French Yellow Vests (Gilets jaunes): a pioneering study of the ‘low earners’ revolt

Saturday 15 December 2018, by BEDOCK Camille, BERNARD Antoine, DELLA SUDDA Magali, GREMION Théo, REUNGOAT Emmanuelle, SCHNATTERER Tinette (Date first published: 11 December 2018).

Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want? To answer these questions, a group of sociologists, political scientists and geographers have recently conducted a study of the motivations and socio-demographic profile of the movement. In this article, they present their initial findings.

The initial results of a study of this mobilization by sociologists, political scientists and geographers show that the demonstrators have social rather than nationalist demands.

While there is no typical profile for the demonstrators, one of the characteristics of the movement being its diversity, the gilets jaunes are first and foremost men and women who work (or are retired from work), aged 45 on average, belonging to the working class or the ‘lower’ middle class. These results, which are still very provisional, are based on an analysis of 166 questionnaires distributed to participants in actions at roundabouts and motorway tollbooths, or during the demonstrations of 24 November and 1 December, by a team of some ten researchers and students.

Over-representation of employees and under-representation of executives

Some categories appear to be strongly represented among the gilets jaunes who completed the questionnaires. This is the case for employees, who made up 33% of the participants (45% of those of working age), compared to 27% for France as a whole. These were more than twice as numerous as manual workers, who made up 14% of the participants. Artisans, shopkeepers and small businesspeople were also particularly numerous: 10.5% of participants (14% of those of working age), compared to 6.5% for France as a whole.

On the other hand, middle-level professionals and managers were poorly represented. In the marches and blockades that took place between 24 November and 1 December, the former accounted for 10% of the participants (13% of those of working age), compared to 26% for France as a whole; the latter were barely 5% of participants (7% those of working age), compared to 18% for France as a whole. A quarter of the participants in the gilets jaunes movement came under the ‘inactive’ category, most of these being pensioners.

The gilets jaunes participating in the survey were on average 45 years old, slightly older than the average age of the French population, which stands at 41.4 years. The age groups most involved were 35-49 years old (27.2%), then 50-64 years old (26.6%) and 25-34 years old. The 18-24 age group made up 6.2% of the participants, the over-65 age group 17.3%.

Women and men

Men (54%) were rather more numerous than women (45%). However, the high proportion of often
working-class women, a social category traditionally not very mobilized politically, is a notable fact. We see here a propensity for women to demonstrate similar to what we observed on the marches of 24 November and 1 December. Comparable figures (55% male, 44% female) were observed in the questionnaire distributed on the (Catholic reactionary) ‘La Manif pour tous’ demonstration of 16 October 2016.

Women have always demonstrated, as many historical studies show, but they are more visible here. There are several reasons for this: with no official spokespeople, trade-union or political representatives, who are all usually men, and in the absence of structures, the media have been forced to turn their attention to ‘ordinary’ participants. The strong social dimension of the conflict and the key place of living conditions in the social movement’s demands contribute to women’s visibility.

Average educational qualifications

Some 20% of respondents had a university-level degree, as against 27% of the general population (INSEE data for 2014); only 5% of participants had more than four years in higher education, the two qualifications most represented being BEP and CAP [1] with 35% (against 24% in the general population) and high-school diploma (29.3% of respondents, against 16.5% of the general population). Only 15.4% of participants had qualifications lower than this (31.4% of the general population). However, on 8 December we received more responses from people with a master’s degree or equivalent. This sketches a population of participants with average qualifications.

People on modest incomes

Some 55% of respondents reported that they paid income tax (a proportion almost identical to the general population) and 85% that they owned a car. The median declared household income was €1,700 per month, about 30% less than the median for all households (Revenus fiscaux et sociaux, INSEE 2015). The majority of participants in the gilets jaunes actions would therefore be individuals on modest incomes. They do not belong to the most economically vulnerable categories: 10% of them declared an income below €800 euros per month, compared to €519 for the poorest 10% of French households.

For almost half of the respondents (47%), the ‘gilets jaunes’ movement was their first mobilization. Only 44% had ever participated in a strike. They therefore have little experience in collective action. When asked about the forms of collective action they would be willing to take or in which they had already participated, demonstration was the most popular mode of action (81%), followed by petition (69.4% of them said they had already signed one). Almost nine out of ten participants rejected action involving violence to property, but 58.8% of them said they were willing to occupy an administrative building, for example. Half also ruled out the idea of going to Paris to demonstrate, with respondents citing economic reasons, violence, and the need to remain visible in the provinces to justify this choice. On tax refusal, only 5% of participants reported that they had refused to pay tax, while 58.4% completely excluded this as a means of action. Other analyses have also found very little difference between the responses of men and women.

Rejection of traditional representative organizations and extreme political orientations

Our survey also confirms the broad rejection of traditional representative organizations: 64% held that trade unions had no place in the movement, 81% thought the same for all political parties.

This relationship of distance from or mistrust towards the established representational system was reflected when respondents were asked to rank themselves on a political spectrum from left to right.
The dominant response was to declare themselves apolitical, or ‘neither right nor left’ (33%). On the other hand, among those who did take a position, 15% were on the far left compared to 5.4% on the far right; 42.6% were on the left, 12.7% on the right, and only 6% in the centre. By comparison, a survey conducted by Ipsos in April showed that 22% of French people rejected the left-right divide, while 32% were on the left and 39% on the right. This major divergence in relationship to politics is a major element in the uniqueness of the movement.

**Motives: in defence of living standards and against policies favourable to the rich**

For our respondents this was less a revolt against a particular tax, or in defence of car use, than a revolt against a tax and benefit system considered unfair. A revolt against inequalities, but also against political speech that despised them and devalued them symbolically. It was a question of defending their purchasing power and their access to a certain standard of living (particularly leisure, seen as increasingly inaccessible), as well as a demand for respect and recognition of their dignity on the part of political figures (the government and the president).

We invited participants to express their motivations through an open-ended question at the start of the questionnaire (‘Why are you demonstrating today?’). The first reason given was inadequate purchasing power (more than half of the respondents). Many people complained that they could no longer afford the least luxury (‘I’m in my twenties and I don’t have any money. If I want to go out, I have to go to the country.’). Mothers told us about their difficulties in making ends meet (‘I want my children to have food on their plates in the last two weeks of the month, not just potatoes’), which sometimes led to housing difficulties, as testified by many young students (‘I can’t afford housing, I live in a friend’s outbuilding’) as well as this mother (‘We had to go down south to live with my mother-in-law’).

Next in the list of motivations was the excessive tax burden (69 respondents, 18 of whom explicitly indicated high fuel prices). Nearly one in five said they were there to protest against the current government and call for Emmanuel Macron’s resignation, citing the ‘arrogance’ of the executive. The terms ‘monarchy’, ‘oligarchy’ or ‘dictatorship’ were often used to emphasize its illegitimacy. The demand for institutional reforms appeared on 24 November and was confirmed on 1 December. A tenth of the respondents called for institutional reforms. This trend seems to have strengthened among the participants in the 8 December demonstrations.

A second open-ended question was what the government should do to address the demands of the gilets jaunes. The most frequent answer, not surprisingly, was a tax cut, spontaneously mentioned by a third of respondents. For 48 respondents, measures to increase purchasing power were also needed. Among these, 28 wanted an increase in the minimum wage, or even wages in general, 14 a general increase in purchasing power, and 8 an increase in pensions. Demands for the redistribution of wealth occurred in the responses of 36 participants: 19 spontaneously called for the reintroduction of the wealth tax, and 5 for a fairer distribution of taxes.

More than a fifth of the respondents simply wanted the government to listen to citizens, ‘put itself in their place’. This was one of the main concerns of the people we spoke to. Finally, one of the specific features of this movement was the presence of institutional demands in addition to social demands. Thus, 26 people stated that it would take major institutional reforms for them to see the movement as a success: 18 called for changes that were sometimes fundamental (for example, a ‘total reform of the state’, ‘a different political system’), 8 wanted an end to the privileges of parliamentarians, and 4 expressed their belief in the need for a Sixth Republic.

It should be noted that only 2 of the 166 people interviewed mentioned the management of immigration in their responses to the two questions presented. This suggests that analyses that view
the movement as an expression of the far right should be reconsidered.

The two main motivations of the gilets jaunes therefore appear to be greater social justice (whether a tax system bearing more on the better-off, a better redistribution of wealth, or the maintenance of public services) and the demand to be heard by the government. Nationalist demands, on the contrary, such as those emphasizing identity or immigration, were very marginal, contradicting the idea of a movement infused by supporters or activists of the Rassemblement National. As sociologist Alexis Spire (author of *Résistances à l’impôt, attachement à l’État*) points out, what explains this mobilization is above all the sentiment of fiscal injustice, particularly marked among the working class.

In short, this is indeed a revolt of the ‘people’ – as many of those interviewed claimed – in the sense of the working class and the lower-middle class, people on modest incomes. Consequently, in several ways the gilets jaunes movement presents a different kind of challenge from the social movements of recent decades. In addition to its size, the strong presence of employees, people of modest educational qualifications and first-time demonstrators, and, above all, the diversity of their relationship to politics and their declared party preferences, have made roundabouts and tollbooths meeting places for a France that is not used to taking over public spaces and speaking out, as well as places for the exchange of ideas and the construction of collectives in forms rarely seen in previous mobilizations.

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As a group of academics, we launched a field study at the end of November to understand the gilets jaunes movement. We met with participants in different regions of France, in demonstrations and at roundabouts. We offer here our initial results on their profiles and motivations.

On 21 October, Priscillia Ludosky started an online petition ‘For a reduction in prices at the pump!’ Rapidly spreading on social networks, and relayed by the media, the petition gained 200,000 signatories in a few days, and more than 1 million to date. A day of action was scheduled for 17 November, calling for a reduction in taxes and lower fuel prices. This mobilization was prepared in a decentralized and autonomous manner by local and national groups, particularly organized through Facebook. On 17 November, more than 280,000 people participated in this mobilization throughout France, mainly by blocking roads at roundabouts or motorway tollbooths. In Paris, a demonstration was held on the Champs-Elysées and some demonstrators tried to get to the presidential palace before being blocked by the police. In the following days, the blockades continued and other days of demonstrations were called for the following Saturdays.

In the wake of 17 November, researchers at the Centre Émile-Durkheim (Bordeaux) launched a call for participation from the political-science research community, with a view to understanding the movement. Today, this collective has nearly seventy members, including academics, researchers at the CNRS and INRA, PhDs without permanent positions, and students. These sociologists, political scientists and geographers work together on a voluntary basis.

166 questionnaires analysed
The scale of the movement and the speed with which it was formed are striking, outside trade-union organizations and political parties. So too are its modes of action and slogans. Who are the gilets jaunes? What do they want? Are we witnessing a profound renewal of the modalities of protest and politics? Should this be seen as a return to traditional forms of popular revolt? How is such a movement likely to evolve over time and how can we understand its scope?

The objective of the survey was to collect data with a view to capturing the movement sociologically. We sought to understand its complexity, composition and evolution, to record the demands of its participants and to assess the scope of its modes of organization and mobilization. Working groups were set up using different methods: field observation, analysis of social-network vocabularies, questionnaires, interviews, mapping. In parallel with this questionnaire, a team of geographers has been conducting a complementary survey in Normandy. Their data is still being analysed. The initial results presented here are based specifically on analysis of the questionnaires distributed at demonstrations, on the roundabouts and at tollbooths.

We arrived at our results by a study on the ground. People’s words and expectations are at the heart of the survey, our objective being to collect and reproduce these as accurately as possible. The ‘questionnaires’ team consisted of thirteen people based in and around Bordeaux, in Marseille, the Caen region, Rennes, Montpellier, and the Grenoble region. We decided to focus on people who were active in the movement and had participated in at least one demonstration or blockade, and we analysed 166 questionnaires distributed on 24 November and 1 December. The study is still ongoing. We chose to conduct face-to-face interviews in order to collect richer, more accurate and longer testimonies than is possible with indirect or online questionnaires. The questionnaire contained 28 questions, five of which were open-ended, and we also took care to note people’s comments on all the questions asked. The first 15 questions dealt with the motivations of the participants, the reforms they desired, their preferred modes of action and their relationship to politics; the last 13 questions covered the socio-demographic profile of the individuals involved.

P.S.

• Verso Books, 14 December 2018: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4180-gilets-jaunes-a-pioneering-study-of-the-low-earners-revolt?fbclid=IwAR2Ta2vkXuR24833tUzkypqecU3gb2NleRP1JgYJw0QULWY4lbFY04XkqzR4

This article was originally published in *Le Monde*. The original version, with graphs, is available on ESSF.

• Translated from French by David Fernbach.

Footnotes

[1] Certificat d’aptitude professionelle and Brévet d’études professionnelles are both vocational qualifications.