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# **Punish or partake? The Yellow Vests' democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis**

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## **Abstract:**

Investigating the Yellow Vest's (YV) attitudes to democracy, this paper assumes that levels of politicization and of populism are key in explaining their preferences for different types of democratic reforms. We first draw on quantitative analyses to demonstrate that compared to their French counterparts, the YV are more supportive of democratic innovations aiming at controlling and punishing elected representatives, and that greater populist attitudes enhance support for democratic innovations based on direct public control. These findings are then refined by means of quantitative textual analysis showing that discourses supporting control and sanction over political leaders are made by first-time protesters facing economic hardships and disgruntled with the political system, while more educated and politicized YV rather favor civic participation. We supplement these results with in-depth interviews delving deeper into democratic practices and emotions that drive these contrasted views on democracy. We find evidence of two typical logics and tones of discourse, largely structured by the experiences that those who hold them have of democracy. The first one, in favor of a better control and a stronger punishment of political elites, typically comes from angry and inexperienced first-time activists. The second one, rather willing to foster citizen participation, emanates from more experienced but also more disillusioned YV.

## **1. Introduction**

The Yellow Vests movement (hereinafter referred to as YV) has taken aback all political commentators –pundits and academics alike– when it first arose in November 2018. Rarely in recent years has a movement sparked so much debate on the background of its supporters, their main claims and expectations. The movement started as a reaction against a fuel tax and initially revolved around purchasing power issues (Paugam, 2019; Spire, 2019), with a spontaneity that made it “elusive” for many (Le Bart, 2020, p. 9). It mostly brought together members of the working class and lower-middle class, unified by a common experience of social insecurity and rejection of party politics (Guerra et al., 2019). Yet democratic aspirations in general and the “RIC” in particular (*référéndum d’initiative citoyenne*, citizen-initiated referendum) quickly made their way through the demands of the Yellow Vests and became increasingly central over time (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019).

This resulted in conflicting narratives about the democratic preferences of the YV. Among the mainstream media, political pundits and part of the academic world, many were impressed by their harsh criticism of elected representatives, the centrality of the RIC motto and the strong anti-elite/pro-people component of the movement. This led them to view the movement as promoting a sort of permanent direct democracy which would replace traditional forms of political representation (Grunberg, 2019.; Lefebvre, 2019; Marlière, 2019; Rouban, 2019). Taking the complete opposite view, others saw in its horizontal organization and its citizens' assemblies the seeds of a “municipalist” and citizen-centered vision of politics based on the local level and on self-government (Hayat, 2018; Jeanpierre, 2019; Ravelli et al., 2020). Some have nonetheless tried to reconcile the two competing perspectives by arguing that despite very strong criticisms of elected representatives and political organizations, the YV actually do not demand the abolition of traditional political representation, but rather its refoundation around three principles: the control of representatives, attentiveness to citizens' claims, and geographical and statutory proximity of elected representatives (Bedock et al., 2021). Even though all these views concur on the fact that the YV support some form of deepening of citizen participation, and thus the implementation of democratic innovations, they differ on how to interpret the changes being advocated. In this regard, media and academic analyses largely echo the divides within the YV movement, which gathers activists with very different levels of politicization and diverse political values.

Democratic innovations can be defined as “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). Some of them, such as referendums or recalls, rely on direct democracy. Others, such as mini-publics, participatory budgeting, or even the replacement of elected representatives by citizens drawn by lot, are based on a participatory and deliberative vision of democracy. Others still, such as citizens' initiative, rely on both (Geissel and Newton, 2012). Which type of innovation do the YV actually prefer? To what extent do the drivers of such democratic preferences differ among YV protesters as well as between the YV and the general population? How do their preferences inform us about the nature of this atypical social movement? Do the YV all advocate for the same democratic innovations, and if not, how do their political background and values influence their aspirations and discourses on democracy?

In this article, we investigate the relationship of the YV to representative democracy and democratic innovations, with a particular interest in the influence of politicization and political values on their democratic preferences. Previous research has stressed the difficulty to grasp democratic preferences with the sole use of survey data and quantitative analysis, due to the inherent complexity of this topic (Bengtsson, 2012). Additionally, some scholars have called for methodological approaches giving citizens “the opportunity to speak or write freely about formal

politics without being guided by tightly worded survey instruments” (Clarke et al., 2018, p. 179). The combination of quantitative and qualitative data (Bedock and Pilet, 2020a) and the inductive use of survey data (Pilet et al., 2020) are gateways to understanding how competing models of democracy can arise and coexist.

We draw on three complementary data sources. First, to put the preferences of the YV in perspective with those of the French population, we make use of two mirror surveys: the *Populism in Europe Survey* (hereinafter referred to as PopEuropa) conducted in April 2019 among a national representative sample of 1313 French respondents, which is compared to a convenience sample of 1910 Yellow Vests interviewed between September and December 2019 (*Yellow Vest Values Survey*, hereinafter YVVS). The third section uses this material to analyze the influence of voting –as a proxy for political values– and populism on preferences for participation and control-centered democratic innovations, as well as to investigate the differences between YV participants and their French counterparts. Additional data sources are used in the two following sections to corroborate and enhance quantitative insights. We delve, in particular, into how internal political differences within the YV movement translate into competing discourses on elected representatives and democratic institutions. For this purpose, we take advantage of an open-ended question administered in the YVVS survey to perform an inductive quantitative textual analysis and disentangle the varieties of discourses about ordinary citizens, their democratic aspirations and the relationship with the political elites. Finally, we supplement this textual analysis with a qualitative analysis of thirty three in-depth interviews conducted with YV activists in Spring 2019 within the *Research Collective on the YV* (hereinafter RCYV) so as to better delineate two ideal-typical discourses on political institutions and democracy. Thus, by contrasting and expanding quantitative findings with qualitative results, our methodological approach is based on both triangulation (i.e., convergence and correspondence of quantitative and qualitative results) and complementarity (i.e., clarification and elaboration of quantitative findings with qualitative findings) (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Green, 2007).

We find strong evidence that the levels of populism and of politicization are key in explaining the preferences for different types of democratic innovations, both within and outside the movement. In particular, quantitative analyses show that the YV are more supportive of democratic innovations that aim at controlling and punishing elected representatives than the French population and that higher level of populism increases support for democratic innovations based on public control rather than on civic participation. Still, whereas voting is associated with large differences in democratic preferences within the general population, the influence of the left-right opposition is less conclusive within the YV.. Quantitative textual analysis and analysis of the in-depth interviews allow us to dig further into this issue. They converge to highlight contrasted

discourses about democracy within the movement. The first one comes from inexperienced first-time activists: Concerned about socioeconomic hardship and dissatisfied with the political system, they support democratic innovations aiming at controlling and punishing political elites. The second discourse emanates from more experienced and politicized YV, advocating for democratic innovations enhancing direct citizen participation.

## **2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

Even though the literature specifically focusing on the democratic aspirations of the YV is relatively limited given the recent nature of the movement, there is a fast-developing strand of research on how ordinary citizens view the democratic decision-making process, with an increasing focus on the determinants of support for various democratic innovations, which we draw on to elaborate our hypotheses.

The first key element to bear in mind is the strong level of dissatisfaction, if not resentment towards the democratic system among YV protesters (Grossman, 2019), in a country where citizens are already particularly disgruntled with their democratic institutions. ‘Enraged’ citizens, i.e. those who are disenchanted with the current functioning of their democracy and institutions, are particularly prone to support various kinds of democratic innovations; namely, the increased use of direct democracy (Bowler et al., 2007; Schuck and de Vreese, 2015; Werner, 2020); consultative and binding mini-publics (Bedock and Pilet, 2020b; Jacquet et al., 2020) or even the full replacement of elected politicians by citizens drawn by lot (Bedock and Pilet, 2020c). Dissatisfied citizens also support any alternative to traditional representative democracy, enhancing the role of experts, or citizens (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013). Otherwise put, individuals who experience dissatisfaction with the democratic system are prone to support any alternative compared to the status quo.

Yet, throughout the weeks during the YV movement, the idea of the referendum (see. supra.) became central and progressively unified the demands of its participants. Two claims have been at the forefront: the will to take back power from the current political elites and the need to reinstate popular sovereignty. The “RIC” became the most identifiable motto of the movement, and acted as a rallying flag. Discourses on the RIC revolved very much around the necessity to control political representatives (Bedock et al., 2021). The participation in the YV movement therefore operates as a politicizing factor for demonstrators, making them more sensitive to certain forms of democratic innovations. Hence our first hypothesis:

*H1. Individuals who identify with the Yellow Vests movement and Yellow Vests activists are more prone to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling political representatives than the rest of the population.*

Meanwhile, the YV have often been labelled as “populists”, mainly due the strong anti-elite/pro-people component that structures this movement. Populist attitudes are indeed prevalent among YV participants: 63percent of the YV strongly agree that “the people and not political leaders should take the most important decisions for the country”, compared to 28percent of the rest of the French population (Guerra et al., 2019). In the literature, populist attitudes are usually associated with stronger preferences for direct democracy (Goldberg et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019). Populism can be understood as an alternative form of representation to party government, founded on a unitary, nonpluralist and unmediated vision of society’s general interest based on the putative “will of the people” (Caramani, 2017). Populist preferences therefore foster support for innovations allowing to control political leaders to make them more responsive, or even to replace current political elites to make sure that “popular sovereignty” prevails. Simply put, populist attitudes are essentially “people-centered” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

*H2a. The more individuals hold populist attitudes, the more they are likely to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling or even replacing elected representatives.*

*H2b. The effect of populism is stronger among Yellow Vests participants than the rest of the French as they are more sensitive to the issue of referenda and popular sovereignty due to the politicizing effect of the movement.*

In addition, various studies have evidenced the influence of citizens’ political values on democratic preferences. Indeed, political parties develop distinctive discourses on democracy. Left-wing parties, in particular radical left-wing parties with limited access to political power, tend to promote values such as self-determination, independence, participation and individual autonomy. As a result, they are more supportive of democratic reforms enhancing citizen participation that contribute to an inclusive and egalitarian society (Junius et al., 2020a). Various studies confirm that left-wing representatives – and radical-left representatives in particular - are more prone to advocate for participatory and deliberative democratic innovations than their right-wing counterparts (Bol, 2016; Close, 2020; Junius et al., 2020b; Núñez et al., 2016). Radical right parties also challenge representative democracy, but through a plebiscitary lens which corresponds to their key ideological features (nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, (Mudde, 2007). More specifically, the introduction of plebiscitary referendums to bypass current political elites and institutional counter-powers constitutes the cornerstone of their democratic reform proposals (Best, 2020; Lisi and Silva, 2020). Consequently, radical right representatives are more prone to support plebiscitary and anti-elitist direct democratic tools (Junius et al., 2020a; Núñez et al., 2016).

Elite preferences are mirrored by their voters: radical left and radical right voters have been found to be more critical towards the functioning of representative democracy (Hernández, 2018) and score higher on referendum support than moderate voters, with radical right voters scoring the highest, but with specific motivations: anti-elitism for radical-right voters, and power redistribution for radical-left voters (Rojon and Rijken, 2020). As the YV are very heterogeneous in terms of political attitudes and behaviors, we expect that such differences will be further reflected in their democratic preferences.

*H3a. Whether or not acquainted with the Yellow Vests, radical right voters are more inclined to support plebiscitary and anti-elitist direct democratic mechanisms such as recall.*

*H3b. Conversely, radical left voters likely support all forms of democratic innovations, including participatory and deliberative ones.*

Finally, the YV movement has been tricky to understand as it was bringing together individuals with various ideological backgrounds and very heterogeneous levels of politicization. First-time protesters with a very remote relationship to politics rubbed shoulders with particularly experienced activists who progressively managed to impose their codes within the movement (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019; Reungoat et al., 2020). Usually "apathetic" citizens therefore mobilized together with individuals who already had a strong experience of protest politics and a left-leaning background. For the latter, their level of politicization and their experience of collective action in various contexts makes them more likely to support participatory and deliberative mechanisms, because they are used to –and keen on– taking part in complex, cognitively demanding and time-consuming collective mobilizations involving debates and compromises (Ravelli et al., 2020). Experienced activists are also probably more aware of the plurality of preferences within the population and of the current functioning of French institutions. By contrast, those who are protesting for the first time are less acquainted with how political life works, and considering their distant history with politics (Reungoat et al., 2020), they should support democratic innovations that do not involve intense citizen participation, but rather allow to control decisions and punish political representatives (Bedock et al., 2021).

*H4. First-time activists are more prone to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling political representatives whereas experienced activists are more prone to support participatory and deliberative mechanisms.*

### **3. Comparing the Yellow Vests and the French population. Between and within variations in democratic preferences**

In this section, we draw primarily on quantitative statistical data from PopEuropa and YVVS surveys to compare the YV' democratic preferences to the rest of the French population. PopEuropa quantitative data were collected online through a national representative sample of 1313 French in April 2019. 59 percent of the sample supports the YV movement, whereas 13 percent have taken part in a YV protest action – which complies with statistics provided by polling agencies (Hoibian, 2019; Moati, 2019). YVVS data are made up with a sample of 1910 YV protesters, recruited through the 250 most active Facebook groups at the national and local levels between September and December 2019<sup>1</sup>. Most of them (76 percent) support the movement and participated in a protest action. 24 percent are supporters of the movement but not activists.

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

The six items mirrored in the two quantitative studies allow to cross check democratic preferences and investigate whether certain types of democratic reforms are more popular among the YV activists and supporters than in the general public. Figure 1 displays the percentage of respondents who support or do not support each proposed democratic innovation across the two samples. As expected, we find that the YV (right panel) are more supportive of democratic reforms that aim at controlling and punishing elected representatives. 49 percent choose the legislative referendum and 45 percent the recall referendum, compared to 36 percent in the French population (left panel) (*H1*).

Conversely, democratic innovations that are more resource-demanding for ordinary citizens (i.e., public consultations, citizen initiative and municipalist initiative) are half as popular among the YV than in the general public. This is particularly true of citizen initiative that is supported by less than one YV in ten. Opinion gaps are less clear-cut with sortition, which is as likely to be chosen

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

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



by the YV than by the French population (17 v. 16 percent). Descriptive results thus lend some first empirical credence to the hypothesis that in combining popular sovereignty, direct democracy and democratic control –as illustrated in the famous motto “RIC en toutes matières”–, the collective action frame from the YV movement echoes the democratic preferences of its sympathizers.

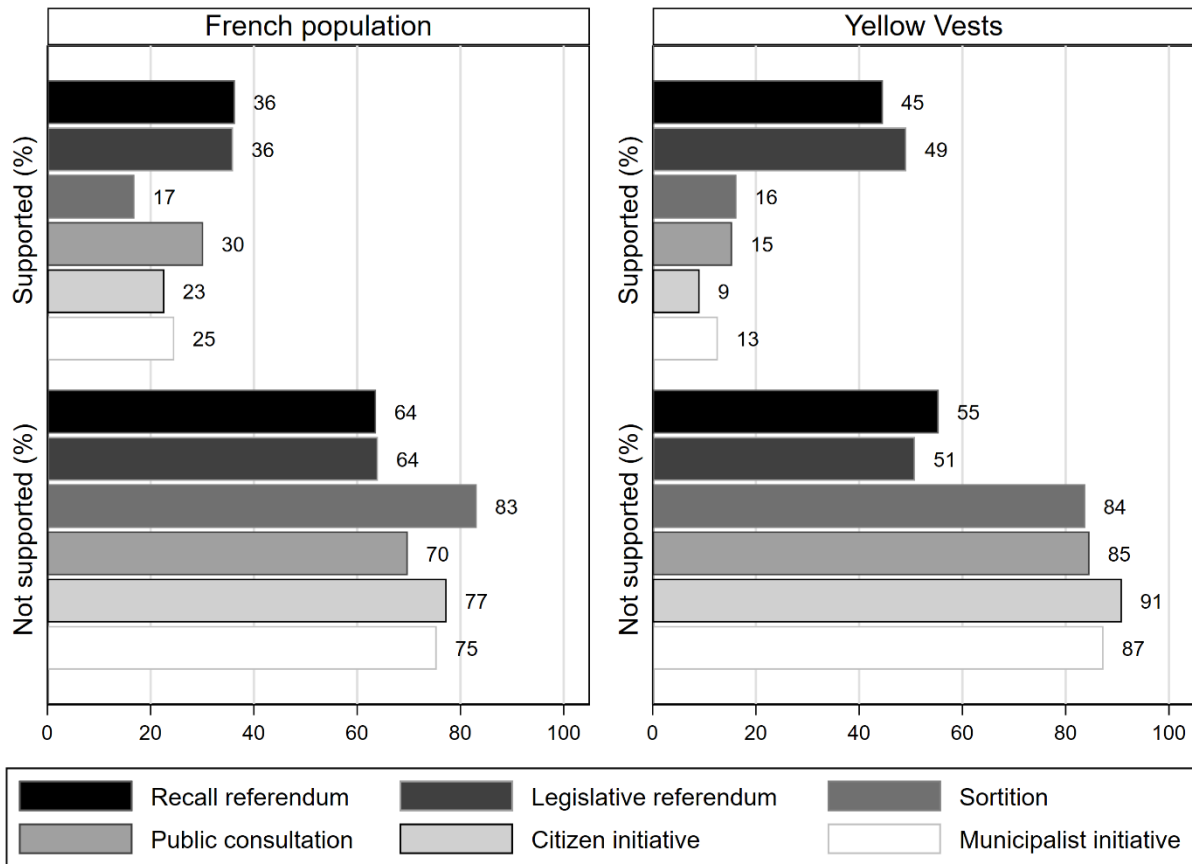


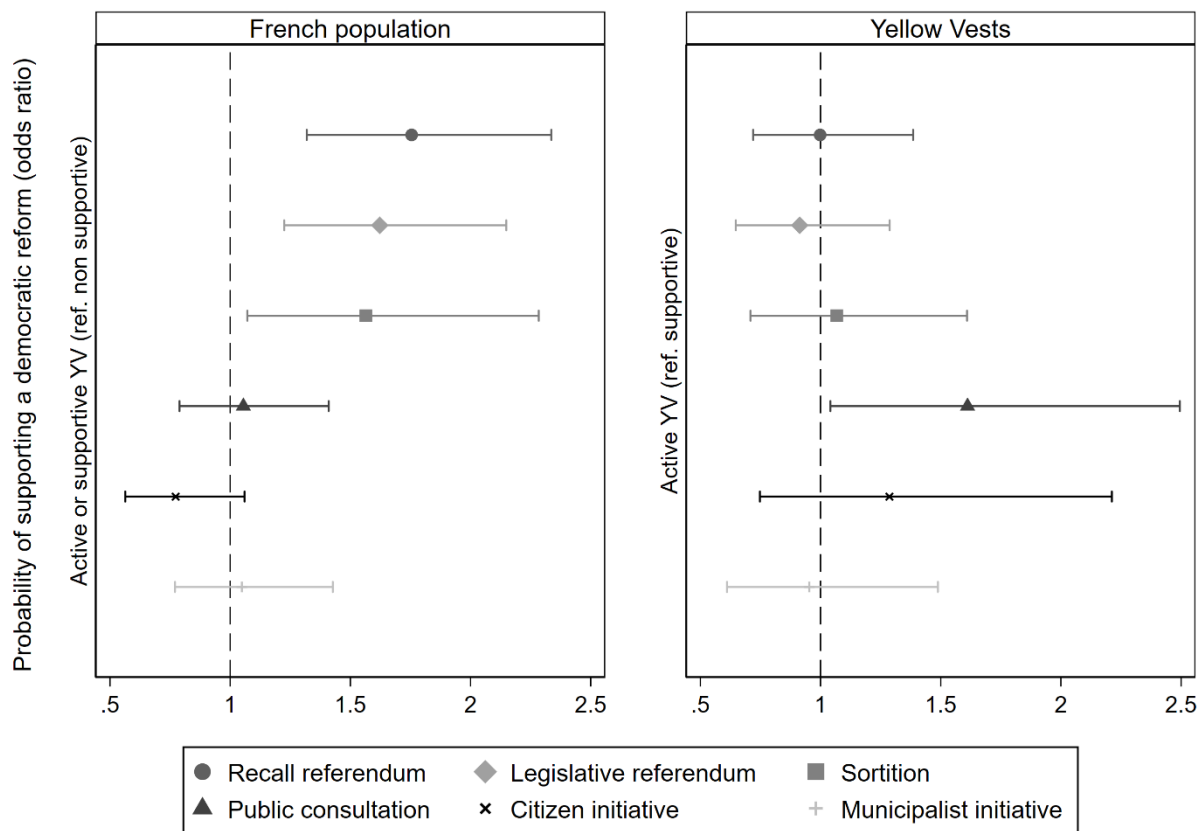
Figure 1. Support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests

Note: Entries display the percentage of respondents selecting (or not) a democratic reform among the French population (left panel – results weighted by sex, age and education) and among the YV movement (right panel)

To be sure and better account for the direction of the causality (from protesters to the YV movement v. the other way around), we performed binomial logistic regressions comparing the probability of supporting each democratic innovation, depending on the level of commitment to the movement. Models control for usual sociodemographics, as well as for confounding political factors (i.e., political interest and support for redistribution) that may also influence democratic preferences (see Appendix B for detailed results). Predicted probabilities plotted in Figure 2 (left panel) confirm that those French who take side with the YV movement are significantly more inclined to support a repertoire of democratic innovations based on public control than the rest of the population. More specifically, in the general public, sympathizing with the YV increases the

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

Within the YV movement (Figure 2, right panel), with the exception of public consultation that is more supported by the most active YV (1.61;  $p < 0.05$ ), all YV – whether active and only supportive– turn out to share the same level of support for democratic reforms. Altogether, our findings suggest that what matters most for democratic preferences is whether the French support or oppose the YV movement than the intensity of their commitment when they are sympathizers. We come back to this argument in the following sections, using qualitative data to highlight that the framing effect of the YV movement nonetheless operates through the way core protesters and remote supporters differentially reflect on their relationship to democratic institutions.



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

Figure 2. Effect of commitment to the YV on support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests

Note: Entries are predicted probabilities (odds ratio) from two sets of six binary logistic regressions estimating variations in support for democratic references between YV supporters and non-supporters among the French (left panel), as well as between active and supportive YV within the movement (right

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

panel), with 95 percent confidence intervals. Models adjust for sociodemographics and political characteristics.

Next, we addressed our second and third hypotheses by adding populist attitudes and voting –as a proxy for political values– in the logistic regressions. Results for the general population are displayed in the left panel of Figure 3 (full models are presented in Appendix B). They substantiate the notion that populist citizens, whether or not YV, are more prone to favor democratic innovations based on public control than on civic participation (*H2a*). In particular, a one standard deviation increase in populism amplifies the probability of supporting recall referendum by almost 40 percent (1.39;  $p < 0.01$ ). The impact of populism is of 41 percent on legislative referendum (1.41;  $p < 0.01$ ) and of 21 percent on sortition (1.21;  $p < 0.05$ ).

The right panel of Figure 3 shows more limited differences within the YV movement. Sortition is all the more popular since the YV endorse a populist mindset (1.9;  $p < 0.01$ ). Yet the most populist YV are not more supportive of recall and legislative referenda. This could be explained by the fact that most of the YV have greater and more homogeneous populist scores than the general public (mean=0.88; sd=0.13 v. mean=0.66; sd=0.19), which mechanically results in moderate statistical variations. All in all, we find only limited support for the hypothesis that populism and protest activism add up to maximize preferences for reforms that ensure strict control and punishment of elected officials (*H2b*).

Turning to the vote in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, models demonstrate that among the French, whether or not YV, radical right voters are significantly more in favor of democratic reforms revolving around popular plebiscite than their center counterparts, even when populist attitudes are controlled for. This is the case with both recall (1.63;  $p < 0.05$ ) and legislative referenda (2.14;  $p < 0.01$ ). Conversely, radical right voters are the least likely to support democratic reforms that involve more citizen participation, such as citizen initiative (0.51;  $p < 0.05$ ) (Figure 3, left panel). Still, the effect of voting for the radical right seems to wear off among the YV, as it is only significantly positive with support for the recall referendum (2.92;  $p < 0.05$ ) (Figure 3, right panel)<sup>4</sup>.

In tune with what was anticipated, radical left voters are found to be more supportive of legislative referendum (1.66;  $p < 0.05$ ) in the French population. However, contrary to our expectations, they are not more supportive of participatory and deliberative innovations<sup>5</sup>. Once again, the effect of the political values, as captured by the voting proxy variable, wears off among

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the recall referendum is more likely supported by YV with low educational levels (1,2;  $p < 0.05$ ) and who are also supportive of redistribution (1.7;  $p < 0.01$ ).

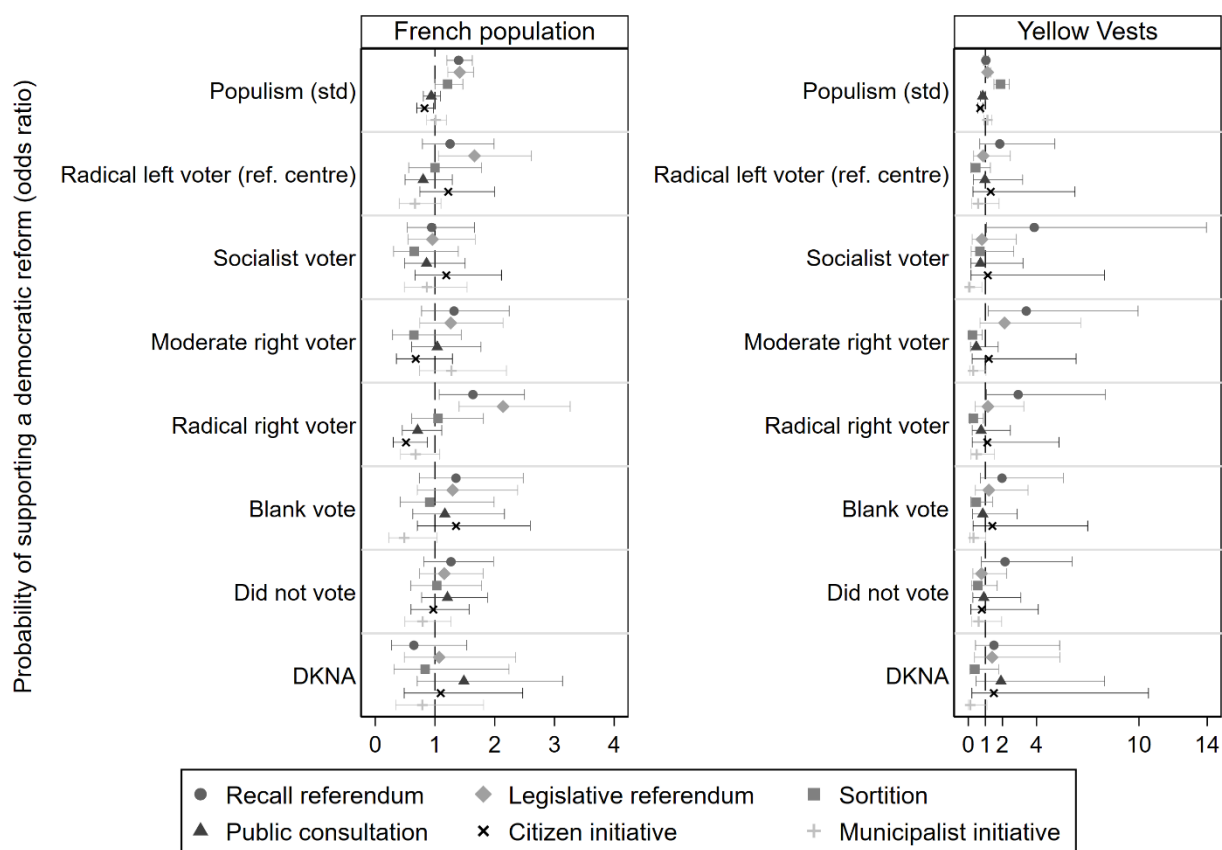
<sup>5</sup> Further analysis suggests that the linkage between radical left voting and inclusive democratic reforms is contingent upon material and symbolic resources, and effective only for richer, more educated and more politically attuned radical left wingers.

the YV. All in all, findings are consistent with the hypothesis that radical right voters have a strong preference for plebiscitary mechanisms (*H3a*), but they provide more limited evidence of a direct relation between radical left voting and inclusive democratic reforms (*H3b*). In addition, the effect of voting preferences which is notable within the French population does not seem to be as influential among the YV.

To sum up, quantitative results demonstrate that as far as democratic aspirations are concerned, variations between the YV and their French counterparts are way greater than variations within the YV movement. Typically, both the level of populism and voting preferences turn out to be way less influential among the YV than within the French population, which suggests that despite large differences in political values and voting behaviors, the YV are quite homogeneous with regards to their democratic preferences. In the next section, we take advantage of qualitative data also collected in the YVVS to make sense of how internal political differences within the YV movement shape competing views about democracy and representation issues. Thus, following triangulation and complementarity principles, we aim at corroborating our quantitative results with qualitative findings but also seek a finer-grained qualitative description of the underlying process. Most notably, we shed light on the role of politicization whose influence is not that straightforward when looking at the YV only through a quantitative lens<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> As it turns out, political interest increases the probability of supporting municipalist initiative in the general public.



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

Figure 3. Effect of populist attitudes and voting on support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests

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

#### 4. Discourses about the people and democratic aspirations among the Yellow

##### Vest: a textual analysis

To address the reasoning of YV protesters on democratic innovations, and to pursue an approach that values triangulation and complementarity of data sources, we analyzed a corpus of 1262 GJ responses to an open-ended question asked in the fall of 2019 within the YVVS. The wording of this question was intentionally simple and explicit: "What do you think of the Yellow Vest movement?".

Using the IRaMuTeQ software –a textual statistics tool based on the R environment–, we worked on a principle of counting, enumerating occurrences, and classifying lexical forms present in the corpus in order to highlight its specific semantic structures. We then used the classification method described by Reinert (1983, 1990) to classify the YVs responses in distinctive groups.

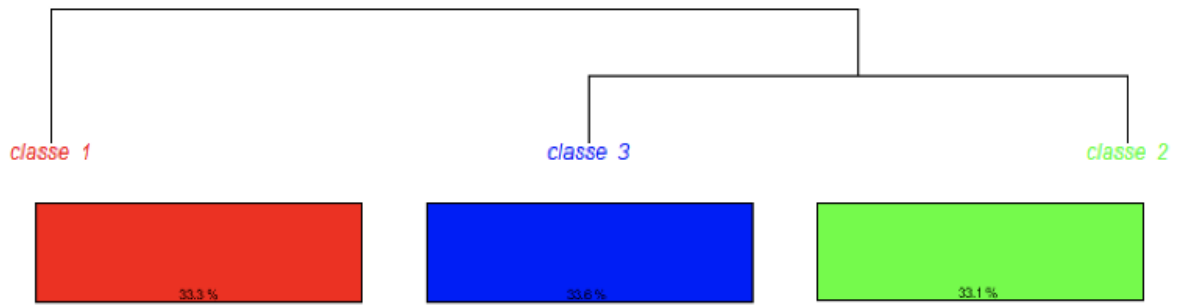
Specifically, we made use of the Reinert textual clustering method to operate as a divisive hierarchical clustering algorithm whose aim is to maximize the inter-cluster Chi-squared distance (see Appendix C for a presentation of the algorithm). The respondents' preferences in terms of democratic innovations, as well as other characteristics related to their social and political backgrounds, employed in the quantitative analysis presented above, are introduced as auxiliary variables to help qualifying the class obtained, and ultimately to verify our hypotheses (see Appendix D for an exhaustive overview of auxiliary variables).

To value the singularity of each answer, we chose to make a simple classification on text, fixing a maximum number of classes at 13. This method proved to be relevant as it allowed us to classify about 96percent of the texts in the corpus in three different classes. Our results highlight two large distinctive discourses that cut across the YV movement (as can be seen on the cutree in Figure 1). First, we found a set of discourses structured by the social concerns of the respondents, through the evocation of their lack of material security and the financial difficulties they face in their daily life (Class 1). Second, another collection of texts gathers the very protest experience induced by the mobilization, as well as the political values they attribute to the social movement (Classes 2 and 3). Indeed, the first class is opposed to the latter two on the first horizontal axis, deriving from the correspondence analysis on which the clustering algorithm is performed (Figure 1, bottom panel).

In the subsequent analysis, we present the universes of discourse identified by the clustering method. To answer our research hypotheses in a more formal way, we inductively use the content of the most representative verbatims associated with each class, but also regarding the democratic and political preferences indicators significantly associated with a class<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> We use the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) and the associated p-value to significantly determine the association between a word or a characteristic of survey respondents with the corresponding class.



payer  
salaire  
taxe  
retraite  
marre  
vivre  
augmenter  
vie  
impôt  
euro  
pauvre  
prix  
argent  
travailler  
enfant  
survivre

démocratie  
politique  
conscience  
solidarité  
nécessaire  
populaire  
fraternité  
justice\_sociale  
vrai  
social  
citoyen  
société  
écologique  
ouvrir  
population  
révolte  
inégalité

revendication  
lâcher  
soutenir  
mouvement  
casseur  
manifestation  
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force  
manifeste  
départ  
totalement  
début  
efficace  
garder

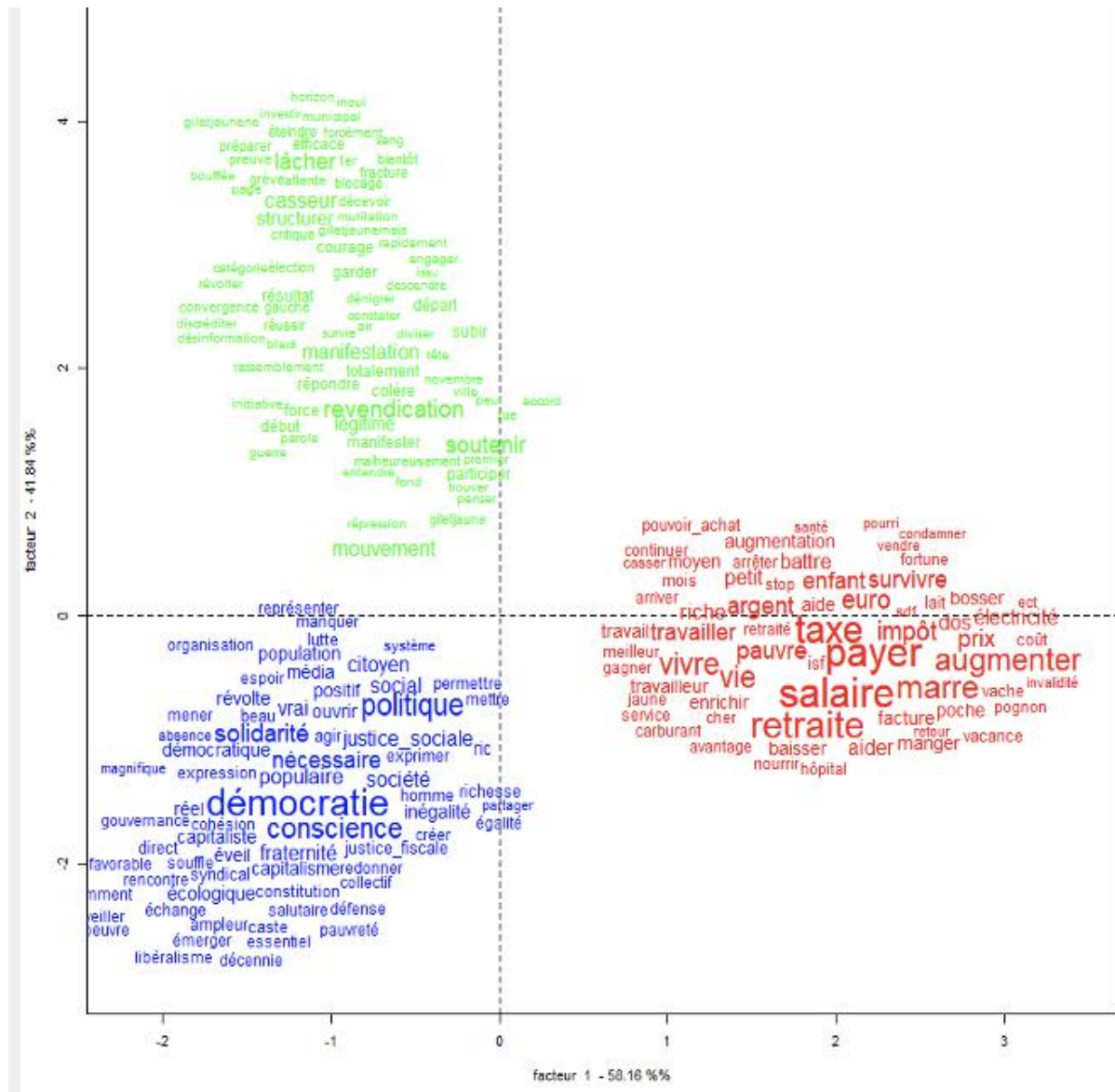


Figure 4. Cutree and most specific terms of the 3-classes clustering (top panel) and 2-dimensional representation of the correspondence analysis (bottom panel)

### ***Struggling to make ends meet, blaming the elites***

The first class (class 1, red, 33percent of the classified texts) clearly brings together texts centered upon the social difficulties respondents face in their everyday life: paying bills, taking care of children, being able to take care of oneself, housing issues, living decently, having access to some leisure activities, are all unbearable realities from which the arguments for commitment to the YV movement are crystallized. Their support for the YV is built upon the evocation of a feeling of deep injustice and a great anger towards political elites who are considered as "privileged" and "corrupted". There is almost no mention in this class of the deliberative aspect of democracy, or of possible alternative mechanisms of collective improvement of its functioning. The respondents are under such social difficulties that they do not spontaneously place alternative democratic



mechanisms at the center of their discourse. Rather, they focus on denouncing social injustices with anger. However, the texts often emphasize the need to hold political leaders accountable for the harshness of their life, thus corroborating *H1*. Among the most contributing texts of this class, we find many statements that combine a set of three distinct elements: a raw denunciation of social reality, the attribution of a very strong responsibility to political leaders, and thus a need to blame them:

« Aujourd'hui pour la majorité des gents ont se prive de tout ont vie pour payer son loyer ces facture sa bouffe et a la fin du mois quand ont a de la chance il nous reste 50 euros pour se faire plaisirs (...) aujourd'hui près de 1 ans plus tard les choses ont changer j ai compris que le problème été plus grave que ça ce n est pas un mauvais calcule mais une volonté politique que de mètre a genoux les plus pauvres et de tout faire pour eviter qu il ne puissent se relevé et le gouvernement ne se cache plus ont est entrée dans une période noir régie par l argent la corruption de despotisme la liberté a été perdu car la violence policière crée la violence citoyenne »<sup>8</sup>

« le peuple en a marre de ne plus avoir d'argent en fin\_du\_mois alors que nos dirigeant vivent dans le luxe pour eux pas de problème de retraite et plein d'autres chose c fini le peuple se défend on a essayé sans violence mais personne écoute le peuple alors ça pète »<sup>9</sup>

« Marre de ce système 2 poids de mesures qui détruit et broie tout aveuglement le gouvernement n'est qu'une mascarade de pantins corrompus vendus pourris jusqu'à l'os nous sommes formatés dès l'enfance à devenir bon esclave les gains indécents de ces milliardaires sont à gerber marre de ces hold-up par les cols blancs en toute impunité »<sup>10</sup>

The verb "to live" is particularly evocative of this universe of discourse, as it refers more to a situation of "survival" than general life aspirations or constructed values. The fact of getting involved in the YV movement, of supporting it or feeling close to it, thus seems to be more a reaction to one's life situation. Besides, and quite unsurprisingly, this class has a strong populist appeal, in the sense that the YVs mobilize here a full-fledged anti-elitist discourse (anti-elitism being one of the three subdimensions of populist beliefs (Wuttke et al., 2020)).

In fact, we note that what also characterizes this class is the low politicization of its respondents. YV categorized in this group are more often women than men ( $p < .05$ ), have a lower level of educational attainment ( $p < .001$ ), have not been involved in other movements ( $p < .001$ ). Consequently, they are not very familiar with politics and describe themselves as not interested in politics ( $p < .01$ ). When they do vote, they tend to support the radical right ( $p < .001$ ). The YV in this class are more in favor of the recall referendum more than others ( $p < .05$ ), and do not seem to express a preference for more participatory mechanisms, such as municipal initiative ( $p < .05$ ) or the citizens' initiative ( $p < .05$ ). Their preferences for democratic innovations provide additional confirmation of our hypothesis (*H4*) about the support of the less politicized YVs for the idea of

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<sup>8</sup> Man, between 35–49-year-old, lower secondary diploma, unemployed, income between 1440 and 2100€, living in a small village, vote for the radical right.

<sup>9</sup> Man, between 25- and 49-year-old, lower secondary or less, employed.

<sup>10</sup> Woman, between 18- and 34-year-old, employed, live in a village, vote for the moderate right.

dismissal and punishment of elected officials and political elites, rather than a more direct democracy.

### ***Deepening democracy by supporting innovations enhancing citizen participation***

Beyond the first class described above, we can observe that there is another one that mobilizes more direct references to the YV movement and the protest experience. This lexical register is internally separated into two subgroups: one, referring to the evocation of actions and claims (class 2), the other echoes the values, grievances, and core principles of the YVs. The theme of democratic innovations is much more present in this last bag of texts (class 3).

The former (class 2, green, 33percent of the classified texts) is built on the answers favoring the arguments and the claims that characterize the support to the movement. It gives an account of the experience of the respondents within the movement. They mention quite a lot of reasons for the mobilization and reveal the circumstances of their experience. It is a textual class that values the emotions and feelings, while reflecting on their commitment to the movement. At the top of this classification are terms like "demands", "never give up", "support", "movement". And this is what it is all about: staying mobilized, collectively pursuing the actions. The movement is seen as a struggle that comes from below, from "the people", and that intends to make the government bend to give citizens the possibility to seize their decision-making power. It is indeed the idea to act so that the citizens find their place in the democratic arena that is achievable through enduring protest actions.

This universe of discourse is then based on two feelings expressed precisely in connection with the way of conceiving the relationship to democracy: legitimacy and anger. Legitimacy relies on the citizens who are the bearers and actors of claims to be defended. Anger is also that of citizens facing the contempt of the governments who forget them and do not involve them in anything when it comes to deciding. By contrast, this kind of anger is not the same as that of those who suffer from their socio-economic conditions (class 1). It is based here on the strong feeling of the confiscation of political power by the rulers. These respondents are primarily disappointed and left-behind citizens.

« J'attends cela depuis 40 ans les raisons de la colère sont légitimes la population est méprisée par des politiques qui confisquent le droit de chacun à participer à l'élaboration de la gestion de notre pays le gouvernement ne comprend pas ou ne veut pas comprendre les racines du malaise ses réponses sont obsolètes le gouvernement est aveugle aux changements profonds qui se préparent déjà dans le monde je soutiens parce que je suis persuadé du bien fondé de ce mouvement »<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Man, over 65-year-old, lower secondary or less, retired, vote for center, income between 2100 and 2910€.

« Mouvement légitime et qui pour moi est issu en majorité des déçus de la politique donc du bon tiers de votants qui se sont abstenus ou voté blanc comme moi pour la première fois de ma vie ma santé ne me permet plus comme en 1995 d'être dans la rue mais je soutiens leurs revendications »<sup>12</sup>

We find that the YV classified in this group have an intermediate level of education ( $p < .01$ ) and are overrepresented in small towns ( $p < .001$ ). They are particularly committed to the movement, as we found more activists in this group ( $p < .001$ ). Therefore, they overreport their grassroots experience and testify to their commitment in movement. Of special interest for us, this class is not distinguishable in terms of specific democratic preferences.

Finally, the third group (class 3, blue, 34percent of the classified texts) is the one that explicitly refers to the universe of values at the core of the YVs grievances: democracy, solidarity, fraternity, citizenship, and social justice. These values constitute the very foundations of their relationship to democracy and show that in terms of democratic innovations, these respondents are clearly advocating for the improvement of the degree of direct citizen participation in an all-new institutional setting. It comes as no surprise that *democracy* is the most representative term associated with this class ( $p < .001$ ). Many respondents in this class say that France is not - or no longer - a democracy, precisely because the features of representative democracy and the institutional setting in the country mismatch their orientations toward more direct democratic preferences. The most significant verbatims make the link between the engagement within the movement and a support to a more direct, local, solidary, and fraternal functioning of democracy:

« Mouvement enthousiaste hétéroclite souhaitant un changement radical de société une démocratie directe ancré localement partout en France et donc à l'image des gens qui le compose localement »<sup>13</sup>

« Favorable au mouvement il faut aller vers plus de démocratie le ric me paraît être l'avenir les réponses du gouvernement montrent leur totale incompréhension de ce que vivent les français »<sup>14</sup>

« Grande solidarité entre les gilet jaune on voit que la solidarité entre les citoyens mobilisés existent on demande le ric pour que la démocratie reprenne sa place dans le pays des droits de l'homme nous partons dans une dérive totalitaire et seul le peuple uni pourra vaincre ce fléau le gouvernement ne propose rien si ce n'est amplifier les inégalités »<sup>15</sup>

« Le mouvement des gilet jaune pose les questions essentielles d'une société et d'un pays telles que la justice sociale fiscale l'égalité des droits de la justice la démocratie participative la solidarité la fraternité l'empathie la problématique d'une oligarchie méprisante et décomplexée »<sup>16</sup>

« Je participe au mouvement nous ne arrêterons plus tant qu'on ne reviendra pas à une vraie démocratie participative et l'application du ric »<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Woman, between 50- and 65-year-old, upper secondary, retired, vote for moderate left, income between 1440 and 2100€, lives in a town.

<sup>13</sup> Woman, between 18 and 34-year-old, employed, does not vote, income between 1440 and 2100€, living in town.

<sup>14</sup> Man, between 50- and 64-year-old, upper secondary, employed, vote for the radical left, income between 2100 and 2910€, living in village.

<sup>15</sup> Man, between 35 and 49-year-old, lower secondary or less, unemployed, vote for the radical left, income between 2100 and 2910€, living village.

<sup>16</sup> Woman, between 50- and 64-year-old, university degree, employed, vote for the moderate left, income between 2100 and 2910€.

<sup>17</sup> Man, between 50- and 64-year-old, lower secondary or less, retired, vote for the radical right, income 2100 to 2910€.

« Mouvement historique qui a fait vaciller le mouvement qui prône une justice sociale et justice fiscale une meilleure répartition des richesses qui réclame le droit de vivre dignement du fruit de son travail une démocratie plus participative »<sup>18</sup>

We notice two important characteristics of both form and content that are very specific to this group of responses. On the one hand, the respondents' remarks are expressed in a particularly constructed style, written, with a rather precise and rather rich vocabulary. In parallel, we observe that some respondents wrote long developments and expressed a well-constructed thought. On the other hand, one of the recurrent themes associated with this class is a specific democratic innovation, namely the Citizen Initiative Referendum (CIR, or "RIC" in French). Indeed, the CIR is presented as a credible alternative to the current functioning of representative democracy in France: a mechanism of citizen involvement that allows "real" democracy to function. The answers containing the term CIR are primarily associated with this group. YV in this group hold political and general reflections on the relationship of citizens to institutions and rulers. The fact that this class is marked by substantiated reflections on democracy is undoubtedly linked to the social and political profile of the respondents overrepresented in this group.

Indeed, protesters in this cluster are more often male ( $p < .001$ ) and they are more politicized. They are very interested in politics ( $p < .001$ ) and tend to vote for the radical left ( $p < .001$ ). They are not first-time protesters ( $p < .001$ ), which means that they took part in other social mobilization in the past. They live more than others in large cities ( $p < .05$ ) and are overrepresented among the YV with a university background ( $p < .05$ ). It is worth noting that they encounter fewer professional difficulties since they are employed ( $p < .05$ ). Concerning their preferences on democracy, and in line with hypothesis *H3b*, they prefer direct democracy mechanisms that strengthen direct citizen participation, such as sortition ( $p < .01$ ) or municipalist initiatives ( $p < .01$ ). In contrast to the first class, they are less likely to choose the recall referendum ( $p < .01$ ). They are not in search of punishment of political elites but supporting a greater involvement of citizens in the actual decision-making process. Therefore, the CIR is positively associated with this class ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the word is very often employed by these protesters and, consequently, the term is associated with this class of discourse ( $p < .001$ ), similarly to "direct" ( $p < .001$ ), which reflects this interest in direct democracy itself. This vocabulary emerged from respondents with a high level of political sophistication and some knowledge of direct popular participation mechanisms that can be implemented. At last, in terms of populist appeal, the YV in class 3 hold another side of populist beliefs: they emphasize people-centrism/popular sovereignty while YVs in class 1 hold more

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<sup>18</sup> Man, between 18- and 34-year-old, upper secondary education, employed, vote blank, between 1440 to 2100€, live in village.

common anti-elitist attitudes (belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty is another crucial facet of populist attitudes (Wuttke et al., 2020)). Even if, similarly to class 1, they share a conflicting relationship with political elites, their orientations toward popular sovereignty are much more pronounced.

Overall, the classification of the responses to our open-ended question shed light on an internal divide in the values and arguments mobilized by the YVs to explain their support for the movement. Our analysis reveals two main discourses about democratic aspirations among protesters (H4). The first discourse supports sanction and control over political leaders and is mainly carried by first-time YVs activists who are facing economic and social difficulties. Another discourse is more popular among highly educated, experienced and politicized protesters who support democratic innovations with a strong emphasis on direct citizen participation. Both discourses highlight different facets of populist beliefs, which are quite widespread among the YV. While the former carries very strong anti-elitist attitudes, the latter conveys a desire for unrestricted popular sovereignty. Reflecting their democratic preferences, the YVs seem to distinguish themselves less on their absolute level of populism, but rather on the internal configuration of their populist mindset in link with their level of politicization. The subtleties of these two cohabiting representations of political institutions and democracy among the YV activists are even better captured from in-depth interviews.

## **5. Two cohabiting representations of political institutions among the Yellow Vests**

Despite the fact all YV activists share a large number of views, beginning with the rejection of Macron, globalization and supranational governance, as well as a very critical discourse on French political elites and regime, there are also crucial differences in terms of democratic aspirations. The analysis of semi-directed interviews conducted with participants in the YV movement enables us to inform the results of the previous section and to identify two ideal-typical discourses on political institutions and democracy of YV activists, which in turn explain their different preferences on democratic innovations. It also provides further empirical evidence of the crucial role of politicization to differentiate these two discourses on political institutions (H4).

The first discourse supports political institutions allowing for a better distribution of political power and participation of the citizens. It is typically held by disillusioned left-wing activists who often had open conflicts with their previous organizations and with ample experience of social and political movements prior to the YV. The second ideal-typical discourse insists on the need to install institutions enabling to control and sanction national politicians - the president in particular - and

focusing on the economic privileges of the political elites. It is typically held by first-time activists with a precarious economic situation and strong anti-system convictions.

The following findings are based on the inductive coding of thirty three semi-directed interviews conducted mostly in Spring 2019 (see Appendix E on the selection of interviewees and coding process). Focusing in particular on the part of the interview dealing with the conceptions of the political system of YV participants, several themes structure their discourses on political institutions and democratic aspirations: their conception of politics, their process preferences, their vision of political representatives, the definition of the people and the characterization of the French political regime. The following analyses are based on the most frequent codes out of the forty-two that we used to investigate these five themes.

### ***Redistributing power: the discourse of disillusioned left-wing activists***

The first ideal-typical discourse gives a central role to inclusiveness and political participation, giving the citizen a central stage in the political system. It is typically held by experienced political activists with a left-wing background, who are used to intensive forms of political participation in various organizations and who found themselves in open conflict with these organizations.

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

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

The idea that the president is a “monarch” is quite telling, as left-wing leaders have criticized the Fifth Republic on such grounds since its creation in 1958.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The YV frequently refer to “the people” in their discourses, stressing a strong dichotomy between the people and political elites. However, they do not all share the same conception of what “the people” actually means and which subgroups it comprises. The most politicized and experienced YV activists often tend to position themselves alongside the people rather than within them, as an enlightened vanguard. Jean-Claude (male, 68, former pointsman) is the one who expresses this idea most directly:

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

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

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

In this second archetypical discourse, the YV insist on the fact that there are “good ideas everywhere” in all parts of the political spectrum. As already evidenced by other authors working on the US (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) or on the UK (Clarke et al. 2018), these interviewees reject party politics as it creates unnecessary divisions and prevents the implementation of policies supported by “the people”. They support the inclusion of the blank vote in the votes cast, as a “signal” to the political elites, to show them how unrepresentative they actually are. This discourse is particularly typical of first-time activists with a limited previous involvement in all political activities, including voting.

The same way as more experienced left-wing activists, interviewees closer to the second discourse insist on the importance of counterpowers, but consider that these counterpowers will come from the ability to recall and sanction political elites in general and the president of the Republic in particular, “to undermine Macron” and force him to listen to the people. The “employer's rhetoric” is pervasive: interviewees insist on the fact that politicians should be treated “just as any other worker”. Estelle (female, 42, school auxiliary) argues:

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

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

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

Direct democracy is not conceived as a permanent, interactive and participatory process, but rather as a means for “the people” to counteract the government and the president.

In this second discourse, interviewees consider that politicians do not represent the people because they do not have the same living conditions and financial constraints. Unlike experienced left-wing activists, first-time activists express criticisms of the political representatives that are extremely personalized and centered around Emmanuel Macron. Interviewees often mention the advantages of current and former presidents and ministers: chauffeurs, very high retirement pensions, lifelong salaries, official accommodations, etc. These financial privileges are sometimes exaggerated. For instance, Jean-Bernard (Male, 70, former technician) is convinced that “if [he] had gotten into politics, [he] would drive a Rolls Royce”. Estelle (female, 42, school auxiliary) argues that the difference between “us” and “them” (the professional politicians) is just too wide to comprehend:



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

Several interviewees refer to the *Elysée* and describe it as a “something all in gold”. This wealthy and inaccessible universe is opposed to “the people” as a whole, defined as the reverse mirror of this world of privileges. Macron epitomizes these privileges and this distance. Various interviewees mention his “contempt”, his collusions with the financial world and with powerful interests, or his divisiveness for the country. These activists understand “the people” as opposed to the privileged and self-serving political elites. Politicians are perceived as physically, financially and geographically distant. Some define the people as the “Third Estate”, others as “people who suffer”, “the workers”, the “lower class”, but the majority of these first-time activists define the people as all of those who are not sharing the condition of the privileged political elites.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The Yellow Vests are not a uniform group, but a complex movement cut across by numerous cleavage lines. The combination of survey analysis, textual analysis and in-depth interviews bears out the relevance of a methodological approach based on triangulation and complementarity. It helps to evidence, in particular, the key role of politicization and better make sense of how internal political differences within the YV movement can translate into competing discourses on elected representatives and democratic institutions.

With this in mind, our research brings a twofold contribution. First, it highlights the stronger support of the YV for democratic innovations punishing and controlling political elites compared to the general population, in particular among the most populist protesters who vote for the far-right. Second, we refine the analyses of the preferences by stressing the divide with regard to democratic preferences between those YV who got involved for the first time in a social movement and left-wing experienced activists. The former group tends to frame their participation within the movement based on their economic and social difficulties, and develop a discourse on the political system based on a strong rejection of political elites –and Emmanuel Macron more specifically. Democracy is not at the very heart of their activism, and when it is mentioned, they plebiscite democratic innovations allowing punishing political representatives, such as recall or legislative referendums. These activists typically share a non-pluralist and a unitary vision of “the people” (Caramani, 2017). The more experienced counterparts, on the opposite, have a more politicized discourse based on their greater knowledge of the political system. Democracy is much more central in their discourse, which places participation at the forefront. They have a pluralist vision of politics inherited from their previous politicization and favor all sorts of democratic innovations, including more time-demanding ones resulting in a greater citizen involvement. Our findings fully corroborate other studies stressing that the representation of the general interest (pluralist, or

unitary) is one of the most structuring lines to analyze the democratic aspirations of French citizens (Bedock, 2020).

On a more general note, our mixed-method analysis suggests that democratic aspirations feed on democratic practices, and not only the other way around: Activists who have experienced various forms of political participation (vote, strike, demonstrations, public meetings, etc.) also develop a view on the role citizens should play within the political system, that is a more active one. Direct democracy is only one of the various sources for democratic innovations they support, in particular when it involves citizens' initiatives. By contrast, first-time activists who feel very remote from politics have a very negative and monolithic view of the political class, seen as distant, privileged, self-serving, and full of contempt. The real aspiration is not so much to participate or to deliberate more than to be able to punish political elites when they do not pay enough attention to ordinary citizens.

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## **Supplementary material**

**Appendix A. Variables used in quantitative analysis**

**Appendix B. Models**

**Appendix C. Introducing the Textual Clustering Algorithm**

**Appendix D. Variables used in quantitative text analysis**

**Appendix E. Selection of the interviewees and coding process of the semi-structured interviews**

## Appendix A. Variables used in quantitative analysis

NAME/NOTION	DESCRIPTION & CATEGORIES	SOURCE	TYPE
<b>Dependent variables</b>			
Recall referendum	Vote to dismiss elected representatives before the end of the term if he or she has done a bad job	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Legislative referendum	Rely more on referenda than Parliament to decide on the most important issues	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Sortition	Stop electing representatives and draw by lots ordinary citizens instead	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Public consultation	Organize consultations with pools of citizens to help evaluate policies and take decisions	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Citizen initiative	Enable civil society associations to make law proposals and referendum proposals	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Municipalist initiative	Shift power to localities where constituents could debate and organize themselves	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
<b>Independent variables</b>			
Commitment to the YV movement	Involvement in the social movement: Active YV have taken part in at least on action; Passive YV support without participating; Others do not support or participate	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Nominal
Populist attitudes	Following the seminal research from Akkerman and al. (2014), we computed an additive scale measuring agreement with the 5 following items: 'The politicians need to follow the will of the people'; 'Elected officials talk too much and take to little action'; 'The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than differences among the people'; 'The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions'; 'I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician'. The scale ranges from 0 (not populist) to 1 (very populist). It has satisfactory psychometric properties (Cronbach's alpha=0.82 in <i>PopEuropa</i> v. 0.66 in <i>YVV</i> ; Loevinger's H=0.52 in <i>PopEuropa</i> v. 0.33 in <i>YVV</i> ).	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Continuous (standardized)
Voting	Vote in first round of the 2017 presidential election: Radical left (Artaud, Poutou, Mélenchon); Socialist (Hamon); Centre (Macron, Lasalle); Moderate right (Fillon, Asselineau); Radical right (Le Pen, Dupont-Aignan, Cheminade); Blank vote; No vote; DKNA.	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Nominal
<b>Control variables</b>			
Sex	Women; Men	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Binary
Age	18-34 years-old; 35-49; 50-64; 65+	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Nominal
Education	Highest educational level attained (ISCED): Lower secondary or less; Upper secondary; Tertiary	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Ordinal
Income	Income household divided into deciles: < 1135 euros; 1135-1440; 1440-1750; 1750-2100; 2100-2480; 2480-2910; 2910-3420; 3420-4090; 4090-5250; >5250	<i>PopEuropa</i> & <i>YVVS</i>	Continuous

Professional situation	Employed; Unemployed; Retired; Others	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Nominal
Main residence	Reported place of residence: Big city; Suburbs; Town or small city; Village; Farm	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Nominal
Political interest	Not at all interested in politics; Hardly; Quite; Very	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Continuous (standardized)
Support for redistribution	'To establish social justice, we should take from the rich to give to the poor': Disagree or strongly disagree; Agree; Strongly agree.	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Continuous (standardized)



## Appendix B. Models (binomial logistic regressions)

Models 1 to 6: Effect of commitment to the YV on support for democratic innovations among the French population (Figure 2, left panel)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mentioned v. Not mentioned	Recall ref b/se	Legisl ref b/se	Sortition b/se	Public cons b/se	Citizen init b/se	Municipal init b/se
Non supportive	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Active or supportive YV	1.746*** (0.26)	1.599** (0.23)	1.572* (0.30)	1.044 (0.16)	0.771 (0.13)	1.009 (0.16)
Men	1.025 (0.14)	1.021 (0.14)	0.994 (0.18)	1.047 (0.15)	1.180 (0.19)	1.017 (0.16)
Women	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
18-34 yo	0.731 (0.25)	0.708 (0.24)	1.195 (0.66)	0.651 (0.24)	1.451 (0.60)	1.276 (0.50)
35-49 yo	1.010 (0.34)	0.776 (0.26)	0.772 (0.42)	0.666 (0.25)	1.409 (0.57)	1.018 (0.40)
50-64 yo	1.336 (0.39)	0.926 (0.27)	0.568 (0.28)	0.583 (0.19)	1.168 (0.42)	0.844 (0.29)
65+ yo	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Lower secondary or less	1.457 (0.31)	0.837 (0.17)	1.191 (0.32)	0.781 (0.17)	0.755 (0.18)	0.809 (0.19)
Upper secondary	1.606** (0.25)	0.961 (0.15)	1.161 (0.23)	0.864 (0.14)	0.814 (0.14)	1.011 (0.17)
Tertiary	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Income (std)	1.169* (0.09)	1.150 (0.09)	0.885 (0.09)	0.990 (0.08)	0.928 (0.08)	0.923 (0.08)
Employed	0.960 (0.26)	0.835 (0.23)	2.175 (1.03)	1.730 (0.54)	1.009 (0.34)	1.145 (0.37)
Unemployed	1.450 (0.51)	0.831 (0.29)	1.077 (0.61)	1.505 (0.59)	1.033 (0.43)	1.176 (0.47)
Retired	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Other	0.922	0.855	1.322	1.507	0.973	1.258
	(0.29)	(0.27)	(0.69)	(0.54)	(0.37)	(0.46)
Big city & suburbs	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Town or small city	0.895	1.344	0.909	0.908	0.736	1.243
	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.20)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.25)
Village & farm	0.851	1.072	0.749	1.209	0.758	1.557*
	(0.16)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.24)	(0.16)	(0.33)
Support for redistribution	1.011	1.079	1.073	0.970	1.151	1.028
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Political interest (std)	0.986	1.070	0.926	1.154	1.031	1.248**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.10)
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N	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000
chi2	47.981	30.750	40.066	15.993	17.149	17.890
ll	-660.618	-676.981	-448.888	-633.264	-553.382	-579.063
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Exponentiated coefficients

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Models 7 to 12: Effect of commitment to the YV on support for democratic innovations among the Yellow Vests (Figure 2, right panel)

	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Mentioned v. Not mentioned	Recall ref b/se	Legisl ref b/se	Sortition b/se	Public cons b/se	Citizen init b/se	Municipal init b/se
Supportive YV	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Active YV	0.994 (0.17)	0.918 (0.16)	1.064 (0.22)	1.607* (0.36)	1.317 (0.37)	0.954 (0.22)
Men	1.210 (0.18)	1.145 (0.17)	1.442* (0.26)	0.636* (0.12)	0.721 (0.17)	0.700 (0.14)
Women	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
18-34 yo	2.143 (0.86)	0.404* (0.17)	2.026 (1.12)	0.733 (0.39)	1.446 (0.91)	0.652 (0.35)
35-49 yo	2.225* (0.86)	0.419* (0.17)	2.272 (1.22)	0.999 (0.51)	0.723 (0.45)	0.566 (0.30)
50-64 yo	1.504 (0.53)	0.692 (0.25)	2.090 (1.05)	0.975 (0.46)	0.999 (0.56)	0.596 (0.28)
65+ yo	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Lower secondary or less	1.656** (0.31)	0.708 (0.14)	0.934 (0.21)	0.773 (0.17)	0.856 (0.25)	0.991 (0.26)
Upper secondary	1.358 (0.26)	0.955 (0.20)	1.005 (0.24)	0.756 (0.18)	0.733 (0.22)	0.935 (0.26)
Tertiary	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Income (std)	0.909 (0.07)	1.260** (0.11)	0.860 (0.09)	1.053 (0.10)	0.943 (0.12)	0.819 (0.09)
Employed	0.414** (0.13)	1.142 (0.35)	1.466 (0.54)	1.691 (0.66)	1.271 (0.60)	1.620 (0.69)
Unemployed	0.362** (0.13)	1.190 (0.43)	1.093 (0.48)	2.180 (1.00)	2.588 (1.37)	0.950 (0.51)
Retired	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)

Other	0.374*	1.080	1.633	2.008	0.838	1.686
	(0.14)	(0.42)	(0.75)	(0.97)	(0.54)	(0.87)
Big city & suburbs	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Town or small city	1.043	0.838	1.281	1.266	0.836	0.676
	(0.23)	(0.19)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.28)	(0.20)
Village & farm	1.018	0.842	1.233	0.963	0.943	0.960
	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.34)	(0.28)	(0.32)	(0.28)
Support for redistribution	1.189*	0.969	1.235*	0.870	0.905	0.829*
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Political interest (std)	0.959	1.059	0.966	0.969	1.261	1.002
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.10)
-----						
N	935.000	935.000	935.000	935.000	935.000	935.000
chi2	32.558	30.939	23.950	24.977	21.314	17.237
ll	-609.157	-580.591	-460.030	-442.637	-303.064	-373.815
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Exponentiated coefficients

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Models 13 to 18: Effect of populist attitudes and voting on support for democratic innovations among the French population (Figure 3, left panel)

	(13) Recall ref b/se	(14) Legisl ref b/se	(15) Sortition b/se	(16) Public cons b/se	(17) Citizen init b/se	(18) Municipal init b/se
Populist attitudes (std)	1.396*** (0.11)	1.414*** (0.11)	1.211* (0.12)	0.938 (0.07)	0.823* (0.07)	1.012 (0.08)
Radical left	1.253 (0.30)	1.662* (0.38)	0.999 (0.29)	0.802 (0.19)	1.221 (0.31)	0.665 (0.17)
Socialist	0.945 (0.27)	0.957 (0.27)	0.654 (0.25)	0.859 (0.25)	1.188 (0.35)	0.866 (0.25)
Centre	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Moderate right	1.319 (0.36)	1.263 (0.34)	0.645 (0.26)	1.038 (0.28)	0.676 (0.22)	1.275 (0.35)
Radical right	1.635* (0.35)	2.140*** (0.46)	1.051 (0.29)	0.710 (0.16)	0.513* (0.14)	0.676 (0.16)
Blank vote	1.351 (0.42)	1.295 (0.40)	0.913 (0.36)	1.166 (0.37)	1.351 (0.45)	0.485 (0.19)
No vote	1.268 (0.29)	1.155 (0.26)	1.030 (0.29)	1.208 (0.27)	0.970 (0.24)	0.792 (0.19)
DKNA	0.647 (0.28)	1.070 (0.43)	0.836 (0.42)	1.484 (0.57)	1.093 (0.45)	0.788 (0.34)
Men	1.047 (0.15)	1.069 (0.15)	0.987 (0.18)	1.009 (0.15)	1.157 (0.18)	1.004 (0.15)
Women	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
18-34 yo	0.840 (0.30)	0.801 (0.28)	1.288 (0.71)	0.635 (0.24)	1.371 (0.57)	1.409 (0.56)
35-49 yo	1.143 (0.39)	0.828 (0.28)	0.824 (0.45)	0.684 (0.25)	1.362 (0.56)	1.129 (0.44)
50-64 yo	1.441 (0.43)	0.959 (0.28)	0.589 (0.30)	0.601 (0.20)	1.145 (0.41)	0.912 (0.31)
65+ yo	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)

Lower secondary or less	1.465 (0.31)	0.816 (0.17)	1.221 (0.34)	0.787 (0.17)	0.807 (0.20)	0.832 (0.20)
Upper secondary	1.539** (0.24)	0.890 (0.14)	1.159 (0.23)	0.894 (0.14)	0.861 (0.15)	1.053 (0.18)
Tertiary	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Income (std)	1.120 (0.09)	1.117 (0.09)	0.852 (0.08)	1.003 (0.08)	0.959 (0.08)	0.910 (0.08)
Employed	0.992 (0.28)	0.869 (0.24)	2.263 (1.08)	1.682 (0.53)	0.930 (0.31)	1.166 (0.38)
Unemployed	1.414 (0.50)	0.824 (0.30)	1.036 (0.59)	1.440 (0.56)	0.984 (0.41)	1.189 (0.48)
Retired	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Other	1.021 (0.33)	0.981 (0.32)	1.386 (0.73)	1.399 (0.50)	0.850 (0.33)	1.262 (0.46)
Big city & suburbs	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Town or small city	0.852 (0.15)	1.291 (0.23)	0.900 (0.20)	0.915 (0.17)	0.776 (0.15)	1.244 (0.25)
Village & farm	0.761 (0.15)	0.961 (0.19)	0.727 (0.18)	1.244 (0.25)	0.847 (0.18)	1.579* (0.34)
Support for redistribution	0.968 (0.07)	0.995 (0.08)	1.049 (0.10)	1.033 (0.08)	1.163 (0.10)	1.070 (0.09)
Political interest (std)	0.985 (0.07)	1.054 (0.08)	0.938 (0.09)	1.203* (0.09)	1.041 (0.09)	1.217* (0.10)
-----						
N	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000	1036.000
chi2	67.447	67.405	42.022	25.591	36.337	27.179
ll	-650.885	-658.653	-447.910	-628.465	-543.788	-574.419
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Exponentiated coefficients

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Models 19 to 24: Effect of populist attitudes and voting on support for democratic innovations among the Yellow Vests (Figure 3, right panel)

	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
Mentioned v. Not mentioned	Recall ref b/se	Legisl ref b/se	Sortition b/se	Public cons b/se	Citizen init b/se	Municipal init b/se
Populist attitudes (std)	1.031 (0.08)	1.135 (0.09)	1.898*** (0.23)	0.844* (0.07)	0.695*** (0.07)	1.121 (0.12)
Radical left	1.846 (0.95)	0.871 (0.46)	0.438 (0.24)	0.976 (0.59)	1.310 (1.04)	0.580 (0.34)
Socialist	3.866* (2.53)	0.799 (0.51)	0.677 (0.47)	0.711 (0.55)	1.137 (1.13)	0.081* (0.09)
Centre	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Moderate right	3.398* (1.86)	2.126 (1.23)	0.246* (0.15)	0.470 (0.32)	1.197 (1.02)	0.288 (0.19)
Radical right	2.923* (1.51)	1.151 (0.61)	0.295* (0.16)	0.751 (0.46)	1.107 (0.89)	0.495 (0.29)
Blank vote	1.976 (1.04)	1.205 (0.66)	0.467 (0.27)	0.848 (0.53)	1.406 (1.15)	0.308 (0.19)
No vote	2.154 (1.14)	0.775 (0.42)	0.558 (0.32)	0.910 (0.57)	0.787 (0.66)	0.607 (0.36)
DKNA	1.503 (0.97)	1.396 (0.96)	0.386 (0.30)	1.915 (1.40)	1.490 (1.49)	0.112 (0.13)
Men	1.200 (0.18)	1.105 (0.17)	1.536* (0.28)	0.696* (0.13)	0.744 (0.17)	0.661* (0.14)
Women	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
18-34 yo	2.246* (0.91)	0.395* (0.17)	1.927 (1.09)	0.810 (0.44)	1.746 (1.11)	0.546 (0.30)
35-49 yo	2.281* (0.89)	0.401* (0.17)	2.220 (1.23)	1.104 (0.57)	0.835 (0.52)	0.549 (0.29)
50-64 yo	1.611 (0.57)	0.687 (0.26)	1.950 (1.01)	1.047 (0.50)	1.139 (0.64)	0.509 (0.25)
65+ yo	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)

Lower secondary or less	1.662**	0.704	0.883	0.806	0.994	0.853
	(0.31)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.29)	(0.22)
Upper secondary	1.359	0.944	0.976	0.787	0.822	0.869
	(0.26)	(0.20)	(0.23)	(0.18)	(0.25)	(0.24)
Tertiary	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Income (std)	0.903	1.259**	0.873	1.051	0.961	0.790*
	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.09)
Employed	0.417**	1.165	1.448	1.735	1.283	1.512
	(0.13)	(0.36)	(0.55)	(0.70)	(0.61)	(0.65)
Unemployed	0.379**	1.329	1.175	2.010	2.409	0.826
	(0.14)	(0.49)	(0.53)	(0.94)	(1.30)	(0.45)
Retired	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Other	0.347**	1.148	1.844	1.780	0.765	1.689
	(0.13)	(0.45)	(0.87)	(0.87)	(0.50)	(0.87)
Big city & suburbs	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Town or small city	1.025	0.816	1.218	1.268	0.859	0.682
	(0.23)	(0.19)	(0.34)	(0.36)	(0.29)	(0.21)
Village & farm	1.003	0.801	1.262	0.980	0.946	0.963
	(0.23)	(0.19)	(0.36)	(0.28)	(0.32)	(0.29)
Support for redistribution	1.197*	0.957	1.128	0.909	0.995	0.803*
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.07)
Political interest (std)	0.973	1.083	0.993	0.934	1.223	0.978
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.10)
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N	938.000	938.000	938.000	938.000	938.000	938.000
chi2	48.719	48.371	71.730	33.453	35.374	36.547
ll	-603.890	-573.785	-438.188	-440.479	-296.366	-369.982
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Exponentiated coefficients

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001



## **Appendix C. Introducing the Textual Clustering Algorithm**

In the results section, we relied on a hierarchical descending algorithm to analyze the discourses of the Yellow Vests on the social movement from an open-ended question in a purposive sample of Yellow Vests activists (YVVS). Hereby, we present the specificity of the method employed in greater details. The algorithm – which the first articles describing it date back to 1983 – assigns each text to one cluster, unlike methods like Latent Dirichlet Association (LDA) used in topic models. Instead, the algorithm uses a singular value decomposition of a document-term matrix. The resulting matrix is then weighted as binary, so only the presence/absence of terms are considered, not their frequencies. The aim is to iteratively split this matrix into two clusters by maximizing the Chi-squared distance between those. To get a good approximation in a relatively short time, texts are ordered according to their coordinates on the first axis of the correspondence analysis of the binary matrix. Then, the texts are grouped in two clusters based on this order, and the grouping with the maximum inter-cluster Chi-squared distance is kept. Based on this first clustering, each text is in turn assigned to the other cluster. If this new assignment gives a higher inter-cluster Chi-squared value, it is kept. The operation is repeated until no new assignment gives a higher Chi-squared. Finally, on the resulting clusters binary matrices, features are selected based on their frequency and on a contingency coefficient minimum value, and the biggest of the two resulting clusters is then split with the same algorithm iteratively. For more detail on the algorithm, see Reinert (1983, 1990).

In the main section, we opted for a 3-class classification for several reasons. While a higher number of identified clusters might improve the deep understanding of the entire discourses of the Yellow Vests protesters on the social movement in which they were involved, we think this would hamper the readability of our analyses without improving our knowledge of the democratic preferences of YV activists. First, the alternatives solutions are composed of 4, 6 and 8 classes maximum. If we follow the divisive logic of the clustering highlighted by the junctions of the alternatives cutrees, we observe that the alternative solutions are all divisions of the three classes reported in the main analysis, but do not reveal essential different classes. For example, in the case of class 1 (i.e., the YVs that exhibit poverty issues), the 6- or 8-classes solutions add another class that talks more about taxes and charges. While this might expand the general understanding of the movement, it is of limited interest for our research question. Second, our approach in this article intends to be as parsimonious as possible. Since the other solutions do not provide substantial gain for our hypotheses and research question, but without compromising the results obtained with the simplest solutions in any cases, we opted for the 3-class solution. Third, the 3-class solution allowed us to classify the highest number of texts, although alternative

classifications in 6 or 8 classes were very high too (more than 90percent of the texts). Ultimately, we opted for a 3-class solution for both clarity regarding our research question and hypotheses about the Yellow Vests democratic aspirations.

## Appendix D. Variables used in quantitative text analysis

NAME/NOTION	DESCRIPTION & CATEGORIES	SOURCE	TYPE
<b><i>Input text variable</i></b>			
Reasons to support the YV	'What are your views on the Yellow Vests movement? Please feel free to evoke the positive or negative facets of the movement, its political efficacy, its evolution over time, policy responses from the government, your motivations to support or participate in this movement...'	YVVS	Textual
<b><i>Auxiliary variables</i></b>			
Democratic preferences	Recall referendum; Legislative referendum; Sortition; Public consultation; Citizen initiative; Municipalist initiative (see Table 1 for details)	YVVS	Nominal
Politicization	'Apart from the YV demonstrations, have you ever participated in a demonstration or a blockade?': First-time protesters; Others	YVVS	Nominal
Political interest	Not at all interested in politics; Hardly; Quite; Very	YVVS	Nominal
Sex	Man / Woman	YVVS	Nominal
Age	Age groups (18-34; 35-49; 50-64; 65+)	YVVS	Nominal
Education	Highest educational level attained (ISCED): Lower secondary or less; Upper secondary; Tertiary	YVVS	Nominal
Income	Income household divided into deciles: < 1135 euros; 1135-1440; 1440-1750; 1750-2100; 2100-2480; 2480-2910; 2910-3420; 3420-4090; 4090-5250; >5250	YVVS	Nominal
Professional situation	Employed; Unemployed; Retired; Others	YVVS	Nominal
Main residence	Big city and suburbs; Town or small city; Village and farm	YVVS	Nominal
Support for redistribution	To establish social justice, we should take from the rich to give to the poor': Disagree or strongly disagree vs. Agree or Strongly agree.	YVVS	Binary
Vote choice	Vote in first round of the 2017 presidential election: Radical left (Artaud, Poutou, Mélenchon); Socialist (Hamon); Centre (Macron, Lasalle); Moderate right (Fillon, Asselineau); Radical right (Le Pen, Dupont-Aignan, Cheminade); Blank vote; No vote; DKNA	YVVS	Nominal
Populist attitudes	Tertiary split based on the continuous measure of populist attitudes	YVVS	Nominal

*Note: All auxiliary variables are introduced as dummy variables.*

## **Appendix E. Selection of the interviewees and coding process of the semi-structured interviews**

The findings presented in the fifth section are based on 33 semi-structured interviews conducted by four interviewers. It concerns Yellow Vests activists residing mainly in the peri-urban fringe of two French metropolises and individuals met during an ethnographic inquiry conducted by two of the interviewers on a roundabout situated close to a 2,930 inhabitants town (Bedock et al. 2020). The choice of the interviewees was guided by the desire to diversify the profiles of the activists by taking into account their age, gender, level of politicization, political orientation and geographical location. Most of the interviews took place from April 2019 onwards, i.e. relatively late after the start of the mobilization, which involves that certain profiles - in particular first-time women activists are underrepresented compared to the early stages of the movement. 36% of our interviewees (12 out of 33) are first time-activists, whereas 64% (22 out of 33) have a previous experience in other political and social movements, which corresponds to the general profile of the YV activists from January 2019 onwards (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets jaunes 2019). Interviews lasted between one hour and two hours and 45 minutes. The interview grid dealt first with the social and political experience of interviewees (social and professional background, standard of living, political experience and practices, media habits). Secondly, we talked about their engagement within the Yellow Vest movement. Finally, we addressed our interviewees' conceptions of the political system, starting with very general questions about what "politics" evoked for them before dealing with their feelings about the French political system and the reforms that seemed desirable to them.

All of the interviews were then transcribed in full and coded in the Nvivo software. The second step consisted in the inductive coding of the interviews for each of the themes covered in the interview guide. The initial codes were elaborated inductively thanks to the interviews with the 32 lay citizens, whereas we used and completed the existing thematic codes for the interviews with Yellow Vests activists (Bedock, 2020). Each of these general themes is divided into sub-themes. Each sub-theme is constituted of various codes. Every time that a new idea came out, we created a new code and classified this code into the general themes and sub-themes. We then re-read the whole corpus, merged certain codes which were redundant and checked the integrality of the corpus in order to stabilize the codes used. A single text segment could refer to several codes when it contains several ideas.

For the analysis presented in this article, we focused in particular on six out of the 42 codes used to characterize their conception of the political system. These codes were selected because they are the most salient in our corpus. They correspond to the ones that have been the most frequently discussed by our interviewees on the following subthemes: conception of politics, process

preferences, vision of political representatives, the characterization of the French political regime and the definition of the people. The codes selected are the following: “conflict and compromise” (conception of politics), “RIC and referendums” and “representativeness and diversity” (process preferences), “world apart and disconnected” (vision of political representatives), “dictatorship / Oligarchy / totalitarianism” (characterization of the French political regime), and any reference to the “people”. After having analyzed the integrality of the references to these different codes, which have enabled to identify and describe the two ideal-typical discourses, we related them to the profiles of the participants.