

CASE STUDY

The *Gilets Jaunes* Protests, Macron's Democratic Experiment, and Deliberative Mini-Publics

What should elected representatives consider when responding to protests and citizens' demands?

Marjan Horst Ehsassi
Hélène Landemore

November 2022



JOHNS HOPKINS
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
SNF AGORA INSTITUTE

Case Narrative

Emmanuel Macron's Vision for a Revolution Française and State-Citizen Relations

To understand the choices Emmanuel Macron would make as president, it is worth briefly considering the political ideology he brought to the role. In her 2019 book *Revolution Française: Emmanuel Macron and the Quest to Reinvent a Nation*, Sophie Pedder describes the influence the French

Macron articulated his vision for a society that would empower individuals and curtail much of the population's dependence on government programs.

philosopher Paul Ricoeur had on Macron's intellectual formation. A social democrat, Ricoeur was "linked to a group of thinkers seeking to define a middle way between liberalism and Marxism," she explains. "From Ricoeur's philosophical thought, Macron absorbed a conviction that society should work collectively towards the common good as well as, crucially, a belief in the constant need to confront ideas with reality, and to create a permanent tension between competing ideas themselves."⁴

During his campaign, Macron spoke of the need to repair the frail relationship between the French state and its citizens. He articulated his vision for an invigorated French society that would empower individuals and curtail much of the population's dependence on government programs. "The modern role of the government," he remarked while campaigning, "is not to provide everything, but it must be to enable everyone."⁵ Above all, Macron extolled the vision of a "new France" in which "citizens would take greater control of their own destiny and fulfill personal ambitions through a more dynamic private sector liberated from cumbersome regulations, which were enforced by a bloated government sector that accounted for one out of every five jobs."⁶

This ideology informed Macron's approach to citizen grievances when, in May 2017, he was sworn in as France's youngest head of state since Napoleon. From the outset, he had a clear vision of a unified republic and of what his country needed. Once he secured a strong majority in the National Assembly, he was able to push forward many of the reforms that he had hinted at during his campaign. His goals were clear: 1) to modernize the French government and its institutions, 2) to relaunch a drive toward a more unified continent, and 3) to establish Europe as an important global power. He focused on new measures to improve the provision of health care and education, seeing education reform as one of the most effective antipoverty programs that government can offer. During the first year of his presidency, his reforms were well-received and his approval ratings high.

Macron's efforts to push forward this unifying agenda, however, were complicated by the perception that, as a former banker, he was brought to power by a circle of wealthy donors whom he rewarded by abolishing the *impôt de solidarité sur la fortune*, France's equivalent of a wealth tax. The most damning example happened in July 2018 when Alexandre Benalla, a close aide who had worked on Macron's campaign and was considered part of the president's inner circle, was caught on tape beating a protester at a May Day demonstration. After the incident, Benalla kept his job and was only given a two-week suspension, which, according to Pedder, "left the distinct impression that there was a self-protecting inner circle that failed to grasp how troubling things looked to everyone else."⁷ Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of France's far-left party, compared the scandal to Water-gate, and by the end of August, the resignation of several ministers aggravated the political crisis.⁸ The reputational damage was severe: Macron's approval ratings dropped to their lowest point—29 percent and 25 percent, according to the Institut français d'opinion publique (IFOP) and Ipsos, respectively—between August and October 2018. The Benalla affair and the ensuing cabinet resignations created a crisis of legitimacy for the Macron government.

He focused on improving health care and saw education reform as one of the most effective antipoverty programs that government can offer.

The *Gilets Jaunes* Protests

Against this backdrop of waning political legitimacy, the government announced an increase in fuel taxes in November 2018 to help curtail carbon emissions. The ratio of tax to gross domestic product (GDP) in France has historically been one of the highest of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). For instance, France's tax revenues for 2019 represented 45.5 percent of GDP. After the announcement, a petition posted online several months earlier—calling for a reduction in fuel prices—spread with great speed and morphed into a series of widespread demonstrations across France. Protesters leading these demonstrations rejected the support of unions and political parties, instead insisting that politics should be conducted *by and for* ordinary people.

Initially, their demands were aligned with Macron's campaign promises: lower taxes, greater purchasing power, and a better democracy. But they did not predict the Macron government would fulfill these promises since lower taxes meant the abolition of the wealth tax for the top 1 percent, a campaign promise Macron had quickly pushed through, while the fuel-tax announcement was a

The movement, soon joined by ultra-left anarchists and far-right agitators, turned against Macron and the French political establishment.

tax increase for the most vulnerable populations—those who cannot afford to live in urban centers and are highly dependent on their vehicles.

The movement became known as *gilets jaunes*, or “yellow vests,” because the protesters wore fluorescent yellow jackets that French law requires all motorists to carry in their cars. A true populist movement, the *gilets jaunes* were structureless, leaderless, and highly volatile.

The movement, soon joined by ultra-left anarchists and far-right agitators, turned against Macron and the French political establishment. Referring to the eighteenth-century bread riots that fomented the French Revolution, the head of polling for the IFOP remarked that the price of fuel was as politically and sociologically sensitive as the price of wheat was in the days of the ancien régime.

Government Interventions

As the unrest continued to grow and spread across the country, Macron and his advisers were increasingly involved in strategic discussions on how to best respond to the protesters. Beginning in late November 2018, the government introduced a series of measures to calm the rising frustrations and unrest among French citizens. This section examines each of the five interventions announced between fall 2018 and spring 2019 and invites readers to evaluate which measures more adequately respond to the demands of the *gilets jaunes* and French citizens.

Intervention 1: Government Increases Subsidies for the Purchase of Fuel-Efficient Cars (Late November 2018)

The state's first response to the mass protests was to address their economic triggers. The government announced a decision to spend 500 million euros on increased subsidies for the purchase of fuel-efficient cars and home-heating systems that emit less pollution. Many citizens were furious and called out these measures as meaningless. They simply could not afford such purchases despite the subsidies. As reported, the government response was also ridiculed by the media and portrayed as a gross inability to understand the needs of the people. By the end of November 2018, according to public opinion, Macron's approval ratings dropped even further to 23 percent (IFOP) and 20 percent (Ipsos).

In early December, as more protesters gathered and violence began to erupt, Macron cut short his attendance at the 2018 G-20 Leaders' Summit in Argentina and flew back to France. He immediately called for an emergency security meeting. Alexis Kohler, his chief of staff, warned against

any concessions while others argued that if the protests extended longer, they could paralyze the country. These statements suggest that, as early as December 2018, the government understood that citizen grievances were deeper and more complicated than a mere reaction to the increase in fuel prices. Across the country, the political environment became more tense every day with a general expectation on the streets and within the Élysée Palace that more radical measures needed to be introduced.

Intervention 2: Government Suspends Fuel Tax (Dec. 4, 2018)

On Dec. 4, Édouard Philippe, the prime minister, announced a series of measures after conceding that his government had committed several political blunders. The government suspended the much-discussed fuel tax that had triggered the demonstrations and promised to raise the minimum wage and delay increases in electricity rates. “No tax is worth putting in danger the unity of the nation,” declared Philippe, as he publicly acknowledged that the government had failed to address the basic grievances, financial challenges, and “anger of a France that works hard and has trouble making ends meet.”⁹ On the same day that these concessions were announced, Macron visited a small town outside the Auvergne region in south-central France. There, he was met with anger and violence. Protesters had erected an effigy of Macron with a sign that read “sending you to the guillotine is our mission,” and a woman spit in his direction and screamed, “I hope you crash and die on your way out of here.”¹⁰ This was a turning point for Macron. According to William Drozdiak, he returned to Paris “dazed and baffled.”¹¹ While personally hurt by the reaction he received, Macron’s focus was on the larger forces behind it. An astute politician, he saw that these protests were about more than taxes and social inequality—they were also about French citizens’ relationship to their government.

While the movement may have started in response to an economic trigger, there was a political dimension to peoples’ grievances that could no longer be ignored.

In a December article, *Les Echos* referred to the *gilets jaunes* as “the invisible.”¹² While the movement may have started in response to an economic trigger, there was a political dimension to peoples’ grievances that could no longer be ignored. The severe lack of trust and confidence in government, along with the violence spreading throughout the streets, suggested citizens were deeply dissatisfied with their democracy and a felt lack of meaningful political representation. In an interview with Drozdiak around this time, Macron remarked that, “for many years, the political elite did not address the real underlying problems of our society, while the economic elite became very selfish. The violence we are seeing on a regular basis is symptomatic of a profound malaise in our society.”¹³ Macron had heard the protesters and understood their grievances. He thought he had a clear sense of what needed to be done.

Intervention 3: Additional Economic Concessions (Dec. 10, 2018)

On Dec. 10, a visibly tired and aged Macron appeared on television. He announced a third round of government concessions. His government would rescind the taxes on retirees, raise the minimum wage, and abolish taxes on any year-end bonus. He was apologetic and his delivery lacked its usual bluster. He acknowledged the mistakes of his first two years as president: “I accept my share of responsibility. I may have given you the feeling that I didn’t care, that I have other priorities.”¹⁴ He then committed to turning his attention to local communities long neglected by the national government. These announcements once again fell short of expectations, and protests raged on. It became clear that relying on economic measures was not going to be sufficient for the government to quell the citizen unrest. Extremist groups, on the left and the right, began to assume a more prominent role in the management of the protests, and protesters’ messaging began to carry anti-immigrant and antisemitic overtones. Government buildings were attacked, windows shattered, a Jewish cemetery desecrated, and swastikas painted on the streets. There was much concern across the country that the *gilets jaunes* movement was evolving into an ominous portent for France. In the face of growing instability, the government needed to restore order and respond to the demands of the French people.

Intervention 4: Great National Debate (January 2019)

By January 2019, Macron understood that he needed to adopt a significantly different and more innovative approach. In an open letter to the French citizenry, he announced a “new contract for

Intended as a “republic of permanent deliberation,” the Great National Debate allowed Macron to seize a key issue: citizens’ participation in political debate.

the nation” that was designed to “transform anger into solutions.”¹⁵ He laid out the foundation for his Great National Debate and engaged local authorities to encourage citizens to voice their demands in *cahiers de doléances* or “grievance notebooks.” This idea dates back to the French Revolution when “Louis XVI ordered his subjects to compile their complaints in official catalogs.”¹⁶ Macron invited citizens to submit written notebooks that were distributed to residents, provide comments on a gov-

ernment website, and participate in organized debates around four issues: the organization of the state and public services, ecological transition, democracy and citizenship, and taxation. By the end of January, according to the IFOP, Macron’s approval ratings increased to 34 percent. Initial French skepticism shifted and began to pave the way to high citizen participation with a reported 40 percent of the French population wanting to take part in the debates.¹⁷

Intended as a “republic of permanent deliberation,” the Great National Debate allowed Macron to seize a key issue: citizens’ participation in political debate. In turn, based on public polling, citizen confidence and trust in the government increased and the initiative brought back some calm to the country. In all, French citizens submitted more than 16,000 grievance books and close to two million online comments. The Great National Debate hosted twenty-one regional citizens’ assemblies

and several assemblies of representatives of professional associations. The most plausible estimates suggest that roughly 500,000 of France's sixty-seven million citizens actively contributed to the Great National Debate, generating close to 746 proposals per 100,000 inhabitants. The regional citizens' assemblies, each meant to include 100 randomly selected citizens (often fewer participated because of a lack of financial compensation), were designed to discuss the four themes listed above over a day and a half. The Great National Debate cost the government between 12,000,000 and 15,000,000 euros and reviews suggest that the French people generally thought of it as a success.¹⁸

Not everyone was on board, however. The *gilets jaunes* viewed Macron's efforts as a guided exercise without much meaning and instead organized their own *Le Vrai Débat* (the True Debate). While leading nonpartisan voices testified to the transparency of the process, some protesters and commentators criticized the Great National Debate for leaving out contentious but important issues such as immigration.

Macron acknowledged these criticisms. The president recognized that the crisis of legitimacy was real and needed to be addressed. He also demonstrated that he understood people's desire for more voice and engagement in between elections. Above all, these measures reflected the importance of engaging in public discourse with the French citizens about the state of their democracy.¹⁹

Macron demonstrated that he understood people's desire for more voice and engagement in between elections.

Intervention 5: Citizens Climate Convention (Spring 2019)

The results emerging from the Great National Debate revealed that an overwhelming majority of French people saw climate change as an urgent problem that needed to be addressed.²⁰ At the urging of activists and several advisers, Macron announced a bold political intervention. In spring 2019, he committed to the establishment of citizens' assemblies, a series of national DMPs. The first of the series was the Citizen Climate Convention (CCC) that began in October 2019 and continued until June 2020. The CCC consisted of a representative sampling of 150 French citizens, was selected by democratic lottery, and was tasked with a mandate to draft a series of laws that would allow a 40 percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 in a manner that was sustainable and compatible with social justice principles. The government committed to submitting all proposals *sans filtre* (without filter) either to direct implementation, a referendum, or a vote in Parliament. Originally designed to include six two-and-a-half-day sessions beginning in October 2019, plans had to quickly change because long strikes against pension reform brought public transportation almost to a complete halt for a significant part of December and January. Soon after, the pandemic hit, causing sessions to be held remotely during the lockdown. The final session was held in June 2020 at the *Palais D'Iéna*, the offices of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, with social distancing measures in place.

The CCC ultimately approved 149 proposals,²¹ many of which received near universal support. For instance, the consumption working group passed provisions mandating that companies disclose the carbon footprint of all products, limiting advertising for high-carbon products, restricting single-use plastic, and creating educational programs promoting low-carbon consumption. The housing working group passed recommendations that require the renovation and retrofitting of buildings by 2040 and effective land resource management to prevent urban expansion. Finally, the food

CCC participant Amandine Roggeman said she was excited about the promise of deliberation. “This bill—*our bill*—is the first one drafted by citizens.”

working group passed proposals to promote local food production, limit food waste, foster agroecology, improve consumer information, and reform fisheries. The criminalization of ecocide was considered especially significant as it was originally not a part of the CCC’s expert-defined agenda but was driven by the citizens. One of the policies that passed with the lowest level of support was a proposal to reduce the speed limit to 110 km/h, and the only proposal to be rejected reduced the work week from thirty-five hours to twenty-eight hours without salary loss.

While some CCC participants were initially disappointed that the government did not adopt all of their proposals, many of the recommendations have been implemented. As of March 2022, of the 149 measures introduced by CCC participants, three proposals had been rejected, fifty-nine were in the process of being implemented, and eighty-seven measures had been implemented, of which sixty-two were part of the Climate and Resilience Law, passed by the French National Assembly in May 2021. According to the *CCC Academic Observers’ Report*, that 146 of 149 measures were retained should be seen as a political success.²² In interviews, CCC participants and experts commented that the CCC has moved France’s climate agenda much further and has created political momentum. In an interview, CCC participant Amandine Roggeman said she was excited about her experience and the promise of deliberation. “This bill—*our bill*—is the first one drafted by citizens,” Roggeman exclaimed. “I look forward to many more citizens’ assemblies designed to solve other pressing public issues.”²³