



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 693

Abstract | This study involved interviews with a sample of individuals who protested in opposition to public health measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews were analysed to explore the motivations for participating in protest activity.

Protesters were motivated by strong personal grievances based on perceived negative experiences and deterioration of their or their family's personal circumstances. For many respondents, these grievances were shaped by and amplified by adherence to conspiratorial ideologies and sovereign citizen beliefs. The combination of grievances and conspiratorial beliefs fostered mistrust and strong anti-government sentiment. For many, the response by government had steeled their resolve to protest.

These findings demonstrate the diverse and sometimes extreme views that can motivate people to participate in protest activity against government authority.

Grievances and conspiracy theories as motivators of anti-authority protests

Timothy Cubitt, Anthony Morgan and Isabella Voce

Recent protest activity in Australia has related to a range of political and social causes, including climate change, women's rights, pandemic-related government policies, and a range of ideological movements. While peaceful protests were held in parts of the country, some resulted in arrests, fines and violence (ABC News 2021; Bavas & Nguyen 2021). Over time, fringe and conspiratorial rhetoric increased across social media (De Coninck 2021) and began featuring more prominently in anti-authority 'freedom' protests (Khalil & Roose 2023). While the public health measures have ceased, these freedom protests—and related social movements—have persisted. Conspiratorial and far-right actors have become increasingly prominent among anti-government or anti-authority protests.

Celebrating
50 years

People participate in protests for a range of reasons. However, for the majority, it may be distilled down to one core factor: a grievance (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). These can include experiences of inequality, feelings of deprivation, feelings of injustice, a perceived moral injury, or a sudden change of circumstances (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2009, 2010). However, the motivation to act on this grievance by protesting is often dependent on a series of associated factors, such as how similar a protest cause is to the core concerns of an individual (Simon et al. 1998; Sturmer & Simon 2004), how closely an individual identifies with the underlying beliefs of a protest group (Sturmer & Simon 2004), and what are known as instrumental factors. Instrumental factors relate to a transaction: protesters experience a grievance, are motivated to protest in an effort to correct that specific grievance, and seek to stimulate a material change in circumstances (Klandermans 1984). While instrumental factors may be resolved quickly, by improving employment rights or increasing pay (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011), emotional factors such as shared group anger are more likely to persist over time (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011).

Grievances that are underpinned by ideological beliefs are often based on a perception that a situation is incompatible with or has violated fundamental individual values, and that the only way to resolve that grievance is to protest. And, while protests motivated primarily by instrumental factors often recede, protests motivated by personal, group-based or ideological factors are more likely to persist.

Conspiratorial views and anti-authority protest

Protests relating to pandemic public health measures, including anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination and anti-vaccine mandate protests, differed from other protest activity because of their links with the anti-government freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023). These protest movements presented an opportunity for exploitation by groups who intended to promote anti-government sentiment, often interlinked with far-right or conspiratorial ideologies, with the intention of increasing division within the community (McGowan 2021; Pantucci 2022; Roose 2021; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022). Anti-authority protests across the COVID-19 period were seemingly characterised by the strong grievances of participants that, in some cases, resulted in threats or incitement of violence towards high-profile politicians and government officials (ASIO 2022; Butler 2022; McKenzie & Lucas 2021).

Protest activity across the COVID-19 period was unique because it brought together groups of individuals, with little else in common, who shared a disapproval of government policy. Importantly, these protests also featured more extreme elements of anti-authority causes (Roose 2021; Wilson 2022), resulting in moderate protest attendees being exposed to extreme ideas, including a range of conspiracy beliefs. This was not unique to Australia, with many of these more extreme groups having a presence at freedom protests around the world (McGowan 2021; Roose 2021).

Conspiracy beliefs can be differentiated from other beliefs by five unique features. Conspiracy theories typically oppose a publicly accepted understanding of events, describe malevolent or forbidden acts, attribute responsibility to individuals or groups rather than systems, are more prone to falsity than other beliefs, and have the potential to misrepresent current events or develop new alternative realities among social groups (Douglas & Sutton 2023). Although each respective feature may be present among groups who hold other beliefs, for those who believe in conspiracy theories, each feature tends to be present. However, it is important to note that conspiratorial beliefs do not exclude the possibility that an individual simultaneously adheres to other ideologies.

Conspiratorial beliefs are associated with alienation from political groups (Jolley & Douglas 2014), while decreasing public support for government policies (Douglas & Sutton 2015; Jolley & Douglas 2014). They offer a unifying narrative and cohesive force against a common enemy and reduce ambiguity in such a way that followers can easily reject alternative worldviews (Bartlett & Miller 2010; Basit 2021). They are also associated with extremist groups and endorsement of political violence (Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet 2015; Vegetti & Littvay 2022). To date, research has relied on social media posts (Khalil & Roose 2023; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022) to provide insight into the relationship between the attitudes and behaviour of individuals. However, less is known about the role that belief in conspiracy theories plays in shaping grievances and motivating protesters (Bertuzzi 2021), especially in the Australian context. Given that they remain a feature of more recent protest activity (Elias 2023), this is an important gap. This study sought to better understand the motives for participating in protests and the influence of conspiratorial beliefs in shaping grievances among a sample of individuals who protested in opposition to pandemic-related public health policies.

Method

The sample for this study was drawn from a larger survey of more than 13,000 online Australians about their social and political beliefs conducted in late 2022. The survey asked respondents if they had ever participated in protest activity, with a follow-up question asking whether they had participated in protest activity between January 2020 and undertaking the survey. Respondents who reported that they were involved in protest activity specifically relating to government COVID-19 policies within the three years prior to undertaking the survey ($n=185$) were then asked whether they would be willing to undertake follow-up online questioning, in which a moderator posed questions and prompts to respondents, to better understand their protest activity. Nearly half agreed to participate ($n=90$, 49%). After recruitment, interviews were undertaken with 35 participants (39% of those who consented) with the intention of understanding the motivations, perceptions and experiences of those who had protested government policies and regulations relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because respondents may have participated in multiple protests during the observation period, the moderated interview was focused on the most recent protest. While all interview participants identified that they had protested against government COVID-19 regulations, there were eight respondents who had most recently protested in support of other causes. These included improved pay and workers' rights, women's rights and climate change. We limited our analysis to individuals whose responses specifically related to protests against COVID-19 public health measures ($n=27$).

Half of the sample were male (52%, $n=14$), 44 percent ($n=12$) said they had a university education, and the majority were under the age of 50 (63%, $n=17$). At the time of undertaking the survey, more than half of respondents had at least part-time or casual employment (59%, $n=16$) and were in a relationship (67%, $n=18$); 56 percent of respondents ($n=15$) said they had never participated in an in-person protest before January 2020, while the remainder were repeat protesters. Respondents were also asked whether they considered themselves to be progressive, centrist or conservative in relation to social-change movements. The majority of respondents reported being either conservative (37%, $n=10$) or centrist (33%, $n=9$). Progressive views on social change were less common (15%, $n=4$), while a further four respondents did not know which way they leaned on social-change issues. Interviews were undertaken using an interactive, text-based online platform managed by Roy Morgan Research.

Given the nature of the data and focus of the research, this study adopted a phenomenological approach to understanding the experiences of individuals who protested against COVID-19 regulations and their reasons for protesting (Burns et al. 2022). This approach focused on how they perceived the introduction of the regulations, their motivations for protesting, and their views of government and police. The semi-structured questionnaire included a series of open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their views and experiences, with some additional prompting from the moderator. We adopted an inductive approach to identify the most common themes to emerge from the online interviews. As this was a written interview, we have presented the written responses verbatim, retaining grammatical and spelling errors.

Limitations

While most participants were forthcoming, requiring relatively little prompting, some (including those individuals who were approached but did not participate) may have been reluctant to share information about their protest involvement, or provide detailed information about their honest views or beliefs. This is because of both the focus of the research and the fact that the online interviews were conducted on behalf of an Australian Government agency (and many participants held strong anti-government views). Conversely, using a confidential online platform—which ensured the identity of participants was unknown to the moderators—may have helped to increase participation, but also limited our ability to explore issues in depth. It should also be noted that, as with any qualitative research, we cannot comment on the presence or absence of a causal relationship between conspiratorial ideologies, misinformation and anti-authority sentiment. Further, we are cautious about generalising beyond the sample of individuals who participated in the research.

Results

While the reasons for attending protests varied between individuals, each participant described a grievance as their core motivation. These grievances were associated with a negative consequence, to either themselves or someone close to them, emerging from COVID-19 public health policies. These could be described as either personal grievances or altruistic grievances. Participants who were motivated to protest by personal grievances wanted changes after feeling aggrieved at how they had been treated. Participants who reported altruistic grievances were more focused on the impact of regulations on their wider community and described a duty to protest against government powers to stimulate change that would benefit a wider group.

Perceived negative consequences of public health policies

Respondents all described the negative consequences of public health policies as a reason for attending protests. Some of these consequences were real, while others were clearly shaped by conspiratorial narratives that had been spread online.

Vaccination mandates in certain settings were a source of significant personal grievance, particularly where restrictions prevented respondents from visiting family members. This was connected to a perceived loss of rights:

With the subsequent onset of c-19, several of what I believed were my rights were taken away, including visiting my dying mother, my only family in Australia bar a distant cousin I barely ever see, in her residential care facility ... At a point during c-19, vaccinated family members were permitted to take UNvaccinated residents offsite to public places, bring them back to the facility, where they were returned to general population until/if they became symptomatic. Meanwhile, I was officially informed to not enter the facility property at all. (Participant 26, first-time protester)

Personal grievances sometimes extended to the treatment of family, indicative of shared grievances. For example, some protested in response to the treatment of their family because of their vaccination status. However, there was little concern for whether this was a more widespread issue:

My parents invited me to take part in the protests. I saw the ways in which they were treated by their family and their Church due to not being vaccinated and it was appalling. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Other participants argued that the measures introduced were unreasonable because, in their view, they were not supported by evidence.

I lost friends and some family relationships over my refusal to be vaccinated or wear a mask in their presence. I refused on scientific, medical and crucially on ethical grounds. (Participant 27, first-time protester)

You do not lock healthy people inside and isolate them from friends and family for their health. You do not force people to wear masks which all the professionals advised are totally useless ... You do not tell them to stay indoors away from fresh air, sunshine and exercise. (Participant 6, first-time protester)

Once the research from various government agencies indicated that prescribed treatments were not fully tested and had side-effects. For example, the compulsory wearing of masks, when all the data indicated that mask wearing was largely ineffective in preventing the spread of COVID. (Participant 7, repeat protester)

I knew that vaccines go through a 10 year testing period and that the COVID vaccine skipped several steps in development. I was concerned about potential side effects especially considering I planned on starting a family and did not want to take any chances with fertility. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Similarly, another protester described how their partner had lost their job after refusing to get vaccinated, and so became increasingly engaged in protest activity to try and prevent others from experiencing the same outcome. This is a good example of an instrumental motivation:

My wife was communicating with many nurses in the same predicament: job or job. We discussed and researched the issue often. Protest rallies were being organized via social media. My wife was attending regularly since she was now unemployed ... It was clear this was not just ignorance or incompetence but vindictive punishment for non-compliance and I decided it was time to give up my weekends as well and attend the protests with her. (Participant 19, first-time protester)

Participating in the social movement had also come at a perceived personal cost, and this only served to amplify the grievance and motivate participants to stay involved:

This movement has cost me my career and another job and it almost cost me my family, I was also made a second class citizen for a period of time where I was not welcomed in many places in my community, the price of my stance on these issues has been heavy yet I regret nothing and was even willing and ready to pay a much higher cost than what I had paid and will continue to support these causes at the risk of losing more than I already have. (Participant 16, first-time protester)

Many first-time protesters—people who had never protested before the pandemic—held strong personal grievances, which translated into strong anti-government sentiment. They described how they or their family had suffered as a consequence of public health policies, such as by losing a job or income, losing ties to family or friends, or experiencing health effects from the vaccination:

My cousin's girlfriend, who I was pretty good friends with, no longer speaks to me, I also haven't spoken to my sister since she got jabbed, this was kind of my fault, as I just didn't know what to say to her, I was so upset when I found out, I cried. We were on the same page for a long time, I just couldn't believe that she would do that just to keep a shitty job at [redacted]. My daughter lost a very well paying job in management due to jab mandates. My friends brother, who was fit and healthy suffered a stroke and died from the jab, as did my son's father in law. (Participant 15, first-time protester)

Among those who did not report a personal grievance, motivations were framed as more altruistic in nature—to help rein in government power and to aid the wider community.

I feel proud to be a part of something during protesting and also defiant as i feel i am against the odds and after a protest I feel a great sense of satisfaction at having done what i believe is the right thing to do for the great Australian community and the community I live in. (Participant 16, first-time protester)

There was a belief among some of these protesters that they had wider community support for their activism, and that protesting had increased their support:

In a few instances people questioned whether or not the pandemic was false and congratulated the protesters for standing up for freedom of choice. (Participant 12, repeat protester)

The wider community is typically represented in the media as being against our cause. However, I believe that there is a silent majority who do support us. I am aware of many people who believe that our protests are futile and consequently do not attend rallies against lockdowns. They believe that we are powerless to bring about positive change on the causes we are fighting for. As time went on, and protesting lockdowns was allowed by the authorities, the rallies intensified and were normalised. I think that this saw our protest movement more widely accepted by the wider community. (Participant 31, first-time protester)

These participants did not point to a singular event or grievance as the source of their motivation; rather, they described more abstract concerns, often referencing social media or messaging applications. Those whose grievance was framed as altruistic often reported learning about pandemic regulations online, consistent with the hybrid online and offline movement that characterised the freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023):

I learnt about the whole pandemic law by reading the online newspaper and what it was and what it entailed. I also googled generally about this proposed pandemic law. Once I read about this proposed law and the power that [politician] will have I was quite angry. I thought I had to do something. So I decided to go to the protest. I learnt about the protest from Telegram. I joined a group called Melbourne freedom rally. It had liked minded individuals like my self who were against lock downs , the mandatory covid vaccine , and the pandemic law. There was alot of discussion about the negative aspects of the pandemic law in this group. The group was telling dates and times of where the protest will be. So I ultimately joined the protest. (Participant 1, repeat protester)

There was a perception among protesters motivated by more altruistic grievances that government policy was causing significant societal damage and increasingly impinging on people's freedoms, which was a common theme and reflects the link with the broader freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023).

In my mind the issue was too important to ignore, and I felt that no action in respect to this issue would allow and lead to further infringements on our rights from multiple levels of government. I saw the issue as the government actively pushing in order to see how far they could go with regard to infringing rights and the level of compliance they could achieve. If nobody stood up to this it would have been a green light to the government to press forward with further restrictions on freedoms. (Participant 24, first-time protester)

When freedoms and human rights are denied under our Australian constitution, regardless of the reason people protest I will always support protect and protest to maintain the validity of the rights of all people ... I will maintain my rights under the Australian Constitution for all Australians. (Participant 12, repeat protester)

This group were also more likely to report conspiratorial views. Their calls to protest to protect their freedoms, and the common language underpinning these narratives, reflected a group-based anger behind an emerging ideological movement.

Endorsement of conspiratorial views and sovereign citizen ideology

Conspiratorial narratives and misinformation shared online appeared to contribute to perceptions of the effects of public health policies—grievances reported by participants—and these narratives were sometimes indistinguishable from one another. Even when they were not central to their grievance, or their motive for protesting, conspiratorial views were common. However, these beliefs existed on a continuum. Some participants described how their rights were being eroded, while others took a more extreme view. Participants who reported concerns about the validity of the vaccine development often paired them with fringe conspiratorial beliefs about censorship by the mainstream media:

When there were scientists and industry professionals talking about some of the concerns they had/have about this experimental vaccine rollout, these people were censored and cancelled by the mainstream media. So many people I spoke to didn't even realise they were participating in a vaccine trial, and it's understandable, because all people heard on the nightly news from government officials is that the vaccines are safe and effective. (Participant 29, repeat protester)

Participants who referenced conspiracy theories also discussed engaging with alternative media sources. While participants rarely described the exact nature of the content, examples included reinterpretation of medical reports on unmoderated social media platforms, and alternative perspectives of vaccination programs on well-known podcasts. These participants were typically seeking information that was not readily available from mainstream media to support their concerns about vaccination and government regulations:

It is obvious the grip of big pharma's financial constraints on the media is still firm, as well as government threats of disciplinary action. However, talking points such as the extraordinary VAERS [Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System] reports, and excess deaths being higher than they should be, are gaining traction, helped by censorship free platforms such as Rumble. Influential podcasters such as Joe Rogan and Russel Brand, with millions of followers, are talking openly about the data now and the censorship by platforms such as YouTube is easing. (Participant 19, repeat protester)

However, some protesters reported a wider range of conspiratorial views. Rather than being framed as concerns, these participants reported certainties that required immediate action. They often referenced not being heard, or listened to, and the need to engage in protest activity to increase awareness of the conspiracy:

Researching independently away from the MSM [mainstream media], the blatant lying by gov agencies and the lack of a measured response—rather than the knee jerk panic rubbish that occurred. I was aware from late 2019 when the suspicious out breaks in Wuhan were dramatically dramatized by the Chinese, and it just rolled on from there, every so called alternate theory has been now proven correct! (Participant 35, repeat protester)

Conspiratorial narratives were not limited to the pandemic; rather, the beliefs about COVID-19 were situated within wider conspiracies:

Agenda 21/30 depopulation through the vaccine. These “vaccines” are neither safe or effective. Already seeing the results ... Then total control over the remaining population through Smart Cities which restricts your movement (walking or cycling) of 15–20 minutes of your residence. All in the name of “Climate Change”. The WEF [World Economic Forum] are open about their plans. (Participant 11, first-time protester)

While participants reported conspiratorial views surrounding vaccine development, the media and government, some reported adhering to elements of the sovereign citizen ideology. Sovereign citizen beliefs range from the passive rejection of government authority to incidents of violence in support of their cause:

The government does not listen to the people, they are a service corporation listed with the United States Security Exchanges Commission NOT a proper government of and by the people and haven't been since 1973 ... Freedom means I choose what I do NOT government, government serves the people NOT the other way around otherwise we are slaves. (Participant 4, first-time protester)

For some, sovereign citizen ideology was accompanied by endorsing violence in support of their movement. These participants suggested the government was actively working against its citizens, with reference to conspiracy theories focusing on monetary policy, immigration and globalisation:

It's full on war and our treasonous govt is working for the enemy the UN and World Economic Forum they are extremely evil organisations working for the social elite. They have stolen our money and are now in control. I think eventually it will come to civil war. The people against the govt. It will be a bloody battle, many lives will be lost, however in the end [it] will be good freedom for all. (Participant 21, first-time protester)

Not all anti-authority protesters held these extreme views. Some participants reported that they were not aware of the conspiratorial views (or the strength of those views) that they were endorsing by attending the protest until after they had become involved:

There was no room for intelligent discussion or critical thinking. You were either in or out. A sheeple in a muzzle or one of them. I was neither and the anti-vax beliefs really didn't sit well with me. So there I was, in a crowd of chanting protesters, clutching my mask in hand, wondering what on earth they thought would be achieved. My reasons for being there were based around the lack of extensive clinical studies and what could be potential adverse outcomes as a result—remember thalidomide. Others there seemed to truly believe the vaccine was a means for world dominance. (Participant 2, first-time protester)

Anti-government sentiment

Unsurprisingly, given the link between conspiratorial beliefs and anti-government sentiment (Douglas & Sutton 2015; Jolley & Douglas 2014), many of the interview participants expressed strong anti-government views. Like conspiratorial beliefs, anti-government sentiment was expressed on a continuum from dissatisfaction with the public health response to extreme views. While participants disagreed with the decisions made by government, some acknowledged that, at least in the beginning, these decisions may have been well intentioned. However, as these public health policies persisted, dissatisfaction and the response to protests grew and the motivation to protest increased:

... they got in too deep on the issue. They began by locking the public down for two weeks during early 2020. Instead of returning things back to normal after a short time and simply admitting that they were wrong, they dug in and continued with lockdowns ...

They seemed to be more upset as our rallies grew in number. The way that the [politician] outright dismissed our cause was great evidence of this. Instead of remarking at how huge the opposition against him was, he thanked 'all those who made the right decision and got vaccinated.' This was a weak move and it made him look scared and intimidated. Such responses motivated me to rally even harder and oppose him even more strongly. (Participant 31, repeat protester)

Some participants reported a duty to protest when they believed that human rights were not being upheld, describing how the government response to the pandemic was inconsistent with their views about how a democratic government should operate, believing that COVID-19 policies impeded their freedoms:

I grew up in a free country. Tens of thousands of young Australians died in wars fighting for those freedoms and I do not intend on surrendering those freedoms to a bunch of uneducated unelected bureaucrats blindly following flawed orders that we[re] detrimental to o[u]r physical and mental health (Participant 6, first-time protester)

Removing vaccination mandates and lockdown policies was seen as an implied endorsement of the decision to protest:

The government has acted like an authoritarian government with its lockdowns, vaccine mandates, mandatory restrictions on people having to sign in to visit a shop for 30 seconds, self loathing daily press conferences, and name calling people who do not have as much faith in the vaccine as they do ... Thankfully I no longer need the government policy to shift as the world has now found out the vaccine was a waste of time, money, and looks like it has more chance of doing harm than good. This has caused most governments in the world to drop their mandates ... I have not attended other protests before. It was the unique issue of the government overreach by the [politician] government. (Participant 5, first-time protester)

As a consequence, many participants called for the government to be held accountable for their decisions. A perceived lack of accountability led to feelings of anger:

I'm angry because the government will always hide behind what they did and never been held accountable, angry because it didn't have to be this way, angry because our local politicians only represented the ones who agreed with them. (Participant 18, repeat protester)

We feel abused. There will be an undertone of this in society until justice is done, and those in power are made accountable ... Some want nothing less than jail time for any found guilty of fraud or negligence, or those that facilitated censorship ... I hope the past few years will someday be taught in history classes alongside the atrocities of the Soviet Union, Maoist China and Nazi Germany. (Participant 19, first-time protester)

More extreme anti-government sentiment was clearly rooted in conspiratorial ideologies:

Governments motives? They just do as they're told. Pretty much every country on earth following the same agenda? All puppets, whose strings are being pulled by the same people. All heading toward the same goal. New World Order, The Great Reset, call it what you will, I believe the curtailing of freedoms etc ... that happened during the pandemic has brought us closer to this end. (Participant 15, repeat protester)

Conspiratorial narratives were also present in how protesters characterised the government's response to protests and the use of violence by police. This had steeled their resolve to continue to protest:

The government was evil they were shooting LRADs [long-range acoustic devices] into the crowds. I got radiation burns that have left a permanent scar. As the 2030 agenda rolls out the govt are getting more and more aggressive for example in Melbourne they sprayed rubber bullets into the crowd, knocked over elderly ladies. I did not attend the Melbourne one but I watched some live footage. The mainstream media propagandized the event as usual with lies and fake news ... We have a lot to lose we must stand up to evil no matter what the cost ... They are not getting control of Australia. (Participant 21, first-time protester)

Myself personally and many of those within the cause that I spoke to while this was happening found that even after this response from the police and government, it was more important than ever to further protest. The response did nothing but add fuel to the fire and strengthen the resolve of protesters. (Participant 24, first-time protester)

Relatedly, participants with more extreme conspiratorial views reported that protest activity and resistance to government authority would persist. While they suggested the wider public may move on and forget about the effects of public health measures, participants who endorsed more conspiratorial narratives around COVID-19 regulations were adamant that they would remain vigilant to future government and police action and would be willing to continue their activism:

The mass public with their gold fish memory, the events that occurred over the past 3 years will fade for them as they settle back into normal life [but] the awakened ones, they will not forget and will be watching for the next wave of control to appear. (Participant 35, repeat protester)

Discussion

Many anti-authority protesters were motivated by strong personal grievances based on perceived negative experiences, and the deterioration of their or their family's circumstances. Others were motivated by the belief that they were protesting on behalf of the wider community. These respondents were protesting because they wanted to influence public health policies, which they perceived as eroding their rights and freedoms or having a harmful effect on society. For many respondents, these grievances were shaped or amplified by adherence to conspiratorial ideologies, including sovereign citizen beliefs. These shared beliefs led to joining the social movement and protesting (Simon et al. 1998; Sturmer & Simon 2004).

Protesters who endorsed extreme conspiratorial views reported that, although COVID-19 regulations had eased, their beliefs and grievances persisted, reflecting the notion that shared anger, fuelled by grievances, was likely to persist over time (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). This is important given that the development of an ideology may emerge from perceptions that fundamental rights or values have been violated (Klandermans 2004; van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). The grievances and shared anger that motivated protest activity appeared to foster mistrust and strong anti-government sentiment, rooted in conspiratorial beliefs, developing in some cases into a persistent anti-authority ideology. This was central to the emergence of the freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023) and attracted concern from security agencies at the height of the pandemic (ASIO 2022).

These interview findings are supported by research measuring vulnerability to radicalisation among anti-authority protesters. Morgan, Cubitt and Voce (2024) found that anti-authority protesters experienced more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than those who protested prior to the pandemic or in support of other movements. Importantly, the majority of their sample endorsed conspiratorial beliefs and reported support for values often linked with sovereign citizen ideology. Together, these findings point to an emerging and persistent anti-authority ideology that is rooted in conspiratorial views and vulnerable to cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.

Of course, anti-authority protest—when it does not contravene public health orders—is a legitimate and legal form of political dissent and an important feature of a functioning democracy. Extreme or radical views rarely result in violence. Similarly, while some protesters reported grievances alongside extreme conspiratorial views as their motivation, others attended protest activity to connect with a community who shared concerns about the efficacy of public health measures. Restricting the ability of the public to express dissent towards government, or support for different causes, has been found to further marginalise these groups and create greater grievance (Peucker 2021). Morgan, Cubitt and Voce (2024) demonstrate the heterogeneity among anti-authority protesters, many of whom neither endorsed violence nor showed an unusual degree of vulnerability to radicalisation. While many of the participants in this study reported persistent conspiratorial views and a motivation for action, others said that the strong beliefs held by others deterred them from further engagement in protest. Emerging research into the role of conspiracy theories has used samples drawn from online forums to compare people who express violent intentions with those who do not (Vergani et al. 2022). While the data used in this study contained limited information about the violent intentions of respondents, similar comparative approaches to analysing community samples may help better understand the link between conspiratorial beliefs and violent intentions.

Understanding the motivations of anti-authority protesters, and the grievances that underpin their action, is pivotal to shaping a government response. Recently, the ASIO Director-General noted the nuanced distinction between extreme views and violent extremism (ASIO 2023). To shape an appropriate and tailored response, it is therefore essential to understand the factors motivating anti-government activism, in this case by those who hold conspiratorial beliefs. Government responses to conspiratorial groups should be guided by a robust understanding of the motivations, grievances and associated factors underpinning their beliefs. This research provides important context to the reasons for protest action and the spectrum of grievances and beliefs that motivated anti-authority protest during the pandemic.

References

URLs correct as at March 2024

ABC News 2021. Anti-lockdown protesters clash with police in Melbourne, smaller demonstrations in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-21/anti-covid-lockdown-protesters-clash-with-police-in-melbourne/100396458>

ASIO—see Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) 2023. Director-General's annual threat assessment 2023. <https://www.asio.gov.au/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2023>

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) 2022. Director-General's annual threat assessment 2022. <https://www.asio.gov.au/resources/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2022>

Bartlett J & Miller C 2010. *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. London, UK: Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-power-of-unreason/>

- Basit A 2021. Conspiracy theories and violent extremism: Similarities, differences and the implications. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13(3): 1–9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27040260>
- Bavas J & Nguyen K 2021. Dozens arrested, hundreds fined as police disrupt Sydney anti-lockdown protest. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-21/nsw-police-arrest-47-issue-260-penalties-anti-lockdown-protest-/100396384>
- Bertuzzi N 2021. Conspiracy theories and social movements studies: A research agenda. *Sociology Compass* 15(12). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12945>
- Burns M, Bally J, Burles M, Holtslander L & Peacock S 2022. Constructivist grounded theory or interpretive phenomenology? Methodological choices within specific study contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221077758>
- Butler J 2022. ‘Occupy Canberra’: Behind the anti-vaccine protests at Parliament House. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/feb/04/occupy-canberra-behind-the-anti-vaccine-protests-at-parliament-house>
- De Coninck D et al. 2021. Beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19: Comparative perspectives on the role of anxiety, depression and exposure to and trust in information sources. *Frontiers in Psychology* 16(12). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646394>
- della Porta D 2018. Radicalization: A relational perspective. *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 461–474. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042716-102314>
- Douglas KM & Sutton RM 2023. What are conspiracy theories? A definitional approach to their correlates, consequences, and communication. *Annual Review of Psychology* 74: 271–298. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329>
- Douglas KM & Sutton RM 2015. Climate change: Why the conspiracy theories are dangerous. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71: 98–106
- Elias M 2023. Neo-Nazis, the freedom movement and sovcsits don’t want the Voice. But for different reasons. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/article/neo-nazis-the-freedom-movement-and-sovcits-dont-want-the-voice-but-for-different-reasons/03raex09d>
- Jolley D & Douglas K 2014. The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one’s carbon footprints. *British Journal of Psychology* 105: 35–56
- Khalil L & Roose J 2023. Anti-government extremism in Australia: Understanding the Australian anti-lockdown freedom movement as a complex anti-government social movement. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17(1): 144–169. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209223>
- Klandermans B 2004. *The demand and supply of participation: Social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements*. In DA Snow, SA Soule & H Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 360–379

- Klandermans B 1984. Mobilization and participation: Social-psychological expansions of resource mobilization theory. *American Sociological Review* 49: 583–600
- McGowan M 2021. Where ‘freedom’ meets the far right: The hate messages infiltrating Australian anti-lockdown protests. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/26/where-freedom-meets-the-far-right-the-hate-messages-infiltrating-australian-anti-lockdown-protests>
- McKenzie N & Lucas C 2021. Far-right protester charged by counter-terror police amid talk of killing Daniel Andrews. <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/far-right-protester-charged-by-counter-terror-police-amid-talk-of-killing-daniel-andrews-20211117-p599qx.html>
- Morgan A, Cubitt T & Voce I 2024. *Participation in anti-authority protests and vulnerability to radicalisation*. Research Report no. 31. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/rr77413>
- Pantucci R 2022. Extreme right-wing terrorism and COVID-19: A two-year stocktake. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14(3): 17–23
- Peucker M 2021. Suppressing dissent and ignoring grievances increases risk of far-right radicalisation. Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. <https://www.crisconsortium.org/blog/dissentandthefarright>
- Simon B et al. 1998. Collective identification and social movement participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(3): 646–658. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.646>
- Sturmer S & Simon B 2004. The role of collective identification in social movement participations: A panel study in the context of the German gay movement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30(3): 263–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203256690>
- Van Prooijen JW, Krouwel APM & Pollet T 2015. Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6: 570–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614567356>
- Van Stekelenburg J & Klandermans B 2010. The social psychology of protest. *Current Sociology* 61(5–6): 886–905. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113479314>
- Van Stekelenburg J & Klandermans B 2009. Social movement theory: Past, present and prospect. In I van Kessel & S Ellis (eds), *Movers and shakers: Social movements in Africa*. Leiden: Brill: 17–44. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004180130.i-260.11>
- Van Stekelenburg J, Klandermans B & van Dijk WW 2011. Combining motivations and emotion: The motivational dynamics of collective action participation. *International Journal of Social Psychology* 26(1): 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1174/021347411794078426>
- Vegetti F & Littvay L 2022. Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review* 52: 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.17>
- Vergani M, Arranz AM, Scrivens R & Orellana L 2022. Hate speech in a Telegram conspiracy channel during the first year of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Media + Society* 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221138758>

Waldek L, Droogan J & Ballsun-Stanton B 2022. *Online far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Report for the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Sydney: Macquarie University. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.5732611>

Wilson C 2022. Sick, paranoid, poorer and disorganised: The aftermath of the Convoy to Canberra protests. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/02/18/aftermath-of-the-convoy-to-canberra-protests/>

Dr Timothy Cubitt is the Acting Research Manager of the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children research program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Anthony Morgan is the Research Manager of the Serious and Organised Crime, Cybercrime and Radicalisation (SOCCR) research program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Isabella Voce is an Acting Principal Research Analyst in the SOCCR research program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

General editor, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. Note: *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers are peer reviewed. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series, visit the AIC website: www.aic.gov.au

ISSN 1836-2206 (Online) ISBN 978 1 922877 43 7 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77437>

©Australian Institute of Criminology 2024

GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia
Tel: 02 6268 7166

Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

www.aic.gov.au