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Liberté, Égalité, Manifester: Explaining the Yellow Vest Movement in France

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LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, MANIFESTER: EXPLAINING THE YELLOW VEST
MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

by
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Alisa Cole.

Thank you for all you have taught me. I love and miss you dearly.

ABSTRACT

BRADY COLE: Explaining the Yellow Vest Movement in France

(Under the direction of Josh Hendrickson)

Les Gilets Jaunes, or the yellow vests, is a movement of protestors that have had a large presence in France since 2018. Beginning as an online petition against French President Emmanuel Macron's fuel tax hike, the movement has quickly amassed several hundred thousand protestors in Paris and other cities across the country. It is the objective of this thesis to examine potential reasons why 300,000 people have felt the need to protest throughout France, apart from the now rescinded fuel tax.

To this end, a sample of data from the Varieties of Democracy database was selected. These variables covered various aspects of French politics and society. The residual for each of the ten variables, explaining the actual value of the variable when controlling for various factors, was used to determine whether or not the values of these variables were higher or lower than predicted. Six of the variables were discovered to be lower than anticipated, which was expected to be correlated with an increase in protest activity. The remaining four variables, being higher than expected, were determined not to be possible explanations for the yellow vest movement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that when we think of other people, we often imagine a stereotype or two. Whether from a positive or negative perspective, people from other countries fall victim to stereotyping quite frequently, and the French are no exception. Ask someone what opinions they carry with regards to the French, if any. More than likely, one of the responses might be that they smoke all the time. Or maybe it's that they have the best food in the world.

One of the most frequently recognized stereotypes of the French is that they complain a lot. Even during something as small as a surprise visit by the president. This was certainly the case for Angers, a relatively small town located about two hours west of Paris. This visit by Macron was met with disdain by the locals, simply due to the disruption in "la vie quotidienne", or daily life. Vincent Cassel, a French actor, once said that the French are never happy with what they have, and that they're always complaining. Even further, in a Bastille Day address to all of France, former President François Hollande stated,

> "There is a sort of illness, which is not serious but can be contagious, where we are always deploring and denigrating. You have to be proud! Don't speak well of the president – I'm not asking you that much. Or of the government – I hope that will come later. But speak well of your country" (France-Presse 2014).

While Hollande's statement was made in 2014, it is just as relevant today, as we are living in what could be referred to as a protest culture.

Culture of this nature is present in countries across the globe, from Hong Kong, Lebanon, the United States, and France of course. In cities all over France for the past few years, there have been protests almost every Saturday or Sunday. One could observe

demonstrations on the current state of the Paris Climate Accords or widespread strikes by railway employees with ease. However, the most common types of protests by a large margin, have been by les Gilets Jaunes, also known as the "yellow vest" protestors by those in the United States.

1.1 Les Gilets Jaunes: Who, Where, and Why?

In May 2018, just one year after the inauguration of Emmanuel Macron, there appeared an online petition, that garnered quite a large following. In fact, support reached a million persons relatively quickly. Citizens continued to sign the petition to repeal the fuel tax hikes implemented by Macron in an effort to combat climate change. Soon thereafter, people began to take to the streets. At first, citizens of the countryside began public demonstrations as a response to both the high costs of living and Macron's green tax. Protestors donned yellow roadside safety vests. These are the same which are required by law to be in the vehicles of all French motorists. These yellow vests also represent uniforms for many French citizens employed in construction, road work, or commercial driving. These workers, known as la classe ouvrière, were disproportionally affected by Macron's fuel tax.

The vests took off as a symbol, and soon massive public protests were taking place all over the country. Many of these protests have resulted in widespread damage, especially in Paris. Protestors, or possibly anarchists taking advantage of the situation, damaged many landmarks in the city, such as the Arc de Triomphe and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

It is easy for anyone distanced from the situation to simply dismiss the protestors and their claims. However, the sheer volume of participants and the passion with which they have protested certainly give credibility to the idea that something major is happening in France. With hundreds of arrests and millions of dollars' worth of estimated damages across several protests, it is difficult to deny that the yellow vest protestors have been a large thorn in the side of Macron and his administration. So much so, in fact, that he eventually gave in to the protestors, by reversing the fuel tax hike that sparked the protests in the first place.

This repeal was enacted in late 2018, to be removed from France's official budget for 2019. However, protests have continued all over the country, as the yellow vests continue their "reign of terror" on Macron and the French government. Demonstrations have taken place as recently as March 14, 2020 in Paris.

1.2 Research Question

In regards to all of the fervor with which the yellow vests are decrying Macron and his administration, it begs the question: what exactly is going on in France? Why is it that approximately three hundred thousand protestors have felt compelled to take to the streets? This thesis seeks first to analyze the directives and demands that have been made by the yellow vest movement. Then, these demands will be compared to data obtained from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database.

The Varieties of Democracy variables measure different aspects of the French political regime and other aspects of society, such as educational inequality. These variables will primarily be used to determine whether or not the claims made by the

protestors are supported by the numbers and/or figures. Other data may be used to provide additional information regarding inequality. Such data and sources will be addressed as they are used. Ultimately, this thesis does not seek to determine exactly what has caused these protests to continue following the rescinded fuel tax hike. Rather, the objective is simply to determine what economic and political factors under Macron's administration have fueled the fire of the yellow vest protests, and which explanations can be ruled out.

In my analysis, I determined that some of the selected variables could possibly be used to explain these protests, and that some could not. More specifically, six of the selected variables, ranging from executive respect of the constitution to educational equality, could possibly be used to explain the initiation and continuity of the yellow vest movement. On the other hand, four variables, ranging from legislative corruption to rates of corruption by public exchanges by public sector employees, could not be used to explain the movement. Given that my analysis contained a total of 11 variables out of a possible 564 variables from the database, it is certainly possible that unselected variables or external factors have also contributed to the existence of the yellow vests.

2. REQUESTS / DEMANDS

Having briefly discussed the origins of the yellow vest movement in France, it seems only natural to ask what the movement wants, or what it is that they are hoping to achieve through these often-violent demonstrations. All movements have goals, and the yellow vests are no exception. In fact, because this is such a large, albeit scattered movement, there have been many different demands that have arisen from chapters of the movement across the country. Fortunately, an "official" list has been compiled, encompassing roughly twenty-five demands of the French government. Attached to these demands is the quote, "These propositions will immediately change daily life for the French. The simple demands nine and ten can recuperate up to 130 billion euros to the public treasury each year. France is a rich country, her people valiant and hardworking, she does not have to live in misery" (Lawrence 2018).

The yellow vest demands can be organized into four different categories concerning different aspects of France and the lives of its citizens. The four categories are economy/work, politics, health/environment, and foreign affairs. Within these four categories lay the proposed plan that the protestors believe is the remedy for the current socioeconomic issues that they think the country is facing. These demands range from legislation aimed at combatting tax evasion by the ultra-wealthy, to following in the footsteps of the United Kingdom by leaving the European Union in a movement aptly and familiarly named "Frexit". In the next section, each category will be broken down, as the demands are explained in greater detail.

2.1 Economy / Work

There are a few demands specific to the French economy, ranging from a revision of tax law to cancellation of debts. The first demand pertaining to the French economy calls for the constitutional ceiling on tax rates to be set at no more than twenty-five percent. Tax rates obtained from the *Direction Générale des Finances Publiques* (Public Finances Directorate General) are listed below (Direction Générale des Finances Publiques 2016).

Portion of taxable income (one part)	Rate
For the portion under €9,710	0%
For the portion over €9,710 and less than or equal to €26,818	14%
For the portion over €26,818 and less than or equal to €71,898	30%
For the portion over €71,898 and less than or equal to €152,260	41%
For the portion over €152,260	45%

Figure 2-1 – Income tax rates in France (Overview of the French Tax System, Section V)

The top income tax rate (as of 2016) was listed at 45% for any euros earned above the level of €152,260. That is to say, the 152,261st would be taxed at 45%, while any earnings preceding would be taxed at 41%. For comparison, the top marginal tax rate in the United States is approximately 37%. The yellow vest movement seeks to drastically cut these rates to a level not to exceed 25% at the highest tax bracket, slightly over half the current maximum.

Next, the movement seeks to reform France's social security program. The pension payment rate in France varies from a minimum of 37.5% of annual earnings to a maximum of 50% (Cleiss). The yellow vests seek to increase the amount paid by

approximately 40%, in an effort to combat the somewhat high rates of poverty for the elderly (Statista).

The third demand seeks to establish incredibly large construction projects in order to provide housing for roughly five million homeless French citizens. As a means of enforcement, severe penalties would be implemented for cities or departments that fail to provide such housing for their homeless constituents.

The yellow vests also seek to break up the "big banks" such as BNP Paribas, Crédit Agricole Group, and Société Générale Group. Going along with this, the movement wishes to establish a separation between investment banking and regular banking. The fifth and final demand pertaining to the French economy revolves around debt. Household debt has increased to a total of 60.6% of GDP as of the second quarter of 2019 (tradingeconomics). To fight this, the protestors aim to cancel (or forgive) all types of debts accrued through usurious rates of interest. It should be noted, however, that the movement has not defined the range of interest rates that would qualify such debts to be forgiven.

2.2 Politics

It is clear that the yellow vests are quite antagonistic towards the Macron administration. The nine demands below reveal their distaste with the current state of French politics. The first is a revision of the very foundations of the government, by amending the French constitution in order to protect people's interests. These new amendments should include binding referenda. To further protect the interests of citizens and individuals in France, they also seek a barring of both lobby groups and interest

groups from having an impact on political decision-making. A new lobbying law was implemented on the first of May in 2018 in an effort to increase transparency to the public with regards to the decision-making process. However, the cultural acceptance continues to lag, and protestors in France would likely seek much stricter legislation, if not a complete ban as suggested by the yellow vests (Europarl).

Among the several demands falling into this category lies a somewhat familiar notion: leaving the European Union in a move named aptly (if not a little derivative) Frexit. The Ipsos Sopra-Steria poll taken by the French newspaper Le Monde found that of all respondents, only about 36%, just over a third, distrusted the European Union while a majority of voters believe that France has been on the decline economically and socially in the years following Macron's election. The protestors seem to believe that leaving the EU would help restore economic and political sovereignty for the country.

Yellow vest participants also seek higher levels of enforcement and harsher punishment for the problem of tax evasion by France's "ultra-wealthy". In 2012, a large case was presented by the French government against UBS, a Swiss bank that allegedly aided French citizens in hiding wealth from authorities from 2004 to 2012. They were ordered to pay a record sum of about $4.2 billion. Other large banks have faced similar suits, with Credit Suisse being fined three-hundred million euros (Alderman).

Their next demand calls for the immediate cessation of privatization, as well as the re-nationalization of public goods such as motorways, airports, railways run by the SNCF, and many others. France finalized a law in 2018 allowing for various state assets to be privatized, among them several airports (including Charles de Gaulle) in Paris. Meanwhile, massive strikes and a debt valued at approximately forty-five billion euros

have the SNCF stuck between a rock and a hard place. With France moving towards

more and more privatization, the yellow vests would see a complete reversal of Macron's

legislation, creating more state-run assets (like the SNCF) and public goods.

In France, separation between church and state, what is referred to as "*laïcité*",

has been around since the earliest days of their constitution, appearing in the first article:

"France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure

the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion."

The topic appears also in the preamble to the Constitution of October 27th, 1946: "The

Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to instruction, vocational training

and culture. The provision of free, public, and secular education at all levels is a duty of

the state." However, it is the belief of the protestors that there still exist non-secular

practices within schools and/or universities, and they therefore require that all ideology

be removed from the ministry of education, ending what they refer to as "destructive"

educational techniques.

The yellow vests then call for the destruction of any and all existing media

monopolies, in order to remove their interference in politics. Lastly, an amendment

should be drafted and added to the Constitution providing for a complete prohibition on

state interference in the personal decisions of French citizens concerning matters of

education, health, and of the family.

2.3 Health / Environment

The third category of demands made by the movement consist of those revolving

around health and the environment. They first seek from the country's durable goods

producers a mandatory guarantee that their products will last a minimum of ten years, and that during this window, spare parts will be readily available. This demand was made against the perceived possibility of practicing "planned obsolescence", in which producers produce goods that become obsolete rather quickly and thus require either replacing or upgrading. A common example of this practice is the usage of nondurable materials, commonly materials such as irreplaceable batteries in phones or laptops. A reduction in these materials, and in planned obsolescence, if it indeed is being practiced, would possibly correlate to a decrease in material waste and possibly pollution.

When France drafted the Paris Climate Accords in December 2015, the idea was to reduce its carbon footprint of all signatories, and consequently, global pollution. However, many in France seem to believe that France has done little, if anything, in the way of achieving this goal, and the actions that they have taken have been met with firm resistance. For example, in Macron's efforts to enforce the accords and make France "greener", he enacted his quite infamous fuel tax hike, which led to violent and sustained revolts in Paris and throughout the rest of the country. The protestors wanted the tax hikes overturned, and were eventually granted this request by Macron. While this request was granted, the movement seeks to go further in their actions for the environmental health of France by enacting a ban on plastic bottles and any other polluting packaging materials. They also seek to ban all genetically modified crops, carcinogenic pesticides, endocrine disruptors, and monocrops (growing the same crop on the same land over time).

They then attack pharmaceutical companies, affectionately known as "big pharma". Companies such as Sanofi who, amongst others, enjoy what the movement

thinks is too much influence on healthcare and hospitals. Sanofi, for example, obtained

roughly 1.891 billion euros in revenue from vaccines of influenza, and 1.946 billion euros

from vaccines of polio. The movement desires to reduce this profitability and to weaken

the influence that these companies have (Mikulic). Lastly, the yellow vests want to see a

reindustrialized France, with a lower dependence on other countries and thus, a reduction

of imports. They believe that the reduced amount of imports would consequently lead to

a decrease in pollution, as the number of transports coming into the country are reduced.

2.4 Foreign Affairs

There is a fourth category, containing four or five of the last demands on the

official list. These are the demands pertaining to reforms regarding France's foreign

affairs. The first demand regarding foreign affairs calls for a cessation in France's

participation in foreign wars of aggression, and an exit from NATO. The second calls for

an exit from what they refer to as "Francafrique" or Franco-Africa. The movement seeks

to establish relations with African states on an equal peer-to-peer basis, and thus France

must stop the practices of pillaging and interfering – politically and militarily –in Africa.

To this end, the movement demands a repatriation of all French soldiers, removing

military presence in Africa.

Next, the yellow vests demand a prevention of migratory flows that they think

France is neither able to accommodate nor integrate. In 2018, France received over

123,000 applications for asylum (an increase of 22% from 2017). The demand increased

a further 7% in the first eight months of 2019 (The Local). The yellow vests desire

stronger borders in order to prevent inflows of this magnitude. The final demand, and the

simplest, requires that France respect international law and the treaties of which France is a signatory.

While this category is certainly important to France and these demands are important to the movement, most of them listed within this category are not relevant for the purpose of this thesis and thus have not and will not be used in any way, unless otherwise stated. The remainder, which have been explained above from sections 2.1 to 2.3, were brought together and used in the search of variables within datasets that may help to explain the specific triggers that have caused this protest movement to arise in the country. These datasets, variables, and methods, will be discussed in the following section.

3. METHOHODOLOGY

The roughly twenty or so official demands made by the yellow vest movement

within the listed categories of economy/work, politics, and health/environment

(excluding foreign affairs – see section 2.4) were compiled and then used in a search for

relevant data, which led to the Variables of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset. The V-Dem,

per their website:

> … is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. We provide a
> multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that reflects the complexity of the
> concept of democracy as a system of rule that goes beyond the simple presence of
> elections. The V-Dem project distinguishes between five high-level principles of
> democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian, and
> collects data to measure these principles (V-Dem).

Using the ninth version of their codebook, twenty-three variables were selected as

candidates whose potential changes could have led to the arising of the yellow vest

protest movement. The variables were organized in the codebook according to different

aspects of democracy. Each of these variables and their values were measured annually

from as far back as the beginnings of the First Republic (c. 1871).

The purpose of this thesis is to determine which, if any, of these variables could

be used as potential explanations for the movement. These potential explanations could

then be used in the future as possible predictors of protesting in France. To that end, this

thesis uses regression analysis on STATA, a statistical software often used in economics

research. Each of these variables were input into STATA, and variables with enough

observations and variability were regressed on various dummy, or binary variables.

A dummy variable is one that takes only two values, 0 or 1. For example, a

dummy variable for the First Republic in this regression would have a value of 0 for any

years outside the period of the First Republic, and would have a value of 1 for the years within it. STATA was used in order to regress the selected variables on the dummy variables for each of the five French republics, the two world wars, as well as a linear time trend. The constant term in each regression refers to a period of time not pertaining to any of the five republics, such as the gap between the first two Republics, which contained the Napoleonic Empires.

For each of these regressions, the residual, which measures changes in any given variable that cannot be explained by the political regime, was plotted over a more recent time period pertaining to the yellow vest movement. These residuals were treated like an exogenous shock, in other words, caused by eternal factors. Transitory, or non-permanent shocks cannot explain the movement, since these shocks reverse very quickly, and their short-term effects would not explain the prolonged protesting in France. Large and persistent shocks represent candidate explanations of the yellow vest movement.

Mathematically, the residual is the difference between the actual measured value of a variable and the value that the variable was predicted to take. That is to say, if the residual is zero, the actual observed value of the variable is equal to what was predicted, given all controls. A positive residual indicates that the value of the variable is higher than anticipated; a negative residual indicates a value of the variable that is lower than predicted. For each variable, the residual over time was compared to the definitions of each variable's possible values. Examining the changes over time in the residual, and then comparing these changes to the values that one would expect to be positively correlated with protests, will either provide or rule out possible explanations for why these protests are occurring, or what could have caused them.

4. DATA / ANALYSIS

There were eleven variables selected as potential candidates for explaining the yellow vest movement. Social Group Equality (v2clsocgrp), Social Class Equality in Respect for Civil Liberty (v2clacjust), Civil Society Organization Repression (v2csreprss), Rigorous and Impartial Public Administration (v2clrspct), Public Sector Corrupt Exchanges (v2excrptps), Executive Embezzlement and Theft (v2exembez), Executive Respect of the Constitution (v2exrescon), Legislature Corrupt Activities (v2lgcrrpt), Educational Equality (v2peedueq), and Power Distributed by Socioeconomic Position (v2pepwrses). Additionally, a variable for Civil Society Organization Anti-System Movements (v2csantimv) was regressed in order to see the growth of anti-system movements over time. As mentioned in the previous section, a regression was run for each of these variables on STATA, and the residual, measuring the difference between the actual value of the variable and the predicted variable, was plotted over time. These graphs were then used in order to determine which variables could possibly explain the protest movement, and which could not.

4.1 Increase in Anti-System Activity

The variable v2csantimv was selected in order to plot a trend of expected anti-system activity in France. Figure 4-1 below shows that anti-system movement was below what was predicted in the 1990s. At first, it increased dramatically in the mid-90s and then gradually until just after 2011. Following a brief decrease, anti-system activity increased throughout the remainder of the 2010s, and spiked around Macron's election in 2017. This stark incline is more than likely attributed the yellow vest movement, and has continued through 2018, the most recent V-Dem data available.
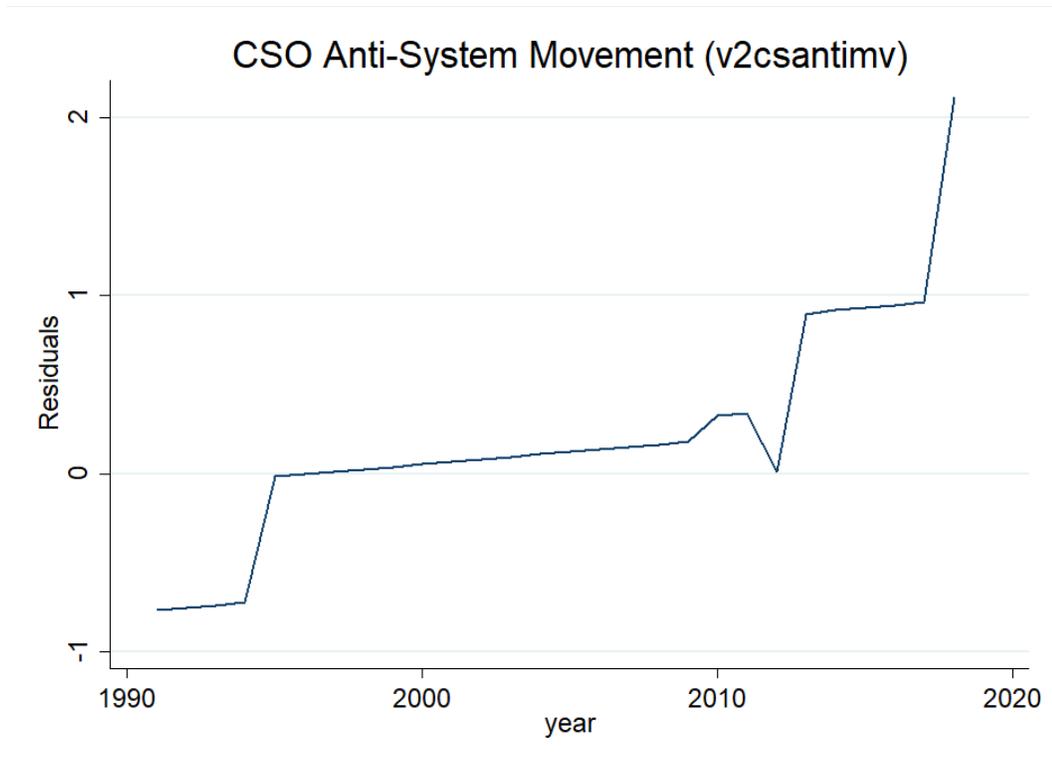
Figure 4-1: CSO Anti-System Movement residuals from 1990 to 2018

4.2 Possible Explanations for the Yellow Vest Movement

Of the ten variables whose residuals were plotted, six of them could be used as possible explanations for the protests. In order for a variable to be considered a possible explanation, it would have to be true that the residual would increase or decrease toward a direction that would be consistent with an increase in protests. For example, in a variable such as executive embezzlement (v2exembez), lower values of the variable are expected to be positively correlated with protest activity. The lowest possible value means that members of the executive act as though all public resources were their personal or family property (Pemstein). Controlling for the political regime, the residual being lower than expected for the current political regime would indicate that the changes in this variable could be used as a possible explanation for the arising of these protests.

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This is what is observed in Figure 4-2, where the residual for v2exembez is relatively

constant from 1990 to 2009 or so, before briefly increasing until around 2012. This

increase is followed by a large decrease which eventually forms a plateau before
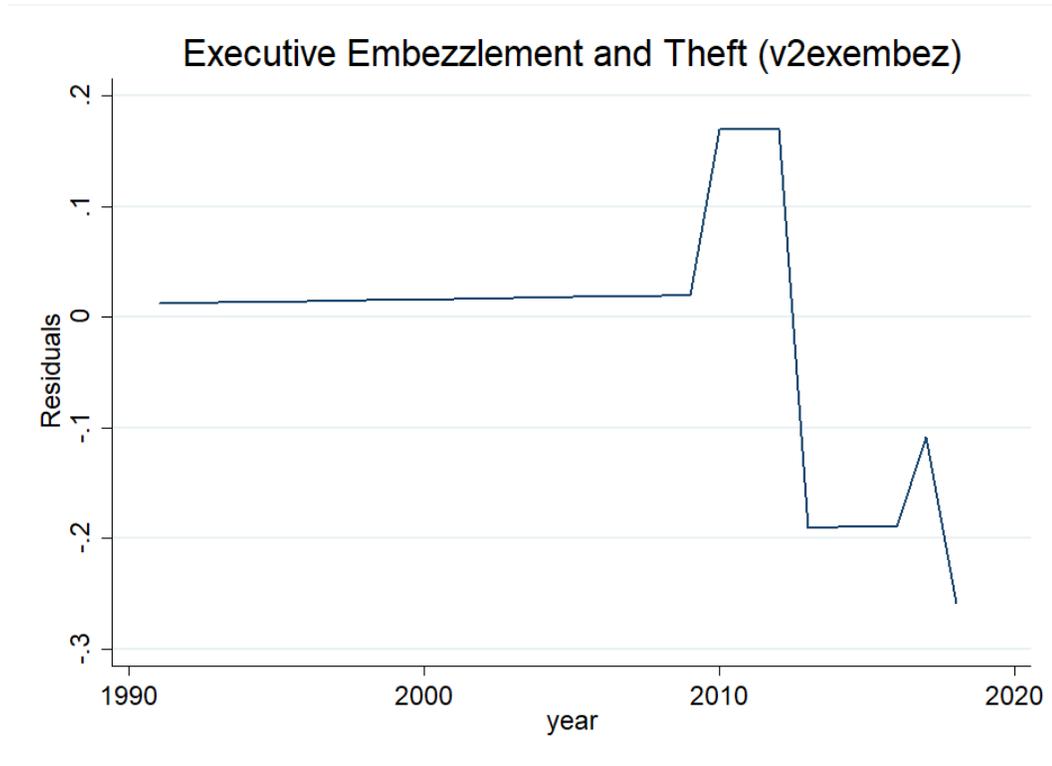
decreasing again following Macron's election in 2017.

Figure 4-2: Executive Embezzlement and Theft residuals from 1990 to 2018

This is simply one example, and there are 5 other selected variables that follow

this same pattern. The second of which is the variable for executive respect for the

constitution, or v2exrecon. The lowest value, zero, indicates that members of the

executive violate the constitution whenever they want to, without legal consequences

(Pemstein). The residual for this variable follows a much simpler pattern than the

preceding example. From 1990 to around 2016-2017, actual executive respect for the

constitution was higher than anticipated, given the current political regime. That is, until

2016-2017, when the residual turns sharply negative, indicating that constitutional respect

in France decreased rapidly through 2018, and has not increased since the initial drop. This is shown in Figure 4-3 below. Consequently, executive respect for the constitution could also be used as a potential cause of protesting in France.
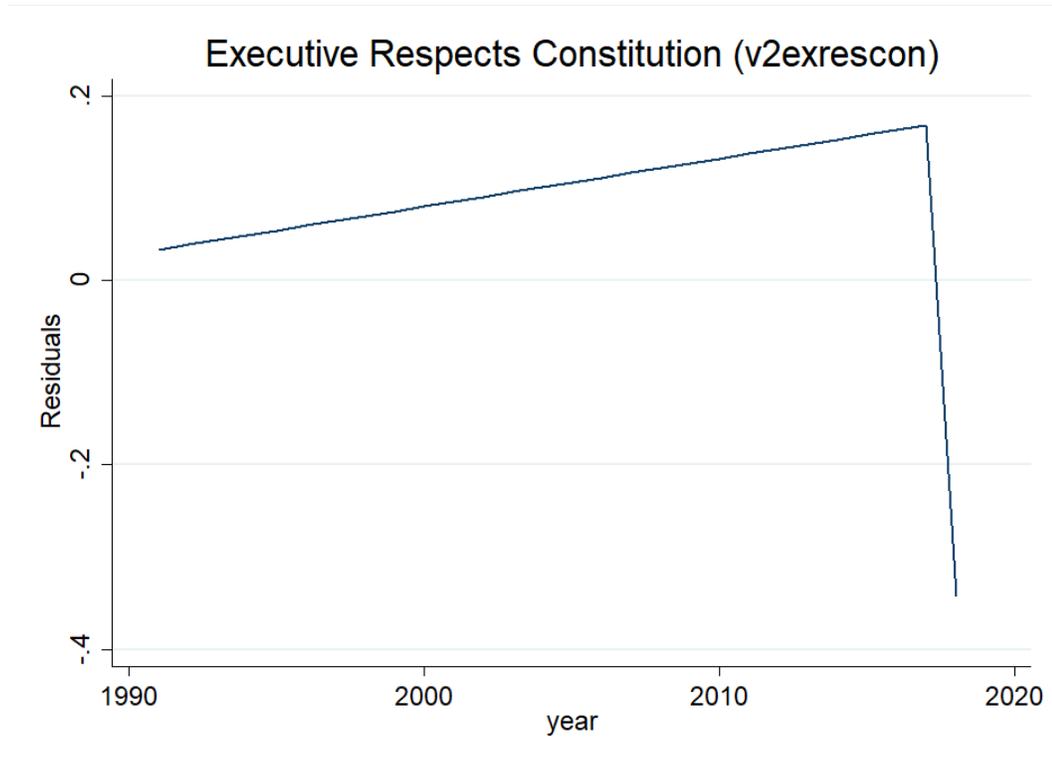

Figure 4-3: Executive Respects Constitution residuals from 1990 to 2018

The third potential explanatory variable is civil society organization (CSO) repression (v2csreprss). These organizations are similar to non-governmental organizations. In the case of this variable, lower values are predicted to be correlated positively with protests. The lowest value for this variable, 0, indicates severe and violent repression of CSOs and all members (Pemstein). The residual for this variable steadily decreased for the entirety of the graph's range. However, it remained higher than expected, that is to say the residual remained positive, until around 2004, where it became lower than expected given all controls. This gradual decrease continued until around 2016, when the decreased became rapid and sharp. Since lower values of the

variable indicate higher amounts of repression, the negative residual means that amounts

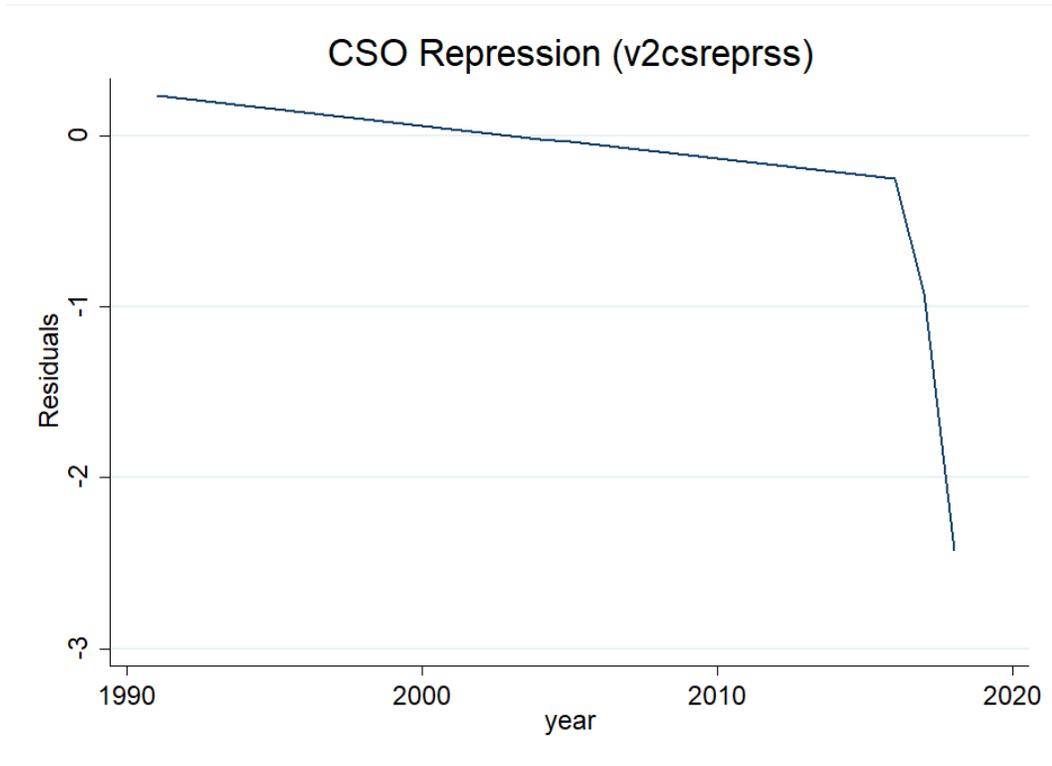of CSO repression actually increased through 2018, seen in Figure 4-4.

Figure 4-4: CSO Repression residuals from 1990 to 2018

Next is the variable measuring respect of the law by public officials,

which is called rigorous and impartial public administration (v2clrspct) by V-Dem. For

this variable, as with many others, lower values are expected to be correlated with higher

protest activity. Specifically, a value of 0 on this variable indicates that the law is not

respected by public officials, and that arbitrary or biased administration of the law is

rampant (Pemstein). In Figure 4-5, the residual for v2clrspct slowly but consistently

declined, but remained positive (i.e., higher than predicted). This trend continued until

2012-2013, when the residual became lower than predicted, and dropped substantially.

The residual continued to decrease following this drop, but at a lower rate. Therefore,

beginning in 2012-2013, the actual value of v2clrspct in France was much lower than expected, meaning that this variable can also be used as a possible explanation for the yellow vest movement.
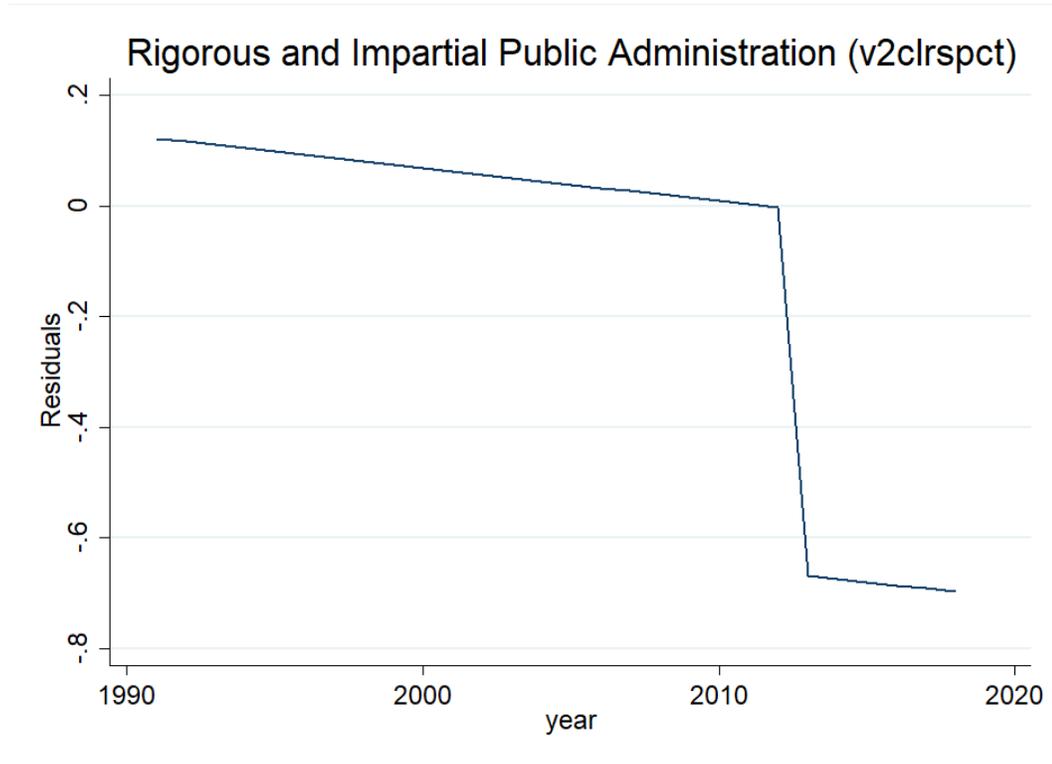

Figure 4-5: Rigorous and Impartial Public Administration residuals from 1990 to 2018

The next, and fifth, variable falling under the explanatory category is educational equality, referred to as v2peedueq in the codebook. Measurements for this variable become more unequal the lower the values go, leading to 0, which means that the level of inequality is extreme. More specifically, that provision of high-quality basic education is extremely unequal and at least 75 percent of children receive such low-quality education that undermines their ability to exercise their basic rights as adults (Pemstein). The residual for educational equality follows a very similar pattern to the residual for v2clrspct. However, the initial gradual decline in this case is much lower, and almost

horizontal. Following the large decrease, which occurs at around the same time as the residual for v2clrspct, approximately 2012-2013, there is also a very brief and very small increase, but the residual remains negative through 2018. In reality, this means that, much like the variable for rigorous and impartial public administration, actual values of educational equality remained higher than expected, although only slightly so. They then decreased dramatically and became much lower than predicted given the political regime of the time.
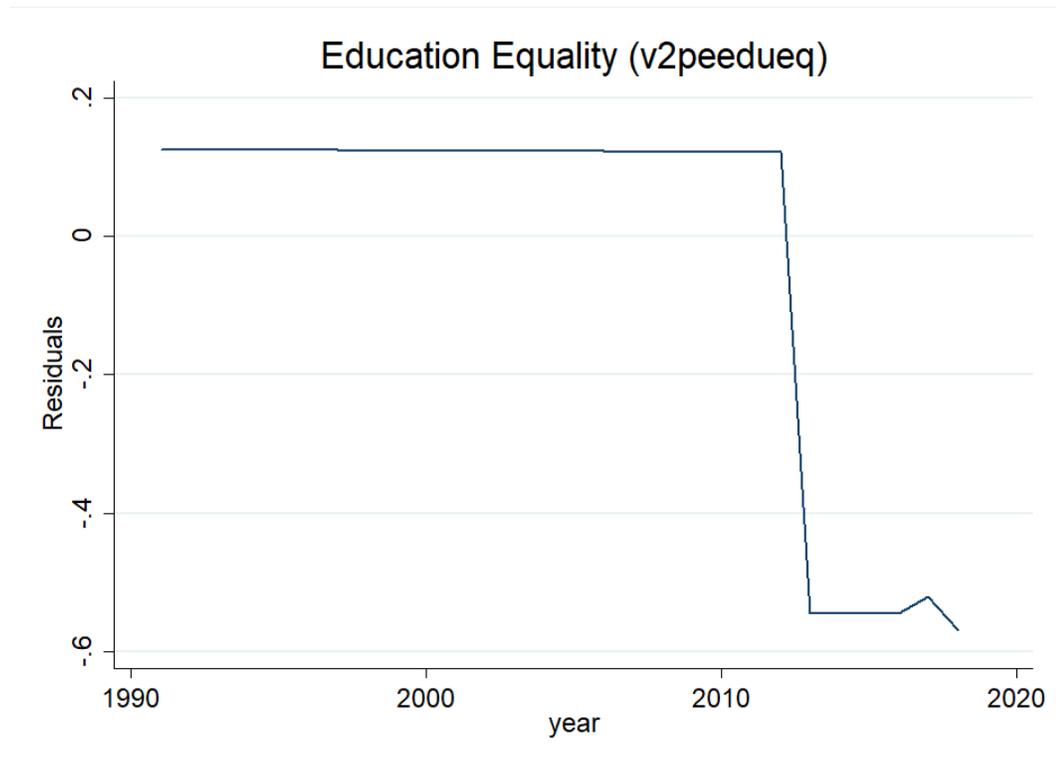

Figure 4-6: Education Equality residuals from 1990 to 2018

The last variable in this section is the variable v2pepwrses, which measures the distribution of power by socioeconomic position. Like preceding variables, the lowest value of v2pepwrses is expected to be correlated with an increase in protest activity. A

zero in this variable means that wealthy people enjoy a virtual monopoly on political

power, and that average or poorer people have almost no influence (Pemstein). The

residual follows an interesting, relatively unique pattern, shown in Figure 4-7. Like with

others before it, the residual for v2pepwrses begins with a gradual decrease, followed by

a large decrease continuing through 2018. What differs is that from the beginning in

1990, the actual levels of power distribution according to socioeconomic position were

already lower than what was predicted. Preceding the residual's drop, it actually increases

enough that the residual briefly becomes positive. This is short-lived, as the residual turns

negative and continues to decrease through 2018. From 1990, the power distribution by

socioeconomic class was less equal than anticipated, until just after 2010, when it became

more equal before then tending towards a virtual monopoly by the wealthy in France.
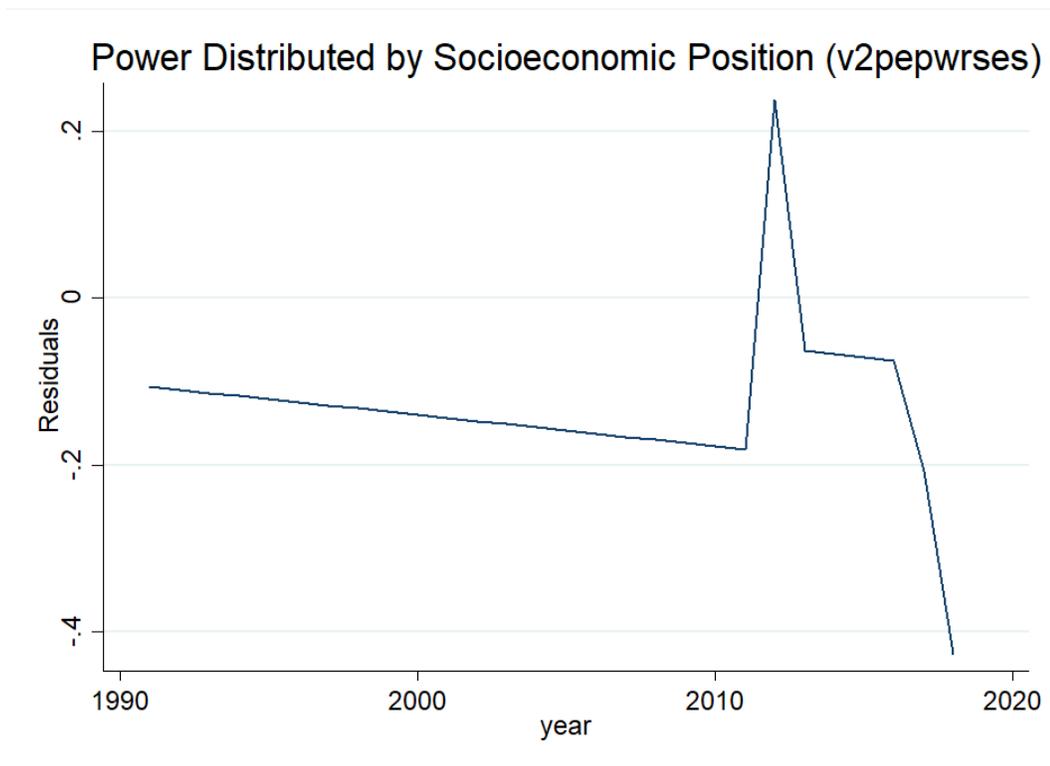

Figure 4-7: Power Distributed by Socioeconomic Position residuals from 1990 to 2018

Power distribution by socioeconomic position is the last of the selected variables whose residuals turned negative, indicating that the real values were much lower than anticipated given all controls. These variables help paint the beginnings of the big picture of which changes in French society, in this case, seem to have resulted in increased protest activity and the arising of the yellow vest protest movement. This is not to say that all of these variables support this conclusion, though the majority of those selected seem to. The remaining variables fall under the nonexplanatory category.

4.3 Explanations That Can Be Ruled Out

There are four variables whose residuals do not seem to explain the observed increase in protest activity in France led by the yellow vest movement. In order for this to be the case, any variable's residual in this category would have to see an increase in recent years, indicating that actual values for that variable were higher than anticipated. For explanatory variables in the previous section, it was generally true that lower values were expected to be positively correlated with protests. This holds true for most of the variables in this section, but instead higher values will be examined. These higher values are expected to be negatively correlated with protest activity. That is, an increase in magnitude in these variables is not expected to result in protesting by the French people.

The first variable that can be ruled out as an explanation measures social class equality in respect for civil liberty. This variable will be referred to as v2clacjust, consistent with the V-Dem codebook. For this variable, the higher in magnitude the values go, the less observed inequality between the social classes. The highest possible value is 4, indicating that poor people enjoy the same level of civil liberties as rich people

(Pemstein). For v2clacjust in Figure 4-8, the residual begins lower than expected, but increases in the early 1990s, becoming higher than anticipated. While the residual decreases from the early 1990s through 2018, it remains positive. In other words, social class equality initially was lower than anticipated. Equality then became much higher than what would've been predicted given the political regime. This continued through 2018, therefore social class equality or inequality cannot be used to explain the observed increase in protests.
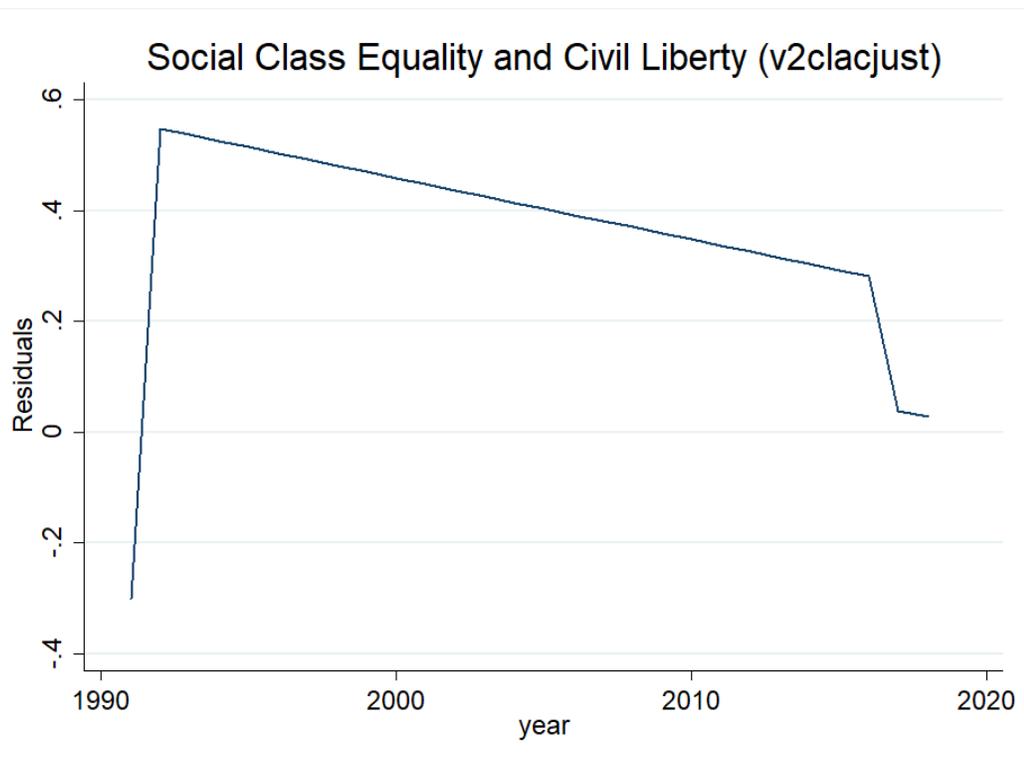

Figure 4-8: Social Class Equality and Civil Liberty residuals from 1990 to 2018

Next is the variable v2excrptps, which measures the rates of corrupt exchanges by public sector employees. The highest value for this variable, 4, indicates hardly any levels of corrupt exchanges by public sector employees (Pemstein). The residual for v2excrptps shown in Figure 4-9 are initially negative in the 1990s, but increase dramatically in 1999-

2000. The residual remains positive through all available data, despite small fluctuations in the 2010s. Therefore, actual rates of corrupt exchanges by public sector were initially lower than expected. At around 2000, the increase in the residual means higher actual levels for this variable. Since higher levels indicate lower rates of corrupt exchanges, the residual implies that there was less corruption by public sector employees than would be predicted given the political regime. This would not likely result in an increase in protesting, and thus should not be considered an explanation for the yellow vest movement.
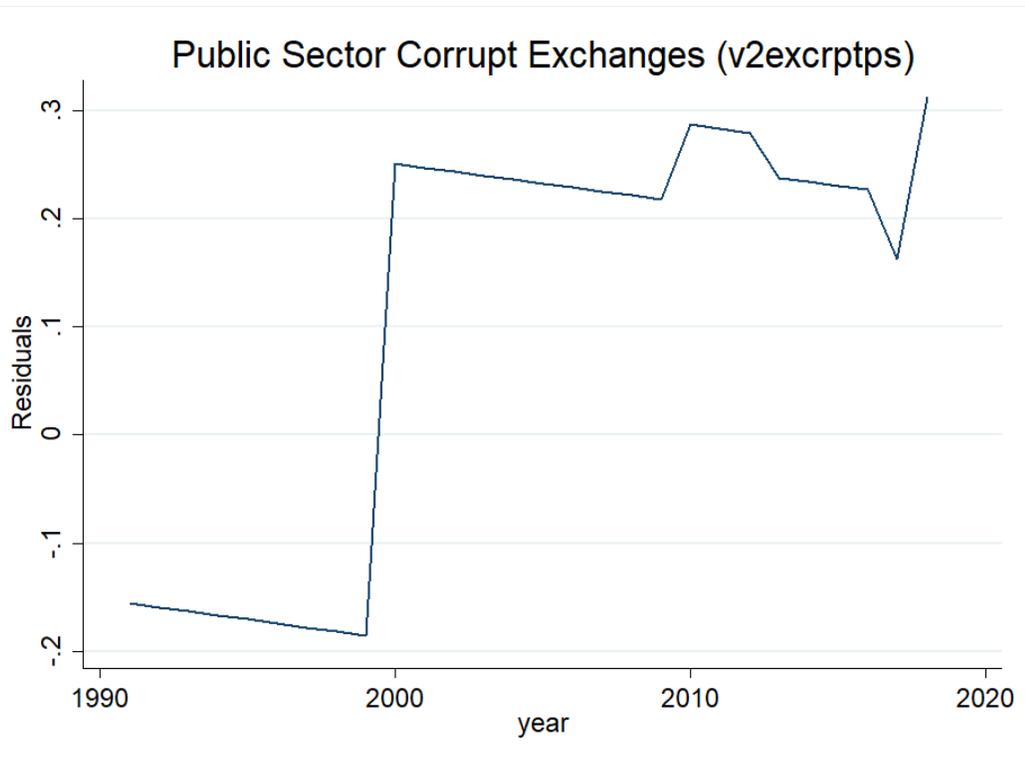

Figure 4-9: Public Sector Corrupt Exchanges residuals from 1990 to 2018

The third is v2lgcrrpt, which measures corrupt activities by the legislature. Similar to the variable for public sector corrupt exchanges, the highest value indicates that legislative corruption is practically nonexistent (Pemstein). In Figure 4-10, the residual

for v2lgcrrpt remains fairly close to zero from 1990 to around 2012-2013. For those years, this means that the level of legislative corruption was what was predicted. After around 2012-2013, the residual increased sharply through 2018, excluding a few years in the mid-2010s where the residual increased, but at a lower rate. The higher residual means higher actual values for v2lgcrrpt controlling for the political regime. Higher actual values indicate lower rates of corruption, so the residual implies that the rate of corrupt activities by the legislature were lower than predicted. Consequently, legislative corruption does not appear to explain the yellow vest protests.
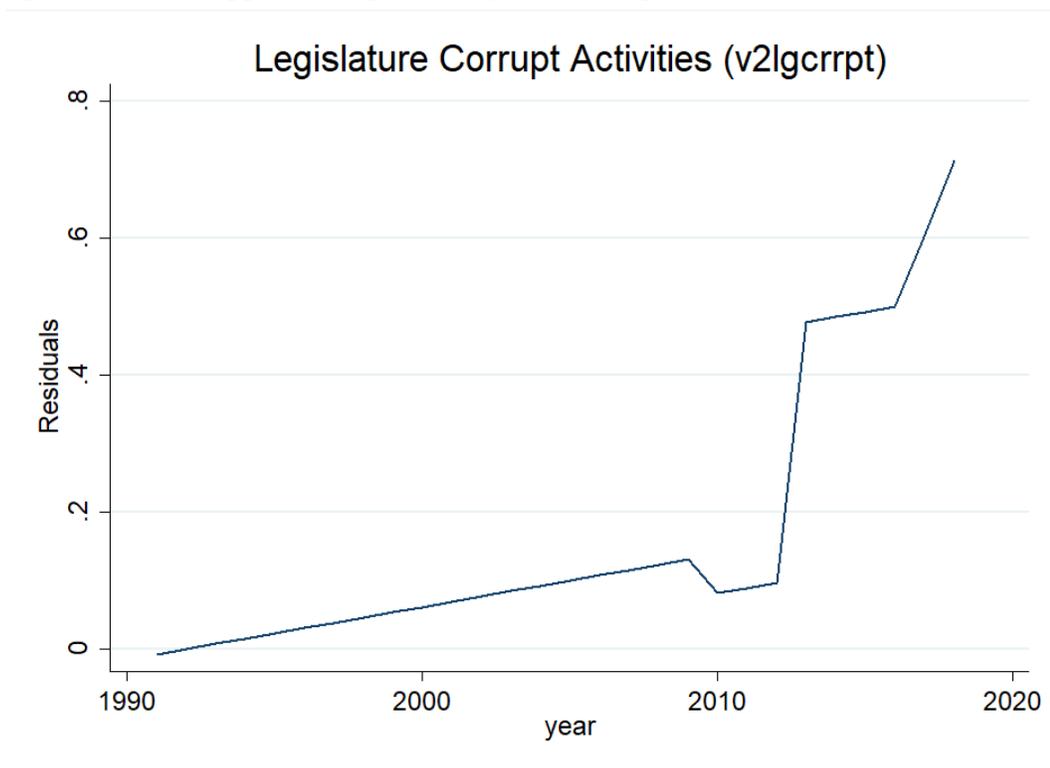

Figure 4-10: Legislature Corrupt Activities residuals from 1990 to 2018

Lastly, v2clsocgrp, the variable measuring social group equality, for which the highest value (four) indicates that members of all salient social groups enjoy the same level of civil liberties (Pemstein). The residual for this variable followed a peculiar trend. After increasing until around 2012, the residual decreases dramatically, becoming

negative. Then, it is followed by a larger increase in the mid-2010s, becoming positive

again. This meant that from 1990 to roughly 2012, social group equality was higher than

expected. It then became much lower than expected for a period of a few years, before

increasing again. Therefore, the impact that changes in this variable had on the activity of

the yellow vest movement is inconclusive, and like the previous variables in this section,
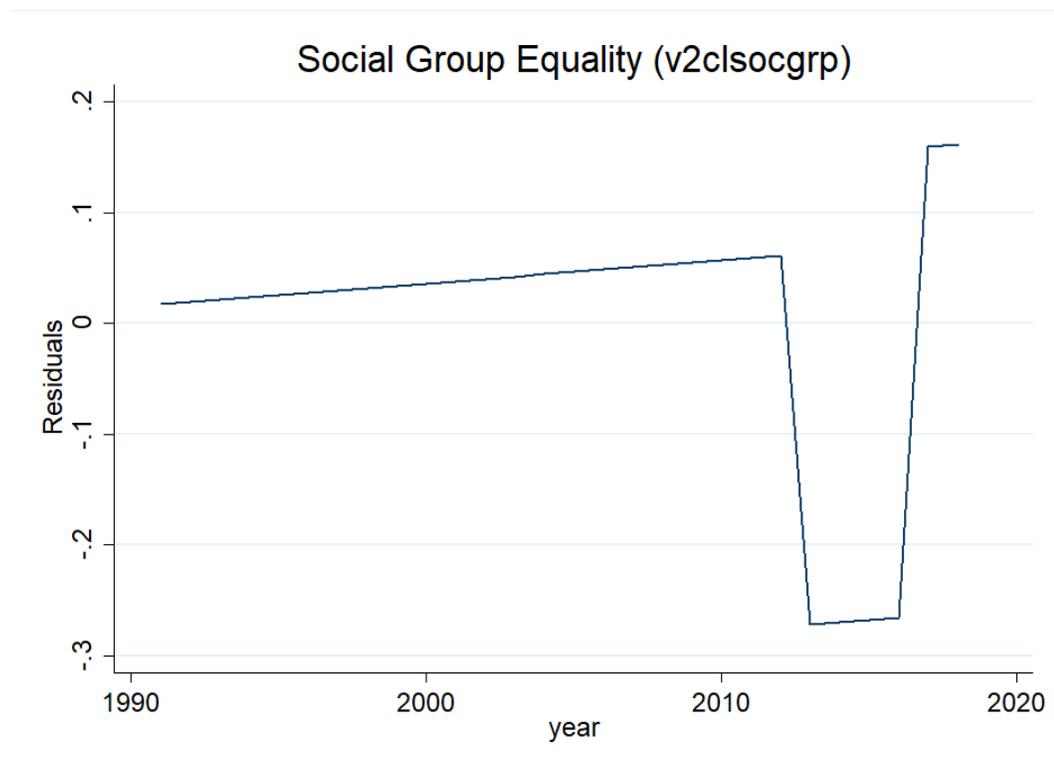
cannot be used to explain the movement.

Figure 4-11: Social Group Equality residuals from 1990 to 2018

The first three variables in this section: social class equality with respect for civil

liberty, corrupt exchanges by public sector employees, corrupt activities by the

legislature, each saw their residual remain positive, i.e., higher than anticipated. The

fourth variable, measuring social group equality, followed a unique pattern and provided

an inconclusive effect on protest activity. For these variables, the residuals suggested that the actual values trended towards those that would not be to be correlated with an increase in protests. Therefore, these variables are not considered to be possible causes of the yellow vest movement.

4.4 Summary of Results

Eleven variables that were chosen for this thesis. The first of these, involving anti-system activity, was used in order to show the increasing amount of unrest in France. The residual for this variable implied that anti-system movement activity was much higher than anticipated for the years of 2012 to 2018. This is largely due to the arising of the yellow vest movement. For the remaining variables, the residual, which explains the difference between the actual observed value of the variable and what was predicted, after controlling for political regimes (see section 3), was plotted over time. This was done in order to determine which, if any, could possibly be used in order to provide an explanation for the arising of the yellow vest protest movement. In total, six variables fit the criteria to be considered possible explanations. The residuals for these six variables were observed to be negative, indicating that actual values for the variables were much lower than anticipated. Generally, lower values were expected to be correlated with increased protesting by the public, which is why these six were selected to be possible explanations.

The next four variables did not follow this pattern. For each, the residuals taking values that were higher than predicted for the political regime of the time. Since higher values are not expected to correlate positively with protesting, these could be ruled out as possible explanations for the yellow vest movement.

5. CONCLUSION

Just one year after the inauguration of Emmanuel Macron in France, an online petition supported by a million French people quickly turned into public demonstrations. Largely against the widely unpopular fuel tax hikes, the movement became known by the yellow vests worn by its participants. This is symbolic because these vests are required to be in the vehicles of commercial drivers in France. Protestors began flocking to Paris and many other large cities in France throughout the country. With hundreds of thousands of protestors and estimated damages in the hundreds of millions, it begs the question of what exactly has been happening in France to cause such an uprising. The purpose of this thesis was to determine which changes in France could have been responsible for the yellow vest movements.

To that end, a selection of variables was chosen from the Varieties of Democracy database. These variables measured changes in various aspects in French society over time. The residual, equivalent to the difference between the actual value and the predicted value controlling for various dummy variables, was plotted from 1990 to 2018, the most recently available data. In general, for each of these variables, lower values were expected to be positively correlated with higher protest activity, and higher values with less protest activity. Thus, when the residuals were lower than expected given all controls, those variables were counted as possible explanations for the arising of the yellow vest protest movement.

In total, there were six explanatory variables: executive embezzlement and theft, executive respect for the constitution, civil society organization (CSO) repression, rigorous and impartial public administration, educational equality, and power distribution

by socioeconomic position. Each of these variables had residuals that tended to be much lower than predicted, which would be expected to result in an increase in protest activity. There were four variables that did not appear to explain the movement: social class equality, legislature corruption, public sector corrupt exchanges, and social group equality. Their residuals tended toward higher values, indicating that the actual values of their variables were higher than expected, which would not be consistent the rise of the yellow vest movement.

While many of the demands made by the protestors could be ideological in nature, there exists parallels between the demands and the data from the Varieties of Democracy database. Many of the claims within the four categories are interrelated both with each other and with the selected variables. For example, one of larger ideas behind the movement is the idea of restoring liberty and/or equality to French citizens. This is embodied in the demands from 2.2 calling for a constitutional amendment that protects the people's interests, and a prohibition on state interference in the decision-making processes of French citizens.

Many of the variables that were determined to be potential explanations for the movement, such as executive respect for the constitution, rigorous and impartial public administration, and power distribution by socioeconomic position, fit under these larger ideals of equality and liberty. The conclusion for each of these three variables is that they were much lower than anticipated given the political regime, which was expected to be met with an increase in protest activity. So naturally, once the protesting became more ubiquitous, aspects of French life appeared in their official list of demands.

On the other hand, demands relating to the corruption of Macron's administration did not seem to be supported by the analysis. More specifically, this is exemplified by the demands calling for respect of international law (2.4) and the barring of lobby groups from political decision-making (2.2), among others. These demands also correlated with the variables involving corruption, such as legislative corruption and public sector corrupt exchanges. The two variables here were ruled out as possible explanations, as they were observed to be higher than anticipated. This indicates that the aforementioned variables should not lead to an increase in protesting. However, it is interesting to see that ideas pertaining to these variables have persisted in the list of demands by the movement.

One could argue that the reason for many of these demands could be ideological, and not based on observations of reality. Ideological demands could be those which call for an ending of non-secular education practices (2.2), a ban on GMO crops (2.3), or perhaps ending France's participation in what the movement determines to be wars of aggression (2.4). While some of these demands may be simply ideological in nature, and hard to quantify, there were demands that did align with the data. The variables relating to these demands fell under both categories: those that could be used to explain the observed increase in protest activity, and those that were ruled out as explanations.

The future of the yellow vests remains uncertain. It would seem as though the public has grown tired of the interminable protesting. Several polls have been conducted by Odoxa, an independent polling agency in France. These polls measured public response to the protestors as well as their sentiments towards the movement overall. In a recent poll, conducted online February 20-21, 2019, a majority of respondents (55%) desired for the protesting to end. This marked the first time that this occurred, and was a

stark contrast to the minority 34% of respondents that didn't support the movement in November 2018 (Bisserbe).

Despite this decline in public support for the movement, which has been in continuity for approximately 74 weeks or so, protestors have continued to flock to the streets. On March 14th of this year, just over a month ago, large crowds of yellow vests demonstrated in Paris, in direct violation of the government's ban on public gatherings resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This protest, like many of its predecessors, was met with large numbers of French security personnel, who were forced to use tear gas on the crowds and to detain several of its members (Irish and Pennetier).

In conclusion, these eleven variables were only a small sample of the almost six hundred variables covering from 1789 to 2018 in France. The small sample covered different of aspects of French society, but certainly not all. Therefore, there are certainly other variables or external factors that could have led to the yellow vests. This thesis sought to simply provide a sample of the big picture, and to uncover the remainder would require more time and research.

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