

# Analysing the territorial roots of discontent

## between anger and silent protest

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### Abstract

In analyses of the contemporary electoral landscape, one phenomenon has been garnering increasing attention: protest behaviour and political disengagement. Recent literature has primarily focused on examining these processes through the perspective of voting for populist parties. However, there have been only a few studies that have delved into other forms of protest. The objective of our study is to surpass the limited scope of populist votes and instead concentrate on alternative types of protest behaviour. Specifically, we aim to compare two distinct manifestations of discontent: the Yellow Vest demonstrations and abstentionism. Our viewpoint is that both the Yellow Vest movement and electoral abstentionism are expressions of rejection stemming from the margins. However, they manifest in different ways – violent demonstrations on one hand, and widespread abstentionism on the other. Our goal is to ascertain whether these two behaviours reflect the same patterns of marginalisation and disillusionment, or if they correspond to different territorial dynamics. To achieve this goal, we have conducted an econometric analysis on the scale of French employment zones, utilising socio-economic and spatial data.

### Keywords

Geography of discontent

Yellow Vests

Abstentionism

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## Introduction

In analyses of the contemporary electoral landscape, a phenomenon is increasingly drawing the attention of researchers in political science and geography: protest behaviour and political disengagement (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Furlong, 2019). Recent literature has focused on studying these behaviours through the lens of voting for populist parties (Dijkstra et al, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2020; van Leeuwen and Vega, 2021; Di Matteo and Mariotti, 2021). To date, few studies have focused on other forms of protest. Yet, Bourdin and Torre (2023) examined the Yellow Vest movement, demonstrating that its geography cannot be conflated with that of far-left or far-right parties. Bourdin and Tai (2022) explored abstentionism as a form of protest, showing that this electoral behaviour of avoiding the ballot box can be explained by individuals feeling abandoned by public policies.

The Yellow Vest movement and the increase in abstentionism in France highlight a growing discomfort among certain segments of the population who feel marginalised and abandoned by traditional political institutions, as described by Legnante and Segatti (2009). Christophe Guilluy underscored this phenomenon by discussing ‘peripheral France’ (2016, 2019) – rural areas and small towns affected by deindustrialisation and globalisation, in stark contrast to prosperous metropolises. Rodríguez-Pose (2020) and Lee et al (2018) extended this analysis by linking the rise of abstentionism and populism to economically weakened or declining areas, where residents express their despair. They lay the groundwork for the geography of discontent and left behind places (McCann, 2020), based on the idea that peripheral areas, dominated by a sense of abandonment by central authorities, express their discontent at the ballot boxes by opting for extreme or protest votes.

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Our perspective is that the Yellow Vest movement and electoral abstentionism are also expressions of a rejection originating from the peripheries, manifesting in different ways: violent demonstrations on one hand, and massive abstentionism on the other. Beyond the methods of expressing opposition, which reveal a desire to either confront or withdraw from the electoral process, these behaviours are symptoms of a broader malaise, challenging the capacity of political institutions to meet the needs of the entire population and reduce territorial disparities. These diverse phenomena highlight the need to re-examine the social contract and mechanisms of democratic representation to make them more inclusive and responsive to the varied experiences of citizens (Kriesi, 2020).

In a context where the contemporary political landscape is marked by increasing protest and citizen disengagement (or even disenchantment), with its geographical study still underexplored, our study aims to move beyond the prism of populist votes to focus on other types of protest behaviour, particularly comparing the Yellow Vest demonstrations to abstentionism. Our goal is to determine whether these two behaviours reflect the same geography of marginalisation and disillusionment or correspond to different territorial dynamics. By exploring the territorial and socio-economic 'roots' of these movements, we seek to enhance understanding of protest as a multidimensional phenomenon, capable of taking various forms depending on the local and regional contexts. This study could illuminate the challenges faced by contemporary democracies in representing and integrating all citizens, especially those from peripheral or shrinking territories.

To achieve this, we have conducted an econometric analysis at the scale of French employment zones, utilising socio-economic and spatial data. We aim to understand how demographic, socio-economic and territorial characteristics shape individual electoral behaviour,

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taking into account insights from existing literature ([Dijkstra et al, 2020](#); [McCann, 2016, 2020](#)) and applying them to our comparative study of the geography of the Yellow Vest movement and abstentionism.

This chapter begins with a literature review followed by our methodology. We then present and discuss the results. Finally, we conclude with some policy recommendations.

## Literature review

Modern democracy faces unprecedented challenges, where protest and electoral abstention are no longer simple indicators of political discontent, but reflect complex territorial dynamics. These behaviours are shaped by a range of socio-economic and political factors that we present in this literature review.

### The geographical expression of discontent: protest movements and abstention

Manifestations of political discontent can take different forms (expressions of anger as in the case of the Yellow Vests or silent protest such as abstentionism). Furthermore, they are not distributed randomly across a nation. They follow socio-economic and political fault lines that cut across them.

### Protesting in the street to express your anger: the example of the Yellow Vests

The Yellow Vest movement, which emerged at the end of 2018, represents a new facet of the protest movement in France, distinguished by its approach and scope ([Kipfer, 2019](#)). Originating without the traditional structure of parties or unions, it sprang from the spontaneous mobilisation of citizens on social networks, who then occupied physical spaces, notably roundabouts, which became emblematic sites for gatherings and an exchange of viewpoints, epitomising French peri-urbanity ([Shultziner and Kornblit, 2020](#)). Its rapid expansion, marked by a network of blockades and local actions, demonstrated a capacity for decentralised organisation. The initial demands

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centred around fuel taxation and a sense of fiscal injustice, reflecting deeper concerns about mobility and purchasing power (Jetten et al, 2020). The movement's growth was further amplified by intense media coverage, both in traditional media and on social platforms. Textual analysis techniques have shown a particularly strong resonance of themes related to mobility and increasing distrust of the national government (Shultziner, 2022).

Despite a decrease in participation in rallies over time, popular support remained significant, indicating widespread sympathy and identification with the values and demands of the Yellow Vests. They have thus significantly impacted the recent social history of the country with their initial apolitical nature and unprecedented use of social media as tools for mobilisation and communication (Clifton and de la Broise, 2020), redefining collective action in France. They also introduced a new form of spatial mobilisation by congregating and establishing camps at symbolic locations in peripheral areas, especially roundabouts. In these places, often occupied for extended periods, a sense of community and mobilisation was maintained.

In their analysis of the geographical distribution of the protests, Shultziner and Kornblit (2020) observed that the actions of the Yellow Vests were a result of tensions and frustrations that had built up over time in specific territories. The movement was particularly strong in areas suffering from economic marginalisation and a lack of state investment. It primarily manifested in regions experiencing a sense of abandonment regarding public policies, as noted by Alvarez et al (2018). Several authors have indicated that the response to these socio-economic policies, perceived as unfair, took root especially in peri-urban and rural regions, distant from dynamic urban centres (Alvarez et al, 2018; Bourdin and Torre, 2023). Della Sudda and Gaborit (2022) added that these protests reflected a sense of abandonment and economic relegation that transcended simple political positions, questioning the distribution of resources and opportunities

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within the nation. The movement thus criticised a form of territorial inequality, where certain areas or regions seemed favoured at the expense of others (Bourdin and Torre, 2022; Torre and Bourdin, 2023).

### Abstentionism as a form of silent protest

Abstention is analysed by Braconnier and Dormagen (2007) as a form of political protest. According to them, not voting can be an intentional political choice, serving as a substitute for active protest, particularly for groups marginalised or disillusioned with the existing political system.

Research by Anderson and Beramendi (2012) found a significant correlation between economic inequality and voter abstention. They observed that income disparities and limited access to essential resources contribute to lower voter turnout. According to them, this situation creates in the average citizen a sense of futility regarding the electoral process, thus diminishing their incentive to vote. This phenomenon suggests that as economic inequality increases, individuals may feel alienated or powerless in the political system, thereby fuelling growing disillusionment with representative democracy.

In their 2013 study, Leighley and Nagler delved further into this issue by examining the social factors influencing voter turnout. They demonstrated that, in the United States, wealthier individuals are more likely to vote than poorer ones. This trend, consistent over several decades, underscores the significant impact of economic factors on electoral participation. Additionally, they found that voters tend to have more conservative economic views than non-voters, revealing a substantial ideological disparity between these groups. Heath (2018) offered a slightly different perspective, suggesting that declining voter turnout might also indicate widespread discontent within society. This discontent is particularly pronounced when citizens feel unrepresented by the

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candidates or parties in the election. This situation can lead to scepticism about the real impact of one's vote on political outcomes, thus reinforcing the belief that voter participation is inconsequential or ineffective.

Pasek et al (2009) examined the links between social discontent and electoral abstention. They highlighted that abstention can be interpreted as a silent yet powerful form of protest against political institutions and their management of public affairs. This type of abstentionism, though less visible than other forms of protests, represents a significant expression of civic dissatisfaction. Similarly, Bourdin and Tai (2023) analysed electoral behaviour related to abstention in the metropolis of Paris. Their findings suggest that abstentionism reflects both disengagement and a form of protest. Non-voters, often residing in socio-economically marginalised areas, become politically disengaged, perceiving politicians as incapable of changing their situation. Additionally, a protest attitude is evident in neglected territories, where public services and local businesses have declined. Bridging this divide is crucial to counter increasing marginalisation and rising protests.

### Socio-economic factors and territorial dynamics of the protest

The work of Stavrakakis et al (2017) demonstrates that political discontent and the emergence of populist movements can be linked to economic crises, which exacerbate feelings of exclusion and injustice. These authors highlight how economic difficulties and disappointment with traditional political elites lead to a search for alternative solutions, often outside the usual political spectrum. Van Hauwaert et al (2019) examine this trend in the European context, identifying a link between increasing abstentionism and the erosion of partisan loyalty. They attribute this disaffection to a sense of alienation and a growing scepticism towards the ability of political parties to address citizens' concerns.

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Several authors (Forest, 2018; Ivaldi, 2019; Giebler et al, 2021) have also focused on discontent within the working and middle classes. Their studies emphasise how personal economic hardship and feelings of abandonment by the state can lead to a retreat into unconventional forms of protest, including abstention. They argue that a loss of confidence in the political system's ability to effect change can lead to a decline in voter turnout. Carreras and Castañeda-Angarita (2019) also study the effect of economic marginalisation – particularly on the working and middle classes – on electoral protest, highlighting that relative deprivation and the perception of social injustice are significant drivers of abstention.

McCann (2016, 2020) and Rodríguez-Pose (2018) underline the role of geographic and economic marginalisation in increasing political discontent. They note that territories abandoned by globalisation and uneven growth often become centres of abstention and protest, signalling a deep territorial divide. In the same vein, Portos et al (2020) explore the impact of economic shocks on voting behaviour, concluding that periods of recession are likely to increase abstentionism. This effect is especially pronounced in regions where citizens perceive a decrease in the quality of public goods and services (Bourdin and Tai, 2022).

The study by Beecham et al (2020) sheds light on the effect of regional economic decline on discontent. They observe that regions affected by deindustrialisation and job loss record higher votes for populist parties, reflecting disenchantment with the policy solutions on offer. Similarly, authors such as Davoine (2019) and Zagórski and Santana (2021) directly link quality of life and socio-economic marginalisation to abstentionism. Their analysis suggests that when citizens perceive public policies as ineffective in addressing their needs, abstention becomes a form of passive protest.



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## Methodology

The analytical approach adopted in this research is based on an ordinary linear regression (OLS) model, which aims to establish correlations between territorial, socio-economic and demographic factors on the one hand, and manifestations of social protest on the other. The OLS model is structured around the following equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \dots + \beta_nX_n + \epsilon$$

where  $Y$  represents the dependent variables measuring either electoral abstention (in 2017, first round of presidential elections) or participation in Yellow Vest meetings per 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

The economic and demographic data were collected for the year 2017 (population density, rate of higher education among 25–34-year-olds, proportion of property owners, income inequality, long-term unemployment, change in median standard of living,<sup>2</sup> and poverty rate). The  $\beta$  are the estimated coefficients for each independent variable, and  $\epsilon$  is the error term.

The employment area is chosen as the framework for geographic analysis in our research. The French National Institute of Statistics (INSEE) characterises it as an area where the majority of residents also work. This choice is based on the study of home-to-work travel, demonstrating that these areas form coherent groups in daily life.

Regarding the data, we first differentiate between territorial variables hypothesised to play a significant role in explaining discontent. In our regression model, the evolution of the number of postal, health,<sup>3</sup> and daily life services is considered for its potential role in access to essential amenities.<sup>4</sup> These services are key indicators of development and local well-being, which can influence residents' perceptions of the public policies implemented (and the potential feeling of abandonment of certain territories), as well as their willingness to express their discontent either publicly or silently.

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The median commuting time is a relevant indicator as it reflects the daily time constraints faced by citizens. Longer commutes are often associated with increased fatigue and reduced leisure time, as well as higher fuel costs in areas with limited public transport services. Moreover, prolonged commutes can reinforce residents' feelings of isolation from economic or decision-making centres. Additionally, the distance from major French metropolises is integrated to reflect individuals' connectivity to urban centres. This measure of geographic distance can affect how voters perceive their integration into political and economic life.

Estimating the evolution of employment in the industrial sector<sup>5</sup> helps understand the economic transformations of territories. A decline in this sector may indicate structural changes in the local economy, potentially affecting social cohesion. This decline can also influence citizens' perceptions of employment stability and economic opportunity, which can diminish their political engagement or prompt them to express their discontent through protest movements.

On the other hand, we distinguish variables more traditionally used in political science to explain discontent, both socio-economic and demographic. Regarding demographic variables, population density is used as a proxy for agglomeration economies and to assess the degree of urbanisation of an employment area. The annual population growth rate, due to apparent net migration, is a variable used to understand a region's demographic dynamics. This measure reveals population growth or decline and can indicate underlying economic trends, such as an area's attractiveness to new residents or out-migration due to lack of opportunities. These trends can impact social cohesion and residents' economic prospects.

The percentage of college graduates is often correlated with greater political awareness and increased election participation. Graduates are more likely to access diverse information, participate in public debates and understand political issues, leading them to more actively exercise

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their right to vote. Therefore, this variable is crucial for assessing the potential for political engagement within a given population.

Furthermore, we also use socio-economic data. The interdecile income ratio is an indicator of economic inequality within a region, revealing the gap between high and low incomes. Such disparities can create a sense of social and economic injustice, thereby influencing attitudes towards the political system and potentially increasing abstention rates or the propensity to protest. We also include two key indicators: changes in the median standard of living and the poverty rate, which are measures of general economic well-being. An improvement in living standards may indicate increased satisfaction with current economic conditions and potentially greater confidence in government policies, while an increase in the poverty rate may signal underlying socio-economic issues and lead to political and civic dissatisfaction. We also include the share of long-term job seekers, reflecting economic desperation among citizens, potentially leading them to disengage from electoral processes or express their discontent publicly.

Finally, the proportion of property owners is a significant variable for analysing social movements such as the Yellow Vests. In this context, owners may feel fiscal pressure more acutely, such as through local taxes and property tax, likely increasing their dissatisfaction. This discontent can translate into heightened participation in protest movements when property owners feel financially burdened or neglected by government policies. Thus, this measure can be an indicator of susceptibility to mobilisation in protest movements.

## Results and discussion

Table 6.1 shows the results of three separate regression models analysing the factors influencing the Yellow Vest movement (models 1 to 3) and abstentionism (models 4 to 6) for each variable

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explained, the first column representing the territorial variables, the second socio-economic and demographic variables, and the third a combined model.

**Table 6.1: The different models – discontent**

	Yellow Vests			Abstentionism		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>ServPost</b>	-0.092***		-0.094***	-0.008*		-0.006*
<b>ServHealth</b>	-0.021**		-0.015**	-0.005***		-0.005***
<b>ServDailyLif</b>	-0.008**		-0.01***	-0.039***		-0.042***
<b>CommuteTime</b>	0.115***		0.127***	0.063		0.065
<b>DistMetro</b>	0.098***		0.105***	0.02**		0.024**
<b>EvoIndustr</b>	-0.019*		-0.016*	-0.004*		-0.003*
<b>PopDens</b>		-0.008***	-0.006***		-0.002*	-0.002*
<b>HigherEdu</b>		-0.002	0.000		-0.308**	0.305**
<b>EvoDemo</b>		-0.035***	-0.03***		-0.001	-0.001
<b>HomeOwner</b>		0.22*	0.25*		-0.015***	-0.017***
<b>IneqRev</b>		0.137**	0.129**		0.08**	0.081**
<b>LTUnemp</b>		0.023***	0.029***		0.109**	0.11***
<b>EvoRev</b>		-0.003*	-0.005*		-0.004	-0.004
<b>EvoPovert</b>		0.006***	0.004***		0.079***	0.086***
R2	0.601	0.548	0.612	0.49	0.462	0.512
F-test	11.454	12.699	12.335	12.117	14.516	11.236

In the first model, we observe negative and significant coefficients, suggesting that an increase in services is associated with a decrease in the number of Yellow Vest gatherings. These results align with the literature showing that a deterioration in services can contribute to social discontent (Bourdin and Torre, 2023). If citizens witness a decline in postal services, healthcare services or daily life amenities, it can create a perception of neglect by local or national authorities, thus heightening feelings of abandonment and injustice. This may lead to an increase in protests, such as those observed with the Yellow Vests, where participants express their dissatisfaction with a perceived decline in quality of life (Della Sudda and Gaborit, 2022). Additionally, the evolution of industry shows a negative coefficient (-0.019\*), indicating that where industry decreases, there

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is a slight increase in Yellow Vest gatherings. This phenomenon can be linked to deindustrialisation and job loss, factors known to generate discontent and stimulate protest movements (Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2021).

Model 2 reveals the importance of socio-economic factors. Here, population density has a negative coefficient (-0.008\*\*\*), indicating fewer gatherings where density is higher. This is consistent with the notion that the Yellow Vest movement is primarily peri-urban and rural (Guilluy, 2019). The effect of the level of education is not significant, implying that education does not determine this protest movement. This aligns with studies on the sociology of the Yellow Vests, which have shown a socio-economically diverse participant base (Kipfer, 2019).

Model 3 combines the effects of the first two models. Travel time has the strongest positive coefficient (0.127\*\*\*), suggesting a close link between long commutes and Yellow Vest activity. This significant result confirms the drivers of protest as explained by Jetten et al (2020). Remember, the Yellow Vest movement originated from an increase in fuel prices, causing discontent among those who rely on cars for commuting. It followed a revolt of lesser importance, that of the 'red hats', which had risen in 2013 in Brittany against the installation of portals allowing the collection of an eco-tax on trucks and in favour of total free access to roads.

In line with Thompson's analysis (1971), this reaction can be viewed from two perspectives. First, from a rational choice framework, the protesters' actions can be seen as a direct response to the economic pressures imposed by increased fuel costs, impacting their daily commutes. This is in line with the movement's roots, which were first and foremost to grievances about their purchasing power. However, Thompson's concept of the 'moral economy' can also be mobilised. The protesters were not only reacting to economic hardship but were also driven by a sense of moral outrage. They perceived the fuel price increase as a violation of the implicit social

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contract between the government and the people, particularly those embedded in areas heavily dependent on automobiles for transportation. The terms of the contract could be described as follows: you live in areas that lack a number of services and public transport but you can easily access them with your private vehicles, even old ones. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of the Yellow Vest movement, illustrating how both economic rationality and moral indignation can fuel collective action.

Distance to the nearest metropolis has a positive and significant effect, indicating that those living far from urban centres may feel disconnected from economic opportunities, services, and political decision making (Torre and Bourdin, 2023). Income inequality and long-term unemployment are positively related to the number of gatherings, with coefficients of 0.129\*\* and 0.029\*\*\*, respectively. These factors indicate a challenging economic and social climate, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion and disillusionment. In particular, income inequality can heighten the perception of a divide between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the current economy, fuelling frustration and the desire to express discontent (Bourdin and Torre, 2022). Long-term unemployment signals enduring economic instability, leaving individuals feeling voiceless and impotent (van Leeuwen and Vega, 2021), prompting them to seek new forms of political expression, such as participating in Yellow Vest gatherings.

Turning to the models on abstentionism, model 4 suggests that improved access to postal services is slightly associated with reduced abstention, while health and daily living services show a stronger association (-0.005\*\*\* and -0.039\*\*\*, respectively). This indicates that quality public services are perceived as signs of attention and support by national and local institutions, potentially reducing electoral disengagement. The distance from metropolises, with a coefficient of 0.02\*\*, suggests that peripheral areas, further from decision-making centres, tend to have higher

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abstention rates. This aligns with studies suggesting that voters far from urban centres may feel less represented or impacted by national policies ([Torre and Bourdin, 2023](#); [Bourdin and Tai, 2023](#)).

The socio-economic variables model highlights significant effects of income inequality and long-term unemployment on abstention, indicating that economic hardship can lead to political alienation ([Heath, 2018](#)). According to Heath, citizens experiencing economic difficulties perceive the political system as failing or indifferent to their situation, leading them to abstain as a form of silent protest or resignation. By comparing the models for the Yellow Vests and abstentionism, we see that certain factors, such as the reduction in various services to the population, are key factors in explaining discontent. They have a negative impact on both phenomena, suggesting that the degradation of essential services leads to disengagement or active protest. The distance from metropolises has a stronger effect on the Yellow Vests than on abstentionism, highlighting that the distance from urban centres can be a factor in mobilising for collective actions and making oneself heard, rather than be in a position of silent protest (via abstentionism). Long-term unemployment and changes in poverty are strongly linked to abstentionism, illustrating that prolonged economic difficulties and worsening poverty can push citizens to withdraw from the electoral system rather than mobilise in movements like the Yellow Vests. On the other hand, our results suggest that the Yellow Vests would be more sensitive to territorial variables.

By comparing the models for the Yellow Vest movement and voter abstention, we observe that certain factors, such as the reduction of various services to the population, are key in explaining discontent. These factors negatively impact both phenomena, suggesting that the degradation of essential services leads to either disengagement or active protest. The distance from major cities has a more pronounced effect on the Yellow Vest movement than on abstentionism.

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This highlights that being far from urban centres can be a catalyst for mobilising collective actions and making one's voice heard, as opposed to engaging in silent protest through abstention. Prolonged unemployment and shifts in poverty levels are strongly associated with abstentionism, indicating that extended economic hardships and escalating poverty may drive citizens to disengage from the electoral system rather than participate in movements like the Yellow Vests. Conversely, our findings imply that the Yellow Vest movement is more responsive to territorial variables.

## Policy recommendations

To effectively respond to discontent and abstentionism, it is essential to create public policies that pay attention to the needs of citizens, especially in peri-urban and rural areas. Indeed, public policies since the 1980s have led to the closure of numerous public services – schools, high schools, hospitals, maternity wards, post offices, and so on – as well as the disappearance of many public servants – police officers, judges in courts, among others (Torre and Bourdin, 2023). They have also involved the removal of many train services, with a drastic reduction in the number of railway lines in rural or outlying areas.

Reversing this trend and rebuilding this dense network, which was costly and inherited from a time when population density was higher in these areas while cities were less populated, appears challenging. Therefore, it is necessary to imagine contemporary solutions that meet the expectations of the population, as well as the rise in peri-urbanisation and the attractiveness of medium- and small-sized cities.

Creating multifunctional public service centres, offering easy access to essential amenities such as postal, administrative and banking services is crucial. This is the direction the French government is heading in, having recently rolled out *Maisons France Services*, particularly in



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medium- and small-sized towns. These facilities provide centralised access to a variety of essential services. They are designed to simplify citizen interactions with the administration, offering a one-stop-shop for various procedures. This initiative significantly contributes to reducing the digital divide by providing internet access and assistance for online procedures in regions where these services might otherwise be limited. They can be relatively easily accessible to urban users, as well as to people travelling from their hinterlands by car, for example.

Another point raised by our study concerns transport infrastructure. Notable improvement is needed. This includes the development of sustainable and affordable public transport projects, such as bus and regional train lines, to improve connectivity and reduce the feeling of isolation. The goal is to facilitate access to employment, education and essential services. Initiatives have been developed in this direction, such as on-demand bus services. These services offer increased flexibility compared to the fixed schedules of traditional public transport, allowing rural area residents to plan trips according to their specific needs. This can be particularly useful for the elderly, students, or those with irregular work schedules. Another initiative worth encouraging is the generalisation of carpooling, which can be another effective solution for improving mobility in less-served areas. Government programmes can support the development of local carpooling platforms, offering an economical and ecological transport option.

Moreover, in a context where some territories are in industrial decline – and more generally in terms of economic activities – and such situations can lead to discontent among the population, it becomes crucial to implement reindustrialisation programmes and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in environmentally sustainable activities or those that reduce pollution, such as the construction of battery factories, photovoltaic panels, or circular economy initiatives. From this perspective, it is essential to expand and promote initiatives such

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as the *Territoires d'Industrie*, also implemented in France. Incentives for businesses to invest in these regions, such as tax breaks or innovation subsidies, should also be considered. Additionally, specific support for SMEs in these areas, through financial aid, management and marketing advice, and mentorship programmes, would help stimulate local employment and economic growth. The implementation of such place-based policies becomes increasingly indispensable, especially in the context of the smart specialisation strategies pursued by the EU until 2030.

Finally, our results suggest a need for the population to be more involved in decision making. This reflects a more general issue of establishing a more inclusive dialogue and citizen participation. If neglected, it can lead either to a growing disinterest of residents in public affairs or to an increase in discontent. Therefore, encouraging citizen participation in political decision making through citizens' assemblies and territorial referendums will strengthen the sense of belonging and political representation. These platforms will offer citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns and directly influence local policies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our study aims to examine two forms of discontent that are often minimally addressed in the literature: the activism of the Yellow Vests and electoral abstentionism. We sought to determine whether these behaviours reflect a common geography of disillusionment or correspond to distinct territorial dynamics. The results reveal that the reduction of local public services, distance from major cities, and the persistence of socio-economic issues such as income inequality and long-term unemployment are strongly associated with these two forms of protest.

However, it should be noted that there are important differences between these two modes of opposition. Generally, abstentionism appears to be more influenced by socio-economic variables, while the Yellow Vest movements seem to be more responsive to territorial factors.

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Nevertheless, unlike Bourdin and Torre's (2023) work, which compares the geography of the Yellow Vests to that of votes for populist parties, we do not observe significant differences (in terms of positive or negative signs) between the two phenomena studied in this chapter. This underscores the utility of studying different forms of political dissent, including votes for extreme and Eurosceptic parties, to enrich the scientific debate on the topic. Overall, our results emphasise the need for policy makers to consider regional particularities when designing public policies to effectively address citizen discontent.

Our study is not without limitations. The data used do not capture all individual behaviours and motivations that a direct survey of the French population could have revealed. For instance, our data do not clarify whether any Yellow Vest protesters were also among the abstainers. Furthermore, our analysis could be enriched with qualitative data or in-depth case studies in specific territories experiencing either high rates of abstentionism, strong mobilisation of Yellow Vests, or both. Finally, it is important to continue exploring the causes and manifestations of protest to enhance the representativeness and integration of all citizens in the democratic process, with particular attention to those from declining or peripheral territories.

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- <sup>1</sup> Data for the first variable were collected from the official website of the Grand National from 17 November 2018 to 21 March 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> The differences in living standards between the wealthiest 10 per cent and the poorest 10 per cent. Here it is calculated between 2000 and 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> Number of doctors per 10,000 inhabitants.
- <sup>4</sup> The evolution of these indicators has been calculated between 2000 and 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Change in the share of employment in the industry within the period from 2000 to 2017.