Anti-Party, Pro-Politics: The Gilets Jaunes’ Challenge to French Representative Democracy

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ANTI-PARTY, PRO-POLITICS: THE GILETS JAUNES’ CHALLENGE TO FRENCH REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR PAHWA

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Introduction

In October 2018, the Gilets Jaunes emerged as a leaderless grassroots movement advocating for economic justice in France. The Gilets Jaunes led approximately 60 Actes, marking well over a year of sustained collective action. The longevity of the Gilets Jaunes is unprecedented in France; two previous French social movements, the May 1968 protests and the Nuit Debout movement, lasted only around seven weeks and three months respectively. The Gilets Jaunes movement is also unique due to its deliberate eschewing of institutional and third party support, including labor unions, political parties and civil society organizations. Yet another distinguishing aspect of the movement is the specificity of the protestors’ demands, which were published and disseminated online, in contrast to the comparatively vague ideological consciousness of the movement itself. Interestingly, the Gilets Jaunes have resisted political identification of any kind, repeatedly resisting attempts by the Rassemblement National, France’s far right party, to co-opt it.¹

One puzzle presented by these particularities is the movement’s rise in spite of its deliberate eschewing of institutional and third party support, given that social movements have traditionally benefitted from institutionalization and coalition building. How did the movement’s lack of such support interact with these other particularities to help or hinder its success?

To answer these questions, this paper will first investigate the movement’s emergence and then conduct a demographical analysis of the Gilets Jaunes protestors, including socioeconomic status, political orientation, and reactions to mainstream

representative institutions. These factors will demonstrate the ways in which Gilets Jaunes members straddle conventional partisan and social identities. This paper will then examine the movement’s unprecedented durability through an investigation of the Gilets Jaunes’ characterization as “anti-system.” The goal is to understand the reasons for the Gilets Jaunes’ low coalition building potential with political parties and unions and how these factors can help explain the movement’s durability in the context of the Gilets Jaunes’ rejection of institutional support. Finally, this paper will reflect on the movement’s successes and limitations to theorize what changes in partisan identification foreshadow for French democracy.

Emergence of the Gilets Jaunes

The first traces of the Gilets Jaunes movement originated online in response to a series of policies instituted by President Emmanuel Macron during the first months of his presidency. These included a special tax on diesel and a reduction of the speed limit to 80 kilometers per hour, both intended to lower France’s carbon footprint. However, these measures would disproportionately affect working class people living in rural communities, who had no other option but to drive to work. Not only did wealthier people predominantly living in cities not face similar taxes on their lifestyles, but also, adding insult to injury, Macron had canceled an Impot sur la Fortune, or wealth tax, six months before announcing the diesel tax. It was therefore widely speculated that the fuel taxes, introduced under the guise of environmental concern, was in fact intended to

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shrink the deficit produced by Macron’s removal of the wealth tax.\textsuperscript{3} This leads us to expect significant implications for how protestors might frame the gas tax as a class issue, an assumption that proves correct.

A multitude of petitions were created and circulated in the months after this series of legislative decisions. One prominent effort was that of Priscillia Ludosky, a self-employed cosmetics businesswoman from Parisian suburb Seine-en-Marne, who in May 2018 posted a petition on the change.org website entitled “Pour une Baisse des Prix du Carburant à la Pompe!” or “For a drop in the fuel prices at the pump!”\textsuperscript{4} The petition gained little traction; by October, it had only accumulated around 1,000 signatures. In October, Éric Drouet, a French truck driver from the same Parisian suburb, contacted Ludosky to help promote the petition. Around the same time, a local newspaper covered Ludosky’s appearance on a radio show; as a result, the article about her petition was shared to a Seine-et-Marne Facebook page with around 50,000 subscribers. Importantly, petrol prices had been continuously rising due to a global spike in oil prices. Following this combination of factors Ludosky’s petition went viral, accumulating over 200,000 signatures. By early December, it had collected over 1.2 million.\textsuperscript{5}

In an effort distinct from Ludosky’s and other online petitions that had been gaining momentum, Drouet and another truck driver, also from Seine-en-Marne, created

a Facebook event called “National Blockage Against Rising Fuel,” scheduled for November 17.⁶

Beginning with the first demonstration on November 17, the Gilets Jaunes’ two main forms of protest include the occupation of public spaces, especially on heavily trafficked roundabouts, and weekly marches, or ‘Acts,’ held on weekends, usually Saturdays, throughout France.⁷ The protests quickly transcended the original fuel tax focus, exploding into a movement against widening inequality, stagnant economic growth, and a fundamental sense of social crisis, all of which have been felt by vulnerable, predominantly rural communities, for whom the fuel tax was the final straw.⁸

A February 2019 survey showed that protestors said they were demonstrating to oppose the political elites (50%); to share the country’s wealth (44%); to fight against unjust fiscal measures (44%); to move away from the policies in place over decades (34%); to improve the way democracy works (25%); and to demand dignity and recognition (19%)⁹. The protestors had strong support from the public, with opinion polls indicating support at over 70% in early December 2018 and over 50% by late March 2019.¹⁰

In short, what began as a fuel protest evolved into a broader, all-encompassing anti-government movement. This phenomenon is unsurprising, according to scholars such as professor of history at New York University Herrick Chapman, who posits that the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, established by Charles de Gaulle in 1958,

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⁹ Royall, “Mobilisation Without Third-Party Support.”
centralized power in the Presidential palace to such an extreme extent – even designing
the National Assembly to operate as subordinate – that it kickstarted a cyclical effect by
which extra institutional action, such as street protests and social movements, became the
only alternative to policy.\footnote{Adam Gopnik. “The Yellow Vests and Why There Are So Many Street Protests in France.” \textit{The New Yorker}, 6 Dec. 2018.} The Fifth Republic’s overcentralized authority has been
funneling French citizens into the streets, as seen through the protests of May 1968, Nuit
Debout, and now the Gilets Jaunes, since its inception. While the emergence of the Gilets
Jaunes aligns with theories of French political cycles, the movement’s durability and
eschewal of third party support are unprecedented and therefore require further analysis
to understand current cycles of French political change.

\textbf{Who are the Gilets Jaunes: Economic, Political and Social Characteristics of Gilet Jaune Participants}

Due to the decentralized and evolving nature of social movements, data pertaining
to the demographics of the Gilets Jaunes movement are not exact. However, a group of
sociologists, political scientists and geographers published a study of the motivations and
socio-demographic profiles of the movement based on an analysis of 166 questionnaires
distributed to participants at roundabouts and vehicle tollbooths as well as during the
demonstrations of November 24 and December 1.\footnote{“Gilets Jaunes: A Pioneering Study of the ‘Low Earners’ Revolt.” Verso Books. December 14, 2018.} These data reveal a variety of
economic, political and cultural factors that mobilized a population in favor of a degree
of political change that they no longer trust the political system and elite to achieve for
them.
Age

The researchers found that the average protestor was 45 years old, slightly older than the average age of the French population (41.4 years). 27% of participants were 35-49 years old and 26% were 50-64 years old. By comparison, 6% were 18-24, while 17.3% was over 65.

These data are unsurprising because this age category has, on average, been edging closer to poverty, experiencing an economic position of insecurity, or “la précarité économique.” Furthermore, they make up an influential voting bloc: France’s 15 million pensioners vote at a higher rate than other age groups. However, while three out of four pensioners voted for Macron in the second round of the 2017 presidential election, a March 2018 survey conducted by the Institut Français d’Opinion Publique indicated that pensioners’ support for Macron had fallen to 53%. This is significant, indicating a partisan identification shift. This shift demands a response from political parties if they want to retain their most vital source of power – popular support.

During his campaign, Macron had pledged to increase the general social contribution (CSG) tax, whose revenues are allocated to the social security budget, including pension schemes and insurance. However, many pensioners claimed they had actually been hurt by Macron’s other tax measures, such as the diesel tax and social welfare reductions. The government had estimated that, as a result of the tax changes, 20-

25% of pensioners would experience a deficit of a few dozen euros, while the wealthiest pensioners could see their spending power fall by several hundred euros per year.\textsuperscript{15}

Labor force participation at older ages in France has been found to have a strong relationship with reforms of retirement and preretirement policy.\textsuperscript{16} This is supported by the case of the Gilets Jaunes, in which widespread mobilization of pensioners follows a fifteen-year reversal of older workers’ labor force participation and employment rates.\textsuperscript{17} While changes in health, life expectancy and education levels have remained more or less consistent, pension reforms and associated changes in monetary incentives have been identified as the factors prompting individuals to work longer with increasingly precarious economic stability. This demographic is relatively unusual for the usual French contentious politics.

This older demographic as core part of the Gilets Jaunes movement contrasts with past movements, including Nuit Debout and May 1968, both initiated by students. Arguably, the Gilets Jaunes movement represents a later phase of Nuit Debout: the abstract disillusionment of the younger, urban Nuit Debout protestors was concretized into a wide-ranging list of specific demands by the Gilets Jaunes.

\textit{Socioeconomic Class}

The unusual age demographic of the Gilets Jaunes links tightly with the socioeconomic class demographics of the movement because the makeup of the Gilets

\textsuperscript{15} Melander, “French Pensioners,” 2018.
Jaunes shows that what is new about the Gilets Jaunes is its linkage to the qualms of rural, older French citizens, unlike past movements, which typically represented a mobilization of the young, urban French.

The average Gilet Jaune is a member of the working or lower middle class. The study found a high presence of employees and poor representation of middle-level professionals and managers. Employees made up 33% of the participants (45% of those of working age), compared to 27% for France as a whole, while middle-level professionals made up 10% of participants (13% of those of working age), compared to 26% for France as a whole. Managers comprised around 5% of participants (7% of those of working age), compared to 18% of France as a whole. \(^{18}\)

55% of respondents said they paid income tax (a percentage comparable to that of the general population) and 85% said they owned a car. Researchers reported that the median declared household income was 1,700 euros per month, around 30% less than the median for all French households. \(^{19}\) If this sample can be assumed to be representative of the broader Gilets Jaunes population, this indicates that the majority of participants are in a precarious financial situation, but not the most economically vulnerable: 10% of respondents declared an income below 800 euros per month, higher than 519 euros per month for the corresponding poorest 10% of French households. \(^{20}\)

One limitation of this study is that it did not examine unemployment as a distinct criterion. However, a comparison of unemployment rates between urban and rural areas in France as a whole presents a puzzle for my research question because we would expect that the regions with higher unemployment would be driving the movement focused on


economic justice. However, not only is the unemployment rate in France actually higher in urban areas (10% in urban areas compared to 6% in rural areas in 2017)\textsuperscript{21} but both rates have been decreasing since their record high in 2015 (11% and 6% respectively).\textsuperscript{22} Paradoxically, those from rural areas have mobilized to a far greater extent than those living in urban areas.

This can be explained by several economic and social factors. First of all, rural areas have been struggling for decades due to globalization, which has caused disproportionate levels of delocalization, out-migration and unemployment in rural regions. The devastating effects of globalization were accelerated by the 2008 financial crisis, from which these populations were unable to recover. Between 2010 and 2013 alone, French companies relocating abroad cost the country 20,000 jobs.\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, 202,000 full-time equivalent jobs had already been lost in the auto sector during the years 2004-2007, which then experienced a fall of 8% in 2008. Since then, French automakers have begun producing the majority of their cars outside of France, reserving few, top of the line vehicles for French plants.\textsuperscript{24} In that same time period, industrial jobs in France as a whole fell from 5.5 million to 3.5 million, with the most heavily affected sectors being real estate and construction. Thus, while unemployment rates may have been higher in urban areas, those areas were also more economically resilient, being better positioned to attract budding industries. In rural areas, by contrast, a closed factory left a huge wave of unemployment in its wake, leaving workers in neighboring towns no choice but to seek temporary labor, to make do with government aid, or to move. Demographer Hervé Le

Bras observed that the map of Gilets Jaunes mobilization matches the map of French regions that are losing population.\textsuperscript{25}

This phenomenon appears to be in line with relative deprivation theories, which posit that people who feel unfairly deprived of resources will join social movements in order to acquire the resources that other members possess.\textsuperscript{26} The Gilets Jaunes’ socioeconomic grievances have contributed to the movement’s durability through the sense of solidarity protestors found within the movement once they joined. Members of a lower socioeconomic status often find it more difficult to find socializing opportunities, between having to work longer hours and not having the extra money necessary to finance a night out. I will argue below that this is a reason for durability.

A vast array of interviews published in news publications and independent documentaries reveal that many protestors saw social rewards in joining the movement. The documentary “J’veux du Soleil!” featured commentary by numerous protestors who shared their experiences of not being able to afford going out: “However little it would cost us, we wouldn’t be able to afford it,” said one of the protestors interviewed at a rond-point. “We didn’t exist and suddenly we found each other. There’s fraternity. The friends I have now I hadn’t had like that in ten years,” said another protestor. Other comments included, “We’ve formed such strong social bonds. I’ve cried more than once” and “We’re doing something crazy, together. It’s wonderful... we’re one big family here.” One protestor commented, “People are very scared of their neighbors. There’s no solidarity. That’s something to restore.” This analysis of a transition from isolation to solidarity is in clear alignment with breakdown theory, which posits that actors who are

weakly integrated into their community and experience social discontent are more likely to join a protest movement. According to breakdown theorist Anthony Oberschall (1978), “Breakdown theory points to the dissolution of traditional social formations and communal solidarities as a result of rapid social change. Social disorganization, demographic pressures, and ecological imbalance lead to the accumulation of strains, frustrations, insecurity, and grievances, and the resulting pressure cooker has a tendency to explode in collective violence and civil disorder.”

The Gilets Jaunes movement, rather than supplementing other socializing opportunities, offered a sense of community and social connection of which many of the protestors had felt otherwise deprived. These social rewards have helped to sustain collective action within the movement.

The case of the Gilets Jaunes presents a challenge to solidarity theorists, who, in opposition to breakdown theorists, argue that isolated individuals are less likely to protest than others because protest is reliant on social cohesion. They argue that solidarity is necessary to produce bloc mobilization, by which movements can expand by enlisting entire blocs of organized people instead of recruiting individuals one by one. The case of Gilets Jaunes, however, shows that social breakdown and discontent can motivate people to create solidarity and mobilizing structures even without preexisting social cohesion, as displayed by the success of rond-point demonstrations.

Overall, the sense of community found within the movement greatly aided its momentum, particularly because many of those who joined had felt previously isolated, as interviews have revealed. I theorize that this social isolation, combined with a sense of

economic suffering and political invisibility, heightened the sense solidarity found within the movement. It can be surmised that this is a broader phenomenon for the Gilets Jaunes because of the prevalence of these social and economic conditions among participants. These factors’ impact was compounded by the movement’s lack of third party/institutional support, which contributed to an additional bond of shared alienation.

Educational Qualifications

Researchers found that 20% of respondents had a university-level degree (versus 27% of the general French population), 35% of participants had obtained vocational high school degrees (versus 24% in the general population) and 29% had obtained general baccalaureate degrees (compared with 16% of the general population). Additional findings from the December 8 demonstration, which saw more additional respondents with master’s degrees, led the researchers to conclude that the population of participants had comparable educational qualifications to the general French population.

These findings underscore the fact that the Gilets Jaunes represent a mobilization not of those at the very bottom, but of those who have found themselves inching closer to the brink of poverty. In addition, it is likely that more of the people who are unemployed in rural areas are older than those who are unemployed in urban areas, due to rising trends of delocalization and globalization, which have driven the bulk of employment opportunities to urban areas. This represents further confirmation of relative deprivation: people who feel unfairly deprived of resources are joining the Gilets Jaunes to acquire the resources that others possess.

Motivations for Joining

In response to the question “Why are you demonstrating today?” more than half of the respondents cited “inadequate purchasing power,” such as not being able to afford small luxuries, struggling to feed their children and moving in with family or friends due to housing being no longer affordable. The second most popular response, from over 40% of respondents, was “excessive tax burden.” Many specifically listed high fuel prices. Approximately 20% said they were demonstrating to protest against the government and to demand Macron’s resignation. 10% of respondents wanted institutional reforms, a sentiment that had strengthened among participants in the December 8 demonstrations.30

Objectives of the Gilets Jaunes: Les Revendications Officielles

As part of the survey, the researchers asked participants what the government should do to address the Gilets Jaunes’ demands. Given that the majority of respondents focused on economic goals rather than institutional reforms, one might surmise that they could be willing to work with parties if they felt that were the only way to make progress. This indicates the importance of the parties’ response to the Gilets Jaunes’ platform and is supported by the evidence below.

One third of respondents said implement tax cuts and another third said institute measures to increase purchasing power. Among these, 16% wanted an increase in the minimum wage or wages in general, 8% wanted a general increase in purchasing power and 4% wanted an increase in pensions. Over a fifth of respondents wanted wealth redistribution. Among these, 11% wanted the reinstatement of the wealth tax and 3%

wanted a fairer distribution of taxes. Over a fifth of respondents wanted the government to show more compassion and understanding toward citizens. In regards to institutional demands, 16% said significant institutional reforms were vital in order to deem the movement a success: 11% demanded fundamental changes, including a total reform of the state or a different political system, 5% wanted to end “the privileges of parliamentarians” and 2% said they believed in the necessity of a Sixth Republic.

Unlike past French movements such as Nuit Debout, which concerned abstract political and philosophical questions, the Gilets Jaunes presented concrete, bread-and-butter demands. The “Charte Officielle des Gilets Jaunes,” or Official Chart of the Gilets Jaunes, was first posted to a Facebook group of the same name on December 5, 2018, where it was widely circulated. The chart, followed by the list of demands translated into English, are included on the next page.

CHARTE OFFICIELLE DES GILETS JAUNES
25 propositions pour sortir de la crise

I- ÉCONOMIE/TRAVAIL

1. ÉTAT GÉNÉRAUX de la fiscalité. Inscrire dans la Constitution l'impossibilité pour l'État de prélever plus de 25% de la richesse des citoyens.
2. AUMENTATION immédiate du SMIC, des retraites et des minima sociaux de 40%.
3. EMBAUCHE MASSIVE de fonctionnaires pour rétablir la qualité des services publics avant la RGPP : gares, hôpitaux, écoles, postes...
4. LOGEMENTS : plan de construction de 5 millions de HLM afin de faire baisser les loyers, le foncier et redynamiser l'économie par l'embauche. Punir lourdement les préfets et maires qui laissent les SDF dormir dehors.
5. BANQUES : les rendre plus petites afin de se protéger des crises, casser les monopoles, séparer le spéculatif du dépôt et interdire le renflouement public.
6. ANNULER LA DETTE : celle-ci n'a pas lieu d'être, elle a déjà été remboursée plusieurs fois.

II- POLITIQUE

8. INTERDICTION DES LOBBYS et autres réseaux d'influence. Exclusion définitive de la vie politique de tout élu ayant un casier judiciaire, mettre fin au cumul des mandats.
9. FREXIT : sortie de l'UE afin de regagner nos souverainetés politique, monétaire et économique (respect du référendum de 2005), regagner notre droit de battre monnaie en sortant de l'article 123 du traité de Lisbonne (50 milliards d'euros d'économies par an).
10. ÉVASIONS FISCALES : récupérer les 80 milliards d'euros abandonnés par l'État chaque année au CAC 40.
11. ARRET IMMÉDIAT DES PRIVATISATIONS et récupération des biens publics : autoroutes, aéroports, parkings, SNCF...
12. RADARS ET VERBALISATIONS : retrait des radars inutiles et de la verbalisation vidéo qui n'est rien d'autre qu'une taxe déguisée.
13. ÉDUCATION NATIONALE : exclure toute idéologie de ce ministère et mettre à plat les techniques éducatives destructrices (méthode globale...).
15. MEDIA : casser les monopoles et le copié-collé médiatique-politique. Rendre les médias accessibles aux citoyens et garantir la pluralité d'opinion. Mettre un terme à la propagande des éditeurs. Retirer la subvention publique des médias (2 milliards par an) ainsi que les niches fiscales des journalistes.
16. GARANTIR LA LIBERTÉ des citoyens et inscrire dans la Constitution l'interdiction à l'État de s'intégrer dans l'enseignement, l'éducation, la santé, la famille...

III- SANTÉ/ÉCOLOGIE

17. OBSOLESCENCE PROGRAMMÉE : rallonger les garanties constructeurs à 10 ans minimum en assurant la présence des pièces détachées.
18. PLASTIQUES : interdire à très court terme la commercialisation des bouteilles en plastique, des verres et autres emballages polluants.
19. LABORATOIRES PHARMACEUTIQUES : affaiblir leur influence, états généraux de la santé et de l'hôpital.
20. AGRICULTURE : interdiction des OGM, des pesticides cancérigènes, des perturbateurs endocriniens, de la monoculture...
21. RÉINDUSTRIALISATION de la France afin de diminuer les importations et donc la pollution.

IV- GÉOPOLITIQUE

22. OTAN : sortie immédiate du traité de l'Atlantique Nord et interdiction d'engager l'armée française dans des guerres d'agression.
24. IMMIGRATION : empêcher les flux migratoires impossibles à accueillir ni à intégrer étant donné la profonde crise civilisationnelle que nous vivons.
25. POLITIQUE ÉTRANGÈRE : respect scrupuleux du droit international et des engagements signés.
Gilets Jaunes' List of Demands

Economy/Work

- A constitutional cap on taxes - at 25%
- Increase of 40% in the basic pension and social welfare
- Increase hiring in public sector to re-establish public services
- Massive construction projects to house 5 million homeless, and severe penalties for mayors/prefectures that leave people on the streets
- Break up the 'too-big-to-fail' banks, re-separate regular banking from investment banking
- Cancel debts accrued through usurious rates of interest

Politics

- Constitutional amendments to protect the people's interests, including binding referenda
- The barring of lobby groups and vested interests from political decision-making
- Frexit: Leave the EU to regain our economic, monetary and political sovereignty (In other words, respect the 2005 referendum result, when France voted against the EU Constitution Treaty, which was then renamed the Lisbon Treaty)
- Clampdown on tax evasion by the ultra-rich
- The immediate cessation of privatization, and the re-nationalization of public goods like motorways, airports, rail, etc.
- Remove all ideology from the ministry of education, ending all destructive education techniques
- Quadruple the budget for law and order and put time limits on judicial procedures. Make access to the justice system available for all
- Break up media monopolies and end their interference in politics. Make media accessible to citizens and guarantee a plurality of opinions. End editorial propaganda
- Guarantee citizens' liberty by including in the constitution a complete prohibition on state interference in their decisions concerning education, health and family matters

Health/Environment

- No more 'planned obsolescence' - Mandate guarantee from producers that their products will last 10 years, and that spare parts will be available during that period
- Ban plastic bottles and other polluting packaging
- Weaken the influence of big pharma on health in general and hospitals in particular
- Ban on GMO crops, carcinogenic pesticides, endocrine disruptors and monocrops
- Reindustrialize France (thereby reducing imports and thus pollution)

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Foreign Affairs

- End France's participation in foreign wars of aggression, and exit from NATO
- Cease pillaging and interfering - politically and militarily - in 'Francafrique', which keeps Africa poor. Immediately repatriate all French soldiers. Establish relations with African states on an equal peer-to-peer basis
- Prevent migratory flows that cannot be accommodated or integrated, given the profound civilizational crisis we are experiencing
- Scrupulously respect international law and the treaties we have signed

A Dual Analysis of the Gilets Jaunes as an Anti-System Movement

Theoretical definitions of “anti-system” political groups shed light on the durability of the Gilets Jaunes despite their consistent resistance to institutionalization. According to Florentine political analyst Giovanni Sartori, “An anti-system opposition abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. According to the strict definition, then, anti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology – thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological difference (Sartori, 1976). Capoccia elaborates on this analysis, arguing that “Sartori’s concept of the anti-system party is thus ‘relational’ in a twofold sense: first, it involves the ideological distance of a party from the others along the political (left-right) space of electoral competition; second, it refers to the delegitimizing impact of the party’s actions and propaganda on the regime in which it operates.”35

Table 1. Attributes of Relational Anti-systemness and Consequences on the Party System Mechanics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute of a Party’s Relational Anti-systemness</th>
<th>Systemic Consequence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Distant spatial location of its electorate from that of neighboring parties</td>
<td>Unequal spacing between parties (or space disjunction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Low coalition potential</td>
<td>Multi-polarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outbidding propaganda tactics/delegitimizing messages</td>
<td>Centrifugality and increase in polarization (process)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Gilets Jaunes embody multiple elements of anti-politics party represented in the table above: (a) their demands illustrate their spatial distance from the mainstream political spectrum because their demands align with an array of party ideologies across the political spectrum, revealing a main reason why the Gilets Jaunes feel unrepresented: there is no established political party that represents all of their interests (b) there has been low potential for coalition building with political parties and labor unions, and (c) the government and media responses to the movement have sought to delegitimize it through accusations of anti-Semitism and homophobia.\textsuperscript{37} The next sections will expand on points (a) and (b) to understand how aspects of these anti-system characteristics can be used to understand the movement’s durability and future.

\textsuperscript{36} Capoccia, “Anti-System Parties.” 2002.

Distant Spatial Location: the Gilets Jaunes’ Nonpartisan Demands and Challenge to Political Parties

The Gilets Jaunes’ wide-ranging demands are key to understanding the movement’s resistance to institutional and third party support. These demands, as aforementioned, align with an array of party ideologies across the political spectrum and therefore reveal a main reason why the Gilets Jaunes feel unrepresented: there is no established political party that represents all of their interests. For example, left parties such as La France Insoumise espouse pension and minimum wage increases, while the demand to crack down on migratory flows is aligned with parties of the right, such as the Rassemblement National. No mainstream political party in France, meanwhile, calls for demands such as amending the constitution. The Gilets Jaunes’ demands to amend the constitution, consistent with protestors in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, may seem at odds with the institutional distrust that defines their movement. However, amending the constitution would represent reclamation of the state by those who feel powerless; many protestors envision a constitution of the people that would restore their trust in government because they would have greater agency to shape it. Aside from institutional distrust, the spatial distance between Gilets Jaunes interests and current party platforms is sufficient to explain their extra institutional action. With over five main political parties in France, not one political platform aligns with the majority of the Gilets Jaunes’ political and economic demands. This reflects the growing political phenomenon that political parties have gradually abandoned the working class.

The increasing misalignment between mainstream party platforms and the interests of the working class has been acknowledged as a growing trend in Western
democracies. Patrick Liddiard, a political analyst at the Wilson Center, posits that structural economic changes in advanced industrial democracies have decreased voters’ demand for traditional political parties of the traditional center-left and center-right orientations, while deindustrialization has reduced the working class, giving the political left less of an incentive to cater to this demographic. Further, political scientists Russel Dalton and Michael Wattenberg argue that deindustrialization, which has produced a more educated population, means these increasingly informed electorates are less dependent on information from traditional political parties to form their individual political opinions. Consequentially, voters become less attached to party labels and elites and increasingly engaged in alternative forms of political mobilization.

In France, there is ample evidence of weakened partisan attachment. According to researchers Philip E. Converse and Georges Dupeux, “flash” political parties indicate weak political involvement and partisan commitments: “such phenomena are hardly signals of long-term public involvement in politics but betray instead a normal weak involvement. The durably involved voter tends toward strong partisan commitments and his behavior over time stabilizes party fortunes within a nation.” Macron’s “La Republique En Marche” is one such example of a flash political party whose short-lived success, contrary to Macron’s language of strengthened unity, reveals the current culture of French citizens’ weak partisan commitments.

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The chart above illustrates the correlation between voter turnout and party system volatility as indicated by changes in existing parties’ vote shares, parties’ vote share between elections, and new/defunct parties’ vote shares. As turnout has decreased, partisan attachment has also decreased, indicating a loss of legitimacy in mainstream political parties.

Focusing back on the ideological and political spatial distance between the Gilets Jaunes and mainstream political parties, this phenomenon is particularly visible in a popular Gilet Jaune Facebook group called “Gilet Jaune,” which contains 25,480 members at the time of writing. The chart below offers further insight into the issues that

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active members care about by comparing the number of mentions per topic (loosely corresponding to the aforementioned list of official demands) in December of 2018 versus December 2019.

Issues like “travail,” “constitution,” “liberté,” “media,” and “pollution” all appeared around 40-50 times in 2018. This chart illustrates the Gilets Jaunes’ ideological and political spatial distance from mainstream political parties because stances of this high frequency fall across the political spectrum, underscoring that no party represents their demands.
Their demands lie outside of traditional left-right spectrum, a spectrum that they challenge through their emphasis on nonpartisan rhetoric and identification, as well as their voting rates. This is demonstrated by the fact that Gilets Jaunes emphatically identify as unattached to the language of left-right party politics. Even when organizing for political office, they described their roster of candidates as “nonpartisan and independent,” a) dissociating from the political party structure and b) casting themselves as a challenge to it.\(^{42}\) While there is not currently sufficient data of party membership among the Gilets Jaunes, a poll showed that in the 2017 presidential election many in the movement voted for candidates on the far left or the far right; however, many also did not vote at all.\(^{43}\)

Furthermore, in the aforementioned analysis of 166 questionnaires distributed to Gilets Jaunes protestors, 33% of respondents identified as apolitical, or “neither right nor left” (versus 22% of France as a whole).\(^{44}\) Among those who did identify their position, 15% placed themselves on the far left, 42% were on the left, 12% were on the right and 5% were on the far right (compared to 32% on the left and 39% on the right in France as a whole). Only 6% of respondents ranked themselves in the political center. One takeaway is that based on their wide range of political identification it is clear that political orientation and party affiliation represent weaker ties for this group than their specific, collective demands. Another takeaway is that, interestingly, despite the wide range of partisan identification, this data suggests that Gilets Jaunes participants are more likely to be on the Left. According to analyst Laurent Bouvet, a member of the leftwing

thinktank the Jean Jaurès Foundation, which advises the Socialist party, there is ample evidence that the French working class has been abandoned by the left through the focus on problems of minority groups instead of French society more broadly, which exacerbates working-class concerns about immigration and resulting cultural changes. In an interview with The Observer, Bouvet said “the economic crisis, unemployment, social problems, globalization make people afraid, but if it was just about economics we would see these people vote for the radical left, which they are not.”

In conclusion, the Gilets Jaunes’ ideological and political spatial distance from mainstream political parties can be explained by a perceived abandonment by the left and the misalignment between their demands and the platforms of mainstream political parties. While protestors mostly identify with the left, they do not trust existing institutions.

In other words, the specificity of the protestors’ political and economic demands shows that they are unified in their sense of invisibility and economic exclusion. However, the fact that they are comparatively divided in political orientation explains the ideological vagueness of the movement and indicates the challenge that the Gilets Jaunes’ mobilization poses to the political party system. There is ample research leading scholars to argue that the population no longer maps clearly onto dominant party positions.

According to Gérard Grunberg, a researcher at the Center for European Studies at Sciences Po, the political cleavages separating mainstream parties, such as the economy, are no longer the issues that drive popular political debate. “On immigration, Europe, 

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globalization, the big divide now is whether you want an open or closed country.”

Pierre Rosanvallon, a professor at the Collège de France, makes the argument that “Voters have moved from a representation system to an identification system. In the old system, parties had identifiable social bases and their job was to represent that base, to aggregate their interests … Now we are in a process of identification … The new leaders are presenting themselves like concepts and voters are asked to adhere to that.”

This line of reasoning applies to both Macron’s party and the National Front, which are based on the personality of Macron and Marine Le Pen rather than appealing to specific voter bases. Political scientist Pierre Cayrol argues that the obsolescence of the French two-party system does not automatically affect the concept of the left-right spectrum; the difference, instead, will be that the differences are based on sentimental identification rather than policy differences. Social issues will be left as the sole distinction between the left and the right.

The Gilets Jaunes exemplify this separation of policy demands from political orientation: they represent an apartisan embrace of an expanded social safety net, instruments of direct democracy and class solidarity.

Furthermore, in this context of rising political distrust, underscored by rising levels of abstention and of the tendency to vote “against” rather than “for” a candidate (Macron’s 2017 victory was due to his outsider status and rejection of his far-right opponent, rather than an embrace of his free market and pro-European platform), a system in which people can act as their own representatives such as direct democracy becomes more appealing.

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The Low Coalition Building Potential of the Gilets Jaunes

Another reason for the movement’s resistance to institutionalization is that many protestors were already distrustful of mainstream institutions: Gilets Jaunes participants largely eschew institutional and third party support, with the majority holding that trade unions (64%) and political parties (81%) had no place in the movement.

The Gilets Jaunes’ distrust of mainstream institutions, their diversity of political orientation and the misalignment between their demands and the platforms of mainstream political parties offer a compelling explanation of characterizations of the Gilets Jaunes as “anti-system.” However, while the protestors’ distrust, diversity of political orientation and the misalignment between their demands and the platforms of mainstream political parties explain the low coalition building potential between the Gilets Jaunes and political parties, these factors but do not account for coalition building potential with labor unions, of which the Gilets Jaunes have also been dismissive.

Articles indicate that French unions have adopted varied and evolving stances toward the Gilets Jaunes movement. On December 6, 2018, a few weeks after the initial demonstration, leaders of the union confederations came together to decide on an official position regarding the uprisings. The CFDT, CGT, FO, CFE-CGC, Unsa and the FSU released a collective declaration calling for the government to “finally commit to genuine negotiations” regarding “spending power, salaries, transport, housing, the presence and accessibility of public services, and the tax system,” affirming Gilets Jaunes demands. However, as part of this declaration, the union confederations denounced all forms of violence in by protestors expressing these demands.

Several unions have shown tentative signs of support for the Gilets Jaunes in acknowledgement of their many shared positions, which include a reinstating of the wealth tax and canceling the increase to retirees’ taxes. The CGT marched during the Acte III demonstration in Paris alongside trade unionists, though separate from the Gilets Jaunes.\textsuperscript{51} Attac, a union that advocates for reforms to the financial system and greater regulation of markets, were distributing pamphlets at Acte III. “I didn’t hear of them being thrown aside,” said Annick Coupé, secretary general of Attac.\textsuperscript{52}

Several factors help to explain the Gilets Jaunes’ resistance to unions despite occupying shared positions. First of all, unions have experienced a gradual loss of power in recent years; interestingly, the emergence of alternative forms of political mobilization in France has correlated with this gradual decline of unions. In his first 10 months in office, Macron softened France’s strict labor laws in an act of hostility toward unions.\textsuperscript{53} However, signs of weakening French unions have existed for decades: union membership has fallen dramatically since 1968.\textsuperscript{54} Consequently, strikes have become less effective and therefore less frequent. As a result, over time, political parties and labor unions have gradually lost the monopoly they once enjoyed over the French political infrastructure. Therefore, despite an overlap in policy goals, the Gilets Jaunes do not see unions as a reliable route through which they could mobilize effectively. This indicates that the reason that the Gilets Jaunes do not work with unions is less an issue of distrust and more logistical concerns that they see unions as inefficient and less influential than before. “We might remember that classic union movements have not been able, over the last few

\textsuperscript{54} Rose, “French Mood,” 2018.
years, to make any social advances. One consequence that is that anger that was muted, it’s being heard today,” said confederal secretary of the CGT Fabrice Angéï. Éric Beynel, spokesperson for Solidaires, echoed this sentiment: “The unions haven’t successfully built the necessary mobilisations to struggle against social injustices. On the labour law, we would have had to blockade the economy through strikes, but we didn’t manage to do it.”

The demographics of the Gilets Jaunes reveal another reason for a disconnect between unions and Gilets Jaunes protestors: the huge majority of Gilets Jaunes are either inactifs (unemployed or retired; 25.5%), employés (service sector workers; 33.3%), ouvriers (industrial workers; 14.4%), or in professions intermédiaires (nurses, primary-school teachers; 5.2%); in other words, this movement is largely comprised of a population that lives off wages and social security instead of profits or rent.

The unions have therefore been challenged by how to work with a population that they do not represent. “Amongst the gilets jaunes, there are so many retirees, so many precarious people, unemployed people. Our terrain is, before anywhere else, the world of work. It’s a question which we’re posed with, the unions, how to reach out to these categories too,” said Angéï. This is an important aspect of why Gilets Jaunes and unions do not cooperate: unions look out for their own workers and the Gilets Jaunes are not likely to be employed in union jobs, or even at all.

On the part of the Gilets Jaunes, there are logistical reasons that working with unions can be difficult. In an interview, Serge, a Gilet Jaune and former customer service employee, gave one explanation: “It gets stuck at the level of the demonstrations. When

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the unions demonstrate, they respect the route defined with the prefecture, while the yellow vests think that if the police say something, the opposite must be done.”

Another Gilet Jaune, whose name was changed for security, said: “I went to ask [the union] for information about my work, I really do not earn enough to get by. I wanted to know if there was an enforceable law to make a living from work. And since they had no answer, I joined the yellow vests. There, I realized that it was the same for everyone; workers are poor, people who do not work are poor; even those who work overtime can't do it, they are taxed so much. So I joined this movement really out of conviction and I will continue to the end, despite the repression.”

Another Gilet Jaune gave their perspective on the movement’s relationship with unions: “We are in contact with the CGT, and with Lutte Ouvrière. We went to parade with them. At the outset, they did not want us to speak. And then there lately, they let us speak with them. Some unions didn't like it, but too bad! We do not know the laws well and they can help us! We build, we build! … We don't want to be a union or a political party. We really want to stay in a movement, to achieve a new way of ruling the country.”

These interviews reveal the logistical and ideological differences between unions and Gilets Jaunes that have made it difficult for the two groups to cooperate, while the unions’ loss of power indicate lessened incentive for the Gilets Jaunes to work with unions in the first place.

Strengths, Limitations and Implications of the Gilets Jaunes

Having examined the demographics of the movement coupled with an examination of its anti-system positionality, one broader question remains: what are the implications of the Gilets Jaunes movement for French democracy?

In the face of institutional mistreatment, there are two options: scapegoating other populations and holding the system accountable. While disillusioned Americans turned to Donald Trump to resolve their existential woes, the Gilets Jaunes steadfastly chose the route of political and economic system accountability and reform. Their early success was impressive: two months after the demonstrations began, Macron succumbed to public pressure and cancelled the fuel tax that had been the final straw for so many protestors. A few months later, he embarked on the “grand débat,” a nationwide tour consisting of a series of town halls to enable direct communication between Macron and the French people. Macron’s concessions and nationwide tour reflect the Gaullist-design of high power concentration in the presidency and the fact that he is less accountable to parliament, allowing him to make policy changes, such as raising the minimum wage, on the spot.

The Gilets Jaunes’ successes were owed to, not in spite of, their anti-system positions, which united people from across the political spectrum. Additional factors were their repertoires of contention, including the potent combination of local junction blocking and weekly urban demonstrations, which offered accessibility for different populations, heightened a sense of solidarity and social rewards, maximized the movement’s visibility, and contributed to its durability.
The Gilets Jaunes, initially empowered by the political diversity of their protestors, ultimately found their ideological vagueness and resistance to institutionalization to be a significant limitation. The movement’s ongoing refusal to form coalitions with unions or to cooperate with political parties, even as some members have begun to run for local office, condemned the Gilets Jaunes to political irrelevance on a national scale. Though highly political, they have run out of avenues through which to achieve their objectives because they have condemned them all.

Despite a gradual weakening on the national political scale, accelerated by the outbreak of COVID-19, it is important to remember that they did succeed in resolving the “final straws” that sparked demonstrations in the first place: the carbon tax was suspended and government aid for working class was increased. However, in terms of meeting their demands and resolving overarching themes of economic and social inequality, the movement was overall ineffective. This is a typical outcome for policy-driven, pressure group-type movements: they have issues, not broader institutional goals. Once they achieve their policy demands, they demobilize58.

This realization seems to have dawned upon current Gilets Jaunes protestors, whose institutional resistance has softened in recent months. The December 5, 2019 protest was reminiscent of a traditional French grève: it was peaceful, diverse and featured the heavy presence of labor unions, whose organized security apparatus prevented casseurs or violent demonstrators from joining. This mobilization represented a stark departure from earlier acts, showing the extent to which the movement has evolved.

In the face of dwindling numbers and the difficulties that come from a lack of centralized leadership, Gilet Jaune activism has shifted from the occupation of public space to local acts of daily resistance and civic engagement. Upon interviewing Gilets Jaunes participants one year after the outbreak of the movement, one reporter observed, “the daily lives of yellow vests are organized around discussions and experiments in direct democracy, with weekly meetings, conferences and debates. Between tips on what to read, discovery of the world of activism, and tutorials into banner making, many emphasize that they have never learned as much as they have since they joined the movement.”

While their forms of activism have changed, their political goals have not. “The vest is, above all, a state of mind,” wrote the same reporter. Some Gilets Jaunes are in fact running for office now, but many are doing so on citizens tickets and are actively building local instruments of direct democracy. For many who donned the vest, the movement catalyzed a political awakening. Now, those living in peripheral France are making daily lifestyle changes as a result. Local symptoms of challenging the political party system include going to the market rather than the supermarket, creating a communal childcare network, and boycotting globalized services such as Amazon.”

Ultimately, the Gilets Jaunes were limited by some of the very qualities that made them so unique, including their ideological vagueness, political diversity and resistance to both political parties and labor unions. Consequently, the greatest strengths and longest-lasting implications of the movement are a politicization of the daily lives of many of its participants.

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participants who will not hesitate to mobilize in the future. While they have weakened on a national level, they continue to show strength on a local level. After all, localized action has always been their specialty.

What remains to be seen is the impact of the Gilets Jaunes on mainstream political parties, who will have to shift their platforms in order to maintain – or regain – legitimacy among a vital voting bloc.

Conclusion

The Gilets Jaunes movement is consequential because it signifies the extent to which certain demographics have become disillusioned with electoral politics, no longer viewing this system as a viable route toward achieving their political goals. Institutional distrust coupled with the misalignment between political parties and the working class are two key factors contributing to the mobilization of the Gilets Jaunes which, left unresolved as they currently are, will continue to funnel individuals into extra institutional, anti-system movements.

While the movement has weakened and lost many of its original particularities, the evolution of the Gilets Jaunes carries significant implications for French democracy. First of all, the Gilets Jaunes movement illustrates the undeniable linkages between growing economic wealth gaps of industrialized democracies and the weakening legitimacy of traditional political institutions. While disillusioned populations in other countries have embraced the scapegoating and charismatic candidates of radical political parties, the Gilets Jaunes’ distrust of political parties shielded them from the temptations of parties such as the Rassemblement National, protecting their vision of political and
economic accountability. Their reluctance to turn to political parties can also be explained by the design of French political system itself: because political power is so concentrated in the presidency, protestors know they need only focus on the president, who can make the changes they want to see. This accelerates the obsolescence of the traditional party system and empowers extra institutional courses of action that pressure the presidency instead of institutional courses of action like running for office or forming a political party.

The most vital takeaway is what this means for the future of French representative democracy. The Gilets Jaunes demonstrate that anti-system politics and social movements are a necessary phase to shuffle the political deck and to construct grassroots institutions of change that will restore the rotting legitimacy of the political system. It is likely that as the same structural factors, such as rising economic inequality, resistance to political institutionalization, political misalignment and a sense of social abandonment, appear in other countries, such as the U.S., similar mobilizations will emerge.

The philosopher Fredric Jameson wrote that it had become “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” To succeed, the Gilets Jaunes will need to do more than oppose, and create dysfunction within, the current system – they must devise a concrete plan to build a France in line with their demands. This may require entering political channels and coalition building with labor unions. It may, in fact, require a Sixth Republic to disperse the power of the presidency to other representative political institutions. It may require acceptance that creating a new system sometimes requires working with the current structure. Whether the Gilets Jaunes are able to enact political change beyond a localized scale will determine their capacity to
create the broad-based change they envision. While unlikely, the temporary unification of individuals from across the political spectrum, in opposition to the traditional party system, is a legacy unto itself.

Although storefronts have been repaired and the metro now runs uninterrupted on Saturdays, the movement’s legacy remains intact. Though less visible than the movement’s iconic uniform, the mobilizing structures created last year are extensive and are continually reinforced through expansive networks established among a previously divided and powerless segment of the French people. Though the broader implications of a politicized French periphery remain to be seen (and will be revealed based on the shifts made by mainstream party platforms) the message has been communicated to Macron and the French government with unmistakable clarity: tread carefully, for accountability exists where it did not before.
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