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How France's 'Yellow Vests' Differ From Populist Movements Elsewhere

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The demands of the so-called Yellow Vests in France are similar to those of other populist movements, but the uprising is not tied to any political party, let alone to a right-wing one.

PARIS — Too little, too late: That was the reaction of the so-called Yellow Vest protesters to the [French government's sudden retreat](#) this week on a gas tax increase. The Yellow Vests, who have thrown France into turmoil with violent protests in recent weeks, say they want more, and they want it sooner rather than later — lower taxes, higher salaries, freedom from gnawing financial fear, and a better life.

Those deeper demands, the government's inability to keep up, and fierce resentment of prosperous and successful cities run like an electrified wire connecting [populist uprisings](#) in the West, including in [Britain](#), [Italy](#), the [United States](#) and, to a lesser extent, [Central Europe](#).

What ties these uprisings together, beyond the demands, is a rejection of existing parties, unions and government institutions that are seen as incapable of channeling the depth of their grievances or of offering a bulwark against economic insecurity.

But what makes France's revolt different is that it has not followed the usual populist playbook. It is not tethered to a political party, let alone to a right-wing one. It is not focusing on race or migration, and those issues do not appear on the Yellow Vests' list of complaints. It is not led by a single fire-breathing leader. Nationalism is not on the agenda.

The uprising is instead mostly organic, spontaneous and self-determined. It is mostly about economic class. It is about the inability to pay the bills.

In that regard, it is more [Occupy](#) than [Orban](#) — more akin to the protests against Wall Street driven by the working poor in the United States than the race-based, flag-waving of Hungary's increasingly authoritarian leader, Viktor Orban.

In Paris, it was the luxury shopping streets, the Avenue Kleber and the Rue de Rivoli — insolent symbols of urban privilege compared with the drab provinces from which the Yellow Vests emerged — where windows were smashed on Saturday.

But it is also about a deep distrust of societal institutions that are perceived as working against the interests of the citizens, and that will make this crisis particularly hard for the government to resolve. The Yellow Vests push politicians away and reject Socialists, the far right, President Emmanuel Macron's political movement, and everybody else in between.

The movement was "totally unanticipated by the parties," said the political scientist Dominique

Reynié. “The system is in crisis.”

In fact, so far at least, France’s movement remains relatively unstructured. It has yet to be hijacked by either the far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen, or the far-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, try as they might to claim ownership.

And that is what makes France’s movement unique, compared with, say, the [Five Star Movement in Italy](#), which grew up out of a similar disgust with political parties and a distrust of elites, and which has held itself out as the authentic expression of the popular will.

But Five Star was always less movement than new-age political party. While organized over the internet, it was led by prominent figures (Beppe Grillo, for one) as well as more obscure ones (the [Casaleggios](#)) who stoked, channeled and harnessed the popular discontent from the start.

Much the same can be said of the now-floundering U.K. Independence Party in Britain, which gave voice to Brexit and the public’s rejection of European Union structures, as well as its class divides with London. Or for that matter, of President Trump, who demonstrates contempt for institutions. His rural and exurban supporters agree with him.

“It is the same fear, anger and anxiety in France, Italy and the United Kingdom,” said Enrico Letta, a former prime minister of Italy who now teaches at Sciences Po university in Paris. “These three countries have the highest level of class slippage,” he said.

For the 30 years after World War II, “they were at the top of the world,” Mr. Letta said, “at the very center.” These countries “used to live with a very high level of average well-being,” he said. “Now, there is a great fear of seeing it all slip away.”

That fear transcends all others. Thus, in Italy, Five-Star’s [proposal for a “citizens’ income,”](#) or guaranteed income like an unemployment benefit, helped the movement conquer the impoverished south. In Britain, Brexit was sold partly as an escape from the perceived crippling of financial constraints from the European Union.

Violence in some wealthy neighborhoods in Paris symbolizes the hatred of the “winners” in the global system, analysts say.

“There’s this social distress that exists more or less everywhere,” said Marc Lazar, a specialist in Italian history at Sciences Po. “Of people who are very worried about the future, not only are they suffering, but they have profound distrust of institutions and political parties. This is what we are seeing everywhere in Europe.”

Comparing the four countries — Britain, France, Italy and the United States — Christophe Guilluy, a French geographer who has studied the demographics of the “left-behinds,” said “the sociology of the people in revolt is the same.”

“These are the people who feel endangered by the current economic model,” which doesn’t “integrate the greatest number,” he said.

In France, fury at the perceived distance of the executive has not helped the government.

“The president has not once spoken to the French,” the Yellow Vest spokesman Éric Drouet said on French TV on Tuesday, referring to Mr. Macron’s relative silence over the last week. “There’s a total denial by our president.”

There is a paradox in the current French standoff, as Mr. Macron's rise was itself predicated on sweeping away existing political parties, and on a rejection of traditional intermediaries like labor unions.

His campaign book was called *Revolution*, and it expressed a kind of contempt for the parties that had handed off power to each other for 50 years. Mr. Macron, by personalizing power and rejecting what had come before, helped create the world of institutional weakness in which the Yellow Vests are now flourishing.

But his base, then and now, was exceedingly small, presaging his current wide rejection by the French, not just by the Yellow Vests. He won only 24 percent of the vote in the first round of voting last year — while his opponents on the far right and far left together won over 40 percent of the vote. Those numbers have now come home to haunt Mr. Macron in a political landscape where nearly eight out of 10 French citizens no longer support him, according to a recent poll.

Mr. Macron, it turns out, is also a change agent out of step with the times, just as France's long delay in biting off structural economic overhauls has left it out of sync with its Western cohort. He is now trying to push through reforms to make France more business-friendly and competitive, as Britain did in the 1980s and Germany in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the global backlash is already cresting, fueled by the income disparities those changes ushered in.

The partial sacking of Paris's rich, tourism-dominated districts last weekend was merely the physical expression of what all these movements feel deeply, in the view of analysts: hatred of the "winners" in the global system, symbolized by urban elites.

"It's the provinces against Paris, the proud and contemptuous capital," Mr. Reynié said. "And Paris has never been so dissimilar to the rest of France. The fracture is very, very sharp."

The combination of discontent and distrust has made the Yellow Vests an expanding force that almost certainly has yet to reach its limits. The protest has already changed from a revolt over a small gas tax increase to demands for higher salaries, and more.

"Right now, give us more purchasing power," Jean-François Barnaba, a Yellow Vest spokesman in the Indre administrative department, told BFM TV on Tuesday.

"The gas tax was only the beginning," said Tony Roussel, a spokesman for the movement in Marseille. "Now there are all the other taxes. There are salaries. There is the minimum wage."

The government's response is especially fraught. On the one hand, top officials express sympathy, not daring otherwise as polls show wide support for the movement; on the other, the same officials are angry and exasperated over the violent challenge to France's institutional structure.

The result is a kind of paralysis, halting adjustments that are only likely to invite more challenges.

"They still haven't understood our demands," Mr. Roussel said by telephone this week. "This was like a firecracker in the water," he said of the government's decision to suspend a planned gas tax for at least six months.

The protests will go on, he vowed — until deeper concessions are made.

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P.S.

• The New York Times, Dec. 5, 2018:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/world/europe/yellow-vests-france.html?action=click&module=News&pgtype=Homepage>

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