movement (meetings on roundabouts, autonomous action groups, general meetings, social media forums). The introduction of a citizens' initiative referendum (RIC) on government policy proposals has in itself become a policy proposal symbolising the deadlock caused by government heel-dragging. It is one of the solutions identified by the working classes to address the crisis of intermediation. Examining the movement's core demands thus tends to rule out the hypothesis of a far-right politicisation of its central actors as the main issues addressed (wages, democracy) do not resonate with far-right political concerns.

# A MOVEMENT IN CONCENTRIC CIRCLES? AN ATTEMPT TO THEORISE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN YELLOW VEST SUPPORTERS AND ACTIVISTS

Notwithstanding the above, the success of the far right and reactionary ideas on the margins of the movement among the yellow vests' declared supporters is a question that cannot be ignored. As previously noted, according to a poll published by Luc Rouban and the declared voting intentions for the European elections, National Rally appears to be the opposition party that has benefited most from the current crisis. However, it is important not to treat the yellow vests as a single homogeneous entity. Whether it be roundabout protesters, cyber-activists on Facebook or people who support the movement without getting actively involved, the views expressed by the different groups are too varied to enable such a simplification.

The scale of observation thus has a decisive influence on survey results. This leads us to the hypothesis of a movement arranged in concentric circles. Far-right rhetoric goes down well among those on the outer margins, who tend to be less mobilised and more receptive to reactionary agendas. By contrast, such ideas have great difficulty penetrating the hard core of active yellow vests. It is essential to separate these two levels of analysis in order to understand how, in a dynamic way, hands-on participation in the movement engenders a political socialisation that distances those who take part from far-right ideas.

On the margins of the mobilisation, we find a section of the general public that supports the yellow vests without actively participating in their revolt. National surveys of this group are particularly revealing. As Luc Rouban demonstrates, it is characterised by a high proportion of far-right views. His analysis compiled a tolerance index based on respondents' hostility towards immigration and desire for the return of the death penalty and repeal of the law allowing same-sex marriage. He found that 65% of people strongly supporting the yellow vests had a low tolerance index, compared with just 38% of those who did not support them. Luc Rouban also presents yellow vest supporters as a movement dominated by attitudes that he calls "populist" because they include criticism of elites and a desire for participation. To describe this legitimate mistrust and demand for more participatory institutions as populism is misleading. The term populism is too often used to discredit the aspirations of a part of the population for greater political participation.

That is why this survey method of linking opinions about the movement to political views among national samples fails to do justice to the complexity of the political issues raised by the yellow vests. Given the confusion over the target group (yellow vests or those who claim to support them) and the normative implications of his analyses, Rouban's method is not able to measure the impact of people's degree of participation on their ideological positioning. To ascertain the actual distribution of far-right views within the movement, it would have been necessary to differentiate between active yellow vests and mere sympathisers.

Unfortunately, few national surveys have grasped the importance of this distinction. Only the Kantar Sofres Institute<sup>12</sup>, in a survey conducted between 21 and 25 February during the 15th week of protests, differentiated between active participants and sympathisers. It found that active yellow vests were less authoritarian and xenophobic than those who merely supported the movement. In terms of xenophobia, 50% of the active yellow vests felt that there were "too many immigrants in France", compared with 54% of their supporters (national average = 44%). In some areas, active participants even scored below the national average. On Islamophobia, 43% of active participants believed that "Muslims are given too many rights", compared with 51% of their supporters and a national average of 45%. The people

participating in the movement were therefore found to be slightly less Islamophobic than the average French person. This is a striking finding, and one that completely contradicts the idea of a movement veering to the far right. The same goes for attitudes on law and order, with 60% of active yellow vests saying that the justice system was “not tough enough on minor offenders”, compared to 72% of supporters and a national average of 64%. When asked whether “the police should be given a lot more power”, 31% of active participants in the movement agreed, compared with 45% of supporters and a national average of 49%. The last two items can, of course, be explained in part by the hard line taken towards the movement by the police and courts, but it nevertheless shows the scepticism of yellow vests towards the ‘soft on crime’ rhetoric that is so emblematic of far-right thinking.



However, the inability of far-right ideas to gain much traction in the inner circle of the most active and mobilised yellow vests can be attributed to two factors.

Firstly, there is the strategic consideration that we have already mentioned: the need for unity among the working classes, who are defined primarily by their material conditions and thus include the welfare recipients normally targeted by far-right discourse.

Secondly, there is an experience of political subjectification unique to this unprecedented movement. We refer here to the work of Raphaël Challier<sup>13</sup>, who carried out an ethnographic study of the movement in a small town in Lorraine. The town has many yellow vest activists and voted for Marine Le Pen by some margin in the first round of the last two presidential elections. Challier notes that active participation in the movement (i.e. attending demonstrations and roundabout occupations) led to encounters between groups of people who would never normally spend time with each other, and that this forged “a shared sense of belonging” among those who were “united by a sense of being the little people”. As a result of this new-found solidarity, pre-existing partisan divisions and judgements needed to be euphemised. Challier cites as examples an RN activist who feared “getting into an argument with people if he expressed his views” and an activist from left-wing party La France Insoumise (LFI), who avoided talking about politics because “not everyone agrees, and that creates problems”. According to the researcher, this sense of “grassroots unity” has shaken the triangular mindset identified by Olivier Schwartz<sup>14</sup>, whereby working class people tend to construct their identity in twofold opposition to those above them (the political and economic elites) and those below (immigrants, the unemployed, welfare recipients), the status of the latter having been enhanced by their participation in the yellow vest movement. Through a process of accelerated socialisation between segments of the working

classes meeting each other for the first time, this tripartite vision of society is giving way among the yellow vests to a dual outlook opposing the privileged to the exploited – an outlook very much akin to the premises of class consciousness.

This outlook is evidently not reflected in national polling ahead of the European Parliament elections. There are two reasons that might explain why the impact of the movement is not translating into voting intentions on the left: the fact that the active yellow vests who intend to mobilise for the European elections are a relatively small proportion of the population, and the delegitimation of the party system. Although LFI and the French Communist Party were early supporters of the movement, many yellow vests (both activists and supporters) see the left as incapable of giving voice to ordinary people's aspirations. This crisis in the relationship between the left and the working classes created an opportunity that the far right was already exploiting long before the yellow vest movement came about. Hitherto, left-wing political organisations have relied on rallying committed activists to their cause rather than working to win over the supporters who surround the movement like a halo. Yet this is where the decisive battle is now being fought.

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## QUANTITÉ CRITIQUE (CRITICAL MASS)

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