On Strikes and Demonstrations: The Power of Protest in France

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Abstract

This article examines the salience of one of the key features of French political culture: civil disobedience. I employed a semi-structured interview methodology to collect information: as opposed to empirical surveys, I discovered higher degrees of nuance and received unexpected responses throughout the interviews, while also allowing for a richer exchange of cultural perspectives. Other influences on civil disobedience are also briefly investigated, such as the unique nature of labor unions and policing practices in France. Put briefly, the article hopes to answer: "What inspires French people to protest?" "Is civil disobedience a civic responsibility?" and "Do French people have confidence in the efficacy of dissent?" I conclude that protest's importance to French history and cultural memory contributes to a high level of civil disobedience, that protest being seen as a duty varies with ideology but is generally considered a political right and tool rather than a responsibility, and that protestors have low confidence in the immediate impacts of their actions but nonetheless believe strongly in the symbolic impacts of their actions. In all, the responses to these questions give insights into the deeper motivations for the frequency of protest in France and provide clues to the issues most likely to inspire larger-scale protests, both of which are fundamental to understanding the state of civil disobedience in France.

Introduction

Ask an American what comes to mind when hearing the word "Paris," and a typical response might include "renowned art museums," "stunning monuments," or even, "envious cuisine." But for many Parisians, the word conjures images of stopped subways and streets choked with massive protests instead. In fact, France has been famously marked by large, sometimes violent protests throughout its history—the foundational French Revolution in 1789 being one of the most recognizable revolutions in the world—but it is clear that the expression of dissent is no longer quite so bloody an affair. Nonetheless, French symptoms of dissent have only worsened, particularly in the last seven years of the Macron presidency, and after the resignation of the prime minister and reshuffling of the cabinet in January 2024, the situation is "*chaude*."

Moreover, when trying to understand the protest cultures of other nations, it may be useful to use insights from France—insights which may reveal the geneses of distinguishing characteristics of civil disobedience and potential future developments. France, with a robust protest culture and considered by many a bastion of liberal ideals, could be taken as a canary of democracy when rights or institutions are perceived as under threat. With a public clearly unafraid to provide political input beyond just the ballot box, the rapidity and vocalness of French political expression contrasts with more reserved nations; thus, as France may be seen as a bellwether among European democracies, understanding its citizens' underlying motivations for civil disobedience may reveal latent dissent in other nations.

The goal of this research is to examine the current opinions of French citizens regarding dissent, government, and civil disobedience in a rapidly changing world, using a combination of scholarly literature, contemporary news media outlets, and, predominantly, a series of semi-structured interviews with protestors and labor unionists.

Background

As mentioned above, a long, rich history of revolutions and protests underlies French culture, but the revolutionary events of nearly two-hundred-and-fifty years ago are not directly linked to the current atmosphere and perspective on dissent in France. To be sure, a history of revolution builds a national consciousness that may be more inclined to make use of protest as a political expression, but the nature of protest itself has significantly changed. For example, revolutionary tendencies of the nineteenth century led to considerable bloodshed, such as in the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune in 1871, but by the Fourth and Fifth republics, dissent had become decidedly less deadly. Moreover, as in other nations—such as the United States—French

authorities now require protests to be reported to relevant security forces before any demonstration occurs, and labor unions must provide due notice before striking. Of course, in practice such regulation of dissent is not foolproof, but the codification of dissent enshrines it as a feature of political life.

But to which time period can contemporary French civil disobedience be traced most directly? Some scholars claim that the roots of the current protest system can be found in the aftermath of the 1968 May protests. Without focusing much on history, it suffices to say that the May '68 protests, although they began as student protests against consumerism and capitalism, soon included a vast general strike and even made political leaders fear revolution (famously, President de Gaulle fled France in secret). Although casualties were quite low, the protests' created an "enduring form of low-level physical and symbolic violence."[1] This continuing inclination for "low-level" and "symbolic" violence have become implicit cultural touchpoints, marking a clear change from the bloody historical revolutions of the past, but simultaneously continuing to enshrine dissent as a political tool.

After 1968, the new light-militant protest culture persisted due to infrequent clear defeats for demonstrators, overall support from the French public, and the perception on the far-left that such actions would inspire workers to do the same.[2] Since protest organizers regarded some violence as a necessary political communication tool, low-violence protests stayed salient into the late 1970s.[3] Thus, modern-day protest, although having moderated even further since the après-mai 1968 (post-May '68) period, undoubtedly has its more violent iterations rooted in this same tradition.

A contemporary analogue to the militant French Maoist groups of the early 1970s is clearly the Black Bloc, a term used to describe the militant, destructive, black-garbed protesters that have become a symbol of the destructive side of European protests. Although such groups have existed since the 1970s, they became much more prevalent in the twenty-first century, as a new era of chaotic protests was "inaugurated" after September 11.[4] Thus, although modern French protests are decidedly more orderly and regulated than those of May 1968, violent extremism has persisted in fringe groups, which complicates policing and can sometimes appear to discredit otherwise-peaceful movements.

Modern-Day

In 2019, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a list of average annual number of strike days per 1,000 employees between 2008 and 2016. Of the included member nations, France topped the list with 128 days, well ahead of most nations (the United States had five days).[5] In fact, strikes are expected annually across a variety of industries and are even viewed as a major vehicle to secure wage increases. One might therefore infer that France has a robust union network, with workers united across the country for collective bargaining; however, the opposite is true.

Strangely enough, as my conversations with several unionists revealed, only about ten percent of French workers are official union members. However, the apparent contradiction between low membership and high influence is answered by the great organizational power of unions and the power of a unique law that allows individuals to go on strike without being union members. In France, labor unions also serve a distinctive role in that, when legislation is passed, the burden falls partially on the unions to codify nuances the broad legislation missed. Although "tribunals" make the final verdict on whether the interpretations are constitutional, unions are still given outsized power, at least in comparison to the American system. But then again, French unions' direct lobbying is weaker than that in other EU nations, such as Germany or Belgium.[6]

Protests, on the other hand, remain salient across many nations, and have in fact been identified as an "escalating global trend" by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). From 2009 to 2019, global protests increased 11.5 percent annually due to "slowing global economic growth, climate change, and foreign meddling in internal politics via disinformation."[7] But more than just new geopolitical and environmental issues, the world's "global political awakening" is facilitated by great structural changes. Global Information Communications Technology (ICT), or more simply, internet connection, has been the greatest "critical enabler of global protests" by establishing hubs to share grievances, connecting disgruntled people, providing forums to discuss alternatives to status quo, and "spurring mass mobilization."[8] At the same time, growing inequality, made visible by expanded social media access, has contributed to deep feelings of aggrievement

1 Provenzano, Luca, 458.
2 Ibid., 461.
3 Ibid, 470.
4 Chemin, Anne.
5 Armstrong, Martin, and Felix Richter.
6 France 24, "Born to Revolt."
7 Brannen, Samuel J, et al., IV.
8 Ibid., 15.

among those who feel left out of the rapid economic growth brought by globalization.

In France, growing sentiments of inequality found an outlet in December of 2018, when a Change.org petition against a new carbon and fuel tax garnered enough support that that online protest suddenly spilled into the physical world. The resulting "Yellow Vest" protests, reported worldwide, marked a change in the style of French protest because, although many of the initial demonstrators had no protest or political experience, unprecedented violence quickly erupted between protestors and police.[9] Yet despite the chaos, during weekly Saturday protests for approximately six months, the Yellow Vests enjoyed consistent support from high numbers of demonstrators, despite the deaths of twelve people between November 2018 and January 2019.[10] Over time, the aims of the movement shifted to encompass about forty demands, with topics ranging from social and fiscal justice to democracy; eventually, the movement evolved to focus more on calls for direct democracy, with a proposed "Citizens Referendum."

In France, the key factor enabling such large-scale protest from typically politically-inactive citizens was widespread access to social media. Research on social media's impacts on protest in first-wave developed democracies found that the ease of interpersonal exchanges, ability to join groups with common interests, and trust-building between protestors all increased propensity to protest.[11] However, in the specific example of the Yellow Vest protests, research found that the biggest indicator of likelihood to protest was not mere social media usage, but instead the expression of political opinions on social media and the deployment of social media to reach political actors.[12] Particularly because many Yellow Vest demonstrators seemed to lack clear ideological profiles, finding traits correlated with protest participation is vital to understanding how future demonstrations may evolve.

In an attempt to quell the protests, President Macron proposed *"Le Grand Débat*", a nation-wide poll of major policy issues, reminiscent of the referendum called for by the Yellow Vests. However, on top of the problem that just under 1.5 percent of the French population participated in the Débat, county-level survey data tended to show participants had high levels of education, high median incomes, and had by-and-large voted for Macron, suggesting a very one-sided exercise.[13] Polls from the time also showed seventy percent of people were skeptical of the effectiveness of the Grand Débat, and two-thirds believed the views they expressed would be ignored.

In the past year, this belief of many French citizens regarding the government's unresponsiveness seems only to have been confirmed by Macron's administration's repeated usage of Article 49.3, a legal artifact from the era of Algeria's struggle for independence that allows the French government to force a law's passage without a vote, unless parliament were to pass a motion of no confidence. Understandably, Macron's usage of highly undemocratic means to force through unpopular policy objectives has also worsened the political and social climate. For instance, Macron employed Article 49.3 to pass both a wildly unpopular pension reform in 2023 and a law restricting immigration and asylum access in January 2024 (the latter inspiring the largest of the protests I was able to attend), both of which sparked the largest protests since the pandemic. More frequent and stronger protests can thus be expected when the president is viewed to be eroding key features of French democracy.

Protestor Interviews

As is hopefully clear, the current French political landscape is bleak and heated, which made it an ideal moment for me to undertake this type of project. While attending protests, I took notes of the general atmosphere, a general profile of demonstrators, and then engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews with attendees. The goal of my questions was to understand people's underlying motivations or inspirations for protesting, whether people considered protest a type of civic duty, and whether they considered civil disobedience inherent to the spirit of the French Republic or rather a byproduct of a tumultuous present period.

In January 2024, the largest protests were motivated by the aforementioned January 2024 immigration law (the Darmanin Law), the war in Gaza, and unfortunately beginning only after my departure, discontented farmers who began to blockade major points of entry into Paris.[14] Due to the nature of time constraints, the protests I attended included two concerning the Darmanin Law, a smaller demonstration against preparatory school closures, and a Yellow Vest protest. In total, I spoke with just under twenty participants at every protest except the first Darmanin Law one, allowing me to synthesize a wide range of political ideologies and provide a snapshot of French protests at that moment in time.

9 Monnery, Benjamin, and François-Charles Wolff, 286.
10 Libération.
11 Froio, Caterina, and Xavier Romero-Vidal, 3.
12 Ibid., 9.
13 Monnery, 286.
14 France 24, "French Govt Prepares to Head off 'siege.'"

Figure 1: La Place de la Republique filled with demonstrators gathered to protest the Darmanin Law. Many unionists and independent protestors attended.

The first protest in which I interviewed attendees was a demonstration to raise awareness of, and counter the arbitrary closing of, various free preparatory schools in the greater Paris region. Thee march set off from La Place de la Sorbonne, a common site for smaller protests and had by far the youngest median age of the protests I attended, due to the high number of preparatory students in attendance—the rest of the demonstrators were largely teachers and people who worked in fields pertaining to educational administration. Overall, the protestors spoke about deep problems in the lack of transparency in the decisions being made by government officials, which was highlighted by the viral clip of the new Education Minister lambasting the public school system, only to later admit that she has kept her children in private schools. To many protestors, the prevailing wisdom was that ministers and other politicians were too far removed from the issues to be making accurate decisions.

Of the students in attendance, there was a mix of new and experienced protestors, and they cited professors and parents as inspirations for voting. Moreover, many of the protestors were not actually being affected by the school closings but were instead protesting in a show of solidarity. When asked about the effectiveness of these protests, protestors were cautious in expressing hope: they were resolved to raise awareness, but also unsure of what their labors would bring. On the question of civil disobedience being a civic duty, most protestors expressed the importance of taking full advantage of all of one's political rights, but did not claim participating in protests or strikes was a civic responsibility Interestingly, a staunch unionist in attendance was much more emphatic on the importance of protesting.

The following protest was on a Saturday afternoon, a weekly protest organized by the Yellow Vests to protest elite rule and the burdens shouldered by the middle and working classes. I was surprised, as the Yellow Vest movement had supposedly ended years prior, and yet I found myself in a posse of almost anachronistic neon-clad protestors. However, for all intents and purposes, the movement was over: the once-mighty movement that had commanded national attention was winnowed down by a pandemic that arrested its activities, a series of police reforms, and a paucity of tangible results, leaving a dedicated core of only sixty people still attending weekly protests five years later.

France is a largely anti-patriotic nation, and many of the protests I attended had more Gazan flags than French ones, if there were any present at all. However, demonstrators proudly carried French flags at the Yellow Vest protest, providing an interesting foil to the other demonstrations I attended, which were decidedly less chauvinistic. Through my conversations with attendees, it was also rather difficult to pin down concrete political beliefs, a contrast to the other left-leaning protests I attended. Within the Yellow Vests, there were clearly many political currents, but as one protestor carefully explained, that was the goal: from the onset, the Yellow Vests were never meant to comprise a distinct ideology. Instead, its original power came from its spontaneity, universality, and elevation of the citizen over the politician.

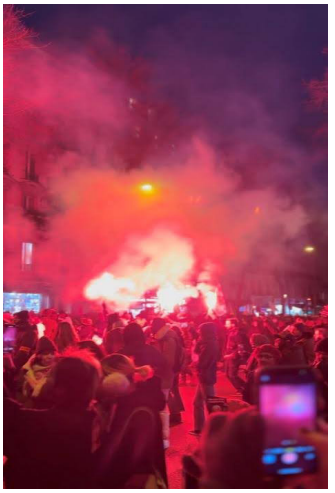
Figure 2: The small but passionate group of Yellow Vests sang songs and played the drums during their weekly protest.

When I asked about the efficacy of their protests, an air of something having been lost noticeably descended upon the Yellow Vest interviewees. To me, it was clear that those who still don the yellow vests long for the past, for an era in which they truly believed in the power to make lasting change. Moreover, on questions of the necessity of protest as a civic duty, Yellow Vest protestors were more likely to treat it as nearly essential for a complete civic life. Finally, many pointed to France's revolutionary history as an explanation for the prevalence of strikes and protest in France.

Before I left the protest, one particular chant stuck in my head: "*On est là!"* ("We are here!"). Although the tune was defiant, it seemed more melancholic than anything. The

Yellow Vests are certainly still there, in their same worn garb, but it seems impossible that they will ever regain what they once had.

The final protest at which I interviewed demonstrators was a second anti-Darmanin one, this time much larger in scale. This protest, held on January 21 and coordinated with protests occurring all around the nation on the same day, was estimated to have had over sixteen thousand people in attendance, and the march started from the Plaza Trocadero and went to the Hotel des Invalides. The structure of this protest was like many larger French demonstrations (according to the union member and experienced protestor with whom I attended the protest) in that the first part of the procession was made up of independent protestors and small affinity groups, the second half was composed of swaths of unionists following large trucks which normally carry leaders energizing the crowd through speeches and chants, and in the rear a huge police presence to largely deter Black Bloc groups from interfering but also to uphold order.



Figures 3 & 4: Figure 3 depicts how, as night falls, protestors break out flares to illuminate the procession. Figure 4 shows a common protest tactic of removing ads from public displays and slotting large handmade protest signs back in.

At this protest, I was able to talk to many different people, as it had the broadest cultural intersections of all the protests I attended. At this demonstration, most protestors were French, and therefore not impacted by the law, but I did have the opportunity to speak with a longtime Chilean resident of France. The Chilean, although they had less to say about civil disobedience as an obligation, was deeply passionate about supporting other immigrants.

Unsurprisingly, people were not necessarily optimistic about the protest itself resulting in an immediate government response, but most, seemingly inspired by the massive attendance, expressed faith in the protest representing the first step in a series of efforts that could repeal the Darmanin Law. More like the preparatory student protest, most attendees I spoke with also seemed to avoid prescribing protest as a political obligation, although they mentioned the importance of exercising as many civic powers as one can. Finally, many of these protestors spoke of familial and historical inspirations for protest.

Unionist Interviews

Fortunately for the city, but not for my research, the major strikes in Paris that are so common in warmer months were not present this January. However, I was fortunate to be able to speak with two figures from the largest educational union in France, SGEN-CFDT (Syndicat général de l'Éducation nationale), one a rank-and-file union member, and the other the secretary general of the Versailles and West Paris region of SGEN-CFDT. I also attempted to contact representatives from la CGT, which is the railroad workers union renowned for its ability to shut down travel across the entire Île-de-France region, and a union representing police officers, but neither of the two groups replied to my questions.

As explained earlier, unions occupy an interesting position in France, due to their rather limited penetration into the workforce but rather large impact on worker's rights and laws impacting the workplace. Both unionists I spoke with pointed to increasing union membership throughout the Macron presidency, as people began to grow tired of politicians and sought political gains elsewhere. However, many French people have grown exasperated with the endless bureaucracy and hierarchical structure of unions in France, which helps explain the genesis of movements like the Yellow Vests—intentionally anti-hierarchical—which further reduced the power of unions in agitating for guarantees from the government.[1]

Figure 5: A typical clustering of unionists found at the rear of the January 21 protest preparing to set off.

The Secretary-General spoke at length about the various union traditions—Christian, Reformist, and Revolution—and shed light on the difficulty unions have, not only with

1 Vail, Mark I., Sara Watson, and Daniel Driscoll, 377.

the government, but also between themselves on conflicting traditions and perspectives on the role of unions. Particularly, a large debate lies in how best to secure rights for union members and workers, and how much a union should serve as a vehicle for social progress. Discussing the importance of civil disobedience, both unionists expressed the view I had heard at previous protests, which acknowledged that neither strikes nor protests can be considered obligations but are instead useful ways of making use of French political rights.

Security and Policing

In France, security forces have increasingly become unpopular, particularly after a series of brutal crackdowns on protests and several killings of young people by police. During the course of my investigation, I tried several times to reach out to various representatives of the police in order to learn more about the complicated role security forces play in expressions of civil disobedience and how they balance and manage security at protests, but to no avail. The job of the police is tricky: on one hand, police are there to protect normally peaceful demonstrators from the intrusions of more violent groups, but at the same time, they might end up protecting protests that are against police interests, such as a protest calling for police reform or reducing the number of police officers, and so on.

Figure 6: A well-armored and equipped unit of police began to wall off the exit of the Alexandre III bridge to both contain protestors and to prevent militant groups from causing violence.

Additionally, in recent years French police have earned a reputation for being more brutal than peer nations. In fact, an analysis of counterprotest measures during the Yellow Vest demonstrations in 2019 found many similarities between contemporary measures and the "zero tolerance" practices of the past.[1] As mentioned earlier, since the early 2000s there have been increases in the violence of protests, but in contrast to de-escalation movements begun in nations like England, Switzerland, and Germany, French security goals have been to remove the "spirit and letter from the right to demonstrate."[2] Some call the problem "splendid isolation," which is the idea that France's model of maintaining order in the twentieth century has been put forward as a mythical story and that and that it is difficult to accept a reality where the security enforcement model may not function as well as claimed.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this experience, I consider its greatest benefit to have been an exploration of French cultural attitudes on strikes, protests, and civil disobedience and of what factors influence these differing perspectives. Speaking directly with others in a semi-structured interview style can reduce the consistency of responses, which is challenging to translate to more quantitative examinations. However, I believe the insights obtained through open conversation led to a much greater wealth of knowledge and opinions shared.

Additionally, through my many conversations, it became clear that familial and historical examples serve as major inspiration for protest attendees in France. Protest is deeply engrained in the memory and cultural legacy of many French people, which contributes to high participation in demonstrations. Regarding whether protest is a duty, results were mixed. Most protestors were cautious labeling civil disobedience "a civic responsibility," but they did identify it as an important political tool. However, the Yellow Vest attendees embraced protests as a civic duty, owing perhaps to the populist nature of their struggling movement.

As for the efficacy of their efforts, few interviewees were optimistic about the immediate impacts of protests. Nevertheless, many protestors appreciated the symbolic quality of civil disobedience and explained that protest was vital to demonstrate discontent to political elites. For many, the hope is that sustained protest may make change long-term, but short-term results should not be expected.

Finally, many protestors spoke of democratic overreach and erosion (especially in the usage of Article 49.3) as motivations for protesting, suggesting a broader link between perceived threats to democracy inspiring stronger civil disobedience. It is thus likely that if the Macron administration continues overreach perceived guardrails of French democracy, or if average citizens continue view political elites as unsympathetic and disconnected, high levels of protest will continue.

For future work, I would be interested in creating a more quantitative survey segment of this study, to find more precise ways to measure public opinion. In addition, I would pose the same questions to those who do not attend protests often in order to hear competing perspectives on the role of civil

1 Chemin.
2 Ibid.

disobedience and protest. Finally, designing a comparative study of protest in France—for example, in comparison to the US—could prove insightful.

Overall, although France's political climate is certainly not tranquil, the continued belief many people have in the value of protest is a good omen that the situation is not hopeless. Despite the current administration's tumultuous relationship with its citizenry, people continue to tap into the French tradition of protest, fighting even against large odds for a plethora of ideological concerns. Thus, although tangible political results of protests in France remain rare, it is clear that the spirit of protest remains sound.

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