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## **Control or participate? The Yellow Vests' democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis**

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### Abstract:

By means of an original mixed-method research design, this article analyzes the French Yellow Vests' attitudes to democracy and democratic innovations. First, we find that Yellow Vests protesters are supportive of innovations aiming at controlling elected representatives, and that populist attitudes enhance support for direct public control. Second, we provide evidence of two different discourses about democracy coexisting within the movement: one, stemming from inexperienced first-time activists, is centered on the control of political elites; the other, coming from more politicized Yellow Vests, rather advocates for direct citizen participation. This article therefore contributes to bridging the literatures on democratic issues in social movement, process preferences, and populism. In particular, we highlight that within 'populist' social movements, various democratic aspirations may cohabit, depending on how protesters define 'the people' and their experience of political protest.

Keywords: Yellow Vests; populism; democratic attitudes; politicization; control; participation

Word Count: 10.799

## 1. Introduction

In a context of strong political distrust that singles out French citizens from their European neighbors (Grossman and Sauger, 2017), the Yellow Vests movement (hereinafter referred to as YV) caused a stir among political commentators –pundits and academics alike– when it first materialized in November 2018. Rarely in recent years has a movement sparked such heated debates, whether on the grounds of its supporters, its central demands, or its expectations. The movement started as a reaction against a fuel tax and initially revolved around purchasing power. Yet democratic aspirations in general and the CIR in particular (Citizens' Initiative Referendum, *référendum d'initiative citoyenne*,) quickly made their way into the YV list of requests and gained more prominence over time (Gonthier and Guerra, 2022).

Democratic demands are not new to social movements. They have been at the very heart of anti-austerity movements that flourished in the wake of the Great Recession (Della Porta, 2015), and which some have labelled as 'real democracy movements' (Oikonomakis and Roos, 2016) or 'pro-democracy protests' (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). Still, compared to these movements whose participants were often found to be young, highly educated, and left-leaning (Grasso and Giugni, 2016), the YV stand out by their specific sociological background and composite political orientations. It consisted, for the most part, of middle age members of the working and lower-middle class unified by a shared experience of social insecurity and a common rejection of party politics, but the movement also mingled a large number of first time protesters with more politically experienced activists (Bendali and Rubert, 2020; Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019; Guerra et al., 2019). In addition, while anti-austerity movements are known for their participatory and deliberative democratic experiments (Della Porta, 2020), the YV are rather similar to 'populist' social movements (Aslanidis, 2016; Bergem, 2022), due to their harsh criticism of the French party system, their strong anti-elite attitudes as well as the pivotal topic of people sovereignty.

The YV democratic aspirations have prompted diverging interpretations. Some analyzed this demand as the promotion of a permanent direct democracy which would replace traditional forms of political representation (Marlière, 2019; Rouban, 2019). Taking the complete opposite view, others saw in its horizontal organization and citizens' assemblies the seeds of a 'municipalist' vision of politics based on local self-government (Jeanpierre, 2019; Ravelli et al., 2020). Ultimately, others have tried to reconcile the two competing perspectives, arguing that the YV actually do not demand the abolition of traditional political representation but its reorganization around three principles: control over representatives, attentiveness to citizens' claims, and 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 direct citizen participation, they differ on how to interpret the advocated changes.

In this article, we build on the case of the French YV to engage a dialogue with three strands of research rarely mobilized together: the literature on democratic demands in recent social movements, the burgeoning literature on process preferences, and populism studies. Whereas social movement studies usually scrutinize left-wing movements with strong deliberative and participatory political aspirations, the literature on process preferences focuses on the general public and democratic innovations that are rarely precisely operationalized. Within this literature, numerous pieces have highlighted the influence of populist attitudes on democratic preferences. We bring together these three bodies of literature to gain a deeper understanding of the YV attitudes to democracy and democratic innovations.

Democratic innovations are '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, are inspired by direct democracy but aim at establishing a more delegate and responsive model of representation by giving the means to the citizens to sanction representatives or bypass them and decide directly. Others, such as mini-publics, or citizens' initiative are inspired by a participatory and deliberative vision of democracy

and aim at increasing the collaboration between elected decision-makers and citizens, with the latter expected to partake in the elaboration of a project before the final decision. 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?

This article also contributes to the debates on citizens' and activists' process preferences by showing the usefulness of mixed methods to investigate such a complex issue. Notions of democracy are increasingly accounted for as a dependent variable (Zmerli, 2021). Still, previous research has stressed the difficulty to grasp democratic preferences through exclusive reliance on survey data and quantitative analysis, due to the inherent complexity of this topic (Bengtsson, 2012). 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). We therefore use a combination of quantitative analysis of survey data, quantitative textual analysis and in-depth interviews to address our research question.

We find strong evidence that the levels of populism and of politicization are key in explaining preferences for different types of democratic innovations, both within and outside the movement. In particular, quantitative analyses show that compared to the French population, the YV are more supportive of democratic innovations designed to control and discipline elected representatives, and that a higher level of populism increases support for democratic innovations based on public control rather than on civic participation. Quantitative textual analysis and analysis of the in-depth interviews allow us to further evidence the key role of politicization. They converge in highlighting contrasted discourses about democracy within the movement. The first discourse comes from inexperienced first-time activists: Concerned about socioeconomic hardship and dissatisfied with the political system, they support democratic innovations aiming at controlling and disciplining political elites. The second discourse emanates from more

experienced and politicized YV, promoting democratic innovations that enhance direct citizen participation.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Democratic demands in social movements**

Social movements and democratic innovations contribute to democratic life in distinct ways. In a context of growing stress on representative democracy in Europe, social movements pay increasing attention to deliberative and participatory practices, not just for internal purposes but also to engage with the society at large (Della Porta and Felicetti, 2022). Thus democratic innovations and movements' mobilization can be depicted as efforts to run counter the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracies and the disappointment of a large number of citizens with the representative model (Della Porta, 2020).

A wide range of social movements have flourished in the aftermath of the Great Recession, such as the Forum of the Global Justice Movements and anti-austerity protests. They have developed deliberative democracy practices and participation 'from below', and a model of grassroots democracy with participatory and deliberative values operating as substitutes for representative and majoritarian models of democracy seen in a deep crisis. Accordingly, scholars have highlighted how democratic practices and innovation issues permeated the demands of social movements (Della Porta, 2013; Della Porta, 2020; Talpin, 2015), also reflecting the specific sociology of anti-austerity movements bringing together individuals with high levels of education, often experiencing economic and social precariousness, and clearly leaning towards to the left (Collectif d'enquête et al., 2017; Grasso and Giugni, 2016; Hylmö and Wennerhag, 2015).

Social movement studies have long demonstrated that collective action involves a process of political identity building that affects political behavior (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans,

2013). More recently, scholars have coined the notion of ‘populist action frame’ to also account for some particularities of anti-austerity protests. The latter indeed tend to build a collective and inclusive identification of individual subjectivities with the figure of ‘the people’ as the sole source and agent of political authority (for an overview, see Bos et al., 2020; see also Aslanidis, 2017, 2018). This encompassing identity of ‘the people as sovereign’ operates as the primary mobilizing and commitment factor, providing protesters with an undisputed sense of moral legitimacy (Canovan, 2005; Westlind, 1996) and enabling them to put aside their potentially competing social identities (Aslanidis, 2020). Theoretically, this identity framing relates to the populist ideology that advocates for a direct linkage, based on the putative ‘will of the people’, between citizens and decision-making –whether through representatives or not– (Caramani, 2017). As Aslanidis forcefully puts it:

‘The strong formal elements of populist collective identity render it a compelling force and facilitate capturing a high moral ground against counterframing activity by opponents. Furthermore, participants are empowered by anchoring their diagnosis of the situation upon the legitimizing values of majority rule and popular sovereignty, which no opposing agent can carelessly defy without being labeled undemocratic’ (2016: 306)

Social movements studies have also long addressed discontinuities in the frequency and in the intensity of protest, more often through survey data (e.g., Oliver, 1984; Saunders et al., 2012) but also by ways of case-control designs in intriguing movements such as homeless mobilizations (Corrigall-Brown et al., 2009). They have demonstrated the transformative nature of participation in certain social movements, which can alter the social destiny and the political attitudes and practices of individuals even decades after (Fillieule and Neveu, 2019; Giugni and Grasso, 2016; McAdam, 1989). Although this field of research is not very developed yet, some studies have established a link between previous political and protest experiences and attitudes towards democracy among activists. For instance, in their study of the 15-M protest campaign in Spain, Portos and Masullo (2017) highlighted that democratic dissatisfaction is significantly

associated with multi-time participation, and suggested that democratic discontent is a central unifying factor of the 15-M movement. Studying the same movement, Nez (2020) emphasized that participants formulate different conceptions of political representation that can be related to their previous experiences of political protest and may exacerbate tensions between participants who do not all share the same democratic aspirations.

## **2.2 Explaining support for democratic innovations of control and participation**

In the last decade or so, there has been a fast-developing strand of research on citizens' process preferences, with an increasing focus on the determinants of support for various democratic innovations. Previous research has found that citizens disenchanted with the current functioning of their democracy are particularly prone to support various kinds of democratic innovations: 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, 2020; Jacquet et al., 2020) or even the full replacement of elected politicians by citizens drawn by lot (Bedock and Pilet, 2021). Dissatisfied citizens can also support enhancing the role of experts over traditional representation (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013). Otherwise put, individuals who experience dissatisfaction with the democratic system tend to prefer any alternative to status quo.

Among these dissatisfied citizens, various studies show that participatory democrats are usually found among people with higher levels of education (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Dalton, 2017; Webb, 2013), political efficacy and political interest (Bedock and Pilet, 2020; Neblo et al., 2010). Others, on the contrary, find that citizens who are less educated, less affluent and less politically interested citizens are more supportive of reforms giving more weight to direct democracy (Bowler and Donovan, 2019; Coffé and Michels, 2014; Rojon and Rijken, 2021), or



reforms disrupting the traditional representative model to replace political representatives by citizens drawn by lot (Bedock and Pilet, 2021; Jacquet et al., 2020; Pilet et al., 2022). Indeed, these reforms challenge political elites and enable citizens to have more control over their political decisions. These contradictory results can be explained by the way in which these various alternatives to representative democracy are defined. In particular, the decisional v. advisory nature of the democratic innovations at stake has an influence on the factors explaining the preferences of various groups of citizens (Rojon et al., 2019; Rojon and Pilet, 2021). This calls for a clearer definition of the democratic innovations that are pitted against one another, which is often lacking.

Within this field of research, numerous studies have analyzed specifically the link between populist attitudes and preferences for direct democracy. Populist attitudes are associated with stronger preferences for referenda (Goldberg et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Werner and Jacobs, 2021). Some have found that even though citizens with populist attitudes are more supportive of referendums, they are also less likely to take part in protest events and to vote in referendums (Zaslove et al., 2021). This apparent paradox is due to the fact that individuals who are more populist also tend to be more disengaged politically and therefore less likely to take part in low-intensity as well as high-intensity forms of political participation, even though they want to control political elites through referenda.

In a nutshell, although democratic dissatisfaction feeds into popular support for various democratic innovations, the profile of those who support these innovations is highly contingent upon the alternatives. Populist attitudes also tend to play a key role, in particular in explaining support for direct democratic reforms.

### **3. Hypothesis and mixed method design**

#### **3.1 Hypotheses**

Our research hypotheses draw on the previous literature review. More specifically, we address whether commitment to the YV movement, populist attitudes and political experience are likely to influence preferences for various types of democratic innovations.

The first key contextual element to bear in mind is the high level of public resentment towards the French democratic system among YV protesters, in a country where citizens are already disgruntled with their democratic institutions (Grossman, 2019). Throughout the weeks during the YV movement, the idea of the CIR became central and progressively unified the demands of its participants (Gonthier and Guerra, 2022). Two claims have been at the forefront: the willingness to claim power back from the ruling political elites, and the need to reinstate popular sovereignty. The CIR became the most identifiable motto of the movement, and acted as a rallying flag. Discourses on CIR revolved around the necessity to control political representatives (Bedock et al., 2021). Consequently, we hypothesize that participation in the YV movement has operated as a politicizing factor for demonstrators, making them more sensitive to certain forms of democratic innovations. Hence our first hypothesis:

*H1. Compared to the rest of the population, individuals who identify with the Yellow Vests movement and Yellow Vests activists are more supportive of democratic innovations that aim at controlling political representatives.*

Our second hypothesis relates to the populist nature of the YV movement. Various scholars have argued that the YV can be characterized as a 'populist' social movement due to the widely shared anti-elite/pro-people views (Bergem, 2022; Hamdaoui, 2021). Typically, 63 percent of the YV strongly agree that 'the people and not political leaders should take the most important decisions for the country', as opposed to 28 percent for the French population (Guerra et al., 2019). Drawing on the link between populist attitudes and preferences for referenda as a way to control political elites and bypass their political decisions, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2. The more individuals hold populist attitudes, the more they are likely to support democratic innovations that aim at controlling elected representatives. This applies within the general population as well as within the YV movement.*

Finally, a striking feature of the YV movement is the fact that it has gathered individuals with varying politicization levels. First-time protesters with a remote relationship to politics rubbed shoulders with experienced activists, often with a left-leaning background (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019; Reungoat et al., 2020). Consequently, we hypothesize that experienced activists are more likely to support participatory and deliberative mechanisms, since 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). Conversely, first-time protesters are less acquainted with the workings of public life, have a distant history with politics (Reungoat et al., 2020) and little experience of political participation. As a result:

*H3. 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.*

### **3.2 Mixed method design**

The above-mentioned hypotheses were tested using the combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Mixed methods are a fruitful gateway to the understanding how competing models of democracy can arise and coexist. 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) (see Aguilera and Chevalier, 2021; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Green, 2007). Moreover, our design

develops an integrative mixed-method approach which is ideal to study factorially complex constructs, such as democratic aspirations (Castro et al., 2010).

We draw on three complementary data sources. First, to put the preferences of the YV in perspective with those of the French population, we use two mirror surveys: the *Populism in Europe Survey* (PopEuropa) conducted in April 2019 among a national representative sample and a convenience sample of Yellow Vests interviewed between September and December 2019 (*Yellow Vest Values Survey*, hereinafter YVVS) (Guerra et al., 2021). With this material, we analyze the influence of commitment to the YV movement and populist attitudes on preferences for various democratic innovations, comparing YV participants and their French counterparts. Additional data sources are then used to understand 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 in-depth interviews conducted with YV activists in Spring 2019 within the *Research Collective on the YV* (hereinafter RCYV) so as to better delineate ideal-typical discourses on political institutions and democracy.

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

##### **4.1 Methodology**

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 of 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, the two surveys contain 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. They were asked to choose up to two of the following six innovations: recall referendum, legislative referendum, sortition (i.e., selection by lot), 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>

One of the key issues of the existing literature on democratic preferences is the lack of distinction between different instruments, which can affect profoundly the profile of the supporters of given democratic innovations (Bedock and Pilet, 2020; Rojon et al., 2019). For this reason, our survey item is an attempt to refine measurements and capture more nuanced preferences. The six innovations that we targeted are evaluated separately, but also can be broadly dichotomized into control vs. participatory mechanisms. Yet, we are aware that this distinction is not always clear-cut. Some democratic innovations, such as CIR can tap into both dimensions, by providing opportunities of participation for the most motivated during its initiative phase and a veto power for all citizens through a final referendum. Similarly, even

1 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.

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

though it gives the chance to deliberate and participate to a limited number of citizens, sortition can also be conceived as an institution controlling political representatives by bypassing them.

#### **4.2 Diverging views on democratic innovations**

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. Our first result confirms that the YV (right panel) are more supportive of democratic reforms that aim at controlling and disciplining 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 and necessitate to collaborate with representatives (i.e., public consultations, citizen initiative and municipalism) 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 by the YV than by the French population. 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.

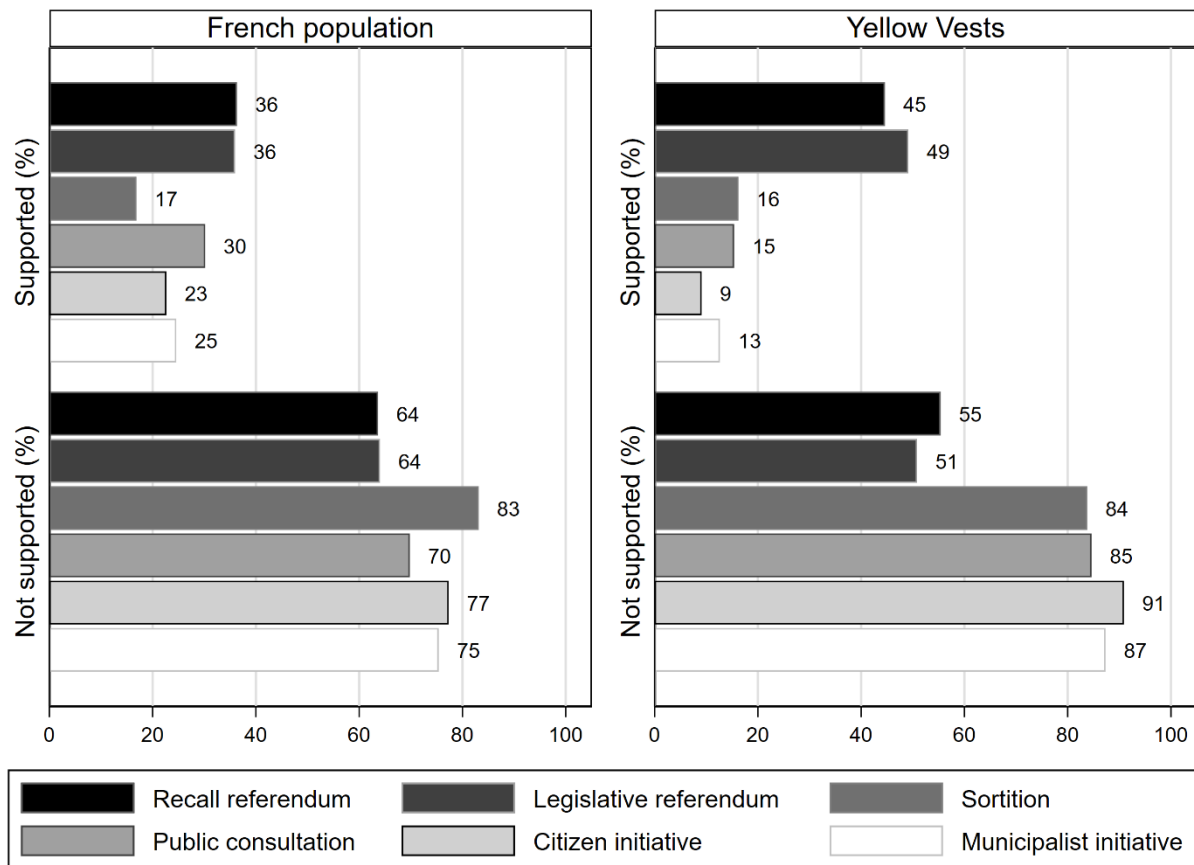


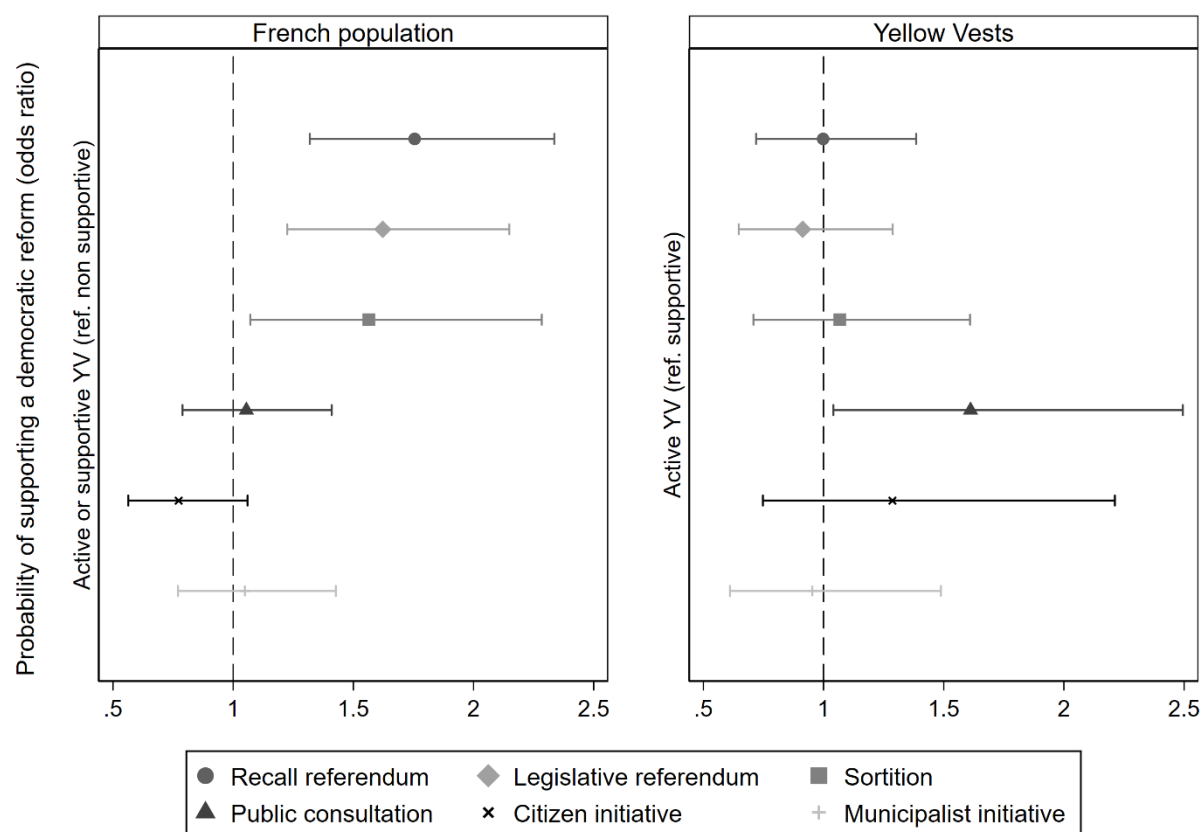
Figure 1. Support for democratic innovations among the French population and the Yellow Vests

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)

We then 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 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 rather than the intensity of their commitment when they are sympathizers.



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

<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.



*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 preferences between YV supporters and non-supporters among the French (left panel), as well as between active and supportive YV within the movement (right panel), with 95 percent confidence intervals. Models adjust for sociodemographics and political characteristics.*

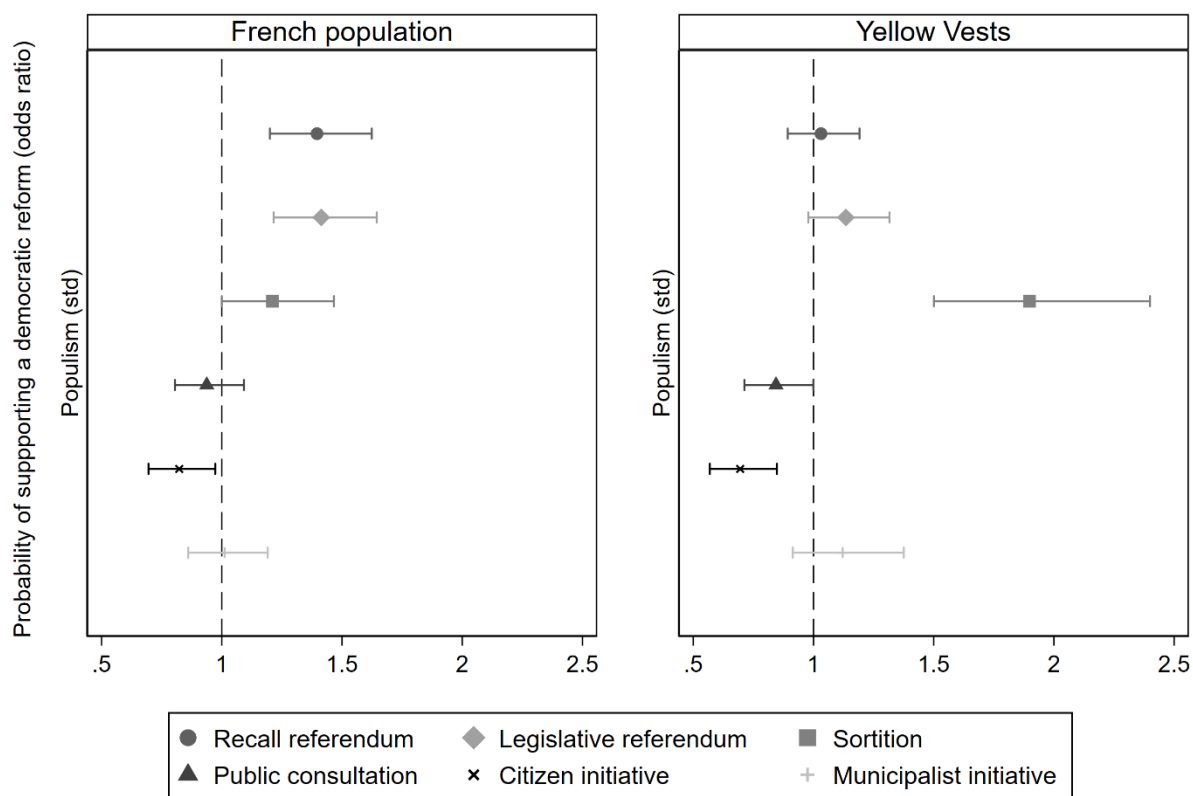
#### **4.3 Variations between the YV and the French are greater than variations within the YV movement**

Next, we addressed our second hypothesis by adding populist attitudes in the logistic regressions. To be sure that the effect of populism was measured net of that of political preferences, we also introduced vote choice in the last presidential election as an additional control. 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 control than on participation. 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 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, when examining the influence of populist attitudes on democratic innovations, we find strong commonalities between the general public and YV protesters. In both

cases, populism increases the probability of supporting reforms that ensure strict control and punishment of elected officials (H2).

To sum up, quantitative results demonstrate that as far as democratic innovations are concerned, variations between the YV and their French counterparts are much larger than variations within the YV movement, which suggests that despite large differences in political values, the YV are quite homogeneous concerning 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. 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.



Controlled for sex, age, education, income, professional situation, main residence, vote choice, 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 preferences among the French (left panel) and within the YV movement (right panel), with 95 percent confidence intervals. Models adjust for sociodemographics and political characteristics.*

## **5. Discourses about the people and democratic aspirations among the Yellow Vest: a textual analysis**

### **5.1 Methodology**

To address the reasoning of YV protesters on democratic innovations, we analyzed a corpus of 1262 YV 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, an open-source textual statistics software, we worked on a principle of classifying lexical forms present in the corpus to highlight its specific semantic structures and to identify statistically different discourse among YV activists. We then used the descending hierarchical classification method described by Reinert (1990) to classify the YV responses in distinctive groups (see Appendix C for a full description of the method). The respondents' preferences in terms of democratic innovations, as well as characteristics related to their social and political backgrounds, are introduced as auxiliary variables to help qualifying the cluster obtained, and ultimately to verify our hypotheses (see Appendix D for an exhaustive overview of auxiliary variables).

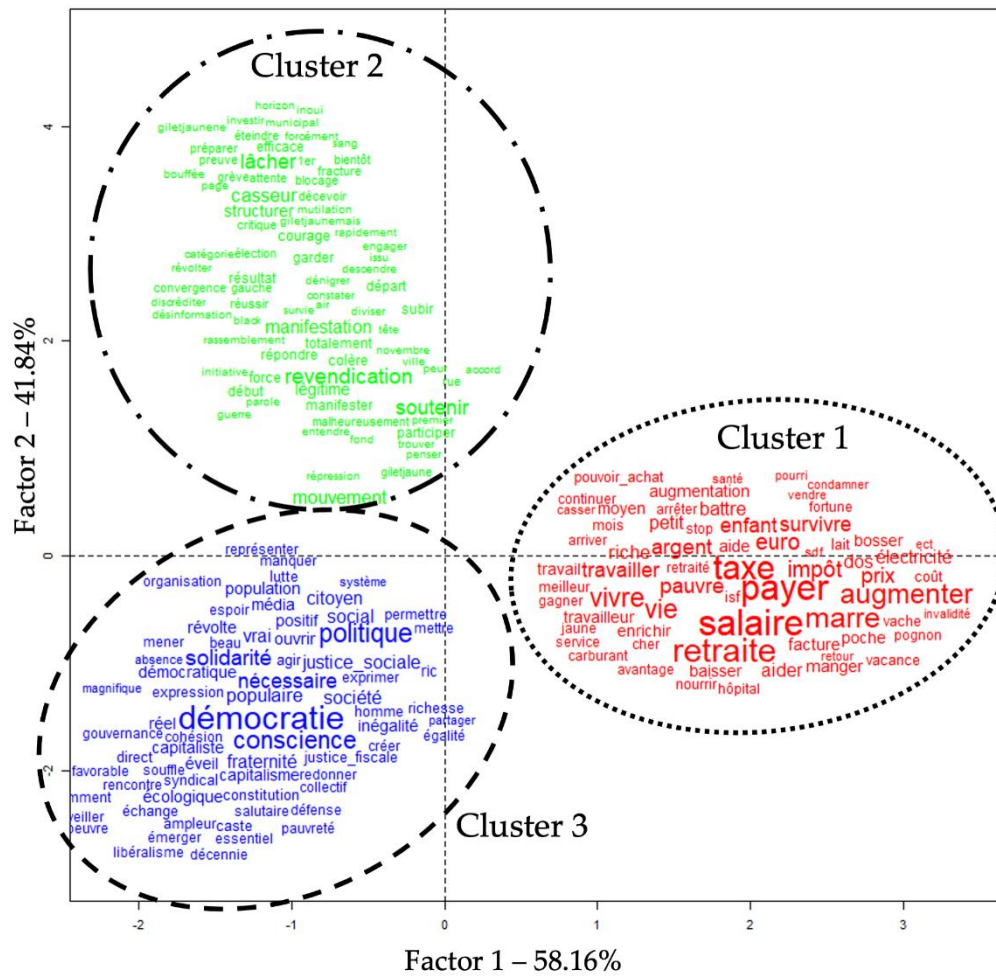
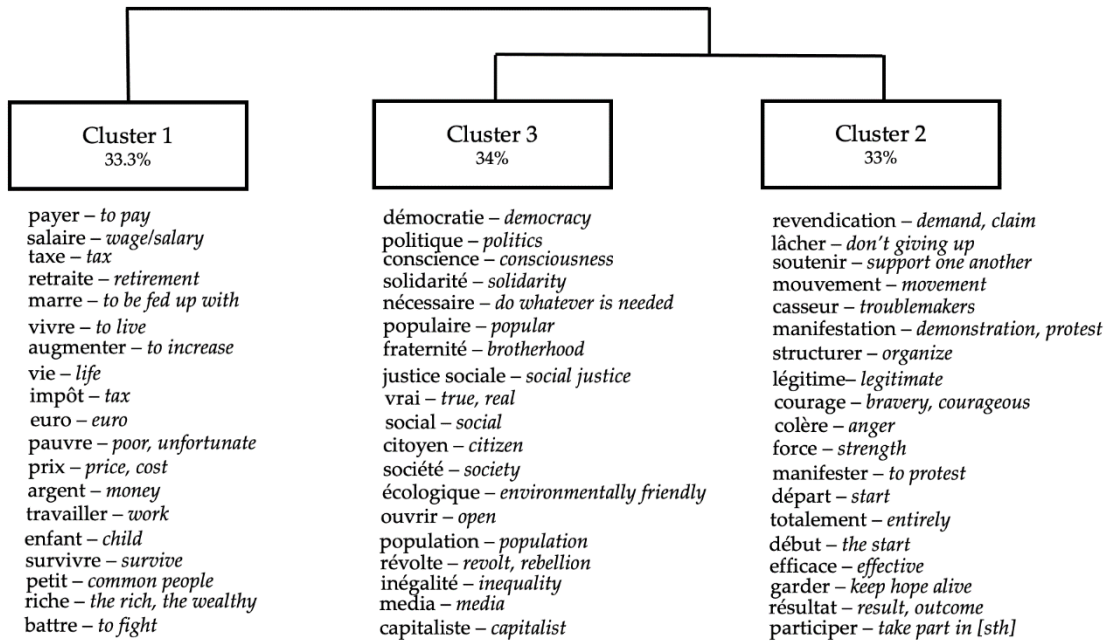
To value the singularity of each answer, we chose to make a simple classification on text. This method proved to be relevant as it allowed us to classify about 96 percent of the texts in the

corpus in three clusters equal in size<sup>4</sup>. Our results highlight two large distinctive discourses that cut across the YV movement (see Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> 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 (Cluster 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 (Clusters 2 and 3). Indeed, the first cluster is opposed to the latter two on the first horizontal axis, deriving from the correspondence analysis on which the clustering algorithm is performed (Figure 4, bottom panel).

In the subsequent analysis, we present the distinctive groups identified by the clustering method. To answer our research hypotheses in a more formal way, we inductively report the content of the most representative verbatims associated with each cluster (see Appendix E), as well as the democratic and political preferences significantly associated with a cluster.

<sup>4</sup> The discourses identified are not overlapping in such a way that answers in the same cluster are more similar to each other than to those in the other clusters.

<sup>5</sup> For the dendrogram classification scheme (Figure 4, top), we focus on the height at which any two branches are joined together that indicate dissimilarity between clusters. For the correspondence analysis (Figure 4, bottom), the distance between any words gives a measure of their similarity (or dissimilarity) along the two main dimensions (i.e., the principal components).



*Figure 4. Cuts in the dendrogram tree and most specific terms of the 3-classes clustering (top panel) and 2-dimensional representation of the correspondence analysis (bottom panel)*

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

The first cluster 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 leisure activities, are all unbearable realities from which the arguments for commitment to the YV movement are crystallized. Their support for the YV builds upon the evocation of a feeling of deep injustice and a great anger towards political elites considered as 'privileged' and 'corrupted'. There is almost no mention of alternative mechanisms that could improve the functioning of democracy. 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 cluster, 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. The verb 'to live' is particularly evocative, as it refers more to a situation of 'survival' than general life aspirations or constructed values. The commitment to or the support of the YV movement seems to be a reaction to one's life situation. Besides, and quite unsurprisingly, this cluster has a strong populist overtone, as these YV mobilize a full-fledged anti-elitist discourse.

What also characterizes this cluster is the low politicization of its respondents. YV categorized in this group are more often women than men ( $p < 0.05$ ), have a lower level of educational attainment ( $p < 0.001$ ), have not been involved in other movements ( $p < 0.001$ ). Consequently, they are not very familiar with politics and describe themselves as not interested

in politics ( $p < 0.01$ ). When they do vote, they tend to support the radical right ( $p < 0.001$ ). The YV in this cluster are also more in favor of the recall referendum ( $p < 0.05$ ), and do not seem to express a preference for more participatory mechanisms, such as municipal initiative ( $p < 0.05$ ) or the citizens' initiative ( $p < 0.05$ ). Their preferences for democratic innovations provide additional confirmation of our hypothesis (*H3*) about the support of the less politicized YV for the idea of dismissal and punishment of elected officials and political elites.

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

More direct references to the YV movement and protest experience can be found in the second and third clusters, with Cluster 2 referring to the evocation of actions and claims, and Cluster 3 echoing the values, grievances, and core principles of the YV. In particular, the topic of democratic innovations turns out to be more present in this last cluster.

Cluster 2 is organized on arguments supporting the claims of the YV movement. It gives an account of the experience of the respondents within the movement. It is a textual class that values emotions and feelings, while reflecting on their commitment to the movement (e.g., staying mobilized, collectively pursuing the actions). The movement is seen as a struggle that comes from 'the people', and that intends to make the government bend to give citizens the possibility to seize their decision-making power. Protest actions are seen as the way for citizens to act to find their place in the democratic arena.

Cluster 2 is also based on two feelings related to 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 comes from the fact that citizens face the contempt of the governments who forget them and do not involve them in any decision. However, this anger is based on the feeling of the confiscation of political power by the rulers, not from deteriorated living conditions (cluster 1). The YV classified in this cluster have an intermediate level of

education ( $p < 0.01$ ) and are particularly committed to the movement, as we found more activists in this group ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, they overreport their grassroots experience and testify to their commitment in movement. Of special interest for us, this cluster is not distinguishable in terms of specific democratic preferences.

Finally, the third cluster is the one that explicitly refers to the universe of values at the core of the YV 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 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Many respondents in this cluster say that France is not – or no longer – a democracy, precisely because representative democracy and the institutional setting of the country contradict their orientations toward more direct democratic preferences. The most significant verbatims connect the engagement within the movement and the support for a more direct, local, solidary, and fraternal functioning of democracy.

We notice two important characteristics in terms of both form and content that are specific to this cluster. On the one hand, the respondents' remarks are expressed in a particularly constructed style with a rather precise and rich vocabulary. On the other hand, one of the recurrent topics associated with this class is a specific democratic innovation, namely the CIR. 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. YV in this group hold political and general reflections on the relationship of citizens to institutions and rulers.

The fact that Cluster 3 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 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and more politicized. They are very



interested in politics ( $p < .001$ ) and tend to vote for the radical left ( $p < 0.001$ ). They are not first-time protesters ( $p < 0.001$ ), which means that they took part in other social mobilization in the past. They are overrepresented among the YV with a university background ( $p < 0.05$ ) and encounter fewer professional difficulties since they are employed ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Concerning their attitudes to democratic innovations, and in line with H3, they prefer direct democracy mechanisms that strengthen direct citizen participation, such as sortition ( $p < 0.01$ ) or municipalist initiatives ( $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast to the first cluster, they are less likely to choose the recall referendum ( $p < 0.01$ ). They do not intend to sanction political elites but support a greater involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. Therefore, the terms 'CIR' and 'direct' are positively associated with this cluster ( $p < 0.001$ ), 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. At last, in terms of populist appeal, the YV in Cluster 3 hold another side of populist beliefs: they emphasize people-centrism/popular sovereignty, while YV in cluster 1 hold more common anti-elitist attitudes (belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty is another crucial facet of populist attitudes - Wuttke et al., 2020), even if, similarly to Cluster 1, they share a conflicting relationship with political elites.

Overall, the classification of the responses to our open-ended question sheds light on an internal divide in the values and arguments mobilized by the YV to explain their support for the movement. Our analysis reveals two main discourses about democratic aspirations among protesters (H3). The first discourse supports sanction and control over political leaders and is mainly carried by first-time YV activists facing economic and social difficulties. Another discourse is more popular among highly experienced and politicized protesters who support democratic innovations with a stronger 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. The subtleties of these two distinct representations of democracy among the YV are even better captured with in-depth interviews.

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

### **6.1 Methodology**

Even though YV activists share a large number of views, 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 clarify the meaning and internal logic of the two discourses identified in the three clusters in the previous section, especially on why YV activists differ in terms of preferences on democratic innovations. The profile of the interviewees closer to these ideal-typical discourses confirms the characteristics identified in the previous section. It also provides further empirical evidence of the crucial role of politicization to differentiate these two discourses on political institutions (H3).

The following findings are based on the inductive coding with the software NVivo of thirty-three semi-directed interviews conducted mostly in Spring 2019 (see Appendix F on the selection of interviewees and coding process) dealing with the conceptions of the political system of YV participants. By broadening the focus beyond the preferences for different types of democratic innovations, our analysis allows us to understand which definitions of politics, process preferences, visions of elected officials, characterizations of the French political system and definition of the people structure representations of desirable democratic mechanisms. The following analyses are based on the most frequent codes out of the forty-two that we used to investigate these five themes.

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

The first ideal-typical discourse is centered around 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 – and often conflictual - forms of political participation in various 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–strive to overcome these different aspirations and act for the common good. This discourse insists on the importance 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 ‘monarch’, without any ability for citizens to interfere and participate in 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 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 the CIR, these activists are in favor of direct democracy as a way to allow citizens to participate in the political process, but they are not supporters of all forms of direct democracy. Several of them even mention the risk of ‘populism’. For instance, Amani (male, artist, 58), argues:

*“The CIR 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 referenda (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 CIR, as they consider it insufficient to achieve self-government. According to Aurélien (male, 32, unemployed, active in student circles):

*‘The CIR 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 CIR, 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. 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’.

These YV frequently refer to ‘the people’ in their discourses, with a strong dichotomy between the people and political elites. 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 subject 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.

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

In this second archetypal 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 specializing either on the US (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) or the UK (Clarke et al. 2018), these interviewees reject party politics as it allegedly 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 widespread among 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 believe that these counterpowers will come from the ability to recall and admonish 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, youth worker 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 share their 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 on Emmanuel Macron. Interviewees make frequent mention of the various benefits enjoyed by 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 political elites) 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 aloofness. Various interviewees resent his 'contempt', his collusions with the financial world and powerful interests, or his divisiveness for the country. These activists construe 'the people' as being diametrically opposed to the privileged, distant and self-serving political elites. 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 do not share the same privileged lifestyles as the political elites.

## **7. Discussion and conclusion**

The French Yellow Vests do not form a homogenous group, but a complex movement penetrated by numerous cleavage lines. The combination of survey analysis, quantitative textual analysis and in-depth interviews bears out the relevance of an integrated mixed method design based on triangulation and complementarity. It helps to evidence, in particular, the key role of populism and politicization, and to 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, compared to the general population, it highlights the stronger support of the YV for democratic innovations controlling and disciplining political elites, most notably among the most populist protesters. Second, we stress the divide in terms of democratic preferences between YV who got involved for the first time in a social movement and left-wing experienced activists. The former tend 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. Democracy is not at the very heart of their activism, and when mentioned, what they plebiscite are democratic innovations designed to discipline and admonish political representatives, such as recall or legislative referendums. These activists typically share a non-pluralist and a unitary vision of 'the people' (Caramani, 2017).

On the opposite, their more experienced counterparts have a politicized discourse based on their deeper knowledge of the political system. Democracy is much more pivotal in their discourse, which puts a strong emphasis on participation. 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 degree of citizen involvement. Our findings fully corroborate 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).

Our mixed-method analysis suggests that democratic aspirations feed into 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 support an active role of the citizen within the political system. Direct democracy is only one of the various 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, which they dismiss as distant, privileged, self-serving, and contemptuous. Their aspiration is not so much to participate or deliberate more extensively than to be able to sanction political elites when they do not pay enough attention to ordinary citizens.

More generally, our article contributes to current debates on citizens' process preferences, democratic aspirations and populist attitudes within social movements. By focusing on an intriguing populist social movement with strong democratic demands, we show the importance of not treating democratic demands within social movements and support for democratic innovations as monolithic. 'The people' can serve as a unifying factor to unite multiple and potentially conflicting identities and demands within the same movement (Aslanidis, 2017). However, it is necessary to dig deeper into the characteristics of the supporters of various democratic innovations and into the discourses of activists to avoid an all-encompassing vision that may conceal cleavages on democracy that run through contemporary social movements. Our study also speaks to the process preferences literature, by demonstrating that supporters of institutions controlling and sanctioning politicians clearly differ from those who support participatory and deliberative mechanisms giving a more active role to citizens in decision-making. The impact of the participation in previous protests and its effect on democratic aspirations has been downplayed and should be further investigated. Finally, our article opens a dialogue with the populism literature, by showing the importance of analyzing the different conceptions of 'the people' –one predominantly anti-elitist, and another insisting on popular sovereignty (Schulz et al., 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020) –, which likely nurture distinctive democratic aspirations.





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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. Most representative verbatims associated with each cluster**

**Appendix F. 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 &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Legislative referendum	Rely more on referenda than Parliament to decide on the most important issues	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Sortition	Stop electing representatives and draw by lots ordinary citizens instead	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Public consultation	Organize consultations with pools of citizens to help evaluate policies and take decisions	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Citizen initiative	Enable civil society associations to make law proposals and referendum proposals	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Municipalist initiative	Shift power to localities where constituents could debate and organize themselves	<i>PopEuropa &amp; 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 &amp; 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 PopEuropa v. 0.66 in YVV; Loevinger's H=0.52 in PopEuropa v. 0.33 in YVV).	<i>PopEuropa &amp; 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 &amp; YVVS</i>	Nominal
<b>Control variables</b>			
Sex	Women; Men	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Binary
Age	18-34 years-old; 35-49; 50-64; 65+	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Nominal
Education	Highest educational level attained (ISCED): Lower secondary or less; Upper secondary; Tertiary	<i>PopEuropa &amp; YVVS</i>	Ordinal
Income	Income household divided into deciles: < 1135	<i>PopEuropa</i>	Continuous



	euros; 1135-1440; 1440-1750; 1750-2100; 2100-2480; 2480-2910; 2910-3420; 3420-4090; 4090-5250; >5250	& YVVS	
Professional situation	Employed; Unemployed; Retired; Others	<i>PopEuropa</i> & YVVS	Nominal
Main residence	Reported place of residence: Big city; Suburbs; Town or small city; Village; Farm	<i>PopEuropa</i> & YVVS	Nominal
Political interest	Not at all interested in politics; Hardly; Quite; Very	<i>PopEuropa</i> & YVVS	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</i> & YVVS	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)

Mentioned v. Not mentioned	(1) Recall ref b/se	(2) Legisl ref b/se	(3) Sortition b/se	(4) Public cons b/se	(5) Citizen init b/se	(6) 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 (0.29)	0.855 (0.27)	1.322 (0.69)	1.507 (0.54)	0.973 (0.37)	1.258 (0.46)
Big city & suburbs	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	1.000 (.)
Town or small city	0.895 (0.16)	1.344 (0.24)	0.909 (0.20)	0.908 (0.17)	0.736 (0.14)	1.243 (0.25)
Village & farm	0.851 (0.16)	1.072 (0.21)	0.749 (0.18)	1.209 (0.24)	0.758 (0.16)	1.557* (0.33)
Support for redistribution	1.011 (0.07)	1.079 (0.08)	1.073 (0.10)	0.970 (0.07)	1.151 (0.09)	1.028 (0.08)
Political interest (std)	0.986 (0.07)	1.070 (0.07)	0.926 (0.08)	1.154 (0.08)	1.031 (0.08)	1.248** (0.10)
-----						
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)

Mentioned v. Not mentioned	(7) Recall ref b/se	(8) Legisl ref b/se	(9) Sortition b/se	(10) Public cons b/se	(11) Citizen init b/se	(12) 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
-----						

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)

Mentioned v. Not mentioned	(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 (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 YV that exhibit deprivation 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. In the main text, we used 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.

## 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. Most representative verbatims associated with each cluster

The table below summarizes the most significant verbatims associated with each of the three clusters obtained from the partitioning of the clustering algorithm. Original responses to the open-ended question (in French) are available upon request to the authors.

Cluster/Class	Verbatim	Social and political characteristics of the respondent
<b>Cluster 1</b>	<i>“These days most people cut all unnecessary spendings to pay their rents and make it to the end of the month, in the best case scenario we manage to squeeze out 50 euros and have a good time. {...} One year down the line, things have changed (for the worse?), I now understand that the problem is more serious, it’s not mismanagment we’re talking about here, but a political decision to bring us poor people on our knees and make sure we can’t get back on our feet again, and the gouvernement isn’t hiding (its goals) any longer we’ve entered some dark times when money, corruption and despotism, freedom’s lost because police violence leads to/gives way to citizen violence”.</i>	Man, between 35 and 49-years old, lower secondary diploma, unemployed, income between 1440 and 2100€, living in a small village, vote for the radical right.
	<i>“The people is sick of ending up penniless at the end of the month while our politicians are basking in luxury, they’re not bothered by problems like our pension system, the people is fighting back, we tried to act peacefully but no one’s listening so eventually violence flares up”</i>	Man, between 25 and 49-years old, lower secondary or less, employed.
	<i>“I’m sick of these double standards which blindly crush and destroy everything , the government is a joke, a bunch of corrupt puppets, they’re bought and rotten to the core, since childhood we’ve all been brainwashed into becoming good slaves. These billionaires are raking in indecent amounts of money. I’m getting sick of all this white-collar theft”</i>	Woman, between 18 and 34 years old, employed, live in a village, vote for the moderate right.

<b>Cluster 2</b>	<i>"I've been waiting for this for forty years, their anger is legitimate, politicians scorn the population and have taken away our right to take part in the decision-making process, the government doesn't get it, or actually they've deliberately decided to ignore the root causes of the problem, their solutions are outdated. The government is blind to the deep changes already underway around the world. I support the movement because I'm convinced that they're doing what's right"</i>	Man, over 65 years old, lower secondary or less, retired, vote for center, income between 2100 and 2910€.
	<i>"This movement is legitimate. As I see it, it's mostly made up of those people who feel disillusioned with politics, which roughly matches that third of voters who either cast a blank vote or didn't vote at all. For the first time in my life, my health doesn't allow me to get out on the streets but I support their demands »</i>	Woman, between 50 and 65 years old, upper secondary, retired, vote for moderate left, income between 1440 and 2100€, lives in a town.
<b>Cluster 3</b>	<i>"It's an upbeat/dynamic, diverse movement which calls for a complete/sweeping change within our society, and mechanisms of direct democracy in place at the local level up all across the country, which would enfranchise/give a voice to those people who are part of the movement"</i>	Woman, between 18 and 34 years old, employed, does not vote, income between 1440 and 2100€, living in town.
	<i>"I support the movement. We need to move towards more democracy, to me the CIR is the future, the solutions/responses the government has come up with shows how little they understand what French people's lives are like"</i>	Man, between 50 and 64 years old, upper secondary, employed, vote for the radical left, income between 2100 and 2910€, living in village.
	<i>"There is a spirit of solidarity bounding yellow vests together, we have proof here that people can help each other, we want the CIR to bring back/re democracy in the country of human rights. The country is drifting towards totalitarianism and only unity within the people will defeat this overcome this bane, the government isn't making any proposal/doing anything except widening the wealth gap »</i>	Man, between 35 and 49 years old, lower secondary or less, unemployed, vote for the radical left, income between 2100 and 2910€, living village.

	<p><i>"The YV movement raises all the key/important questions of any society or country like social justice, tax fairness, equality, participatory democracy, solidarity, fraternity, empathy, the problems posed by an openly scornful/oligarchy/ruling elite."</i></p>	<p>Woman, between 50 and 64 years old, university degree, employed, vote for the moderate left, income between 2100 and 2910€.</p>
	<p><i>"I'm a member of the movement. We won't stop until we're back to a proper citizen/participatory democracy, with CIR in place"</i></p>	<p>Man, between 50 and 64 years old, lower secondary or less, retired, vote for the radical right, income 2100 to 2910€.</p>
	<p><i>"A history-making movement, which came close to taking down the government, it calls for social justice, fiscal justice, a fairer distribution of wealth, the right to eke out a decent living off one's labour, and a more participatory (vibrant?) democracy"</i></p>	<p>Man, between 18 and 34 years old, upper secondary education, employed, vote blank, between 1440 to 2100€, live in village.</p>

## **Appendix F. 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 five 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. 2021). 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 guide 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 32 lay French 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), 'CIR 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.