

ZOOM Político

15M Revisited: A Diverse Movement United for Change

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2012 / 11

Las claves

- ✓ *The 15M movement in Madrid is not just a movement of the young and marginalized. Many participants are older, employed and a majority of them consider their current financial situation as relatively good. At the same time, many share a concern about their future financial situation*
- ✓ *Participants' main concerns regard political corruption, global financial markets and banks as well as issues related to public spending*
- ✓ *Their main emotions are moral outrage and anger, but little hope when thinking about economic inequality*
- ✓ *The current situation is seen as an opposition between disadvantaged groups (such as the unemployed, workers and young people) and the powerful (such as politicians, banks and companies)*

Protesting for a change

At the time of its first anniversary on May 15th, the movement of the “indignados” shows no signs of surrendering. Large demonstrations took place on October 15th and again in the run-up to the November 2011 elections. The beginning of 2012 was marked by the “Primavera Valenciana” (spring of Valencia) where protestors against cuts in public spending clashed with the police, and by nationwide mobilization organized by unions against labour reforms. In Madrid, where the 15M began, assemblies and working groups gathered throughout the winter preparing actions and materials as well as coordinating between different assemblies within Spain and globally.

The movement is gaining experience in coordination and communication at a time when unemployment rates continue to rise and the government keeps imposing new cuts. Understanding who are the people joining the movement and what they are so angry about is as timely as ever.

This report is based on a questionnaire study conducted in Madrid between 11th and 20th of November 2011, right before the general election. The sample consists of 230 people who participated in activities related to the 15M such as assemblies and the demonstrations on November 13th and 17th. Furthermore, 21% of the participants were interviewed during different events at Hotel Madrid, an old hotel building occupied by some members of the 15M movement between October and December 2011.

Similar studies on the 15M movement have been conducted in Salamanca in May and June 2011 (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana, & Mena, 2011) and in Bilbao between May and December 2011 (Arellano, Basterretxea, and de la Cruz, 2012). The results from the Salamanca study were reported in ZOOMPolítico 2011/4. Although the three studies differ somewhat in their focus, similarities exist among the findings and will be pointed out. Together, the three studies offer a comprehensive picture of the people who participate in 15M, their motivations and their demands.

The first part of the study offers a profile of the people who participate in the movement in Madrid, showing that **although the majority of the participants are young, there are also many people aged over 50**. A majority of the participants consider their current financial situation as relatively good or sufficient, but they are concerned about their future financial situation and about becoming

unemployed. **Most participants identify with the ideological left but are not actively involved in a political party.**

The second part of the study provides a comprehensive view of the different social and political issues that motivated people to participate in the protests in Madrid, as well as their emotional reactions. The participants are equally concerned by **political corruption as by global financial markets and banks.** Issues related to public spending, in particular education and health care, are also ranked high on the list of issues that motivate participation in protests.

Finally, an analysis of open-ended answers allows identifying the key categories of actors as perceived by 15M participants. The unemployed, workers, immigrants, young people and students, the elderly, women, middle and lower class are seen to suffer the most in the current situation. The main adversaries of the 15M movement include **the political class and parties, banks and bankers, together with the financial system and speculators, and companies.** Importantly, however, the participants do not see themselves as fighting in favour of specific social groups but, rather, in favour of **a change that would benefit society as a whole.**

Profile of the participants

The data come from 230 people who participated in activities of the 15M movement in Madrid in November 2011.¹ The majority had participated in the demonstrations on both May 15 and October 15 in 2011. Furthermore, 90% had participated in assemblies (see Table 1). Let us begin by looking at who were the people that were active in the movement in November 2011. What is their profile in terms of gender, age, education and employment situation? How do they perceive their financial situation now and in the future? What political activities do they take part in?

¹ Altogether 249 people answered the questionnaire but those who were not active in the 15M were left out of the analyses (i.e. those who had not participated in any of the following activities: demonstration 15M, demonstration 15O, encampment, assemblies).

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Table 1. Out of activities carries out by the 15M movement, in which did you participate?

	N	Percentage who had participated
Demonstration 15M	183	82%
Demonstration 15O	183	82%
Encampment	100	47%
Assembly	204	90%

Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

Half of the participants interviewed in Madrid were men and half were women. Their age ranged between 16 and 68 years, with a mean age of 33 years. The movement is often portrayed as consisting mostly of young people and students. Data from the Madrid study show that this is only partly true. Similarly to the Salamanca and Bilbao studies, the majority (67%) of 15M activists in the Madrid sample were young, between 20 and 35 years old, showing that young people are more easily mobilized to take part in demonstrations and assemblies of the 15M movement.

However, it is important to notice that 15% of the people interviewed were between 50 and 68 years old. Also, while 45% of the participants were students², 52% declared to be currently in paid work. Again similarly to the Salamanca and Bilbao studies, the **level of education** of the participants was very high: the majority (66%) reported studying or having studied at university.

A common concern among all participants is the **fear of unemployment**. Of all the respondents who were not yet retired, 54% found it probable that they would be unemployed for at least four consecutive weeks within the next 12 months³. Among those currently in paid work, the number of people anticipating unemployment was somewhat lower, 38%, but among students it was as high as 70% showing that this group perceives the bleakest future prospects (see Table 2).

In addition to anticipations of future unemployment, Table 2 also shows how many 15M activists have **previously been unemployed** and looking for work

2 The number is lower than in the Salamanca study where 67% declared themselves as students.

3 This includes those who answered 5, 6 or 7 on a scale from 1 = not at all probable to 7 = very probable.

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As many as 20% of the people interviewed felt they were wealthy or financially better off than most

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for over 3 months. This is the case for 54% of all participants. An interesting phenomenon occurs among students: only 38% of them have been unemployed and looking for work previously but 70% of them think this will be the case in the next 12 months.

Table 2: Previous unemployment and anticipation of future unemployment

	Students (total number of students)	In paid work (total number of "in paid work")	All (total number of respondents)
Fear of future unemployment	70% (58)	38% (44)	54% (107)
Previous unemployment	38% (39)	57% (68)	54% (124)

Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

Based on their demands for more social justice and their opposition to cuts in social spending, one could assume that the 15M movement mostly consists of people with a poor financial situation. This does not seem to be the case, at least when asking about how the participants **perceive their financial situation relative to other people in Spain**. Figure 1 shows that altogether 70% of the participants consider their financial situation as good (32%) or so-so (38%). Only 10% think they are poor or worse off than most people in Spain. It is interesting to note that as many as 20% of the people interviewed felt they were wealthy or financially better off than most. So, in line with findings from the Bilbao study, **the 15M is not a movement that only engages people who are directly suffering from the situation or feel they are worst off in society.**

To understand how the participants felt about their position in society, they were also asked to what extent they felt that there were people in Spain who were **unfairly advantaged** compared to them. 76% of the participants agreed with the statement⁴, showing that, overall, **there is a strong sense of unjust deprivation**. Strikingly, at the same time 66% of the participants felt they were **privileged** compared to many people in the country. The people active in 15M, then, seem to feel at the same time unjustly deprived and relatively privileged, creating a tension where they feel both touched by the problems but also have enough resources to take action.

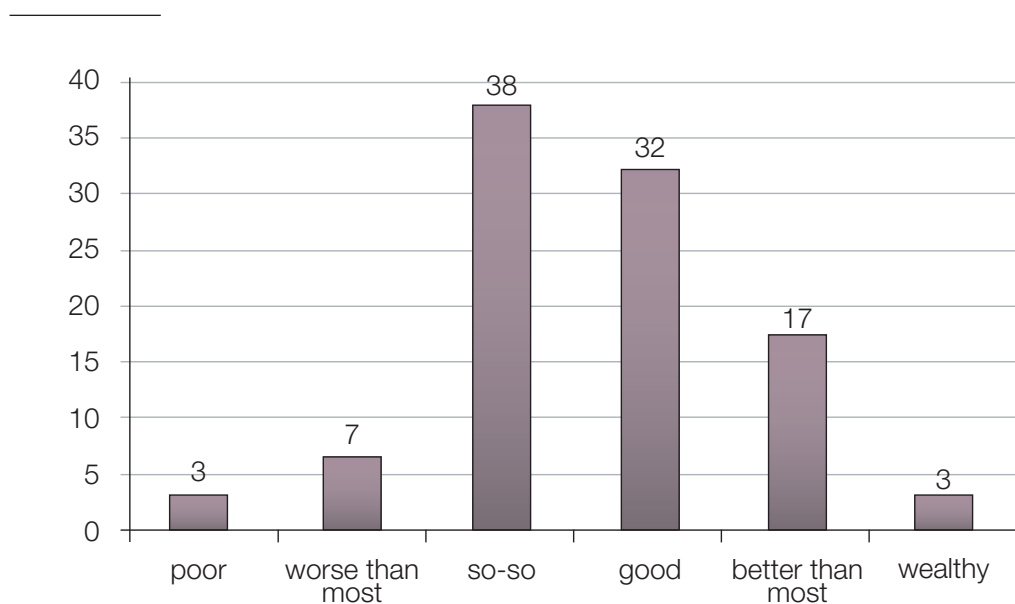
⁴ This includes those who answered 5, 6 or 7 on a scale from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree.

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While most participants feel their current financial situation is good or so-so, many feel much less confident about their situation in the future

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Figure 1. Perceived economic situation compared to other people in Spain (percentage of participants in each category)



Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

In addition to the questions on their current material situation, the participants were asked how they perceived their **future financial situation**. They were asked how likely they thought that there would be periods during the next 12 months when they would not have enough money to cover household necessities. 24% of the participants said this was “very likely” (answering 7 on a scale from 1 = not at all likely to 7 = very likely), and another 25% agreed somewhat with the statement (answering 5 or 6). These findings are striking as they show that while most participants feel their current financial situation is good or so-so, many feel much less confident about their situation in the future. The feeling that one’s situation is likely to deteriorate in the future is likely to play a role in explaining the willingness to participate in the protests.

Regarding ideological views, as in the Salamanca study, **15M activists in Madrid locate themselves clearly on the left of the political left-right continuum**. On a scale from 1 (=left) to 10 (=right), the mean was 1.67. Not all participants, however, considered that the continuum was a meaningful way to account for their ideological location (e.g. anarchists), and 12% of respondents refused to answer the question.

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As we saw above, the participants are characterized by active engagement in the 15M through participation in demonstrations, assemblies and encampments. But what other political activities have they engaged in? Table 3 shows that the members of 15M are most active in groups and associations not related to political parties. 36% had, however, contacted a politician or an official. Nearly all participants had participated in demonstrations and signed petitions, a natural result considering that the data were collected mostly during demonstrations and assemblies.

Table 3. Which of the following activities have you done in the last 12 months?

	Yes	No
Contacted a politician, government or local government official	36% (83)	64% (146)
Worked in a political party	17% (40)	83% (189)
Worked in an action group or association	82% (187)	18% (41)
Signed a petition	92% (209)	8% (19)
Taken part in a public demonstration	99% (228)	1% (1)

Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

Issues motivating participation

To understand why the 15M movement emerged and why it has not dissolved it is central to look at the motivations of those who participate in it. The study provides a comprehensive view of the different social and political issues that motivated people to participate in the protests in Madrid. Figure 2 shows the mean agreement with twelve different issues ranging from public services and unemployment to lack of democracy and corruption. While all twelve issues were considered important in motivating participation (all means are above 6 on a scale from 1 = not important at all to 7 = very important), some emerged as more important than others.

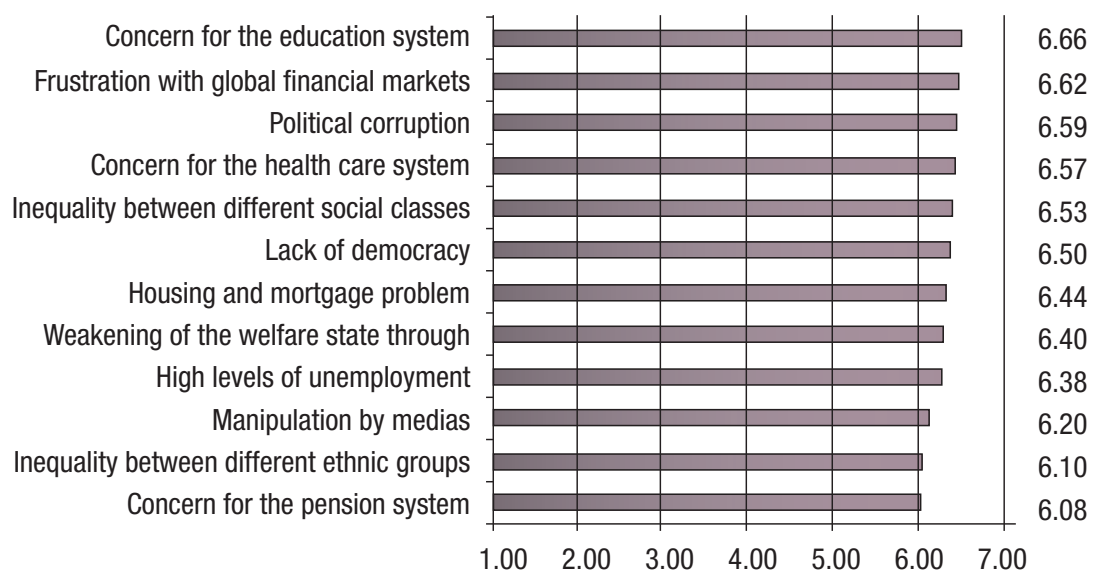
The question with the highest agreement was concern with the **education system**. This may partly be explained by the fact that November 2011 (when the data were collected) was a time of active student mobilization against raises in university taxes and cuts in higher education as well as the “green tide” (Ma-

rea Verde) movement opposing cuts in public education, both of which brought the issue of education to public awareness. **Frustration with global financial markets as well as political corruption** also came at the top of the list as motivating the choice to participate in the protests, along with a number of issues related to health care, housing and weakening of the welfare state.

When comparing with the results from the Salamanca study, several similarities can be noticed. First, the overall support is high for all the different issues presented to the participants. Second, both studies find that the participants are not only concerned about politics and corruption, but also highly frustrated by the power of financial markets and banks. Of somewhat smaller importance, but still clearly on the agenda among the 15M in both cities, are cuts in social spending. In the future, the issue of public spending may become an even more central one for the movement as unemployment soars and the government faces demands for ever deeper cuts from the European Union.

Considering that the 15M consists of people of all ages and diverse backgrounds, we could expect to find different motivations among different groups of people. Are the reasons to participate in protests the same among students compared to non-students, among younger compared to older participants, or among those

Figure 2. Importance of issues in deciding to join the protests (mean on a scale from 1 = not at all important to 7 = very important)



Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

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with a more precarious financial situation compared to those better off? Analyses (data not shown) reveal **no differences between students and non-students, or between different age groups**, in their agreement with the twelve items. **One’s perceived financial situation relative to others, however, was related to some small differences in concerns.** When contrasting those who considered themselves wealthy or better off than most (20% of the sample) with the rest of the participants, those with a better situation were somewhat less concerned about the following issues: levels of unemployment (mean 5.89 vs. 6.49), the pension system (5.57 vs. 6.21), housing and mortgage problem (6.19 vs. 6.51), lack of democracy (6.23 vs. 6.57), and inequality between different ethnic groups (5.64 vs. 6.22). The conclusion based on these differences is not that the 15M is divided into those who are better and those are less well off. Rather, **even the more financially secure participants were highly concerned about the same issues as the other participants.**

We can assume that **different motivations are related to each other** so that for example people who are concerned by the health care system are also concerned by pensions, both being services traditionally guaranteed by the state. It is possible to explore such grouping of questions into larger dimensions by using a technique called factor analysis. The analysis reveals that participants’ motivations are grouped into three dimensions, summarized in Table 4. The first dimension groups together issues related to public services and the welfare state. The second dimension refers to inequality between groups and a lack of democracy. The third dimensions includes issues related to financial markets,

Table 4: Three dimensions of issues motivating participation

1. Concern for public services	2. Concern about inequality	3. Concern with markets and corruption
Concern for the health care system	Inequality between different social classes	Frustration with global financial markets and banks
Concern for the education system	Inequality between different ethnic groups	Political corruption
Concern for the pension system	Manipulation by medias	Housing and mortgage problem
High levels of unemployment	Lack of democracy	
Weakening of the welfare state through spending cuts		

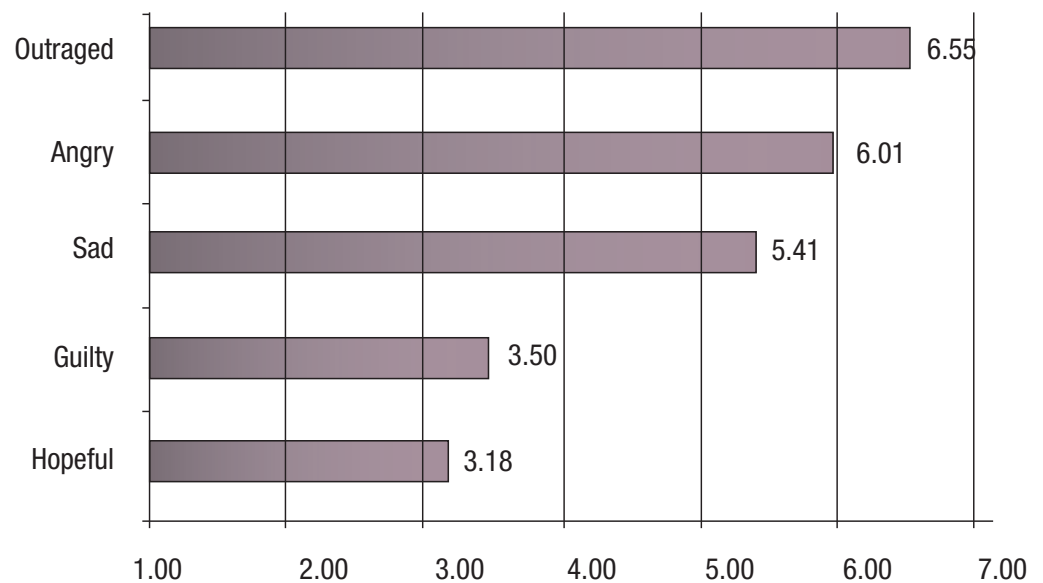
Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

corruption and housing. In the minds of participants, then, issues within each dimension are related. A participant concerned about health care is also likely to be concerned about education and pensions, while someone who feels strongly about corruption is also likely to be frustrated with financial markets and banks.

Emotional reactions to economic disadvantage

Emotions such as anger or moral outrage are a critical aspect of social movements as they may energize mobilization (e.g., Montada & Schneider, 1989). It is therefore fitting that the participants of the 15M movement are also called the “indignados”, or the “outraged”. Emotions were also found to play a key role in a study on the 15M in Bilbao (Arellano, Basterretxea, and de la Cruz, 2012). In the Madrid study, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt each of the following emotions when thinking about economically disadvantaged people: morally outraged, angry, sad, guilty, and hopeful. The general picture that emerges from the results (Figure 3) is clear: **the key emotion was moral**

Figure 3: Emotions felt when thinking about economically disadvantaged people (mean on a scale from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree)



Source: Study conducted in November 2011 in Madrid

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Despite their active participation in the protests, the participants were reserved in their hopes that economic inequality would be solved soon

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outrage, but two other negative emotions – anger and sadness – were also rated high. **The 15M is a movement characterized by anger at social injustice.** The mean for the positive emotion of hope was low, only 3.18 on scale from 1 to 7, showing that despite their active participation in the protests, the participants were reserved in their hopes that economic inequality would be solved soon. Finally, although the mean for feeling guilty when thinking about economically disadvantaged people was only 3.50, as many as 33% of the participants agreed with the statement (responses between 5 and 7). In other words, it seems like many of the participants were motivated by a sense of guilt related to their own, relatively good position.⁵

Qualitative analysis: Victims, beneficiaries and adversaries

From the beginning of the movement, members of the 15M have been clear about who they think are the key culprits responsible for the problems: mainly **politicians, banks and the financial system.** The aim of the Madrid study was to see if other categories were also present by giving the participants the opportunity to express in their own words who they felt they were fighting against, but also who they were fighting for. The study used open-ended questions to offer participants the opportunity to express their views on: 1) who they perceived was suffering the most in the current situation in Spain; 2) who they felt they were fighting for; and, finally 3) who they felt they were fighting against. An analysis of the answers allows identifying the key categories of actors and victims of the current situation, according to participants of the 15M movement.

Victims. The same categories of people emerged over and over again when asking which groups or people suffered the most in the current situation in Spain. The main categories mentioned by the participants included **the unemployed, workers, immigrants, young people and students, the elderly, women, middle and lower class.** Some participants spoke in more general terms of the disadvantaged, the oppressed, and those with fewer resources. They pointed out that the crisis had hit the hardest those groups that were already socially excluded. The participants also mentioned other groups, including people and families with mortgages, those evicted from their housing, people working in

⁵ This interpretation is supported by a positive relationship between guilt and perceiving oneself to be privileged compared to many people in Spain.

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Rather than perceiving themselves as a group of radicals who advance the interest of a specific social group, they seek a change that will benefit “all citizens” or, even, “all humanity”

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personal care service and the social sector, as well as those with lower education and therefore fewer employment opportunities.

Beneficiaries. The participants were also asked who or which groups they felt they were fighting for. Here they mentioned largely the same groups as in the previous question regarding who was suffering the most: **the workers, the unemployed, young people, middle and low classes, and the disadvantaged in general.** Furthermore, several participants felt that change was necessary **not only in Spain but also globally.**

A key finding is that although the participants identified specific groups that were suffering from the current situation, **a large part of participants felt that they were not fighting for any specific groups but, in fact, in favor of everyone.** The participants felt that in the end everyone would benefit from the change they were advocating. In other words, the 15M in Madrid does not portray itself as a movement that aims to create divisions or bring to power a new group or elite, replacing one hierarchy with another. Rather than perceiving themselves as a group of radicals who advance the interest of a specific social group, they seek a change that will benefit “all citizens” or, even, “all humanity”. These findings are in line with one of the main results from the Salamanca study showing that a majority (62%) of the participants in Salamanca saw the movement as an attempt to gradually change the current system, rather than pursuing radical change.

Adversaries. The participants were also asked who they perceived they were fighting against. The two main categories that emerged are not surprising to anyone who has been following the movement in media or elsewhere: politicians and banks. The participants repeatedly mentioned the **political class and political parties**, and the word “politician” was often followed by the word “corrupt” or “professional”. **Many also rejected the two-party system that was not seen to support a truly representative democracy.** Again, a link can be made with the Salamanca study which showed that as many as 79% of the participants who had voted in the regional and local elections on May 22nd had given their vote to a small political party. Together, these findings illustrate a deep disillusionment with the big political parties in both cities. The disappointment with big parties does not, however, translate into an active political engagement with the smaller ones, as only 17% of the Madrid sample reported having collaborated with any political party (see Table 3 above). Rather, the participants seem totally frustrated with traditional politics and have, therefore, chosen a third way: the 15M.

Banks and bankers, together with the financial system and speculators formed the second large category that 15M is fighting against. A third key category consisted of **companies**. The participants said they fought against large companies, businessmen and multinational firms. On a more abstract level, they said they were opposed to **capitalism and the neoliberal system**.

The answers given by 15M participants indicate a vision of a society that is divided between those who hold power and abuse it and the rest of the population. In addition to the three concrete categories mentioned above, the participants spoke about the powerful, the rich, high political and economic classes, even using terms such as the “caciques”. The participants spoke of oppressors and exploiters who were perpetuating inequalities. They were described as purely self-interested, with no regard for the dignity of others.

Globalization, democracy and ideology. Three more themes emerged from an analysis of the comments by 15M participants. First, many participants underlined **the international nature of political and social problems**. They mentioned international financial elites as the culprits, pointing out that the problems were not limited to the Spanish context but were increasingly dependent on international organizations and the global economy. Some of the participants said they were demanding global change that went beyond the current problems in Spain.

A second theme that emerged was that of democracy. As the name of the movement “Democracia Real Ya” implies, together with the famous slogan “No nos representan”, members of the 15M are **frustrated with the current forms of representative democracy**. They ask for a more direct democracy by the people, where their voice is heard in all decision-making, not only at the ballot box once every four years.

Finally, earlier studies have sought to identify where the 15M movement can be located on the ideological left-right continuum. A third theme that emerged in the comments concerns the need to go **beyond a traditional conceptualization of ideology in terms of left and right**. For some participants, the 15M is first and foremost a movement of citizens against politicians and banks. Divisions in terms of left and right were seen as diverting attention away from more real and pressing concerns such as human dignity.

Conclusions

Based on a questionnaire study among 230 people participating in assemblies and demonstrations related to the 15M movement in Madrid in November 2011, certain conclusions can be made. Regarding the profile of the participants, contrary to how the movement is often portrayed as consisting of young and disadvantaged individuals, **this study found that the movement also includes an important number of people who are over 50 years old, people who are not students and people who consider their financial situation to be very good.** Almost half of the participants, however, were concerned about their future financial situation.

There was high agreement on the different problems that are at the core of the protests, such as concern with the **education system, frustration with global financial markets and political corruption**, along with a number of other issues. However, despite the diversity of people participating in the movement, there were few or no differences in the importance given to these issues between different age groups or as a function of financial situation. In other words, the movement stands united regarding the problems that need to be addressed.

Finally, the qualitative part of the study shows that the groups that are seen to suffer the most in the current situation include the unemployed, workers, immigrants, young people and students, the elderly, women, middle class and lower class. As the main adversaries, the participants identify politicians, banks and companies. Despite these clear categorizations, a central vision among a majority of participants is that the change they seek is one that will benefit everyone – no matter what their position.

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