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# French critical citizenship: between philosophical enthusiasm and political uncertainty

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## Keywords

Critical citizenship, Representative democracy, Participation, Distrust, France

## Abstract

This paper sketches the portrait of French critical citizens on the eve of the 2017 presidential election. Following the work of Norris (Critical citizens: global support for democratic government, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999), critical citizenship has emerged as part and parcel of the crisis in representative democracy. While critical citizenship is mainly discussed as a sign of civic apathy and distrust of political institutions and elites, our objective is to investigate the “positive” face of critical citizenship with a focus on what French critical citizens value and aspire to. Drawing on data from the CEVIPOF 2017 French electoral survey, we analyse the socio-demographic and political profile of four groups (*Non-Critical Citizens*, *Demo-Reformers*, *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*) and examine what is theoretically at stake in their respective models of democracy, criticism and aspirations.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In France, the so-called “Yellow Jackets” (Gilets jaunes) grassroots movement<sup>2</sup> first emerged in October 2018 and appeared to embody the crisis in legitimacy of representative democracy. The movement made multiple and heterogeneous demands that encapsulate strong criticism of economic and political elites, whom it accused of defending their own private interests to the detriment of the common good, and especially to the detriment of middle and working-class interests. Such distrust targeted not only political and financial leaders but also intermediary

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<sup>2</sup> The “Yellow Jackets” movement started as a protest against the increase in the domestic consumption tax on energy products, including petroleum (TIPP). The struggle against social injustice and fiscal inequalities lied at its core. In particular, limiting the wealth tax (ISF) to property assets was a bone of contention.

bodies such as political parties, trade unions and the mass media. While traditional representative institutions and processes are thus suspected of betraying democratic ideals, the protest expressed was accompanied by calls for participative and direct democracy, as illustrated by the requested referendum based on the citizens' initiative (RIC).

The combination of criticism and aspirations expressed by the French "Yellow Jackets" movement echoes the very concept of "critical citizenship" which was prominently articulated by Norris (1999, 2011). Indeed, the seminal *Critical Citizens* study (Norris 1999) investigated "the rise of 'critical citizens'" through "the tension between unwavering support for democratic principles but sceptical evaluations about democratic practices" (Norris 2011: 236). With the impetus generated by the work of Inglehart (1977, 1990) on post-materialism and the shift towards the self-expression values in advanced industrial societies, such tension is believed to result from higher expectations among ordinary citizens with respect to the endorsement of democratic ideals, and not by a lack of support thereof. Inglehart (1997: 330) explains: "economic development leads to cultural changes that make mass publics more likely to *want* democracy and more skilful at *getting* it". These changes—the argument goes—express "an increasingly high priority given to autonomy and self-expression" (Inglehart 1997: 330) in the context of a post-materialist culture of personal well-being. In short, they amalgamate rising demands for participatory and direct involvement in decision-making processes and lower levels of respect for political authorities and trust in them.

As pointed out by Amnå and Ekman (2014: 262), "the literature encompasses both *optimistic* and *pessimistic* interpretations of the ongoing changes". For some (Putnam 2000; Sandel 1998), the changes pertaining to an ethics of personal self-expression and liberalisation pose a threat to robust democracy, as they may aggravate liberal democracy's tendencies towards individualism and consumerism. In turn, the value given to self-fulfilment and personal interests contributes to the decline of collective commitment to the general interest and the public good. This translates into low electoral turnout and distrust of political elites and institutions which are in turn exploited by political discourse and movements of a "populist", "nationalist" or "authoritarian" nature, whether on the left- or right-wing. For others (Dalton et al. 2003; Geissel 2008), while these changes represent genuine signs of profound discontent, they may also be an asset for the reinvigoration of democracy through new practices and political arrangements designed to encourage "engaged citizenship" (Dalton 2008) and reduce the gap between citizens and their democratic institutions and representatives.

Yet, these two opposing interpretations are not mutually exclusive. This twofold interpretation is particularly well illustrated by the debate surrounding populism, defined as "a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with 'the people' not the elites" (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 4), and its potential impact on liberal democracies. "On the plus side" populism can be analysed as "a useful corrective for liberal democracy, if it encourages innovative forms of direct participation, highlights genuine public concerns neglected or quarantined by cosmopolitan liberal elites, and brings the cynical back into politics" (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 22). However, as far as current populist discourse and movements are concerned, the "negative side" entails authoritarian values that have the potential to endanger "the long-standing norms and institutions of liberal democracy", notably by "corrod[ing] respect for free speech, social tolerance and confidence in government" (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 22).

While this ambivalent interpretation of critical citizenship runs through all fields of political science, the specific characteristic of empirical research is that its methodological focus remains a set of "negative" attitudes such as "public weariness, scepticism, cynicism and lack of trust in politicians and political parties" (Abdelzadeh and Ekman 2012: 178). In other words, even in the "positive" accounts which conceive of critical citizenship as providing a potential impetus to strengthen democracy, this hypothesis is tested through concepts and tools which can be labelled "negative" in the sense that they focus on various forms of "democratic deficit" (Norris 2011) in terms of legitimacy, involvement and participation.

By contrast, the question as to how democracy is precisely conceived of by critical citizens and the related question of what must be done to make use of these different conceptions have received little attention. With some notable exceptions (Teorell [2006](#) and to a lesser extent Landwehr and Steiner [2017](#); Warren [2009](#)), this lack of attention is even more prevalent when it comes to answering these two questions by interconnecting the resources of political theory and of empirical research, in particular electoral surveys. This article tackles the above questions from a cross-disciplinary perspective, thus allowing what is theoretically at stake in the data on critical citizenship to be examined, especially with respect to complementary or alternative visions of democracy. In this sense, our analysis is part of the philosophical debate on the shortcomings of liberal democracy and how to remedy them. The analysis draws on the literature which includes participatory, deliberative, radical or agonistic democracy (among others: Gutmann and Thompson [1996](#); Habermas [1994](#); Laclau and Mouffe [1985](#); Young [2000](#)) and the potential framework for “post-democracy” (Crouch [2004](#)), a political order beyond democracy, where the latter becomes a mere label with no democratic substance.

In short, our starting point is to conduct an investigation into the “positive” face of critical citizenship through a philosophically informed approach applied to a study of the meaning and scope of critical citizenship in contemporary France. With this in mind, we propose to analyse critical citizens on the eve of the 2017 French presidential election with a focus on what they value and aspire to in terms of democratic citizenship.

We will begin by explaining the methodology used and then present our findings on French critical citizens, specifically analysing who they are and what they think of democracy in contemporary France. We will draw a socio-demographic and political portrait of French critical citizens, defined as those who consider that the way in which democracy functions in France must be improved, radically changed or that the democratic system should be abandoned. We will then analyse how respondents position themselves *vis-à-vis* different concepts of democracy, the areas they are mainly critical of and the main aspirations behind their criticisms. The results will be discussed with a focus on the philosophical hypothesis that criticism by citizens can reinvigorate democracy. Having put this philosophical hypothesis to the test of our survey data, we conclude that it would be difficult to assert that such philosophical enthusiasm is empirically grounded. What does emerge from our investigation is the political uncertainty related to the way in which French citizens express their criticisms at the ballot box in the current context of rising populist and nationalist parties.

## Methodology

The results analysed in this article are based on answers to the “*Democracy and the Citizen*” module integrated into Wave 9 of the French Electoral Survey of the 2017 Presidential Election (ENEF 2017) carried out by the CEVIPOF (Center for Political Research of Sciences Po). ENEF 2017 Wave 9, which included the “*Democracy and the Citizen*” module, was carried out among 18,013 respondents between 2 and 7 December 2016. The “*Democracy and the Citizen*” module was designed and analysed on the basis of a challenging twofold disciplinary approach that combines quantitative electoral analysis (Bruno Cautrès, Flora Chanvril-Ligneel) and political theory (David Copello, Bernard Reber, Janie Pélabay and Réjane Sénac). This combination was used to examine citizens’ distrust of their democratic representatives, institutions, regime and polity as an expression of the gap they perceive between what democracy should be and how it actually functions. The research project required collecting data on the variety of ways in which ordinary citizens conceive of good democracy and citizenship and question the concrete achievements of the principles and ideals they attach to democratic citizenship.

To this end, we designed the module by drawing on contemporary philosophical debate surrounding liberal democracy and the criticism it is subject to, in particular post-Rawlsian literature (Christiano and Christman [2009](#); Kymlicka [1990](#); Mulhall and Swift [1996](#)). This theoretical

background gave us the conceptual tools needed to investigate two key points.

Firstly, we needed to better understand which conception of democracy underlies citizen perceptions of a gap between ideals and practices and fuels their disagreement and distrust. For this reason, questions and items contained in the module were phrased according to a philosophically informed categorisation. Respondents were thus asked to position themselves on a relevant range of ideal-typical concepts of democracy—representative, participative, deliberative, epistemic, expertocratic or radical—and of citizenship—liberal, neo-republican, communitarian or multiculturalist.

Secondly, anchoring our analysis in philosophical debate was essential to enable discussion of results on the conceptions of democracy favoured by French citizens, the content and scope of their criticisms, and their preferences in terms of how democracy might be improved. This is because philosophical debate includes a wide range of theories that promote the “positive” democratic role played by criticism. Taken as a whole, these various theories allow critical attitudes towards the system among ordinary citizens to be seen as consubstantial with democratic citizenship, and not (necessarily) a sign of civic decline and political disengagement. Moreover, insofar as the theoretical framework allows a dialogue to be created between diverging visions of such democratic criticism, it was particularly instrumental in identifying the differences between the content and scope of criticism made by French citizens.

Data were collected from a panel survey, administered by Internet (CAWI). The panel began in November 2015, on the eve of the regional elections and continued until June 2017, immediately following the presidential and legislative elections. It consisted of an initial sample of 24,369 individuals, representative of the French voting population in 2017, i.e. aged 18 years and over. The sample was drawn up on the basis of geographical stratification (regions and categories of agglomeration) and by using the quota method (age, gender, profession of the head of household), and by reconstituting voting choices, which is the classic approach used for public opinion surveys in France. Bias was corrected by a posteriori weighting of socio-demographic and vote reconstitution criteria. Panel attrition did not cause further bias. The response rate (completed questionnaires/invitations sent) for Wave 1 was 12%.

With regard to the significance of the results presented, we tested the existence of a link between the variables analysed using the Chi-square test and measured the intensity of the link using Cramer’s *V*. The results thus obtained were consolidated by statistical inference: several models based on multinomial logistic regressions allowed us to generalise and to adopt an “all else being equal” approach.

The interpretations and conclusions presented in the tables are confirmed by the results of the multinomial logistic regressions models presented in Table S1. Three final models (III, IV and V) were obtained on foot of a series of nested models (I, II then III/I, II then IV/I, II then V). The variable on categories of citizens constitutes the dependent variable, and the *Non-Critical Citizens* variable serves as a reference modality. Model I is solely socio-demographic (see Table 1 for the list of explanatory variables included in the model). Model II includes both socio-demographic and political explanatory variables (see Table 2). Model III includes Model II and variables on “What should democracy be?” (see Table 3). Model IV includes Model II and variables on the content and scope of criticism (see Table 4). Finally, Model V includes Model II and variables on preferences for how France might be better governed (see Table 5).

#### **Table 1 Socio-demographic profiles of French critical citizens**

[Full size table \(Springer\)](#)

#### **Table 2 Political profiles**

[Full size table \(Springer\)](#)

### Table 3 What should democracy be?

[Full size table \(Springer\)](#)

### Table 4 The content and scope of criticism

[Full size table \(Springer\)](#)

### Table 5 How France might be better governed

[Full size table \(Springer\)](#)

The empirical-cum-theoretical approach adopted in this research not only sheds new light on data relative to critical citizenship, but also tests the philosophical calls for criticism to be seen as being at the core of democratic citizenship.

## French critical citizens: Demo-Reformers, Demo-Transformers, Demo-Exiters

In order to construct our typology of French critical citizens, respondents were firstly invited to position themselves with respect to four opinions on *"the way in which democracy functions in France"* by choosing only one of these items. The 9.2% of respondents who opted for the item *"Our democracy works well, there is no reason to make real change"* are considered to be *Non-Critical Citizens*. The category of critical citizens includes all those who made a choice of one of the other three items, all of which express some level of dissatisfaction with the functioning of French democracy but differ in terms of the increasing intensity of their criticism.

The item *"Several aspects of our democracy should be improved"*, which 48.3% agree with, expresses a moderate level of criticism by citizens whom we call *Demo-Reformers*. These citizens want the existing democratic system to be perfected or completed.

The answer *"Establishing true democracy in France would call for radical change"*, given by 34.6% of respondents, expresses radical criticism among citizens whom we qualify as *Demo-Transformers* since the changes they call for can be categorised as *transformative politics*.

The answer *"Democracy doesn't work, we need to find a new political system"*, chosen by 7.8% of respondents, expresses an extreme degree of criticism which calls for the democratic system to be abandoned. We qualify those who chose this item as *Demo-Exiters*. While they express the most radical criticism of democracy, they do so as citizens of a democratic state within which they enjoy all the rights and immunities that such a status confers. Just as electoral turnout raises the issue of a paradoxical form of political participation (Muxel 2007), the question as to whether *Demo-Exiters* situate themselves outside the democratic system calls for further research on the potential conflict between their behaviour and the rules, rights and duties that are part and parcel of the democratic system. This question goes beyond the confines of the present study, since it cannot be answered without data on whether and to what extent their radical criticism of the democratic regime is followed by undemocratic behaviour.

The above three categories of French critical citizens make up the vast majority of those interviewed (90.8%). Given that the critical position here is defined by the wish expressed by these citizens to go beyond the *status quo* on how democracy functions in France, it is not surprising that such a position is dominant. However, our aim is to undertake a more in-depth study that would allow us to go beyond this apparent near-consensus, firstly by revealing the complexity of the socio-demographic and political profiles of French critical citizens, and secondly, by clarifying the divergences on their underlying conceptions of democracy.

## Varied socio-demographic profiles

From a socio-demographic perspective, significant differences can be observed between the four categories of French citizens: *Non-Critical Citizens*, *Demo-Reformers*, *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*.

Gender is a differentiating factor among two categories: *Demo-Reformers* and *Demo-Exiters*. While the highest proportion of women and the lowest proportion of men are found among *Demo-Reformers*, the highest proportion of men and the lowest proportion of women are found among *Demo-Exiters*. This distribution echoes a gendered division that associates women with an attitude that favours a listening and conciliatory approach rather than opposition and confrontation, in keeping with the image associated with care ethics (Gilligan [1982](#)).

With regard to age, 35–49 year olds form the largest group among those who express a wish to abandon the democratic system (*Demo-Exiters*). For their part, the 18–24 and 25–34 age brackets are almost equally divided between *Non-Critical Citizens* and the three types of critical citizens. By contrast, the 65 and over age bracket are predominant among *Non-Critical Citizens* for whom “*democracy functions well*”. Of those who are critical in this age bracket, few of them are found in the *Demo-Exiters* category. Thus, while the data do confirm a lesser disposition towards criticism among older citizens, they do not confirm the idea that young people are characterised by more radical criticism.

The level of education is conversely proportional to the intensity of criticism. Those who have completed four years of study at university/*grandes écoles* level are in a majority among *Demo-Reformers*. Those with no qualifications or with a “BEPC, CAP or BEP”<sup>3</sup> are predominant among *Demo-Exiters*.

Income is also distributed in a manner that is conversely proportional to the intensity of the criticism. Compared to *Demo-Exiters*, *Demo-Reformers* are over-represented among the 3500–6000 and over 6000 euros per month income bracket. A greater number of those with an income of up to 2500 per month can be found among *Demo-Transformers*. *Demo-Exiters* have the lowest level of monthly income with large numbers of those earning less than 1250 euros being present in this category.

The same logic applies to the professional status of respondents. Retirees and senior managers are mainly in the *Non-Critical Citizens* category, predominantly believing as they do that French democracy works well. The unemployed and first-job seekers, students and workers are predominantly in the *Demo-Exiters* category.

With regard to place of residence, inhabitants of towns with a population of 200,000 and over are over-represented among those who consider that democracy functions well and, if they are critical, they are more likely to adopt a reformist approach. The number of inhabitants of rural areas (fewer than 2000 inhabitants) who express radical criticism and a desire to abandon the democratic system is slightly higher. Among inhabitants of medium-sized towns (10,000-49,999 inhabitants), the differences between categories, whether they be critical or not, is insignificant. While a difference does emerge between urban and rural areas, these data do not allow a precise estimate to be determined between category and level of intensity of criticism in the peri-urban sector. Thus, it is not possible to draw conclusions about where to situate the French critical citizen with respect to the “territorial divide” (Guilluy [2014](#)), or the progression of distrust and the far-right vote in peri-urban areas.

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<sup>3</sup> French secondary technical qualifications.

## Marked divergences in terms of political profiles

From the point of view of political profile, *Non-Critical Citizens* are more likely to position themselves on the left<sup>4</sup> of the political spectrum (43% compared to 33.6% for respondents as a whole), as a result of an over-representation of individuals declaring themselves to be “left-wing” or “somewhat left-wing”. With regard to respondents who declare themselves to be “very left-wing”, the proportion of *Non-Critical Citizens* paradoxically corresponds to the sample average. Among *Non-Critical Citizens* who position themselves on the right<sup>5</sup>, only those who declare themselves to be “very right-wing” are under-represented.

In terms of partisan proximity,<sup>6</sup> *Non-Critical Citizens* are most likely to identify with French governing parties: the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) on the left and *Les Républicains* (LR) on the right. They are also less likely to identify with the *Front national* (FN)—the far-right party renamed *Rassemblement National* (RN) in June 2018.

Among critical citizens, *Demo-Reformers* cannot really be distinguished from respondents as a whole with respect to their self-positioning on the political right or left. On the other hand, they are under-represented among respondents who declare themselves to be “very right-wing”. This result is corroborated by their low level of proximity to the FN.

*Demo-Transformers* are more likely to position themselves on the right than on the left, due to their over-representation among those who are “very right-wing”. This is evident through their strong level of proximity to the FN. Their slight over-representation among those who position themselves as “very left-wing” is connected to their greater proximity to the *Parti de Gauche*.

For their part, *Demo-Exiters* are clearly under-represented among respondents who declare themselves to be on the left, even if they are within the average range of respondents as a whole who position themselves as “very left-wing”. The fact that they position themselves to the right can be explained by a clear over-representation among those who declare themselves to be “very right-wing”. Thus, *Demo-Exiters* do not identify with the governing parties (PS and LR) and they declare very close proximity to the FN. Beyond their very clear over-representation on the far-right, *Demo-Exiters* can also be distinguished by their over-representation among respondents who declare that they do not know where to position themselves on the left-right scale. These respondents may therefore be understood as a type of “neither-nor”.

With regard to identification with the “*En Marche!*” movement<sup>7</sup> the figures gathered when this survey took place in December 2016 are not significant. Only 2.5% of respondents as a whole stated that “*En Marche!*” was the party they felt closest to or the least distant from. However, the results do provide more meaningful figures on Emmanuel Macron’s popularity rating among different types of citizens, whether they be critical citizens or not, together with voting intentions for Macron in the first round of the presidential election. His popularity rating was conversely proportional to the intensity of criticism. While only 32% of *Non-Critical Citizens* said they “do not like him”, 36.2% of *Demo-Reformers*, 50% of *Demo-Transformers* and 54.9% of *Demo-Exiters* said the same. With regard to voting intentions, Emmanuel Macron obtained between 12.9 and 18% from respondents as a whole depending on which candidate he might face in the first round of the presidential election (the left-wing primaries were being held at the time of the survey). These voting intentions show two clearly distinguishable groups: on the one hand, *Non-Critical Citizens* (from 15.1 to 25.6%) and *Demo-Reformers* (from 15.5 to 22.7%) and on the other hand *Demo-Transformers* (from 9.5 to 11.2%) and *Demo-Exiters* (from 7.8 to 9%). Thus, the respondents who identified with Macron’s proposals

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<sup>4</sup> Position on the left is based on the added rates for the items “very left-wing”, “left-wing” and “somewhat left-wing”.

<sup>5</sup> Position on the right is based on the added rates for the items “very right-wing”, “right-wing” and “somewhat right-wing”.

<sup>6</sup> In this article, we refer to the different parties in question using the name effective at the time of the survey.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for data on Macron and his political movement.

are overwhelmingly citizens who aspire to marginal change only and indeed those who do not believe any change is necessary. This result may seem to be at odds with Macron's rhetoric of change and his stated ambition to change traditional politics that characterised him during the campaign. The paradoxical dimension of the result diminishes given that while Macron called for traditional partisan structures to be set aside, he did not indicate a desire for radical change to the democratic system and even less so for the system to be abandoned.

The differences between the three groups of critical citizens are relevant in terms of political positioning and partisan proximity. The intensity of the criticism is significant in terms of electoral choice and corresponds particularly to a clear over-representation of respondents who declare that they identify with the FN among *Demo-Transformers* and, even more so, among *Demo-Exiters*. This particularity is expressed very clearly by Marine Le Pen's strong popularity rating among *Demo-Transformers* (33.7%) and *Demo-Exiters* (43.3%), with the average among respondents as a whole standing at 24%, among *Non-Critical Citizens* at 10.8% and among *Demo-Reformers* at 16.4%. It should be noted that Jean-Luc Mélenchon's popularity rating did not reveal a cleavage. *Non-Critical Citizens* (13.3%), *Demo-Reformers* (14.7%) and *Demo-Exiters* (12.7%) are close to the average (15.5%), and *Demo-Transformers* are slightly above it (17.8%). This result shows that the two political programmes which present themselves as embodying radical criticism on the right and on the left of the political landscape are not equally supported by *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*. These two categories of critical citizens are significantly closer to the radical right, but not to the radical left.

On a political level, what distinguishes the different groups of citizens is above all their self-positioning vis-à-vis the FN and the main governing parties. Two blocs emerge with, on one side, *Non-Critical Citizens* and *Demo-Reformers* who identify with the mainstream governing parties and, on the other side, *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* who are the most likely to identify with the radical and nationalist right.

While socio-demographic factors are less significant than political factors in terms of differences between the four categories of French citizens, those that can be considered as relevant distinguishing factors are: level of education, income and socio-professional status. The levels of all three of these elements are inversely proportional to the strength of the criticisms made.

## **French-style democracy: aspirations, criticisms and potential improvements**

In addition to the above socio-demographic and political portrait of French critical citizens, analysis of the "Democracy and Citizenship" module sheds light on three other aspects: (1) which conception of democracy they aspire to; (2) the content and scope of their criticisms of how democracy functions in France; and (3) their preferences about what should be done in order for France to be better governed.

### **Non-critical and critical citizens' visions of good democracy**

With a view to analysing how French citizens conceive of democracy (whether they are critical or not), percentages based on their levels of agreement (on a scale from 0—corresponding to "completely disagree"—to 10—"completely agree") with a series of proposed "*different ways to define what democracy should be*"<sup>8</sup> are revealing.

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<sup>8</sup> The question about 'good' democracy was as follows: "Here are different ways to define what democracy should be. What is your opinion of these different propositions? Please evaluate each answer on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = completely disagree, 10 = completely agree)?" Five randomized items that begin with "*Democracy is...*" were then proposed to the respondents (for details, see Table 3).

"Giving oneself the right to contest decisions judged to be bad ones" is the most strongly supported definition of democracy (67.6% on average). This item, which focuses on the contentious dimension of democracy, places the idea of critical citizenship itself at the fore, in that it consists of saying that there is no democracy without the right to criticise. Not surprisingly, this item received a high score from *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* in descending order of support. Yet, it should be underlined that *Demo-Reformers* and indeed *Non-Critical Citizens* also strongly support it. For *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*, these figures can be interpreted as marking opposition to a type of democracy that they believe does need radical change or should be overturned. Given the radical nature of their criticism, one can assume that potential ways of expressing such opposition may well go beyond what is legally permissible within the existing democratic framework. On the other hand, the adherence of *Demo-Reformers* and *Non-Critical Citizens* to this item can be understood as an attachment to the norms and practices of the rule of law that ensures freedom of expression and democratic pluralism, including a multiparty system and the regulated expression of dissenting opinions.

The deliberative conception of democracy defined as citizens "*Talking about issues together to hear all arguments and then deciding*", is also approved by all (63.4%) although less enthusiastically by *Demo-Exiters*, by *Non-Critical Citizens* and by *Demo-Reformers* in comparison with *Demo-Transformers*. This approach draws on an old idea from the period of Enlightenment, when political liberty was linked to an ideal of public reason, i.e. the ability to make public usage of one's reason (Habermas 1995; Rawls 1995). Public reason requires argumentative skills together with social and cultural capital, which makes it demanding, and correlated with socio-professional characteristics such as education and profession. The lesser approval of this approach to democracy shown by *Demo-Exiters* might thus be related to their socio-professional profile. At the same time, such a hypothesis could be nuanced given the thirst for debate that characterises the "Yellow Jackets" movement notably through the organisation of a "*Vrai Débat* (true debate)" as an alternative to the official "*Grand Débat* (formal debate)", criticised by them as being insufficiently deliberative.

The conception of participative democracy, that corresponds to the item "*Participating in public life beyond elections*" (54.7%), is supported both by *Non-Critical* and critical citizens, with a slight preference from *Demo-Transformers*. Such support shows a certain desire for political expression not to be limited to the vote alone, and, in that respect, it coincides with the aforementioned favourable judgement of deliberative democracy.

The low level of support (37%) for a definition of democracy based on "*Delegating political decisions to elected representatives*" reveals distrust of representative democracy among both critical and *Non-Critical Citizens*. Insofar as such lack of trust is proportional to the intensity of the criticism, the results corroborate the association of critical citizenship with the crisis of representative democracy.

The least supported item (32%) "*Trusting experts to make the right decisions*" defines a vision of democracy that can be qualified as expertocracy. The lowest level of support is found among *Non-Critical Citizens* and the highest among *Demo-Exiters*. This is coherent with a vision of expertocracy as a way to question the legitimacy primarily given to elected representatives.

These answers bear witness to aspirations for critical democracy founded on the right to protest, deliberation and participation beyond the vote. We shall now look at whether or not such an active dimension of democratic citizenship is echoed in the criticisms made by survey respondents.

## **The content and scope of criticism**

Our analysis of what critical citizens consider as dysfunctional and open to criticism in French democracy is measured through percentages of agreement and disagreement with a series of

proposed criticisms<sup>9</sup>

In decreasing order, the criticism with which respondents mostly agree (83.7%) is the statement that "*Political elites know nothing of the problems of ordinary people*". Such consensus obscures important differences in terms of support between, on the one hand, *Non-Critical Citizens* and, on the other hand, critical citizens, among whom *Demo-Transformers* are the highest percentage to make this criticism, followed by *Demo-Exiters* and *Demo-Reformers*. Even if the differences are not huge, *Demo-Exiters* are not the most critical of the political elite, as might have been expected considering their sociological profile and their high level of distrust towards representative democracy.

The criticism that "*Political power is subject to economic power*" comes in second position (79.9%). It should be noted that, among the seven items, this is the criticism with which *Non-Critical Citizens* most strongly agree. In addition, while this opinion is broadly shared among critical citizens, the level of agreement is not proportional to the intensity of the criticism, with a slightly higher level of agreement among *Demo-Transformers* than among *Demo-Reformers* and *Demo-Exiters*.

In third position (79.8%), the item "*There is a lack of control over the actions of political leaders*" singles out critical citizens, with once again stronger agreement among *Demo-Transformers* compared to *Demo-Exiters* and *Demo-Reformers*.

The criticism that "*Not all citizens are treated in the same way*" comes in fourth place (79.1%). The strong difference in levels of support reveals a gap between *Non-Critical Citizens* and critical citizens, with an over-representation of *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*. This item covers equality of treatment, one of the core values shared by both liberals and republicans. Thus, agreement with this statement may be understood in relation to how respondents perceive and experience discrimination. Given their sociological status and economic position in society, it is not surprising that *Non-Critical Citizens* should be less attentive to the inequalities of treatment which they are less likely to suffer from. As for *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*, their agreement with this statement needs to be interpreted given their partisan proximity to the radical right. Instead of a universalistic demand that equality of rights be realised through anti-discrimination law, their support is likely to express the demand that the rights of the majority group (culturally speaking) be defended over what is perceived to be policies that are excessively favourable to ethno-cultural minorities.

In fifth position, the item "*There is a lack of information about and explanation of political decisions*" (72.9%) is not of much interest to *Non-Critical Citizens* possibly due to their belief that they themselves are sufficiently informed. Among critical citizens, there is a decreasing level of interest, from *Demo-Transformers*, to *Demo-Exiters* and lastly *Demo-Reformers*.

The second last proposed criticism (71.5%) asserting that "*Blank votes are not sufficiently taken into account*" follows the same ranking among critical citizens, while a sizeable number of *Non-Critical Citizens* also subscribe to this idea.

"*Too many decisions are taken by non-elected experts*" is the least favoured item, on average (57.4%) among each category of citizens. It is also distinguished by the fact that over a third of respondents do not take a position (neither agree nor disagree) on it. The lesser level of support for this item is consistent with the fact that expertocracy comes last in the list of proposed items regarding what democracy should be.

In summary, respondents' positioning in relation to criticism about the way in which France is

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<sup>9</sup> The following question was put to respondents: "People have different opinions about the way in which France is governed. Some of these opinions can be critical. Do the following criticisms seem pertinent to you?" To answer, respondents were invited to evaluate their level of agreement with each of the seven randomised items (see Table 4) on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = completely disagree, 10 = completely agree).

governed shows that *Non-Critical Citizens* also subscribe to the criticisms proposed, with percentages that may be smaller but are nonetheless significant (between 60 and 75%), with the exception of resorting to the use of experts (44%) and the lack of information (55.1%). Among critical citizens, *Demo-Transformers*, and not *Demo-Exiters*, are most critical, while *Demo-Reformers* are slightly more moderate in their criticism.

## Citizens' preferences that "France be better governed"

In order to understand what type of action is considered to be capable of bringing about the changes aspired to so that democracy in France might improve, respondents were also asked to position themselves on a list of propositions presented as opportunities for France to be "better governed"<sup>10</sup>

The item which receives most support from all categories of respondents (72.3%) is the proposal that "*Groups of ordinary citizens should be consulted more frequently*". The two largest proportions of those who agree with this proposed change are *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*. These results can be interpreted in relation to the socio-demographic profile of *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* who are better able to see themselves as the main beneficiaries of a potentially broadened consultation process.

The proposal that "*We should test and evaluate the skills of elected representatives before they take office*" came in second position with an average of 67.1% agreeing. *Demo-Reformers* are less favourable to this option than *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*. Such variations in positioning strengthen the idea that distrust of elites above all characterises citizens from more working-class backgrounds and those who are sensitive to extreme-right discourse.

The proposal that "*Leader profiles should reflect the diversity of today's society*" is supported by 63% on average, with stronger support from *Demo-Transformers* and more moderate support from *Demo-Exiters*. Given that the latter group are the least well-off in terms of education and income and their partisan proximity to the FN, *Demo-Transformers'* and *Demo-Exiters'* support for diversity can be understood as an expression of disapproval at the perceived exclusion of the working classes, and not as a call for the inclusion of ethno-cultural minorities and of women. This interpretation is consolidated by answers to the first two criticisms of French democracy which stress the distrust of *Demo-Transformers* and of *Demo-Exiters* vis-à-vis a political and economic elite that does not resemble "ordinary citizens" and that does not represent their interests.

For respondents as a whole, the proposed change that "*There should be greater recourse to referenda to ensure that citizens have the final say*" only comes fourth with 61.6% in agreement. However, this figure obscures a significant difference between *Non-Critical Citizens* (40.1%) and critical citizens, among whom an additional cleavage can be observed between, on the one hand, *Demo-Reformers* (55.7%) and, on the other, *Demo-Transformers* (73.4%) and *Demo-Exiters* (71.1%).

In the eyes of critical citizens, the following two proposals seem relatively less of a priority for the improvement of democracy in France.

Thus, "*Voting should be mandatory for all elections*" is less well supported (51.1% on average) and also less divisive among the four categories of French citizens.

Although sortition is currently being discussed by academics (Delannoi and Dowlen 2010) and used by political actors as a tool to create broader consultation, the proposal that "*At least some decision-makers should be randomly selected from among ordinary citizens*" takes final position

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<sup>10</sup> The question was phrased as follows: "People have different opinions about how France might be better governed. Do the following propositions seem pertinent to you? Please evaluate each answer on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = completely disagree, 10 = completely agree)". For details of the six randomised items, see Table 5.

(41.6%), with great disparities between categories of citizens. While it receives very little support from *Non-Critical Citizens* and not much from *Demo-Reformers*, more than half of *Demo-Transformers* and of *Demo-Exiters* consider that selection by sortition would contribute to France being better governed. This is consistent with the anti-elite tonality of the criticisms favoured by *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters*.

## Discussion

The main result to be discussed on the basis of the multifaceted portrait of French critical citizens as outlined in this article, is the crucial importance of criticism understood as “*Giving oneself the right to contest political decisions judged to be bad ones*” within the very definition of democracy. The defining role played by criticism is more apparent among critical citizens, but, remarkably, it is also shared by over half of *Non-Critical Citizens* (see Table 3). How can this critical consensus, including the weight of protest it implies, be interpreted? Such a question has become pressing in light of the “Yellow Jackets” movement which clearly calls the “positive” face of critical citizenship into question.

Over the past four decades, the literature on the renewal of democratic citizenship has contributed to shaping its “positive” aspect by linking the right to criticise to the promotion of pluralism and disagreement. Such a connection is present in a wide range of thinking from “Rawls-style” political liberalism to agonistic democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Various approaches can be distinguished based on the scope of criticism and the purpose it serves. In this respect, Rawls’s notion of “reasonable disagreement” and his related scenario of an “overlapping consensus” (Rawls 1993) constitute a far less radical approach than an adversarial interpretation that sees politics as inherently confrontational (Mouffe 2013). While Habermas (1995) puts forward a “consensus through confrontation” that focuses on conflicts of interpretation vis-à-vis the same civic rights and duties, Waldron (2004) emphasises that “the circumstances of politics” are themselves made up of contestation, thus extending protest to the rights and freedoms attached to the democratic rule of law. As different as they may be from each other, to a certain extent all of these theoretical approaches express enthusiasm for criticism and its role in democratic societies. Such philosophical enthusiasm is embedded in the hypothesis that disagreement, confrontation and indeed conflict are of productive use in that they enhance the legitimacy of the democratic regime, its institutions and practices. The question must be asked as to whether the “positive” face of critical citizenship, as empirically tested in our survey, is echoed in French citizens’ opinions about democracy.

The above hypothesis that criticism has a democratic virtue implies that the changes aspired to would be to the benefit of the democratic system and would not lead to it being abandoned. The fact that fewer than 8% of respondents belong to the *Demo-Exiters* category possibly points to a democratically constructive understanding of criticism. However, this result alone is not enough to determine whether the philosophical enthusiasm vested in such an assumption can be empirically grounded. On the contrary, our study shows the large amount of political uncertainty that characterises French critical citizenship in two respects. Firstly, the “positive” dimension of critical citizenship is far from being a homogenous and established fact. Secondly, it is uncertain in the sense that, rather than strengthening liberal democracy, critical citizenship may on the contrary endanger it, depending on the political choices made by critical citizens.

The first dimension of uncertainty relates to the socio-demographic and political differences between the three sub-categories of critical citizens. What emerges from the multifaceted and contrasted figure of French critical citizens is that the higher the level of education, income and socio-professional position are, the weaker the criticism is. Even though *Demo-Reformers* have a greater cultural and economic capital, they are not the most likely to strongly promote deliberation and participation in conceptions of democracy. *Demo-Transformers* are the most attached to these

ideas, while *Demo-Exiters* show less interest in deliberative and participative democracy. The factors that introduce the greatest contrasts between types of critical citizens are partisan proximity and political positioning. Thus, there is a clear division between *Demo-Reformers* who declare themselves to identify with governing parties, on the one hand, and *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* who include a proportionally much greater number of those who identify with the far-right, on the other hand. The political proximity of both *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* to populist and nationalist movements provides an indication of the nature and orientation of the transformations their criticisms would be likely to produce. Thus, the question as to whether the changes aspired to would indeed remain within the limits of an internal transformation of democracy does not apply only to *Demo-Exiters* but also to *Demo-Transformers*.

Hence, the second dimension of uncertainty may well constitute a threat to liberal democracy, at a time when authoritarian-populist movements have gained increasing electoral support not only in France but elsewhere in the world. Such a context is characterised by a “backlash” of liberal values; this is the diagnosis made by Norris and Inglehart (2019: 87) who argue that “a cultural silent revolution has heightened polarisation over cultural issues in the electorate”. According to them, what is at stake in such polarisation is the growing expression of civic anxieties about cultural and identity matters, especially among the once-dominant cultural group which has experienced both identity and economic insecurity. In our study, these issues are analysed through the respondents’ answers to the question of what it means to “*be a genuine French citizen*”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, these answers corroborate the fact that together with its electoral consequences, such value-based polarisation is at work within French society. Indeed, such polarity reveals a significant cleavage. There is a clear division between *Demo-Exiters* and *Demo-Transformers* who mark their attachment to a demand for conformity with the identity and morals of the national community, on the one hand, and *Demo-Reformers* and *Non-Critical Citizens* who tend to associate inclusion with respect for legal and political rules, in accordance with the model of a procedural democracy, on the other hand. This difference indicates the contrasted level of adherence to the item on “*Identifying with the typically French way of life*”. On this item, a gap can be observed between *Non-Critical Citizens* (58.5%) and *Demo-Reformers* (57.8%), on the one hand, and *Demo-Transformers* (64.9%) and *Demo-Exiters* (67.5%), on the other hand. The latter two types of critical citizens are the most likely to favour a conception of citizenship focused on the preservation of a way of life whose authenticity is seen to be threatened by individuals and groups suspected of adhering to competing values. This result highlights the combination of a strong level of criticism towards French democracy and support for conservative values, such as those currently promoted by populist and nationalist parties. This combination sheds light on the crucial role played by the radical right in translating the strong criticisms expressed by *Demo-Transformers* and *Demo-Exiters* into votes.

Ultimately, the political uncertainty attached to critical citizenship primarily results from the fact that there is no way of knowing which of the two polarised sides will win the values and electoral battle. This uncertainty analysed in the period before the 2017 French presidential election continues to be relevant, as shown by the results of the 2019 European election in France, where the far-right party, *Rassemblement National*, took the lead.

## Conclusion

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<sup>11</sup> In the module, the meaning ascribed by respondents to French citizenship was studied using the following question: “Some people believe that, in order to be a genuine French citizen, it is essential to have some of the following characteristics. For others, this is not essential. In your opinion, to be a genuine French citizen, is it important to...” Six answers were then proposed. Respondents were asked to evaluate each of them on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = absolutely not important, 10 = absolutely important). The six items were: “Respecting each individual’s rights”; “Taking part in elections”; “Living on French territory”; “Identifying with the typically French way of life”; “Being informed about and interested in politics”; “Engaging for the benefit of the collective”.

To conclude, the portrait of French critical citizens tempers, and indeed erodes, the philosophical enthusiasm engendered by the potential productive value of disagreement on the meaning (both significance and destination) of democracy. Such enthusiasm is based on a wager: that the disagreement expressed can be reinvested in debate that results in proposals for changes whose effects might be to the benefit of democracy. The criticisms of representative democracy expressed by the “Yellow Jackets” movement and their promotion of direct participation by the people show the complexity of this wager. The end result of this unescapable challenge is uncertain and perhaps perilous given the differences in both objects and intensity of the criticisms made by each category of French critical citizens.

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