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ARTICLES

Truly Exceptional? Participants in the Belgian 2019 Youth for Climate Protest Wave

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Abstract

In 2019, the world witnessed an exceptional wave of climate protests. In this case study, we scrutinise who participated in the protests staged in Belgium. We ask: did the exceptional mobilising context of the 2019 protest wave also bring exceptional protesters to the streets? Were thanks to the unique momentum standard barriers to protest participation overcome? We answer these questions by comparing three surveys of participants in the 2019 protest wave with three surveys of relevant reference publics. Our findings show that while the Belgian 2019 protest was in many ways exceptional, its participants were less so. Although participants – especially in the early phase of the protest wave – were less protest experienced, younger and unaffiliated to organisations, our findings simultaneously confirm the persistence of a great many well-known socio-demographic and political inequalities. Our conclusion centres on the implications of these findings.

Keywords: protest, participation, inequality, climate change, Fridays For Future.

1 Introduction

In 2019, the world witnessed an exceptional wave of climate protest. What started with a lonely, striking Swedish schoolgirl, quickly became an international grassroots movement (Fridays for Future) staging global days of action. On 15 March, no less than 1.6 million people in more than 125 countries at 2,000 different locations walked the streets demanding better climate policies. This *tour de force* was repeated a few months later in September of the same year – with even more impressive global turnouts. Reviewing climate activism of the last few decades, de Moor and colleagues (2020: 1) note: "The year 2019 was extraordinary

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in terms of the unprecedented scale and coordination of mobilizations on the climate crisis."

In this contribution, we focus on the Belgian case within this larger international cycle of protest. In Belgium as well, 2019 was exceptional in terms of climate mobilisation. Inspired by the resistance of Greta Thunberg, two young schoolgirls launched a Facebook page named 'Youth for Climate' (YfC), calling youngsters to join them in their protest against the lack of climate ambition by Belgian governments. The protest wave sparked by YfC was extraordinary. For over twenty consecutive weeks – from January till the national election day on the 26th of May – schoolchildren and students held weekly demonstrations all over the country. Both the age of the initiators (youngsters, many not eligible to vote), their commitment (protesting for consecutive weeks), the action form (attesting of disobedience by skipping school) as well as their simple claim (politicians, show ambition) made the protest resonate strongly in Belgian society. The protests resulted in a spectacular share of media coverage (see later), unprecedented public consternation (the largest climate mobilisation in Belgian history was held) and fierce political debate (a 'climate law' was discussed in federal parliament; the Flemish climate minister needed to resign).

In sum, it is fair to say that the Belgian 2019 climate protests were exceptional. In this contribution, we ask whether this exceptional moment in climate mobilisation also gave rise to exceptional protest participants. A long tradition in political participation research testifies of inequalities in participation (Dalton, 2017; Verba et al., 1995). Those who make their voice heard – be it by voting, signing petitions or demonstrating – are not a representative sample of the population. Rather, participation is skewed to those with the necessary resources, skills and embeddedness (Teorell, 2006). These inequalities are consequential. They matter for the signals politicians receive and for how they assess them. Additionally, such inequalities harm the generation of bridging social capital and solidarity-building across groups, key democratic resources (De Moor & Wouters, 2022). A major challenge hence lies in understanding the conditions under which such inequalities might be overcome. To that end, we ask: who participated in the 2019 protests? Did the out-of-the-ordinary momentum result in out-of-the-ordinary participants or were usual suspects flooding the streets?

In order to answer these questions, we combine evidence from multiple surveys. The first group of three surveys allows us to sketch a profile of the 2019 protest participant. We document the early phase of the 2019 protest – from January till February – by means of a panel survey of YfC Facebook members. Making use of two protest surveys – surveying participants at actual protest events – we document the profile of participants in later episodes of the 2019 protest wave (March and September). The second group of surveys pictures three reference publics to which we compare the 2019 protester. A first baseline is that of the climate protester; being participants in a climate demonstration staged in Brussels in 2009. A second baseline is the profile of the average Belgian protester, as measured by several rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS). A final baseline is that of the average Belgian citizen – measured by the ESS as well.

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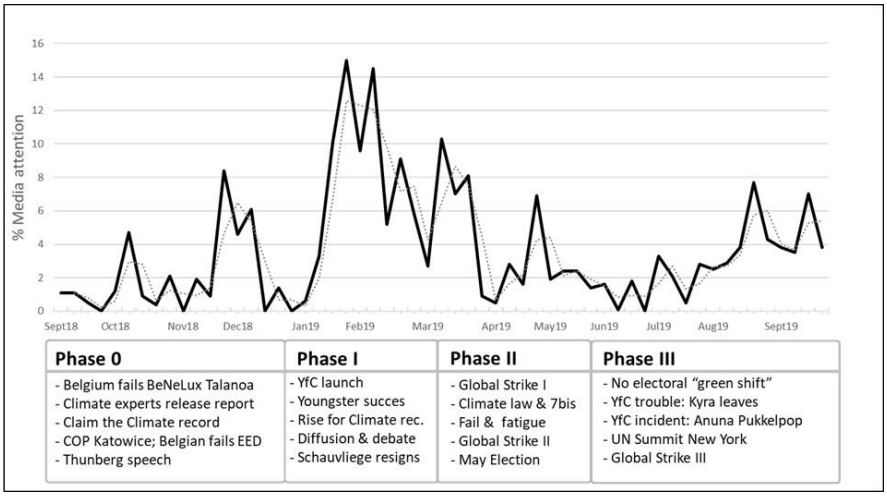
We proceed as follows. First, we sketch the case. We narrate the protest wave and detail its political context. This sketch brings into focus the key features that made the 2019 protest context exceptional: its social media generated start, amplified with unprecedented media, public and political resonance. Second, we theorise how these key features of the exceptional mobilising momentum could draw exceptional participants to the street. Our results show that while the 2019 protest wave was in many ways exceptional, its participants foremost were not. Although less protest experienced adolescents unaffiliated to political organisations participated more, the 2019 climate protests quickly drew a crowd that was hardly distinguishable from similar climate protest, and far removed from the general public or typical demonstrator. In short, despite exceptional mobilisation momentum, many standard patterns of participation inequality were reproduced.

2 The 2019 Climate Protest Wave in Belgium

How did the 2019 protest wave unfold? Figure 1 presents the evolution of the Belgian protest wave, showing the ebb and flow of media attention over time. Based on our reading of various media and contact with protest organisers, we divided the protest wave into four phases: the build-up with the COP in Katowice and the 'Claim the Climate' demonstration (phase 0, September-December 2018); the launch of the youth protest, with the Rise for Climate turnout record (phase 1, January-February, 2019); the solidifying of the protest between the first Global Climate strike and the Election of May 26 (phase 2, March-May, 2019) and the final chord of the protest wave between election day and the final Global Climate strike (phase 3, June-September, 2019).

Figure 1 Timeline of the Youth for Climate protest wave



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2.1 Phase 0 – Build-up Towards the Protest Wave

To better grasp the 2019 protests, we start our reconstruction several months earlier. In early September 2018, close to the 'Global Climate Action Summit' in San Francisco, several hundred 'Rise for Climate' activists demand more urgency and ambition from Belgian governments. The Paris Agreement by then is about three years old and activists worry that too little effort is undertaken. Their scepticism is confirmed a few weeks later when Belgian Minister of Energy and Climate Marghem last-minutely fails to sign more substantive climate deals with The Netherlands and Luxembourg in so-called Talanoa-dialogues – a format developed at COP23 to help countries meet Paris targets. Interestingly, about simultaneously debate on dreaded energy shortages – also a competence of Minister Marghem – is high on the political and media agenda. Belgians fear energy blackouts and electricity shutdown plans are developed. Eurobarometer data show that by the end of November 2018, a record number of 25% of Belgians considers climate change among the most important problems facing the nation, the starkest increasing issue compared to November 2017 (+12%). Climate change by then ranks second, only surpassed by immigration.

That climate is clearly on the rise as an issue of concern is confirmed on 2 December 2018 with the 'Claim the Climate' protest. Traditionally, the Belgian climate movement mobilises in Brussels at the start of every COP – that year taking place in Katowice, Poland. The Claim the Climate protest is exceptional: it draws 65,000 participants, the biggest climate mobilisation in Belgium so far. The claim of the demonstrators sounds familiar: Belgium should sign ambitious policy proposals. Two days later, however, Belgium becomes one of only four countries not signing Europe's new Energy Efficiency Directive. Opinion makers interpret the Belgian 'no' as an 'arrogant punch in the face' of the many demonstrators. On 16 December, Greta Thunberg speeches in Katowice, calling politicians 'scared to be unpopular' and 'not mature enough to tell it like it is'.

2.2 Phase 1 – The Early Phase: Youngsters on a Roll

The speech of Thunberg resonates with two Belgian girls, Anuna De Wever (aged 17) and Kyra Gantois (aged 19), who launched a Facebook page named 'Youth for Climate' (YfC). In a video, they call pupils and students to skip school and strike for climate every Thursday until the upcoming elections in May – that date, Belgians elect new regional, federal and European members of parliament. The call of YfC proves successful. The first demonstration on 10 January draws unexpectedly a little over 3,000 pupils to Brussels. One week later, 12,500 pupils show up. In the third edition, over 35,000 youngsters – now joined by university students – make themselves heard. Another three days later, on Sunday 27 January, an estimated 70,000 people participated in the *Rise for Climate* demonstration, a new record-breaking climate mobilisation in Belgium. Media attention skyrockets (see Figure 1); the 'klimaatspijbelaars' are the talk of the nation. The fact that it is youngsters (not eligible to vote) skipping school (a particular way of disobedient action) succeeding in generating an impressive response (rising turnouts) without professionalised mobilisation machinery (two girls, a Facebook page, sharing and an interested press) places climate at the heart of public conversation.

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After the record-breaking turnout, every week, a new twist to the Thursday actions is given. Next to the main march in Brussels, local spin-off actions pop up. Other youngsters – many of them girls; like Laura Cools, Hanne De Guytenaere and Adelaïde Charlier – take the lead as the youth protest diffuses. Other movement actors jump the bandwagon: the more radical organisation 'Act for Climate Justice' illegally places posters on commercial billboards, encouraging citizens to 'wake up their ministers' by SMS and e-mail bombing them. As an indirect consequence, Joke Schauvliege, the Flemish climate minister, needs to resign. Also, the elderly engage ('Grandparents for Climate'). And, during the 7th and 8th YfC demonstration, Greta Thunberg herself joins the Belgian climate strikers. She speaks to Juncker and the European Commission later that day, and, with other leading youngsters, to President Macron later that week. Also, opponents of the movement enter the public debate: the civil disobedience of striking school children is frowned upon. In sum, the climate protest is met with strong media, public and political resonance.

2.3 Phase 2 – Fridays for Future and Holding on Till Election Time

On 15 March – the tenth consecutive week of youth protest – phase 2 of the wave begins. Belgium was an early adopter and on 15 March also the rest of the world sets itself in motion (Wahlström et al., 2019). Under the banner 'Fridays for Future' no less than 1.6 million people in more than 125 countries at 2,000 different locations protest. In Brussels, 30,000 demonstrators participate. Next to striking schoolchildren, also delegations from schools, students, grandparents and members of civil society organisations take part in the 'Global Strike for Climate'. At this moment, media attention peaks again. The week afterwards, on 24 March, climate strikers occupy the Wetstraat in Brussels, the political heart of Belgium. They chain themselves to the gates of the Federal parliament where discussions on a constitutional revision and a so-called climate law are taking place. On 28 March, however, the needed two-third majority is not met; Flemish nationalists, Liberals and Christian democrats vote against; the 'climate law' is off the table for the current legislature. According to Anuna De Wever, climate activists are 'disillusioned'.

From April onwards, the momentum of the movement starts to slow down. The turnout figures diminish; youngsters express demonstration fatigue. In the remaining weeks, YfC stumbles to election day. On 24 May, two days before the general election, a second 'Global strike for Climate' takes place. In Brussels, 7,500 demonstrators wrap up twenty consecutive weeks of protesting and demand citizens to vote wisely and politicians to make climate policy a priority. During her main speech at the event, Anuna marks the day as 'the end of the beginning' for YfC.

2.4 Phase 3 – After the Elections: It Is Not Over Till It Is Over

The May 26th elections mark the start of phase 3, with the target of keeping the climate issue on the public radar until election day is met. After the elections, YfC announces that it will be back soon, but in a different form, not with weekly demonstrations. The elections do not bring the desired 'green shift'. Political parties Groen (+0.8%) and Ecolo (+2.8%) increase their voters' share, but only

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slightly so. During the hot summer months – July 2019 is the hottest month on record – YfC is plagued by incidents (disagreements between the founders; hateful social media comments). However, with the UN Climate Summit in New York approaching, and with Greta Thunberg sailing the ocean to visit the summit, attention peaks again. In the week of 20 September, the 'Global week for future' kicks off – a third international mobilisation parallel to the Climate summit. In Belgium, the opening demonstration on Friday 20 September draws 15,000 participants. The demonstration is the comeback of YfC, who label it 'season two' of the climate actions. In many ways, however, the September demonstration is the final chord of an exceptional year of climate activism.

Wrapping up, our sketch of the 2019 climate protest wave reveals it was exceptional in many ways. Sparked by youngsters and social media mobilisation, testifying of persistence by demonstrating over twenty consecutive weeks, part of an expanding international movement and setting record turnout numbers in terms of climate activism, the protests generated exceptional media, political and public resonance. As such, the climate protest both *created* and *enjoyed* a unique mobilising momentum. In the next theoretical section, we highlight how key features of the exceptional 2019 mobilising context might have drawn exceptional participants to the streets. To that end, we first highlight what the typical traits of protest participants are. Subsequently, we elaborate on which features of the protest wave might have affected those traits, potentially diminishing inequalities.

3 Inequality and the 2019 Mobilising Context

A vast literature in political science testifies of stark participatory inequalities across social groups. While some people wield a megaphone', 'others speak in a whisper' (Dalton, 2017; Schlozman et al., 2018; Teorell et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995). The typical protest participant for that matter has the accent of the highly educated, middle-aged, male, urban-dweller, who is politically interested, sophisticated and well connected in society (Teorell et al., 2007). Such individuals possess the right resources (education, biographical availability), have sufficient motivation (political interest and skill) and are socially embedded (organisational membership), making them more likely to be *informed* about participation opportunities and *capable* to act upon such opportunities.

While early research on protest participation primarily focused on sketching the general profile of those who protest (e.g. Barnes & Kaase, 1979), more recent work – acknowledging these inequalities – argues that who protests varies and depends on the specific *context* in which protest is staged (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2009). That is, the context of protest might affect the range of people that are *informed* about the event and the range of people that are *motivated* to participate. Several studies based on general population surveys, for instance, show how the economic and political context in a country affect the extent of protest as well as the profile of who participates (Dodson, 2015; Grasso & Giugni, 2016; Jenkins etal., 2008; Kern etal., 2015). Other work, surveying protesters at specific events, similarly finds that protest staged on different issues

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draws different publics (Verhulst, 2011); that the kind of government coalition affects a demonstration's composition (Wouters et al., 2017) or that different people are mobilised on the very same issue before and after the passage of a law (Gómez-Román & Sabucedo, 2014). Clearly, context matters for who participates, and thus can deepen or diminish inequalities. Which features of the 2019 climate protest wave stand out in that regard? And how might they have affected participation inequalities?

First, the 2019 protests were a textbook example of a *connective action* event (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) in which digital media like Facebook fulfilled a key organising and mobilising role. In contrast to the more traditional logic of collective action, where organisations like unions stand front and centre in diffusing information and providing selective incentives to spur participation, connective actions are characterised by digital media networks as organisational spine and personalised content sharing as driver of information diffusion. Such a different organisational infrastructure might bring different individuals to the streets. Enjolras and colleagues (2013), in their study of participants in the Norwegian Rose Marches, find that those who were mobilised via social media, for instance, were of lower socio-economic status and younger, suggesting that social media reach different segments of the population and can diminish traditional divides. Relatedly, in a case study on the Indignado's movement in Spain, Anduiza et al. (2014) show how the movement's *connective* style of mobilisation drew younger and less experienced protesters to the streets compared to similar demonstrations that followed a more traditional logic of *collective* action. Maher and Earl (2019) therefore argue that digital media allow unusual suspects to 'route around' traditional pathways to participation. Social media's built-in recommendation systems, for instance, might inform individuals about participation opportunities they would otherwise be unaware of or link them to online communities that foster activism.

Second, the protests of YfC were heavily *mediatised* as well (see Figure 1). Similarly, heavy mediatisation of protest can expand who is targeted by demonstration information, as such affecting its composition. Walgrave and colleagues (2009, 2021) speak of 'open' and 'closed' mobilisation in that regard. Closed mobilisation channels touch only upon a specific subsection of the population; they connect to particular groups and have a limited reach. A key example are organisations: they can directly reach out to their members, yet members tend to have particular features that are mostly in line with those who have political resources and skills. Open mobilisation channels like mass media, on the other hand, have a much broader reach – they are far less exclusive in who is targeted. Protest that is heavily mediatised, therefore, is more likely to tap into pockets of society that are typically difficult to mobilise, as such driving unusual participants to the streets. Walgrave and Verhulst (2009), studying protests against the imminent war in Iraq in 2003, for instance, show how stronger media mobilisation brought more diverse crowds to the street, more alike the composition of a nation's general citizenry. Across 71 demonstrations and eight issues, Walgrave et al. (2021), similarly find that protest characterised by more open mobilisation channels is more likely to bring 'unusual suspects' to the streets. That is, individuals

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with less protest experience, less political interest and a lower feeling of general political efficacy. In sum, fierce mass media coverage impacts who is reached by information about the demonstration, which can result in exceptional protesters participating.

Third, several features of the 2019 protest context might also have altered the *motivational* dynamics underlying protest participation, lowering the barriers that normally separate those who are intending to participate from those who actually participate (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Indeed, the arguments in the previous paragraphs hinged primarily on mass and social media's ability to *inform* individuals of a participation opportunity. Yet people do not only need to be informed in order to participate; they also need to be willing. They need to be motivated and feel capable; there needs to be a belief that one's participation matters and that one can make a difference (Opp, 2009). Several features of the 2019 context – stressing the success of the demonstrations – might have altered the calculations of potential participants, as such encouraging unlikely participants to participate anyway. For instance, the fact that turnouts were on the rise during January and that a record-breaking turnout was established could have altered potential participants' perception of social support for the demonstrators and their claims, as such boosting their participation (Van Zomeren et al., 2004). Next, the all-female protagonists staging the protests might have pushed (young) women to participate via processes of group identification (Stürmer & Simon, 2004). And, the fact that the young organisers were received by state leaders, or that a minister addressed by the demonstrators needed to resign, might have convinced individuals who normally consider demonstrations to be quite toothless of the current wave's efficacy, fostering their participation (Schussman & Soule, 2005).

In sum, features of the demonstration context, we argue, influence the diffusion of information about the demonstration as well as the motivational dynamics underlying participation. This way, contextual features can bring atypical participants to the streets and diminish inequalities. In this article, we test to what extent this train of taught fits the case of the 2019 climate protest wave. We ask: *did the exceptional context of the 2019 climate mobilisation result in exceptional protest participants? Was a more unusual protester mobilised, more akin to the general public, less resembling the 'typical' climate demonstrator, as such overcoming well-known inequalities?* In order to answer these questions, we systematically compare the 2019 protesters to three reference publics (see later) across three relevant groups of variables: respondents' *organisational embeddedness* (membership of organisations, demonstration information channels), *socio-demographics* (gender, age and education) and *political attitudes and behaviour* (political interest, talking politics, left-right placement, party preference and past protest participation).

4 Data and Methods

We rely on six surveys to answer our main research question. The first group of surveys (surveys 1 to 3) presents snapshots of the 2019 participants at key moments in the protest wave. The second group of surveys (4 to 6) focuses on the

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reference publics to which the 2019 participants are compared. Table 1 presents an overview of all surveys. In online Appendix A, we detail the exact wording of each question, its measurement and related recoding procedures.

Table 1 Overview of surveys

N°	Group	Period	Respondents	Survey Type	N
1	2019 Protest wave		YfC Facebook visitor	Panel	576
2	2019 Protest wave	March 2019	Protest participant	Protest	166
3	2019 Protest wave		Protest participant	Protest	183
4	Reference Public		Protest participant	Protest	334
5	Reference Public	2002-2018	ESS demonstrator	Population	1,142
6	Reference Public	2018	ESS population	Population	1,767

4.1 Surveys of the 2019 Protest Participants

Survey 1 – January/February: Youth for Climate. When YfC started to get traction, we launched an online panel survey that the organisers posted for us on their Facebook page (author cite). The first wave of the survey ran from 24 January till 27 January. The second wave ran from 1 February to 12 February. In total, 576 respondents completed wave 1, of which 493 shared their e-mail address. In wave 2, 230 respondents started the survey, and 213 completed it (a 43% response rate). The panel survey combines characteristics of a self-selection and snowball sample: respondents opted in themselves and we had no control over how the survey link was shared on social media. As a consequence, it is impossible to say whether or to what extent the survey is representative of the movement or even of the YfC Facebook page visitor at that moment in time. After all, the movement in this early phase was in constant development. The panel data nevertheless is incredibly valuable. To the best of our knowledge, it is the only existing data on the movement in the early phase. It allows for sound within-sample comparisons; across-sample comparisons should be done cautiously. Several analyses give the data face validity, however: the share of respondents in the sample declaring to have participated in YfC demonstrations nicely follows turnout figures reported in the press. And, the composition of the marches – with university students showing up in greater numbers from demonstration number 3 onwards – is clearly reflected in the data as well (author cite). Note that in the results noted later, our group 'YfC Jan-Feb' is defined by those respondents who participated in at least one of the first four YfC weekly demonstrations. As such, we are comparing protesters (collected among YfC Facebook visitors) with other protesters.

Survey 2 – March 15: Global Climate Strike. On 15 March, the first Global Climate Strike (GCS) was held. In Brussels, between 30,000 and 35,000 protesters showed up. We drew a random sample of the demonstration by means of the established

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fieldwork method labelled protest surveying (see Walgrave et al., 2016 for an extensive review). In short, two teams of surveyors supervised by a so-called pointer attended the event. In order to distribute surveys, one team started at the front of the demonstration and one team at the back. By systematically skipping n-rows (based on the estimated size of the demonstration) and selecting a demonstrator walking at the left, centre of right side of that row, a random sample of the entire crowd was drawn. In total, 733 survey leaflets were distributed. Respondents could participate in the survey by scanning the QR code on the leaflet. Next to the 733 leaflets, 140 brief face-to-face interviews were held: a short questionnaire asking for basic socio-demographics and general political attitudes. The face-to-face questionnaire allows us to track potential response biases (see later). In total, 166 protesters completed the full survey (23% response rate).

Survey 3 – September 20: Global Week for Future. On 20 September, 15,000 protesters walked the streets of Brussels. Again, we surveyed the march following the protest survey method; 733 leaflets were distributed, 148 face-to-face interviews were held and 183 protesters completed the survey (25% response rate). A response bias analysis (Appendix B) shows no significant patterns of non-response, both in Surveys 2 and 3. We, therefore, report analyses with unweighted data in the Results section.

4.2 Surveys of the Reference Publics

Survey 4 – December 5: the climate demonstrator. On 5 December 2009, 15,000 protesters participated in the climate change demonstration '*Loop storm voor het klimaat*', organised by *Klimaatcoalitie*. A few days later, the COP in Copenhagen would start and the 2009 demonstrators wanted to put pressure on the Belgian government to go for an ambitious agreement. Both the claim and the close-to-COP setting of the 2009 mobilisation are very similar to the starting point of the 2019 protest wave. And, although also the 2009 demonstration was considered a success and drew considerable media attention, its resonance comes nowhere near the 2019 momentum, making it an appropriate point of comparison – especially as the Belgian climate movement has a tradition of mobilising in the days surrounding the COP (Van Laer, 2017). The 2009 demonstrators were surveyed following the very same protest survey design – with one crucial difference: as mobile internet and smartphones were less common back then, we distributed booklets and pre-paid envelopes. In total, 777 booklets were distributed, 143 F2F surveys were conducted and 334 respondents returned their questionnaires (43% response rate). Again, no response bias was administered (Walgrave et al., 2016).

Survey 5 – the ordinary demonstrator. Our second baseline is the 'general' Belgian demonstrator. Here, we make use of European Social Survey data on Belgium (ESS). We include ESS round 1 to 9 and include those respondents who answered 'yes' to the question about having 'taken part in a lawful public demonstration' in the last 12 months. We include data from multiple rounds to minimise potential supply-side effects – for instance, in the years of the economic crisis the general demonstrator profile might be biased towards the profile of austerity protesters (Verhulst, 2011).

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Survey 6 – the general citizen. Our final baseline is the *ordinary citizen*. We use ESS round 9 as this round came closest to the climate protest wave.

In the results section, we systematically compare the different publics by means of ANOVAs and Chi-square tests. We display results by use of figures; overlapping confidence intervals signal non-significant differences. The corresponding significance tests can be found in Appendix C.

5 Results

Were in 2019 more 'unusual protesters' mobilised, diminishing participation gaps? To answer these questions, we analyse participants' *organisational embeddedness, socio-demographics* and *political attitudes and behaviour*.

5.1 Organisational Embeddedness and Information Channels

YfC originated as a Facebook page in an era of hashtag activism and can be considered a textbook example of connective action. Allegedly characterised by high levels of social media mobilisation, the 2019 protest might have recruited more organisationally unaffiliated people to the streets; whereas participation normally is skewed to organisational members. To tease out this dynamic, Figure 2 compares the main information channel and associational background of participants in the 2009 and 2019 protests.

With regard to *information channels* – that is, the main communication channel through which respondents learned about the upcoming demonstration – the 2009 and 2019 demonstrations are starkly different (Figure 2, top panels). In 2009, organisational information channels (like co-members, an organisation's website, magazine, mailing list or meeting) dominate information diffusion about the protest: about 51% of participants indicates that organisational channels were their most important information channel. In 2019, the relevance of organisational channels has dwindled, ranging from practically 0% in the early phase to 28% in September. Across all phases of the 2019 protest, social media channels perform particularly potent (ranging from 29% to no less than 64%). Clearly, the 2019 protest stood out as a connective event.

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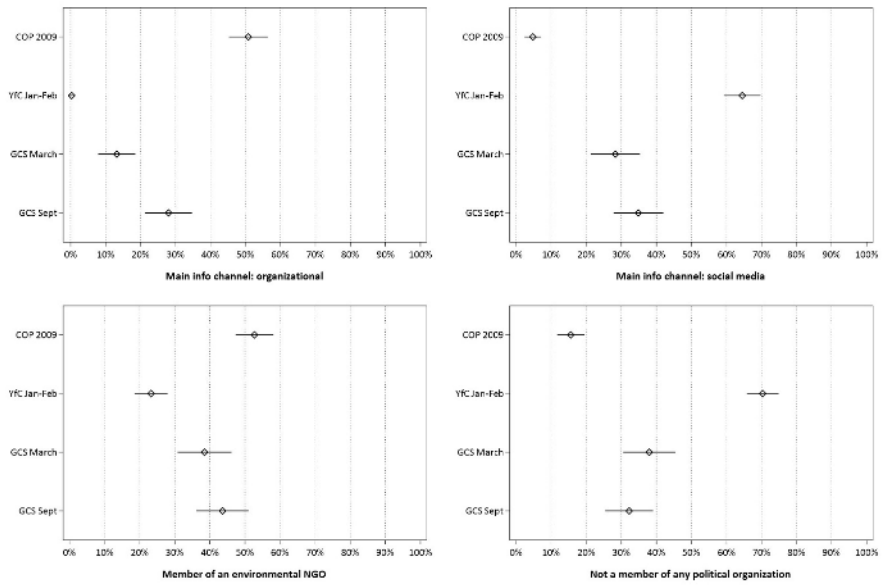
Figure 2 Information channels and organisational embeddedness



In terms *of organisational embeddedness*, the bottom panel of Figure 2 shows that the 2019 protest wave drew less on members of environmental organisations – the core constituency of the climate movement. Whereas in 2009 53% of participants declared environmental membership, less do so across 2019 (ranging from 23% to 44%). The fact that more individuals outside of environmental organisations participated points to the participation of unusual suspects in the 2019 marches. This finding gets additional confirmation when looking at the share of participants that are unaffiliated to organisations with political goals (trade unions, peace organisations, women's rights organisations ...): the 2019 protests drew significantly more participants that were less organisationally affiliated.

In sum, the analyses confirm the connective nature of the 2019 protest (high social media mobilisation) and show that participants were exceptional in the sense that they were less affiliated to organisations (environmental organisations and political organisations). As especially organisational members tend to raise their voice in politics, the 2019 protest wave levelled the playing field in that regard. Yet, were the 2019 participants also exceptional in terms of their socio-demographics and political traits?

5.2 Socio-demographics

Figure 3 compares the socio-demographics of our six different publics. We start with *gender*. In terms of the reference publics, we find that the 2009 climate demonstrator is more female (45.2%) compared to the ordinary demonstrator (42.7%), for whom a significant gender gap persists with the share of women across the population (51% female). Did the 2019 protest wave, with its all-female

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protagonists, bring significantly more female demonstrators to the streets? Our data suggest a partial 'yes'. We find support for significantly stronger female enthusiasm in the early phase of the protest wave, with no less than 60% of protest participants being women, resulting in an overrepresentation rather than underrepresentation of women. In the later phases of the protest wave, on the other hand, our data show female participation rates that are indistinguishable from those reported in the 2009 climate demonstration (46% to 47%). In sum, for a brief moment in time, in early 2019, the climate strikers could clearly count on stark female enthusiasm, closing and even overturning a participation gap. In later phases, 'ordinary' rates of female climate participation are reported.

For *age*, we find a strong effect across all phases of the 2019 protest wave. Our data show that the mobilisation of youngsters was truly exceptional. Looking at the average age (not in figure), the typical (climate) demonstrator appears to be forty-something (42.5). The average age of respondents in the early phase of the 2019 protest is much younger (18.5), whereas the age of those in March and September is not significantly different from the average (climate) demonstrator. In each phase of the 2019 protest wave, however, the share of adolescents (<19 years) by far outnumbers the share of adolescents of the reference publics; and, also the share of emerging adults (<25 years) in the 2019 protest wave is at least equal compared to their share amongst the reference publics. In sum, our data show that the 2019 protest wave was truly exceptional, giving voice to younger generations. We do see, however, that while youngsters participated at impressive rates, their share decreased over time. Interestingly, especially baby boomers – often criticised by the young climate strikers – seemed to have jumped on the youngster's bandwagon.

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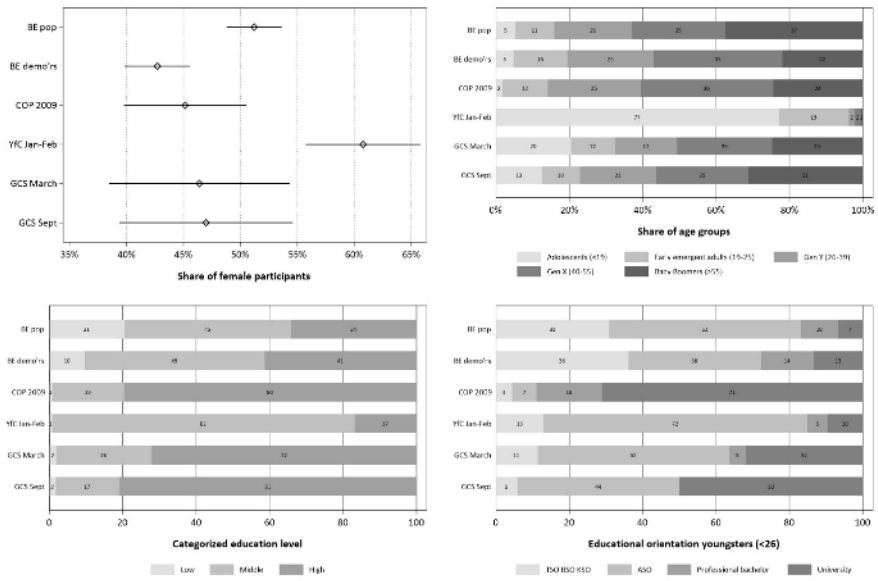
Figure 3 Socio-demographics



What about *education*? Did the climate momentum bring higher shares of lower educated people to the streets? In terms of baselines, it is relevant to note that the ordinary climate demonstrator is already (much) higher educated (79.4% highly educated) compared to the general demonstrator (42.5%), who in turn is higher educated compared to the average citizen (33.7%). These findings confirm that demonstrating, often described as the weapon of the weak, in fact, is a tool whose use starkly rises with increased education – and that this education gap is particularly steep when it comes to climate protest.

Given the age findings discussed earlier, we should be careful with our take on education in the 2019 protest wave: youngsters have not necessarily reached their full educational potential, likely distorting a broad-brush comparison. Throughout the 2019 protest wave, we see a shift from predominantly middle levels of education (82% in secondary school) to high levels of education (72 to 81 in higher, tertiary education) as the pupils who kick-started the wave were supplemented with students and adults (Figure 3, bottom left panel). To make a more precise comparison of our different publics, we, therefore, track the educational achievement of youngsters under 26 in the different samples (Figure 3 bottom right panel). The differences between the different publics are stunning and do not point to the 2019 protest wave as the great educational equaliser. The lion's share of 2019 youngsters were either pupils in *general* secondary education (denoted by ASO in Figure 3) and/or university students. Pupils of technical, professional and secondary art education remain vastly underrepresented compared to their share in the national (and general demonstration) population, although they are somewhat more present when compared to the typical climate demonstration. In

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brief, education clearly matters for participation and the 2019 protest still particularly mobilised the typical educational elite (to be), despite a momentum that would make one expect diminishing inequalities.

In all, four conclusions can be drawn from our analysis of socio-demographics. First, our analysis points to an exceptional participation rate of adolescents. Second, especially in the early phase of the wave, the protest could count on strong female enthusiasm. The education gap, thirdly, appears to be the most persistent one, with the lion's share of demonstrators being drawn from high educational profiles or high educational profiles to be. Finally, our data show that especially the early January-February phase of the protest wave was atypical and that throughout the protest wave, the socio-demographic profile of the 2019 participant increasingly started resembling that of the typical climate protester.

5.3 Political Attitudes and Behaviour

Did the 2019 protest wave manage to mobilise individuals that were to a lesser extent 'political animals'? Or did it reinforce the voice of those already likely to be politically active? Figure 4 zooms in on the political attitudes and behaviours of the different publics. Especially for these features, our data show that the 2019 climate demonstrators were not that exceptional. Especially individuals with traits of the usual suspects were mobilised. In many cases, the 2019 protester shows to be indistinguishable from the 2009 climate demonstrator. And, in several instances, the 2019 protester is even more 'extreme' and thus farther removed from the general public (and general demonstrator) than the climate protester in 2009. In sum, for political traits, the exceptional mobilisation context appears to have widened rather than closed participation gaps.

For *political interest*, we find that the 2019 protester, across all phases, is equally interested in politics as the ordinary climate demonstrator (up to 85% is quite to very interested in politics), with climate demonstrators being much more interested in politics compared to the average demonstrator (64.7%) and the general citizen (43.9%). The same holds for *talking politics*: the 2019 protest wave did not manage to mobilise participants who talk generally less about politics (hovering around 3.5 on 5). So, just like in 2009, the 2019 climate protesters were very much politically aware and savvy.

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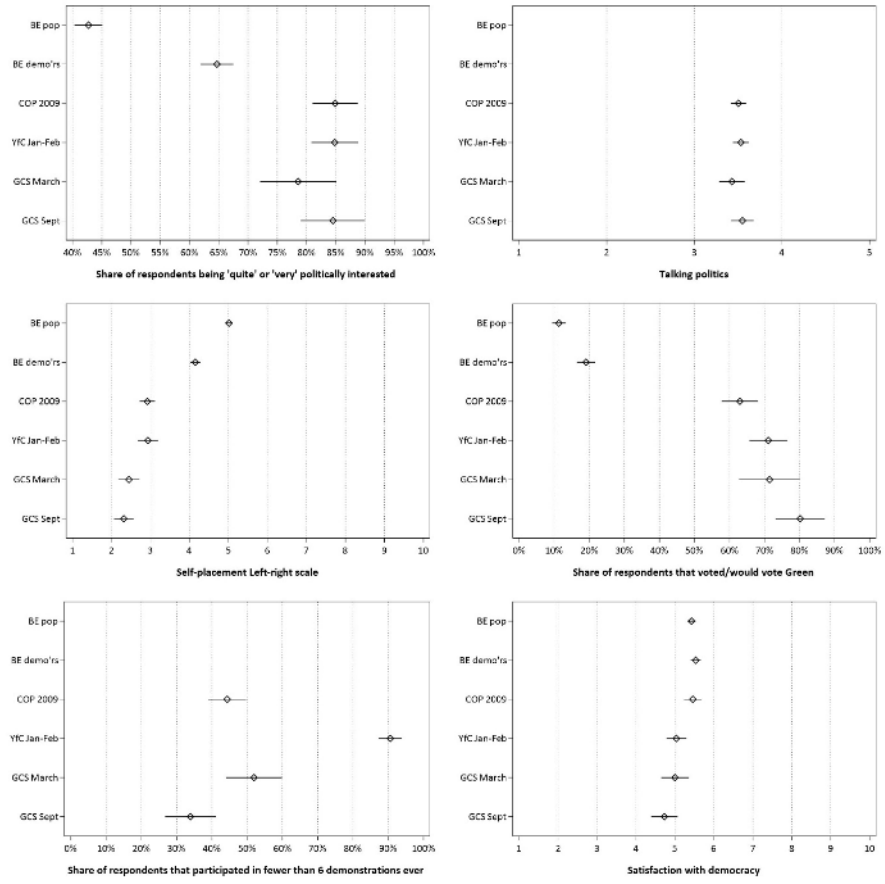
Figure 4 Political attitudes and behaviour



On other political traits, the 2019 demonstrator was different from the 2009 climate demonstrator. Yet, most of these differences go in the opposite direction of what we would expect of the mobilising context. Rather than adding unusual suspects to the mix and closing participation gaps, they were broadened. Our findings show that in terms of *political positioning* the 2019 demonstrator became more detached from the general public, rather than more resembling – especially throughout the protest wave. So, while the climate demonstrator in 2009 was already quite *left-wing* (2.9), and definitely more left-wing compared to the general demonstrator (4.2) and citizen (5.0), the 2019 demonstrator in March (2.45) and September (2.31) was even more left-wing than the 2009 climate demonstrator. A similar pattern comes to light with regard to protesters' *party preference*. In 2009, about 63% of climate demonstrators indicated to have voted for a green party in the last election. Amongst demonstrators in general, this holds for about a fifth of protesters (19%). The vote share of greens within the 2019 demonstrations skyrockets, from 71 to no less than 80% of participants. Again, one has to be

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careful while interpreting these findings. On the one hand, it could be that the 2019 protest wave convinced participants to vote green. Simultaneously, it could also be that only those who (intended to) vote green persisted in their protest; and that those who shared the ideals of the climate strikers but did not vote green dropped out. In any case, the scope of party preference within the 2019 protest wave starkly diminished and grew narrower throughout the campaign, clearly setting the 2019 climate demonstrator apart from the general public, even more so than the 2009 demonstrator. *Democratic satisfaction*, finally, diminished throughout the wave – plausible given the meagre success of the protesters despite so much commitment (no climate law, disappointing electoral results). Also in that regard, the 2019 protesters became less rather than more reflective of the general population.

Only for one characteristic, we can confirm that the 2019 protest wave drew exceptional, new blood to the climate movement. That is, the share of participants with little *demonstration experience* was much higher in the early phase of the 2019 protest: 90% of participants in January demonstrated less than 6 times in their lifetime – undoubtedly the consequence of youngsters taking the lead. In March (52%), the crowd grew more experienced. And, September participants (32% having demonstrated less than 6 times) were even more experienced compared to the 2009 climate demonstrator (44%). This might especially be the consequence of more 'greybeard participants' showing up throughout the wave as our findings on age suggest. Yet, a part of this result can also be ascribed to the role of persistent youngsters, however, who quickly gained protest experience throughout 2019. In all, we find that across most age groups, the 2019 protests drew less experienced protest participants compared to 2009.

In sum, especially for the political traits mentioned earlier, the results of the 2019 protest wave in fostering equality are rather bleak. Except for less experienced demonstrators in the early phase, most other evidence points to the same old pattern of highly interested and predominantly left-wing 'political animals' hitting the streets.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

From an event perspective, the 2019 climate protest wave was without doubt exceptional. Launched as a Facebook page, Youth for Climate drew exceptional masses to the streets for an exceptional number of consecutive weeks resulting in exceptional media, public and political resonance. In this article, we scrutinised whether at the level of the participating individuals, the 2019 protest wave was exceptional as well. Did the out-of-the-ordinary mobilising context bring out-of-the ordinary participants to the streets? Or were deep-rooted participation biases reproduced?

While our findings straightforwardly confirm the exceptional mobilising structure of the 2019 protests with heavy reliance on social media mobilisation, the evidence for higher participation rates of unusual participants and hence more equal participation is mixed. On the one hand, we find that in the 2019 protests

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younger participants obviously participated more. And, we found that those who participated were less protest experienced and more frequently unaffiliated to organisations as well. These latter results were found across age groups. As such, the protest wave clearly tapped the potential that climate demonstrations typically do not succeed in reaching, closing participation gaps in that regard. On the other hand, our findings simultaneously confirm the persistence of many traditional inequalities related to demonstrating in terms of socio-demographics and political attitudes. Also in the 2019 protest wave, the typical participant was highly educated, very politically interested and politically talkative. In fact, on most of the socio-demographic and political features we tested, the 2019 and 2009 climate demonstrators were indistinguishable. Moreover, the 2019 participant showed to be even more leftist and narrow in its party preference compared to the 2009 climate demonstrator – and thus farther detached from the general public. While the 2019 protests thus clearly mobilised younger, less experienced, unaffiliated individuals, these very same individuals at the same time strongly resemble the typical (climate) protester in terms of political attitudes and behaviour. In addition, the mobilisation of unusual suspects is especially apparent in the early phase of the 2019 wave and clearly diminished throughout, suggesting that for the persistence of the 2019 protests the usual suspects were very much needed. More than a story of vast individual-level change in demonstration composition given the exceptional mobilising context, our findings reflect one of modest change and high individual-level continuity, confirming the stark persistence of many inequalities related to participation.

Critics might argue that this interpretation does injustice to the unique and unprecedented nature of the 2019 protest. To be sure, we agree that the level of mobilisation by adolescents and emerging adults was exceptional. In times where youngsters are blamed for political apathy (Sloam, 2014), the initiative and engagement they showed in the 2019 protests are remarkable and should not be underestimated. In fact, given the importance of political socialisation and defining moments (Grasso et al., 2019), the experience of the 2019 protest might mark an entire generation of youngsters, influencing the climate movement in the years to come.

Acknowledging the, by all means, noteworthy engagement of youngsters, our findings strongly highlight the stark persistence of inequalities and the difficulty of mobilising truly exceptional participants. For those who expected that the climate momentum succeeded in mobilising atypical protesters – with slim educational achievements, low political interest and holding less left-wing orientations – our analyses come with a sobering message. Although younger, less experienced and unaffiliated individuals were reached, the closing of these gaps came with exacerbating others. In sum, even in highly favourable contexts, deeply rooted inequalities are difficult to overcome.

Our study has several limitations. Although the data we leverage are by all means impressive and unique, it also has its shortcomings. As emerging grassroots social movements are phenomena under construction, it is hard to pin down 'the' movement participant. Movement scholars aim at a moving target (Tarrow, 1991). We focused on three key moments in the mobilisation that were accompanied by

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spikes in media attention, but we did not survey *all* events. This brings up the question of whether our selection of events could have distorted our conclusions. In an ideal world, on-the-spot data would have been gathered at the two 'turnout-record' climate demonstrations as well. It might be the case that those events were rare species of demonstration equality. We doubt so, however. In any case, with three snapshots of the exceptional 2019 protest wave and three reference publics being scrutinised, the least one can say is that our approach of the 2019 protest wave was elaborate.

Wrapping up, clear future research challenges emerge. With this case study, we focused in close detail on the events in Belgium, an early adopter in the 2019 climate protest wave. As part of an international data collection effort, also climate protests in other countries were surveyed (Wahlström et al., 2019). One promising way forward appears to scrutinise whether other protests from the same wave confirm the findings reported here, or rather, that the Belgian case is an outlier in international perspective, and in that light, which contextual elements help to explain similarities and differences in demonstration composition cross-nationally. Doing so will improve our understanding of the conditions that enable tearing down structural inequalities in participation.

For the Appendix, please see https://www.elevenjournals.com/tijdschrift/PLC/2022/Online%20First/PLC-D-21-00003A

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