Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 702 October 2024

Abstract | We conducted a randomised survey experiment involving 13,301 online Australians. Respondents were asked about their support for environmental, anti-lockdown and sovereign citizen protests. They were randomly allocated to one of three groups presented with different protest tactics—peaceful marching, disrupting traffic and violent clashes with police.

Respondents were significantly more likely to oppose violent or disruptive protests than peaceful protests, regardless of the issue or movement in question. The strongest opposition was to anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, followed by protests relating to the sovereign citizen movement. Protests about environmental issues had the most support.

The effect of conspiratorial beliefs on support for protests varied by protest cause. Belief in conspiracy theories increased support for protest violence, relative to other tactics. Support for certain protest causes and tactics is shaped by a person's ideological beliefs.

An experimental study of support for protest causes and tactics and the influence of conspiratorial beliefs

Anthony Morgan, Timothy Cubitt, Alexandra Voce and Isabella Voce

In the last few years protest activity has increased globally (van der Zwet et al. 2022). Australia has been no exception. Recent protest activity has advocated for a range of political and social causes, including support for increased action on climate change, opposition to public health measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, women's safety, Indigenous deaths in custody and other more extreme ideological movements.

There were protests in response to lockdowns and social distancing measures from very early in the pandemic (McGowan 2020), including the emergence of the freedom movement in late 2020 (ABC News 2020). There was further protest activity following the rollout of the national vaccination program in early to mid-2021 (Noble 2021). While many of these protests were peaceful, there were numerous examples of disruptive behaviour and clashes between protesters and police, resulting in large numbers of fines and arrests, as well as the hospitalisation of police officers (Seyfort & Zagon 2021). This included notable anti-vaccine mandate protests in Melbourne, which attracted widespread condemnation (Marin-Guzman 2021).

As frustration with public health measures grew, antisocial behaviour and threats of violence towards political leaders escalated (Butler 2021). In early 2022, several thousand Australians travelled in a 'Convoy to Canberra' to protest against a range of grievances, organised using social media and supported through crowdfunding (Britton 2022). While fringe and conspiratorial views were apparent in some of the earliest protest activity, the convoy exemplified the central role that conspiratorial beliefs, the language of the sovereign citizen movement and other ideological motives had come to play in pandemic protest narratives (Khalil & Roose 2023; Roose 2022).

While COVID-19 protests garnered significant attention, protest activity occurred in support of several other movements in this same period. It too involved a mix of tactics. Following intense bushfires in the 2019–20 summer, tens of thousands of people protested nationally in support of action on climate change and environmental policy (Regan & Yeung 2020). Conversely, in mid-2022, Blockade Australia disrupted traffic heading into the centre of Sydney during peak hour, while concurrently protesting through Sydney's central business district (Thompson 2022). Despite involving no more than 60 individuals, there was significant disruption to the community and a number of protesters were arrested (McGuire 2022). Two large, nationally coordinated protests were also noteworthy. Marches against Indigenous deaths in custody and systemic racism occurred in mid-2020 (Henriques-Gomes & Visontay 2020), while the 'March 4 Justice' took place in March 2021 in 40 cities in response to high-profile cases of sexual violence, with estimates of up to 110,000 attendees (Gorman 2021). These were peaceful protests that, unlike much of the pandemic-related protest activity, were planned in consultation with authorities and held in accordance with public health measures.

In attempting to draw public attention to their social or political cause, protesters may use disruptive and at times aggressive tactics (Andrews & Caren 2010). Often this depends on the perceived legitimacy of the government of the day—protest violence is more likely when the government is perceived as coercive rather than legitimate (Sullivan 2018). Some protest groups can be unpredictable and volatile, attracting individuals with a greater propensity for violence (Maguire et al. 2016; Tyler et al. 2018). However, it is also clear that protest violence can be specific to the situation and is more likely to occur when the action is disorganised or spontaneous (Gustafson 2020; Ives & Lewis 2020), when there are counter-protesters present (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation 2020), and during periods of heightened emotion and tension following some sort of triggering event (Nassauer 2016). The use of more assertive policing measures can lead protesters to escalate to violence in competition with police tactics (della Porta 2014). But this is not always straightforward. What constitutes lawful or violent protest can vary between places and also over time, particularly in political and legal environments where tolerance for public protest may be lowered. This has implications for law enforcement, whose role it is to maintain civil order and enforce protest laws, and can shape how they respond but also how that response may be perceived.

The majority of Australians support the right to protest (Amnesty International 2022). However, public support for activism may be influenced by the tactics used by protesters, even among individuals who are personally aligned with the social or political cause (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff 2020; Muñoz & Anduiza 2019; Simpson, Willer & Feinberg 2018). Of course, what constitutes violent action is subjective, and can depend on the political beliefs of the individual (Hsiao and Radnitz 2020). Even so, the negative effects of violent protest have been shown in survey experiments (Simpson, Willer & Feinberg 2018) and in studies of real-world protest violence (Huet-Vaughn 2013; Muñoz & Anduiza 2019). Further, regardless of an individual's core ideology, violent protest action can reduce support for the cause overall, and diminish identification with a movement, with observers reporting the action to be immoral (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff 2020). This can lead to fewer protesters being willing to engage in subsequent protest activity—although violence by the state can have the opposite effect (Steinert-Threlkeld, Joo & Chan 2022).

Protest tactics can also be influenced by a group's underlying ideology. The onset of the pandemic saw an increase in protests endorsing conspiratorial views (Khalil & Roose 2023), which have been associated with increased support for violence (Uscinski et al. 2022). Recent research has found that individuals who show greater commitment to conspiratorial beliefs are also more likely to endorse ideological violence (Vegetti & Littvay 2021). Further, these beliefs are associated with support for political violence, particularly where they co-occur with mental health issues (Baum et al. 2023).

It is not clear how these findings apply to the Australian context, particularly as it relates to contemporary protest movements and the recent growth of certain ideological movements and conspiratorial beliefs. To measure differences in support for different protest causes and tactics, we conducted a randomised survey experiment. We examined scenarios involving fringe movements, including sovereign citizen and anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests (Khalil & Roose 2023), and more widely-accepted mainstream movements, including action on climate change (Bradley et al. 2022). We also examined the extent to which support was influenced by belief in conspiracy theories. This research has implications for both protest organisers seeking to generate community support for their movement and authorities who are responsible for ensuring that protest activity is lawful and non-violent.

Method

Sample

Data for this study were collected as part of a large national survey of online Australians about their political and social beliefs. Fieldwork was conducted by Roy Morgan Research in November and December 2022. Respondents were recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source panel, which comprises individuals recruited through a rigorous clustersampled, face-to-face survey approach, and a panel managed by Pureprofile. The survey was sent to members of these panels aged 18 years and over who had joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys.

Proportional quota sampling was used to ensure the sample broadly reflected the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) population data. The majority of respondents (58.7%) were drawn from Roy Morgan's Single Source survey panel. The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 7.1 percent; however, 78.3 percent of respondents who opened the invitation and were eligible to participate in the research went on to complete the survey. Poor-quality responses and duplicates were removed from the final sample.

The survey took respondents an average of 23.8 minutes to complete. The initial sample size was 13,302 respondents. One respondent was removed as they were present in more than one experimental group, leaving a sample of 13,301. Because we were interested in the differences in protest support between groups, and the randomisation ensured there were no threats to the internal validity of our findings, we did not apply post-stratification weights to the data.

Experimental design

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to read descriptions of four protest scenarios:

- a group of pro-choice advocates marching to show support for protecting abortion access in Australia;
- a group of anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown and anti-mandate advocates protesting government-imposed mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations and lockdowns;
- a group of sovereign citizens protesting oppression by the government, which they view as an illegitimate corporation depriving them of their sovereign rights and imposing laws to which they do not consent; and
- a group of environmental activists protesting government inaction on climate change and calling for a new, green approach to energy and emissions.

A split-ballot design was embedded into the survey, in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of three mutually exclusive groups (Table 1). Each group was asked about different tactics used by protesters in support of each issue or movement. These included peacefully protesting (peaceful protest condition), disrupting peak-hour lunchtime traffic (disruptive protest condition), or violently clashing with police (violent protest condition). We did not vary the tactics used in the pro-choice protest scenario, which acted as a control condition to verify that the randomisation had been successful. Access to abortion services was chosen because it is an issue that has received consistently high support from the Australian public in the previous decade (IPSOS 2022). It is noteworthy that the survey was conducted in the months after the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade*, a landmark case that had legalised abortion nationwide (ABC News 2022), leading to an increased focus on the issue in Australia (Truu 2022), where most legal barriers (but not non-legal barriers) to abortion have been removed (Sifris & Penovic 2021).

The order in which scenarios were presented to each respondent was also randomised. This was done to avoid any carryover ordering effects, in which the respondents' ratings of support for or opposition to a given scenario (eg peaceful protests) could be influenced by the scenario that preceded it (eg violent protests). Respondents were asked to rate their level of support for each protest scenario on a scale from one (strongly oppose) to five (strongly support). Respondents could also answer that they did not know or decline to answer (combined into an unknown category).

Table 1: Assignment of protest causes and tactics to experimental groups (*n*=13,301)

	Group A (*n*=4,463, 33.6%)	Group B (*n*=4,411, 33.2%)	Group C (*n*=4,427, 33.3%)
Pro-choice protest (control condition)	Marching	Marching	Marching
Environmental protest	Violently clash with police	Disrupt traffic	Peacefully protest
Sovereign citizen protest	Disrupt traffic	Peacefully protest	Violently clash with police
Anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protest	Peacefully protest	Violently clash with police	Disrupt traffic

Other variables of interest

In addition to the control protest condition, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement 'It's OK to support groups that use violence to fight injustices.' This was used to measure any differences between groups in their support for violence as a means of achieving political or social change.

To analyse the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and support for different protest causes and tactics, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with common conspiracies, some of which were related to the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures. There were seven statements in total, ranging from more moderate beliefs to more extreme conspiracies:

- mainstream media reports in a biased and false manner;
- COVID-19 vaccine mandates are an unnecessary form of government control;
- COVID-19 has been intentionally released as part of an orchestrated plan;
- secret societies control the world;
- big events (wars, recessions, elections) are controlled by small groups secretly working against the rest of us;
- vaccines can be used maliciously to infect people with poison or insert microchips into people; and
- elites use microchips to track and affect the population's behaviour.

Responses were based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To produce a global measure of conspiracy beliefs, these ordinal scales were converted into a continuous variable (Sullivan & Artino 2013). These items had very good internal consistency (α=0.87) and an overall mean score was calculated.

Finally, respondents were asked to provide a range of sociodemographic information as part of the survey. We also asked respondents whether they had ever participated in a protest or rally in-person in support of a political or social movement and, if so, whether they had participated in an in-person protest since January 2020. Respondents who said they had participated in an in-person protest since January 2000 were then asked the issues or movements they had supported through protest.

Analytical approach

Our analysis proceeded in three stages. First, we examined whether the randomisation had resulted in a balanced sample in each of the three groups, and whether respondents in each of those three groups provided similar responses to common questions about protests and the use of violence. Second, we analysed the results from the experimental study, comparing the responses from the three groups to determine the extent to which support for protest activity varied according to the tactics employed. In both stages we used chi-square (χ^2) tests of association to assess whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the experimental group assigned and the variable of interest. Where this result was statistically significant, we used Cramér's *V* to measure the strength of this association.

The third stage of the analysis examined whether the relationship between protest tactics and support for protests varied depending on whether a respondent believed in conspiracy theories. We did this by estimating a series of ordinary least square regression models. We converted the outcome variable—support for protests—from a five-point ordinal scale to a numeric variable (excluding respondents who did not know or declined to answer from this stage of the analysis). We included protest tactics as a categorical independent variable, with peaceful protest used as the reference category. We then included a variable that measured the strength of each respondent's beliefs in common conspiracy theories. In addition to estimating the main effects of these variables on the level of support for protests, we included an interaction between protest tactics and belief in conspiracy theories. These models also included several control variables that were expected to be related to support for protests, including age, gender, employment status, level of education, level of socio-economic disadvantage, relationship status, parental status, and whether the respondent had participated in protest activity (never protested, protested before January 2020 but not recently, and protested since January 2020).

Limitations

The experimental design allowed us to understand how the level of support changes depending on whether a protest is peaceful, disruptive or violent. It ensures a high degree of internal validity. However, the findings cannot explain why a certain cause or tactic may garner more or less support. Moreover, although the protest scenarios described in the experiment were based on actual events in Australia, in which protesters halted peak-hour traffic (Thompson 2022) and violently clashed with police (Seyfort & Zagon 2021), it is possible that the hypothetical scenarios lack real-world context, which may have influenced the extent to which respondents indicated support (or not) for different protest causes and tactics. For example, support for protests that involve violent clashes with police may depend on the severity of that violence, how it started and how police responded, among other variables. Respondents may also have had limited awareness of the sovereign citizen movement beyond the short description provided in the survey. Finally, the current study was not intended to measure the general level of support in the community for protest activity, nor do the results apply to other social movements; rather, they are specific to the scenarios described in the survey. There are limitations associated with non-probability sampling, including not being able to generalise beyond the sample of respondents.

Results

Validating the randomisation

Sample characteristics

Sample characteristics, presented in Table 2, show that the three experimental groups were very similar. There were no statistically significant differences between the groups in respondent age, Indigenous status, sexuality, place of birth, language spoken at home, disability, relationship status, parental status, usual place of residence, highest level of education, employment status or level of socio-economic disadvantage. The only statistically significance between the three groups was in the gender of respondents ($\chi^2(4)=10.6$, $p<0.05$, Cramér's $V=0.02$). Inspection of the adjusted residuals made it clear this was due to differences in the small proportion of respondents who identified as non-binary. Specifically, there was a lower than expected number of non-binary or other gender respondents in Group A, and a higher than expected number in Group C. When these respondents were excluded, the difference between groups in the proportion of respondents who were male or female was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4)=3.1$, $p=0.21$). Ultimately, the difference between the groups was very small (demonstrated by a weak association), meaning it was unlikely to have had any effect on the results from the analysis that followed.

Table 2: Sample characteristics, by experimental group (%)				
	Group A	Group B	Group C	χ^2, *p*-value
Age				
18–34	25.2	24.8	25.3	1.0, *p*=0.90
35–64	49.1	50.0	49.7	
65+	25.7	25.2	25.1	
Gender				
Male	47.6	46.7	45.6	10.6, *p*<0.05
Female	52.2	52.8	53.8	
Non-binary or other gender	0.3	0.5	0.6	
First Nations	2.4	2.2	2.7	2.9, *p*=0.58
LGB+ respondents[a]	7.8	8.1	8.6	3.2, *p*=0.53
Born outside of Australia	23.3	23.5	22.8	2.7, *p*=0.60
Speaks a language other than English most often at home	5.6	4.9	5.6	5.1, *p*=0.28
Restrictive long-term health condition	12.7	13.2	12.0	3.1, *p*=0.54
Currently in a relationship	63.1	65.3	64.5	8.1, *p*=0.09
Children living at home	35.2	36.5	36.2	4.9, *p*=0.30
Usual place of residence (remoteness)				
Major city	72.6	73.9	73.1	11.0, *p*=0.09
Regional	24.7	22.7	23.6	
Remote	2.0	2.8	2.6	
Highest level of education				
High school	26.1	25.1	25.4	3.7, *p*=0.88
Vocational	22.8	23.4	23.3	
University	50.4	50.9	50.8	
Employment status				
Employed	62.2	62.0	62.6	0.7, *p*=0.99
Other	33.5	33.9	33.1	
Unemployed	3.8	3.7	3.9	
Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage				
Quartile 1 (most disadvantaged)	17.3	15.6	15.6	9.8, *p*=0.28
Quartile 2	19.5	19.4	20.1	
Quartile 3	25.3	25.5	26.2	
Quartile 4 (least disadvantaged)	37.1	38.9	37.4	

a: LGB+ respondents include those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another non-heterosexual sexual orientation

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not know or declined to answer the question. Where present, this unknown group was included in the comparison between groups

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

As shown in Table 3, the rate of protest participation, including since January 2020, did not significantly differ between the three experimental groups ($\chi^2(6)=8.4$, $p=0.21$). We also compared the groups in terms of the prevalence of participation in recent protests in support of specific issues or movements relevant to the current study. While participation in these protests was relatively rare , there were no differences between the groups in whether respondents had participated in protests in support of environmental issues or climate change ($\chi^2(2)=1.9$, $p=0.39$), women's safety or rights ($\chi^2(2)=1.4$, $p=0.50$), government policies on COVID-19 ($\chi^2(2)=1.1$, $p=0.58$), or the rejection of government authority and legal documents (typically associated with the sovereign citizen movement; $\chi^2(2)=0.5$, $p=0.77$).

Table 3: Protest participation, by experimental group (%)

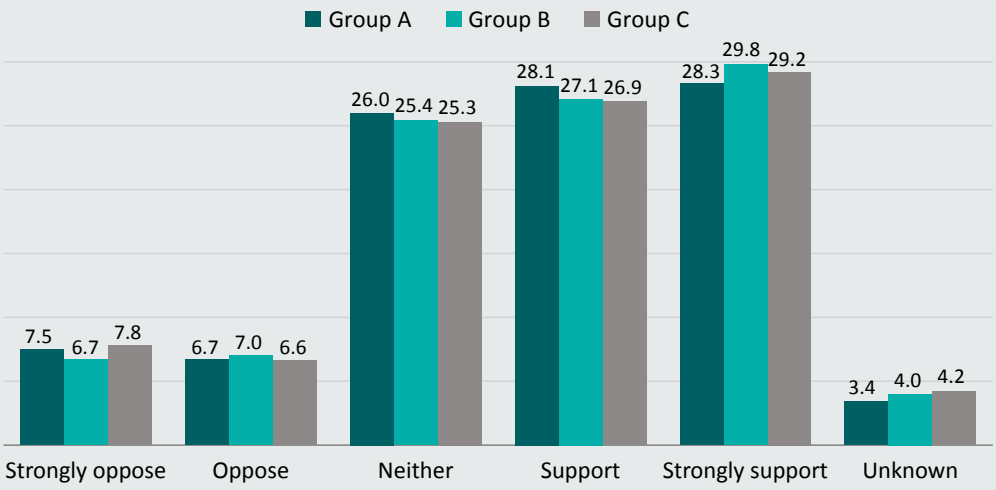
	Group A	Group B	Group C	χ^2, *p*-value
Protest participation				
Never protested	77.3	75.8	76.1	8.4, $p=0.21$
Protested before January 2020, but not recently	13.3	14.8	15.1	
Protested since January 2020	7.0	7.2	6.7	
Unknown	2.4	2.2	2.2	
Participation in specific protest movements (since January 2020)				
Environment issues or climate change	4.0	4.0	3.5	1.9, $p=0.39$
Women's safety and rights	2.1	2.4	2.3	1.4, $p=0.50$
Government policies on COVID-19	1.3	1.5	1.3	1.1, $p=0.58$
Rejection of government authority and legal documents	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.5, $p=0.77$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Support for pro-choice protests and support for violence

We then compared the groups on their support for pro-choice advocates marching to show support for protecting abortion access in Australia (Figure 1). There was no mention of specific tactics, and the same scenario was presented to all three groups. Support for this protest activity was high across all three groups, with only a small minority (13.7–14.4%) either opposed or strongly opposed. Importantly, there was no evidence that the level of support varied between the three experimental groups ($\chi^2(10)=11.4$, $p=0.33$).

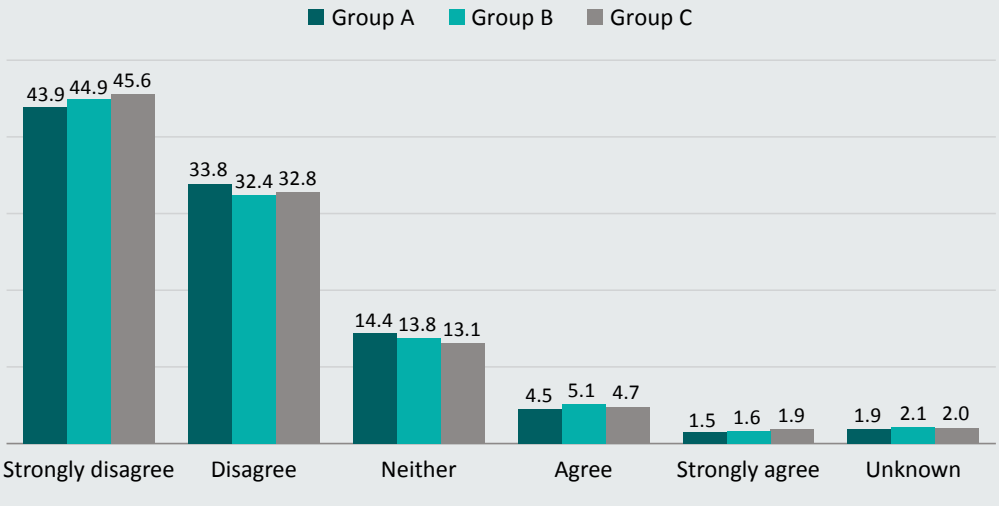
Figure 1: Level of support for pro-choice protests (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Next, we compared groups on their support for violence as a means of social or political change (Figure 2). Support for the use of violence to fight injustices was low among all three groups, with three-quarters of respondents (77.4–78.3%) either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement 'It's OK to support groups that use violence to fight injustices'. There were no significant differences in the level of support for this statement across the three groups ($\chi^2(10)=10.4$, $p=0.41$).

Figure 2: Level of agreement with the statement 'It's OK to support groups that use violence to fight injustices' (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

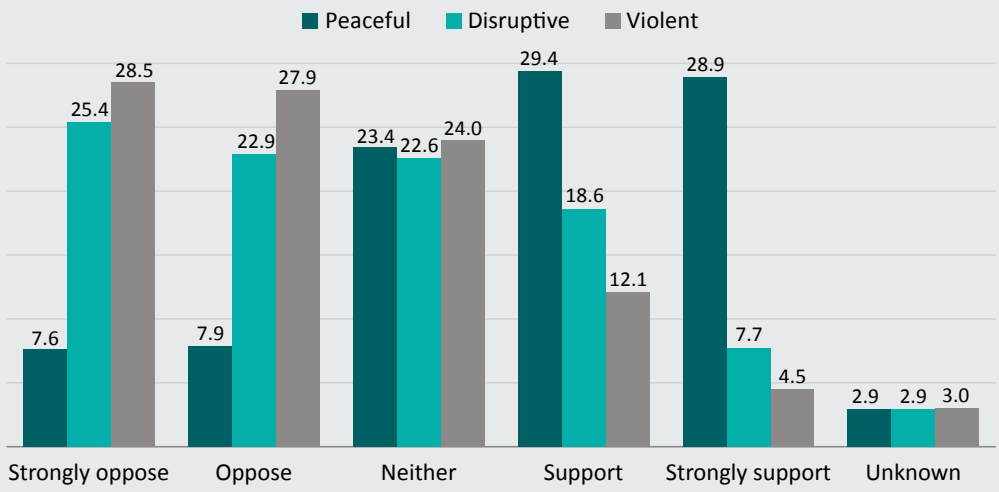
There were no major differences between the three groups in terms of sociodemographic characteristics and protest participation, and respondents in the three groups provided very similar responses to the same questions about pro-choice protests and the use of violence. This finding was important because it suggests that any observed differences in support between the different protest causes and tactics that follow are attributable to the experimental manipulation (ie varying the protest tactics). In other words, the randomisation was successful, and this was a valid experiment.

Protest causes and tactics and community support

Among the three movements included, environmental protests had the highest level of support and the lowest level of opposition, irrespective of the tactics used. For example, more than half of respondents (58.3%) were supportive or strongly supportive of peaceful environmental protest, compared with 27.4 percent for sovereign citizen protests and 15.9 percent for anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests. The levels of support for and opposition to environmental protests were similar to those for pro-choice protests observed above.

There was clear evidence that protest tactics have a significant influence on support for protest activity. For example, in the case of environmental protests, only a small minority (15.5%) of respondents said they were opposed or strongly opposed to peaceful protests (Figure 3). In contrast, nearly half of respondents opposed or strongly opposed environmental protests that disrupted peak-hour traffic (48.3%), while more than half were opposed to environmental protests that involved violent clashes with police (56.4%). There was a very strong, statistically significant relationship between protest tactics and support for environmental protests ($\chi^2(10)=2{,}520.2$, $p<0.001$, Cramér's $V=0.31$).

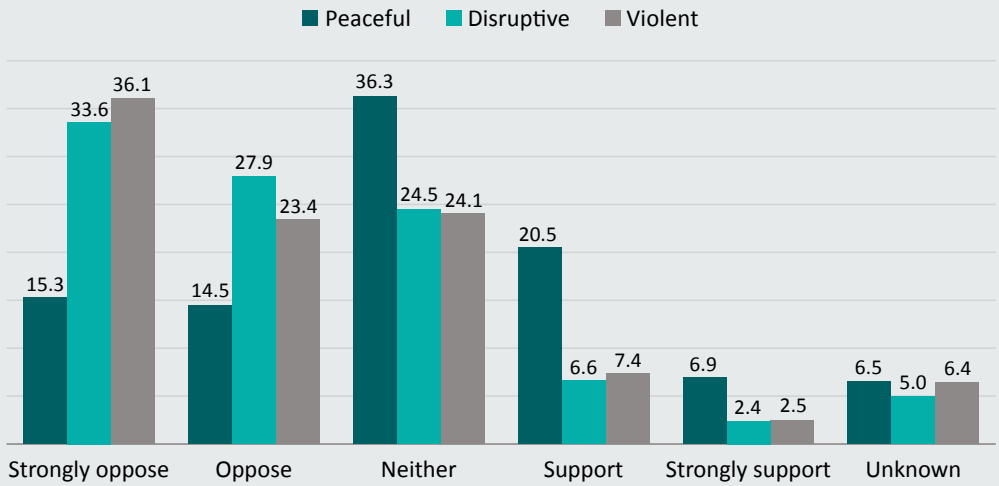
Figure 3: Level of support for environmental protests, by protest tactic (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Similarly, opposition to sovereign citizen protests was much higher when protests were described as disruptive (61.5%) or as involving violent clashes with police (59.5%) than when they were peaceful (29.7%). The levels of support for sovereign citizen protests were similar for disruptive protests and protests involving violent clashes with police. Nevertheless, there was a strong, statistically significant relationship between protest tactics and support for sovereign citizen protests ($\chi^2(10)$ =1,369.4, p<0.001, Cramér's V=0.23; Figure 4).

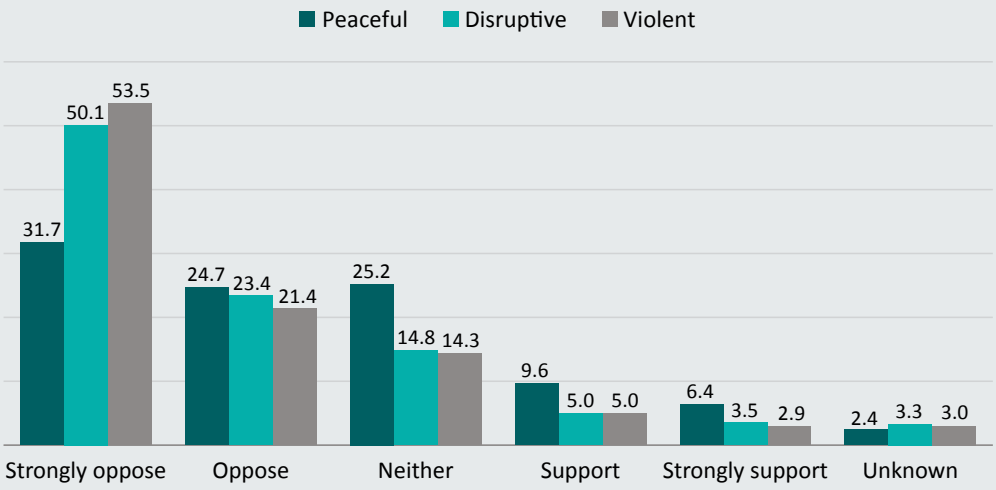
Figure 4: Level of support for sovereign citizen protests, by protest tactic (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Finally, while the level of support for anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests was lower than for other protest causes, there was still a relationship between protest tactics and support (Figure 5). While more than half the respondents were opposed to peaceful anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests (56.4%), this increased to three-quarters of respondents when protests were described as disruptive (73.5%) or as involving violent clashes with police (74.9%; $\chi^2(10)$=646.9, p<0.001, Cramér's V=0.16). Similar to sovereign citizen protests, there were almost identical levels of support for and opposition to disruptive protests and protests involving violent clashes with the police.

Figure 5: Level of support for anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, by protest tactic (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Belief in conspiracy theories and support for protest causes and tactics

The final stage of the analysis examined how belief in conspiracy theories influenced support for protest activity and, more specifically, whether the relationship between protest tactics and support for protests varied depending on whether a respondent believed in conspiracy theories. Results from three ordinary least square regression models are presented in Table 4. The statistically significant, negative coefficients for protest tactics show support was lower for disruptive and violent protest, relative to peaceful protest. The coefficient for conspiracy beliefs was significant in all models, but in different directions. A negative coefficient for the environmental protest model indicates that stronger conspiracy beliefs were associated with lower levels of support for environmental protest, while the positive coefficient for sovereign citizen and anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests indicates higher levels of support for protest among respondents with stronger conspiracy beliefs.

The interaction effect was significant in all three models. This was true for both coefficients in the environmental protest and sovereign citizen protest models, and the interaction between violent protest and conspiracy beliefs in the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protest model. These results show that not only does belief in conspiracy theories influence support for protests, independent of the tactics used, but it moderates the relationship between protest tactics and the level of support.

Table 4: Ordinary least squares regression predicting level of support for protests

	Model 1: Environmental protests		Model 2: Sovereign citizen protests		Model 3: Anti-lockdown protests	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Protest tactics (vs peaceful)						
Disruptive	−1.71***	0.07	−0.99***	0.07	−0.57***	0.06
Violent	−2.25***	0.07	−1.20***	0.07	−0.68***	0.06
Conspiracy beliefs						
Strength of beliefs	−0.40***	0.02	0.31***	0.02	0.63***	0.02
Interactions						
Disruptive × conspiracy beliefs	0.28***	0.03	0.09**	0.03	0.04	0.03
Violent × conspiracy beliefs	0.41***	0.03	0.18***	0.03	0.06*	0.03
Constant	4.78	0.07	2.41	0.07	0.76	0.04
n		11,850		11,525		11,859
F		367.33		179.15		266.3
R^2		0.31		0.22		0.33

***statistically significant at $p<0.001$, **statistically significant at $p<0.01$, *statistically significant at $p<0.05$

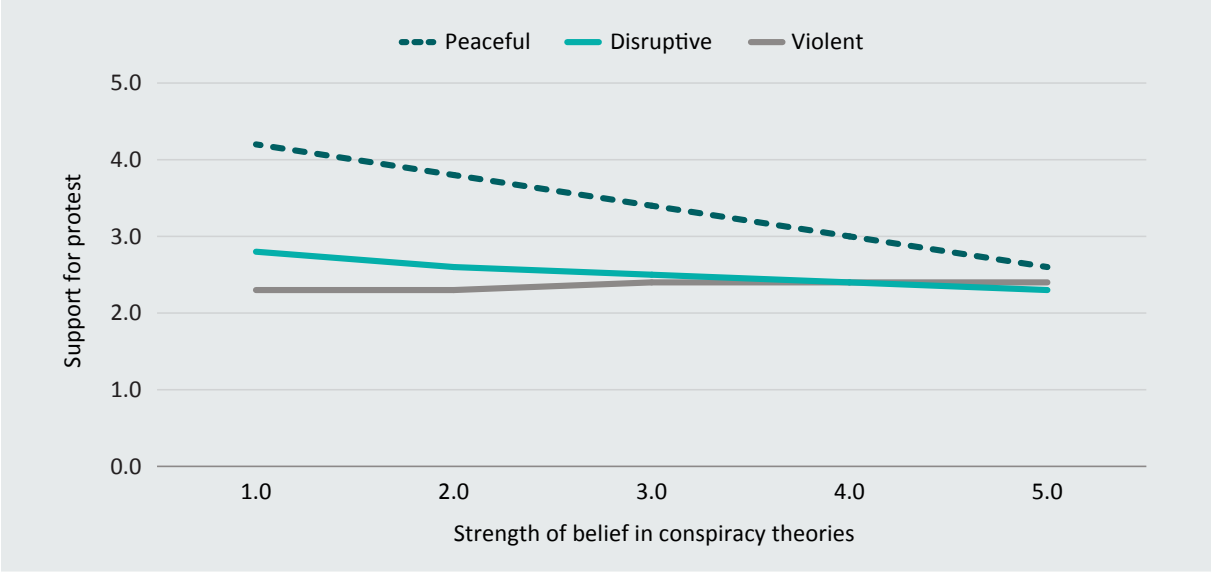
Note: Each model included controls for respondent age, gender, employment status, highest level of education, relationship status, whether children were living at home, and participation in protest. Robust standard errors were used

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

We can show how conspiracy beliefs influenced support for protests, and moderated the relationship between protest tactics and support for protests, by estimating the predictive margins. We did this for each model. These show the predicted level of support for protests at each level of belief in conspiracy theories, according to the type of protest tactic included in the scenario presented to the respondent.

Figure 6 shows that support for peaceful and disruptive environmental protests decreased as belief in conspiracy theories increased. Support for violent protest remained constant. Among respondents with the strongest belief in conspiracy theories, there was little difference in the levels of support for different protest tactics.

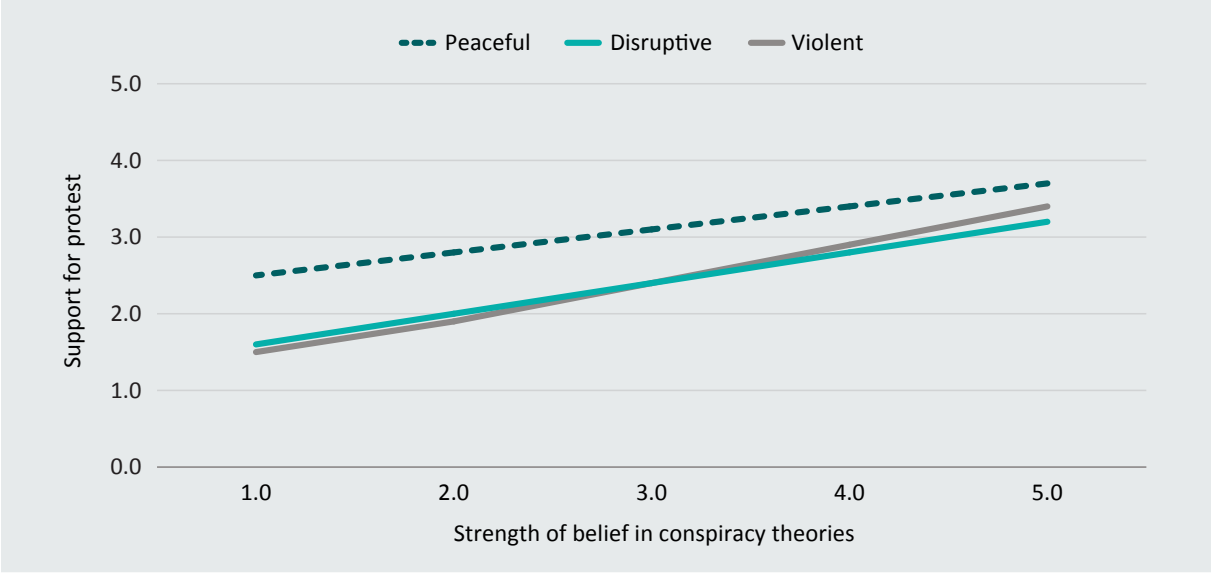
Figure 6: Level of support for environmental protests, by belief in conspiracy theories and protest tactic (predictive margins)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

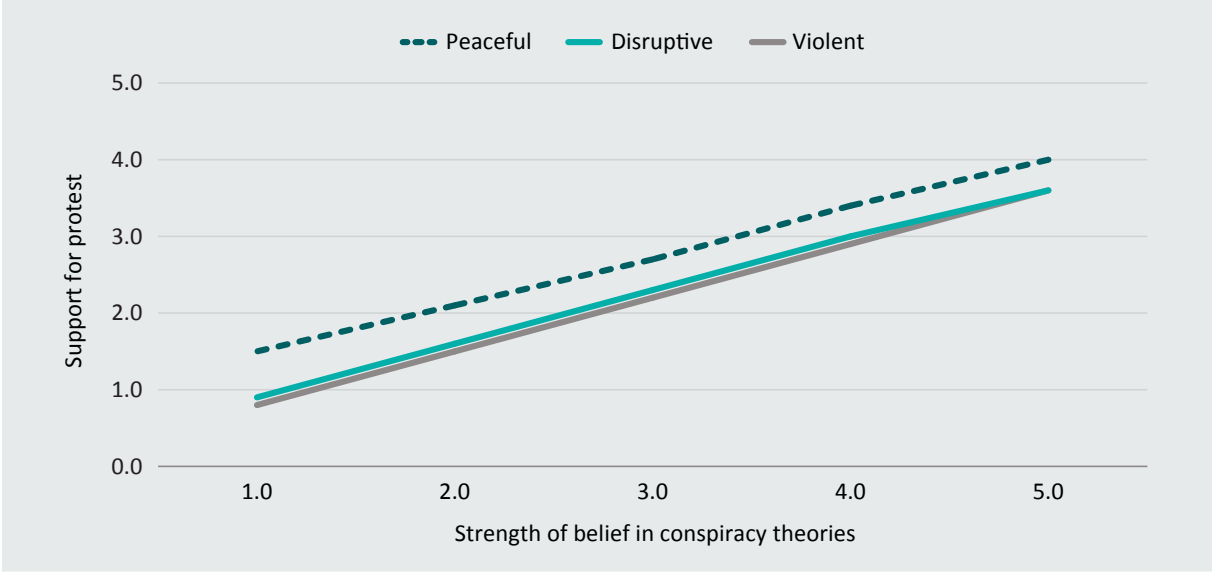
The effect of conspiracy beliefs on support for sovereign citizen protests and anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests is presented in Figure 7 and Figure 8, respectively. These show similar patterns. For both types of protest, respondents who held stronger beliefs in conspiracy theories were more likely to support protest activity. Further, support for violent protest increased at a faster rate than for peaceful protests (and, in the case of sovereign citizen protests, disruptive protest). This means conspiracy beliefs had a larger, positive effect on support for violent protest, relative to other protest tactics.

Figure 7: Level of support for sovereign citizen protests, by belief in conspiracy theories and protest tactic (predictive margins)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Figure 8: Level of support for anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, by belief in conspiracy theories and protest tactic (predictive margins)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Discussion

Our study shows that community support for protests varied according to the social issue or movement and the tactics used by protesters. The strongest opposition was to anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, followed by protests relating to the sovereign citizen movement. Protests about environmental issues had the most support. This largely reflects popular opinion on these issues. Support for action on climate change is very high in the general population (Australian Conservation Foundation 2021). Similarly, there was widespread support for Commonwealth and state and territory public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and worry about the effects of the disease (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021; Tranter 2022). Further, many anti-lockdown protests took place in contravention of public health orders (Khalil & Roose 2023). There were also numerous examples of disruptive behaviour and violence occurring during protests against pandemic-related public health measures (Butler 2021; Marin-Guzman 2021). There was extensive media coverage of disruptive environmental protest (eg Thompson 2022) immediately prior to our survey, but this involved a small group of activists. Similarly, the sovereign citizen movement is largely a fringe movement associated with strong anti-government views (Khalil & Roose 2023) and was prominent in a large-scale convoy protest in Canberra, alongside more malicious actors (Roose 2022), which was widely condemned by the local community. Once a protest movement is associated with unlawful, violent or disruptive activity, it may be that the loss of support among the general public endures, even when subsequent protest activity is peaceful.

Respondents were significantly more likely to oppose violent or disruptive protests than peaceful protests, regardless of the issue or movement being protested. There was generally very little difference in levels of support between disruptive protests and those involving violent clashes with police. These findings are consistent with evidence that protest tactics considered to be extreme (harmful, disruptive or violent) can be counterproductive, alienating both supporters and neutral observers and reducing broader community support for the cause (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff 2020; Simpson, Willer & Feinberg 2018). When protesters adopt such tactics, the public may perceive the movement as representing the extreme viewpoints of the group. In turn, this may lead to members of the public, even those who sympathise with a movement's goals, feeling disconnected from the movement—believing that the protesters do not represent them. Some activists may be unaware of this effect, believing instead that there is wider public support for their movement, irrespective of the tactics used (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff 2020).

Not all protesters attend protest activity with the same intention, particularly among larger protests. Protest activity may be unpredictable and, when a cause has been associated with disruptive or violent protest in the past, it may attract individuals who attend because of the possibility of violence (Maguire et al. 2016; Tyler et al. 2018). Early protest activity relating to COVID-19 regulations was comparatively peaceful and, while some activism focused on vaccination (Khalil & Roose 2023), there were also industrial and employment issues that attracted peaceful protest activity (Marin-Guzman 2021; Seyfort & Zagon 2021). However, with the onset of disruptive and violent protest in mid- to late 2021, it is possible that disruption and violence became associated with anti-lockdown activism. Our findings support the notion that more extreme protest tactics tend to undermine support, even among those who are aligned with the cause (Feinberg, Willer & Kovacheff 2020; Simpson, Willer & Feinberg 2018).

There are important lessons from this research for those who engage in activism to effect societal or policy changes. Not only are peaceful protests more successful at generating support in the community, they have also been shown to be more effective at promoting policy change than violent protests (Huet-Vaughn 2013). Disruptive or violent protest, regardless of the cause, is less likely to garner support from the community, while also risking recruiting individuals who are more interested in violent or disruptive behaviour than the cause itself (Maguire et al. 2016; Tyler et al. 2018). The effects depend on who is responsible for the violence and the scale of that violence (Steinert-Threlkeld, Joo & Chan 2019). The primary goal of some movements may not be to generate community support. Indeed, communicating a grievance with like-minded people is often the dominant motive, even if it is unlikely to lead to change (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011). Nevertheless, the results encourage the use of peaceful protest where the aim is to shape policy. Whether these findings apply to other protest causes is unclear.

Separately, these findings may be important for engagement and messaging by authorities. In Australia the right to peaceful assembly is protected under international conventions and some state and territory legislation (Martin 2021). Communication with protest organisers and, where possible, attendees may help promote a shared understanding that peaceful protest activity is the best mechanism for generating wider community support for the cause and improving the chances of influencing public policy. Communication of this type may also offer an opportunity to identify and de-escalate extreme or fringe factions ahead of planned protest activity (Police Executive Research Forum 2022), which would benefit both authorities and protest organisers.

Lastly, our finding that belief in conspiracy theories significantly influences support for all forms of protest demonstrates the important role that underlying ideologies play in shaping a person's attitudes towards protest activity (Thomas et al. 2024). Belief in conspiracy theories has been shown to reduce support for policies to address climate change (Biddlestone, Azevedo & van der Linden 2022), intentions to engage in politics (Jolley & Douglas 2014) and extreme right-wing beliefs often associated with denial of climate change (Imhoff et al. 2022), which may explain why an increase in conspiratorial beliefs reduced support for peaceful environmental protests. That it increased support for disruptive and violent protest as part of more fringe movements, over and above the effect on support for peaceful protests, is also significant. This adds to the growing evidence of the links between conspiratorial beliefs and support for the use of violence in anti-government social movements (Thomas et al. 2024; Uscinski et al. 2022; Vegetti & Littvay 2021). It also supports prior research which found that conspiratorial beliefs are associated with greater willingness to justify violence and support or participate in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of one's own group (Morgan, Cubitt & Voce 2024; Rottweiler & Gill 2022). Given the proliferation of conspiracy theories that accompanied the pandemic (Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022), and persisted as pandemic regulations eased, there is a need to draw on the growing evidence on how to detect disinformation online (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard 2023) and effectively communicate information about social or policy issues that are frequently targeted by malicious actors (Lazić & Žeželj 2021). This may help to reduce support for violent protest among those susceptible to this disinformation without infringing on people's right to protest.

References

URLs correct as at May 2024

ABC News 2022. United States supreme court overturns Roe v Wade, erasing constitutional right to abortion. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-25/united-states-supreme-court-overturns-roe-v-wade/101183036

ABC News 2020. People protesting against coronavirus lockdown arrested in Melbourne amid clashes with police. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-13/victoria-coronavirus-anti-lockdown-protest-arrests-melbourne/12659410

Aïmeur E, Amri S & Brassard G 2023. Fake news, disinformation and misinformation in social media: A review. *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 13(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-023-01028-5

Amnesty International 2022. Amnesty International Australia 2022 Human Rights Barometer. https://www.amnesty.org.au/report-amnesty-international-australia-human-rights-barometer-2022/

Andrews K & Caren N 2010. Making the news movement organizations, media attention, and the public agenda. *American Sociological Review* 75(6): 841–866. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410386689

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023. National, state and territory population, September 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021. Household impacts of COVID-19 survey, June 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/jun-2021

Australian Conservation Foundation 2021. Australia's biggest climate poll. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/19310/attachments/original/1630276451/PollingReport.pdf?1630276451

Baum MA, Druckman JN, Simonson MD, Lin J & Perlis RH 2023. The political consequences of depression: How conspiracy beliefs, participatory inclinations, and depression affect support for political violence. *American Journal of Political Science* 68(2): 575–594. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12827

Biddlestone M, Azevedo F & van der Linden S 2022. Climate of conspiracy: A meta-analysis of the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories about climate change. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101390. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101390

Bradley G, Deshpande S, Foxwell-Norton K, Hennessey N & Jackson M 2022. *Griffith climate action survey: Summary for policy and decision making*. Brisbane: Griffith University. https://www.griffith.edu.au/research/climate-action/national-longitudinal-survey

Britton A 2022. What you need to know about the 'freedom convoys' seen in Australia and across the world. *SBS News*, 16 February. https://web.archive.org/web/20220220223459/https://www.sbs.com.au/news/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-freedom-convoys-seen-in-australia-and-across-the-world/f992191c-8f41-43ae-979f-e0514d44ff7b

Butler J 2021. 'Sick and scary': Condemnation of gallows at anti-Andrews protests. https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2021/11/16/gallows-daniel-andrews-protest/

della Porta D 2014. Competitive escalation during protest cycles: Comparing left-wing and religious conflicts. In C Demitriou (ed), *Dynamics of political violence: A process oriented perspective on radicalisation and the escalation of political conflict*. London: Routledge

Feinberg M, Willer R & Kovacheff C 2020. The activists dilemma: Extreme protest actions reduce popular support for social movements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 119(5): 1086–1111. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000230

Gorman A 2021. 'Enough is enough!' Where, when and why March 4 Justice protests are taking place across Australia. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/15/march-4-justice-where-when-womens-march-protests-australia-march4justice-sydney-melbourne-canberra-brisbane

Gustafson D 2020. Hunger to violence: Explaining the violent escalation of nonviolent demonstrations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64(6): 1121–1145. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719890669

Henriques-Gomes L & Visontay E 2020. Australian Black Lives Matter protests: Tens of thousands demand end to Indigenous deaths in custody. *The Guardian*, 6 June. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/06/australian-black-lives-matter-protests-tens-of-thousands-demand-end-to-indigenous-deaths-in-custody

Hsiao Y & Radnitz S 2020. Allies or agitators? How partisan identity shapes public opinion about violent or nonviolent protests. *Political Communications* 38(4): 479–497. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1793848

Huet-Vaughn E 2013. *Quiet riot: The causal effect of protest violence*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2331520

Imhoff R et al. 2022. Conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries. *Nature Human Behaviour* 6: 392–403. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7

IPSOS (Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur) 2022. *Global views on abortion survey 2022*. https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-advisor-abortion-2022

Ives B & Lewis JS 2020. From rallies to riots: Why some protests become violent. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64(5): 958–986. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719887491

Jolley D & Douglas KM 2014. The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology* 105: 35–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018

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://doi.org/10.19165/DUYA5041

Lazić A & Žeželj I 2021. A systematic review of narrative interventions: Lessons for countering anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Public Understanding of Science* 30(6): 644–670. https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211011881

Maguire E, Barak M, Cross K & Lugo K 2016. Attitudes among Occupy DC participants about the use of violence against police. *Policing and Society* 28(5): 526–540. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2016.1202247

Marin-Guzman D 2021. Victoria to close down construction industry after wild protests. *Australian Financial Review*, 20 September. https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/anti-vaxxer-tradies-clash-with-cfmeu-officials-20210920-p58t7i

Martin G 2021. Protest, policing and law during COVID-19: On the legality of mass gatherings in a health crisis. *Alternative Law Journal* 46(4): 275–281. https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X211029963

McGowan M 2020. Ten arrested and police officer injured at protest against Victoria's Covid-19 lockdown laws. *The Guardian*, 10 May. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/10/ten-arrested-and-police-officer-injured-at-protest-against-victorias-covid-19-lockdown-laws

McGuire A 2022. Car drives into protest by climate activist group in Sydney CBD. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June. https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-harbour-tunnel-closed-during-blockade-australia-protest-20220627-p5awsz.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

Muñoz J & Anduiza E 2019. 'If a fight starts, watch the crowd': The effect of violence on popular support for social movements. *Journal of Peace Research* 56(4): 485–498. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318820575

Nassauer A 2016. From peaceful marches to violent clashes: A micro-situational analysis. *Social Movement Studies* 15(5): 515–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1150161

Noble F 2021. Anti-coronavirus vaccine protests held in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth. *9 News*, 21 February. https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-protest-melbourne-brisbane-sydney-pete-evans/a328629b-4d7f-48b1-a13f-72fe42dd8c2b

Police Executive Research Forum 2022. *Rethinking the police response to mass demonstrations: 9 recommendations*. Critical Issues in Policing Series. Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum. https://www.policeforum.org/critical-issues-series

Regan H & Yeung J 2020. Tens of thousands protest Australian PM's climate policies amid bushfire crisis. CNN, 10 January. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/10/australia/australia-fires-climate-protest-morrison-intl-hnk/index.html

Roose J 2022. How 'freedom rally' protesters and populist right-wing politics may play a role in the federal election. *The Conversation*, 15 February. https://theconversation.com/how-freedom-rally-protesters-and-populist-right-wing-politics-may-play-a-role-in-the-federal-election-176533

Rottweiler B & Gill P 2022. Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34(7): 1485–1504. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

Seyfort S & Zagon C 2021. More than 200 arrests made on third day of Melbourne protests. Nine News, 23 September. https://www.9news.com.au/national/victoria-protest-update-coronavirus-daniel-andrews-pleads-for-vaccinations-amid-construction-rallies/b6f176fa-3dd8-4d4a-bfcc-2ffd0da93b92

Sifris R & Penovic T 2021. Barriers to abortion access in Australia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Women's Studies International Forum* 86: 102470. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102470

Simpson B, Willer R & Feinberg M 2018. Does violent protest backfire? Testing a theory of public reactions to activist violence. *Socius* 4. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118803189

Steinert-Threlkeld Z, Joo J & Chan A 2022. How state and protester violence affect protest dynamics. *Journal of Politics* 84(2): 798–813. https://doi.org/10.1086/715600

Sullivan H 2018. Sticks, stones, and broken bones: Protest violence and the state. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(3): 700–726. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718763932

Sullivan G & Artino A 2013. Analyzing and interpreting data from Likert-type scales. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 5(4): 541–542. https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-5-4-18

Thomas EF et al. 2024. Do conspiracy beliefs fuel support for reactionary social movements? Effects of misbeliefs on actions to oppose lockdown and to "stop the steal". *British Journal of Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12727

Thompson G 2022. Blockade Australia shut down Sydney with climate change protests. Now they're fighting arrests in court. *ABC News*, 14 August. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-14/blockade-australia-arrests-for-protesting-on-road-harbour-bridge/101320368

Tranter BK 2022 Your money or your life? Public support for health initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 57: 544–561. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.220

Truu M 2022. How Australia's version of Roe v Wade, a little known court case, set a national precedent for reproductive rights. *ABC News*, 29 June. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-29/australias-roe-v-wade-menhennitt-ruling-abortion-access/101185984

Tyler D, Barak M, Maguire E & Wells W 2018. The effects of procedural injustice on the use of violence against police by Occupy Wall Street protesters. *Police Practice and Research* 19(2): 138–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1418153

Uscinski J et al. 2022. The psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Scientific Reports* 12: 21672. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-25617-0

van der Zwet K, Barros A, van Engers T & Sloot P 2022. Emergence of protests during the COVID-19 pandemic: Quantitative models to explore the contributions of societal conditions. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 9: 68. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01082-y

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 2021. Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review* 52(1): 18–32. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.17

Waldek L, Droogan J & Ballsun-Stanton B 2022. *Online far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.5732611

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

Timothy Cubitt is a Principal Research Analyst in the SOCCR Research Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Alexandra Voce is a Senior Research Analyst in the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children 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 61 1 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77611

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

www.aic.gov.au