

Anti-Government Extremism in Australia: Understanding the Australian Anti-Lockdown Freedom Movement as a Complex Anti-Government Social Movement

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This article aims to explore the emergence and consolidation of various actors and sympathisers into the Australian ‘anti-lockdown’ freedom movement, a diverse, hybrid anti-government movement that emerged during the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative longitudinal analysis of data from the online posts of a prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom movement, we identify the movement’s core narratives, motivations, and forms of action, revealing how this social movement developed into a complex form of anti-government extremist movement that combines and conflates anti-institutional, anti-elite sentiments, and anti-government attitudes and beliefs through conspiratorial narratives. Drawing upon interrelated strands of social movement theory and the broader body of research on conspiracy theories and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on radicalisation to extremism, we offer a conceptual framework to understand the movement’s emergence, consolidation, and development. This study furthers our understanding of how conspiracies and disinformation can be utilised and fed into anti-government extremism during times of crisis and emergency.

Keywords: anti-government, conspiracy, extremism, crises, social movement, hybrid movements

Introduction

The stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Australian state and federal government pandemic responses to it, particularly the lockdown measures enacted during declared states of emergency, served to acerbate anti-government sentiments among segments of the Australian population. This provided opportunities for existing anti-government extremist actors and ideologically driven extremist movements, particularly far-right, sovereign citizen, and conspiracy fuelled extremists, to capitalise on these sentiments and conditions.¹ It also led to the emergence of a new, often difficult-to-define movement—the anti-lockdown ‘freedom’ movement. Despite its self-characterisation as a peaceful association intent on preserving civil liberties, the anti-lockdown freedom movement has engaged in violent rhetoric and forms of action and can be labelled as an anti-government extremist movement that is, as defined by Jackson, “*primarily or consistently focus[ed] on government as a source or cause of perceived crises.*”²

Drawing upon the work of an ongoing research project, *Crisis Points: Extremism under a State of Emergency*,³ this article aims to explore the emergence and consolidation of various actors and sympathisers into the Australian ‘anti-lockdown’ freedom movement, a diverse, hybrid online/offline anti-government movement that emerged during the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative longitudinal analysis of data from the online posts of a prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom movement called the Melbourne Freedom Rally, we identify the movement’s core narratives, motivations, and forms of action, revealing how this social movement developed into a complex form of anti-government extremist movement that crosses the boundaries between various forms of anti-government extremism (ideological, issues driven, and conspiratorial), and combines and conflates anti-institutional, anti-elite sentiments, and anti-government attitudes and beliefs through conspiratorial narratives. Drawing upon interrelated strands of social movement theory and the broader body of research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on radicalisation to extremism, we offer a conceptual framework to understand the movement’s emergence, consolidation, and development.

While the overt activities of the Australian anti-lockdown freedom movement have reduced in scope and tempo since pandemic restrictions have lifted, the anti-lockdown freedom movement serves as an important case study to illustrate how a diverse anti-government social movement can come together, particularly in terms of the movement’s ability to unite a disparate and diverse cross sector of actors and how it provided opportunities for political exploitation and recruitment by extremist ideological players. This study also furthers our understanding of how conspiracies and disinformation can be utilised and feed into anti-government extremism. This case also serves as an example of a hybrid form of anti-government extremist movements and illustrates the online-offline dimensions to social movements that we are likely to see in the future. By offering an alternative typology of violent forms of action that can be carried out by anti-government social movements we also hope this study of the anti-lockdown freedom movement can expand our understanding and categorisations of political violence.

Background to the Study

Fortress Australia

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in Australia was recorded on the 25th of January 2020 when a traveller from Wuhan Province arrived in the city of Melbourne.⁴ It did not take long for community transmission to occur, with the first case recorded in early March 2020.⁵ Consistent with the country's precedent of strong biosecurity approaches, the response of the Australian government was swift and stringent. The Commonwealth government, at the time under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, applied a COVID-19 Biosecurity Emergency Determination under the Commonwealth Biosecurity Act on March 18, 2020. This gave the national Health Minister expansive powers to "issue any direction to any person" and "determine any requirement" to control this biosecurity threat, with criminal charges, fines, and jail time applicable against anyone contravening these directives.⁶ Under the Biosecurity determination, which was in effect for 25 months,⁷ the federal government shut international borders and issued an overseas travel ban for citizens and permanent residents. Australian state governments, particularly the most populous states of Victoria and New South Wales, undertook a public health approach to manage the pandemic and enacted similarly stringent measures, declaring states of emergency that enabled state governments to bypass normal constitutional checks on government authority to enact these measures.

Australia's pandemic response amounted to some of the strictest public health measures in the democratic world. The state of Victoria made frequent use of so-called 'lockdowns.' While the state of New South Wales also enacted strict and contested public health measures, from March 2020 until October 2021, the Victorian government declared six lockdowns. This meant that Victorians lived under multiple forms of restriction for a cumulative 260 days over a nearly two-year period, leading Melbourne to be named "the world's most locked down city."⁸ Lockdown measures in Victoria included the use of stay-at-home measures, mask mandates, curfews, 5km travel limits, school shutdowns, prolonged quarantine requirements for the sick, restrictions on gathering, including to attend funerals, religious services, and in private homes, even bans on the use of children's playgrounds.

State border closures were also part of the pandemic response which restricted travel between Australian states and territories. The announcements of snap lockdowns, resulted in residents stranded across state lines, unable to return to their own homes, when they could not make arrangements to cross state borders before the deadline.⁹ Lockdowns also saw public housing residents in Victoria unable to even leave their apartments to obtain food or supplies for a period of time, a measure that the Victorian Ombudsman found had violated their human rights.¹⁰ When vaccines became widely available, the Victorian government issued vaccine mandates in all but name only, which restricted the activities and freedoms of those who were not vaccinated, creating tiered levels of rights and liberties during the later stages of the state of emergency conditions.

While these public health measures reduced the spread of the virus and helped reduce the risk of illness and death, they also had negative consequences and effects. The lockdowns added

to the prolonged exposure to stress during the pandemic. The lack of social contact and support resulted in multiple psychological and social ill effects.¹¹ The lockdowns also revealed the expansive nature of state power and cultivated feelings of exclusion among segments of the population who felt that some of the public health measures overly impinged on their freedoms without providing a clear public health benefit. Perhaps for the first time, many people were confronted with, and resented, the ability of governments to impose on the basic liberties previously taken for granted in a democratic society such as Australia.¹² Additionally, the impacts of the pandemic and the governments' pandemic response measures were felt unevenly across socioeconomic demographics. While there were no significant differences in infection rates across class, race, or gender, there is evidence that pandemic and pandemic restrictions had differentiated effects across social groups and that it exacerbated sociocultural, health, educational, economic, and digital disadvantages.¹³

Nevertheless, according to opinion polls, lockdown measures were broadly supported by the general public.¹⁴ The Victorian government's robust public health response was even identified as a major factor in the re-election of the State Labour government led by Premier Daniel Andrews in November 2022.¹⁵ But as the lockdowns wore on, public sentiment began to shift, with a majority of Victorians turning away from support of their usage¹⁶. Even during times when these measures were largely supported by the general public, there was concurrent, vocal opposition among a diverse cross section of society.

COVID-19, Anti-Government Extremism, and the Emergence of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Movement

COVID-19 Pandemic and Violent Extremism

Existing research literature, as well as government and professional reporting, has found that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in radicalisation to violent extremism and the exploitation of the pandemic by extremist actors of all ideological stripes, but particularly the far right.¹⁷ Violent extremists have used the pandemic to bolster their existing frameworks and beliefs and used the crisis to make direct calls for action.¹⁸ The pandemic also provided fertile ground for ideologically based extremist movements to recruit others with existing or developing anti-government sentiments to their cause.¹⁹

Government pandemic response measures that restricted rights and liberties provided further justification for anti-government extremist beliefs. In Australia, the reliance on lockdowns energised anti-government extremists as it fuelled their conspiratorial narratives about an authoritarian takeover. The public-health-driven model that was adopted by state and Commonwealth governments was reframed as "health dictatorship" or "health fascism" by the anti-lockdown movement.

The COVID-19 pandemic also led to an accompanying 'infodemic'²⁰ of mis- and disinformation and pandemic-related conspiracy theories. A rise in conspiracy theories is common during times of crisis. Complex situations, like a pandemic, where the origins and implications of the

crisis are contested, have been found to increase the propensity for belief in conspiracy theories. These theories flatten ambiguity and complexity, often positing that these complex crises are caused or controlled by a cabal of the powerful who harbour malintent. Conspiracies and disinformation around the pandemic not only undermined public health efforts, but they also fuelled societal divisions, a rise in hate speech, and anti-government sentiment and action.²¹ Conspiratorial beliefs have also contributed to radicalisation to violence and involvement in extremist movements.²²

The contribution of conspiratorial belief to anti-government extremism is well researched. Foundational scholar of conspiracy theories Michael Barkun articulated how extremist and conspiratorial movements can emerge out of the junction of catastrophic events and mass communication.²³ Scholars, such as Fenster, Hofstadter, and Lipset and Rabb, have examined how conspiracy theories are commentaries on power and encourage vanguardism,²⁴ how they can contribute to and reflect feelings of alienation and cynicism with the democratic process,²⁵ and how they have been central to anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies²⁶. They can also motivate violent and unlawful anti-democratic behaviour²⁷ and serve as a basis for anti-government extremism. Belief in conspiracy theories can also develop in group/out-group delineations, which according to Berger, are essential components of extremism.²⁸ More broadly, conspiratorial beliefs contribute to the 'transformational delegitimation,'²⁹ of democratic governance, the state, and other institutions.

Freedom Rally Movement

The emergence of the Freedom Rally Movement is part of this broader context. The Melbourne Freedom Rally (the subject of this study and data collection) was the first expression of the Australian anti-lockdown, 'freedom' movement, a new social movement arising from the pandemic conditions in Australia that eventually grew to include chapters across many Australian cities. The anti-lockdown freedom rally movement first began as an online social movement, which Loader identifies as a social movement that develops via interactive computer-mediated communication channels where these channels are used for networking, communicating, and mobilisation to protesting. It is in these online spaces where collective identity is formed, and communication is at the 'interstices of networked social action.'³⁰ However, as will be explored in more detail, it was not limited to an online movement but encompassed other forms of 'offline' actions and expressions.

The anti-lockdown freedom movement incorporated a wide array of actors, including anti-vaxxers, religious communities, wellness influencers, QAnon and other conspiracists, sovereign citizens, and known Australian far-right actors and influencers. They all converged alongside so-called 'average citizens' who were opposed to vaccine mandates imposed by Australian governments and the harshness of the lockdown measures and other policies that they perceived as unfair or unwise.³¹ This divergent cluster of actors nevertheless formed into a cohesive movement that shared conspiratorial beliefs and grievances against government and institutions.

The first and most prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom rally movement was the Melbourne Freedom Rally. The Melbourne Freedom Rally first emerged as a social media ac-

count on various mainstream social media platforms, namely Facebook, where followers of the account could communicate, network, share grievances, and organise protest action. It was not the only online social media account involved in these efforts and it had antecedents in other Facebook accounts, such as the '99% Unite' Facebook page, but it would emerge as the prominent manifestation of the anti-lockdown movement. Like other similar online accounts, the Melbourne Freedom Rally was soon deplatformed from Facebook as part of the company's crackdown against content that hindered the COVID-19 health response.³² But it quickly transferred to the alternative online messaging platform Telegram. From then on, Telegram became the movement's primary platform. The platform's affordances and features contributed to the movement's sustainability, growth, and mobilisation efforts at time when pandemic restrictions in Australia made mass mobilisation difficult.

Telegram was launched in 2013 as encrypted messaging service by two Russian nationals, Pavel and Nikolai Durov, who also started V Kontakte (VK), known as the Russian Facebook. Even though it was initially created as a free, no-ad, encrypted messaging platform, it has added features that have allowed it to become an alternative social media platform.³³ Public and private messaging groups, called channels, can host up to 200,000 users, essentially functioning as social media accounts. Telegram also added 'broadcast' channels where the channel administrators can broadcast messages, audio, video and text files, images, and customisable stickers to an unlimited number of accounts. These messages and media can also be shared between channels.

Telegram has several features that have made it the platform of choice for extremist movements and other dangerous actors.³⁴ It has good functionality and an expanding user base. The risk of deplatforming is low. The platform does not moderate or take down private or group chats and it rarely moderates or removes public channels. It rarely enforces its terms of service that state that users are not allowed to promote violence on publicly viewable Telegram channels. Its encrypted messaging functionality aids clandestine activity and planning while its public channels are ideal for sharing propaganda and messaging. Telegram also added a file storage feature which has allowed users and movements to securely create and house their material.³⁵

One feature that Telegram does not have is an algorithmic recommender system, which helps steer users to other accounts based on their preferences and profiles. However, Telegram users have worked around the loss of an automated recommendation tool and formed a type of 'do-it-yourself' recommendation system where users, like those within the anti-lockdown freedom rally movement, manually post recommendation lists of like-minded Telegram accounts to join.

Even though this do-it-yourself system is not as efficient or powerful as algorithmic recommendation, what these curated, personalised recommendations lose in efficiency, they gain in credibility and have also led to greater opportunities for social movement development. Because the recommendation is made via human-to-human interaction rather than algorithm to human, they serve to strengthen interpersonal bonds and community cohesion—key aspects that contribute to the strength and longevity of any social movement.³⁶

The posts by the online administrator of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Channel, recommending other channels to follow also exposed the channel's followers to conspiratorial and far-right

ideological content. The recommended accounts by the Melbourne Freedom Rally administrator, who became a de facto leader of the movement, have included sovereign citizen accounts, far-right figures, and conspiracy influencers, revealing a broader ideological motivation and agenda of the individuals leading the anti-lockdown movement activities and online presence.³⁷

Investigations by *The Guardian* and the Australian White Rose Society identified the channel's administrator as Harrison McClean, a 25-year-old former competitive cheerleader, Bitcoin enthusiast, and COVID denier. McClean was not only active in administering the online channel but in organising offline protest action and rallies.³⁸ He also connected with other like-minded groups and actors associated with the anti-lockdown freedom movement and coordinated activities and messaging. He was especially associated with far-right figures and known Australian extremist actors, which will be explored in more detail below.

Hybridity

The anti-lockdown freedom movement was not limited to an online social movement. Rather, the anti-lockdown freedom movement operated simultaneously across online and offline spheres making it a truly hybrid movement. Online postings and expressions of the Melbourne Freedom Rally were accompanied by 'offline' or 'real world' action. The online administrators organised and participated in real-world protests; so too did the posters *within* the channel engage in protest action, some of it violent, in response to the Victorian government's public health measures, particularly lockdowns and vaccine requirements.

Protest action and rallies, which were illegal during the state of emergency due to the ban on public mass gatherings, often punctuated key public health policy or legislative action by government. This included when lockdowns were extended, vaccine requirements were enacted, and further limitations on working conditions were placed. Notably large violent protests occurred in September 2021 when new limitations were placed on the construction sector that targeted labour unions, police, and government.³⁹ There were also large anti-government demonstrations outside Victorian Parliament. In an echo of the January 6th riots, protesters dragged out a noose in front of the State Parliament House⁴⁰ and threatened to hang 'treasonous' politicians when pandemic-specific legislation was being considered.

Participants in the anti-lockdown freedom movement also engaged in anti-government extremist violence. Protesters involved in the anti-lockdown movement have made multiple assassination threats on the state premiers' and other politicians' offices and residences. Police have also laid charges against individuals involved in the broader anti-lockdown movement for incitement, violent plotting, including plans to kidnap the premier; bringing weapons to protests, and attacks on infrastructure, among other expressions of violence. These violent actions were not necessarily directed by movement leaders but were reflective of the loosely organised, sometimes spontaneous violence committed by individuals who are connected to a broader network and movement.

The anti-lockdown movement also had significant overlap with Australian far-right extremists' influencers and movements. Far-right ideologues and influencers as well as alt-right media

figures amplified and participated in the anti-lockdown freedom movement's protest action. McClean, for example, engaged with a number of other extreme right-wing groups including the Victorian chapter of the Proud Boys.⁴¹ These connections have been confirmed by our data collection which showed posts from Australian Proud Boys Telegram channels being reposted on the Melbourne Freedom Rally channels and vice versa. The leader of the Victorian Proud Boys branch, Jarrad 'Jaz' Searby, also engaged and posted online on the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel. McClean confirmed in an interview that "There is some overlap on a lot of principles [within the groups] but not all of them ... we have had the Proud Boys come to our events, they were invited, they didn't infiltrate us."⁴² McClean however has attempted to strategically shield these affiliations and present himself as a "libertarian activist, and vocal proponent of individual and economic freedom, through the application of technological and political decentralisation."⁴³

Applying the Lens of Social Movement Theory

In seeking to understand the anti-lockdown freedom movement in Australia in the period 2021–2022, we faced an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the movement was constituted by a diverse array of actors. During protests, anti-vaxxers marched alongside vaccinated protesters angry at the lockdowns, while known far-right extremists were present amidst an often highly multicultural mass of people. Evangelical Christians marched alongside conservative Muslims. On the other hand, the protesters were largely united in their opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns, vaccine and mask mandates, and criticism of the government, demonstrating at least a base level of cohesion that make it possible to refer to it as a cohesive anti-government 'social movement.' Social Movements as defined by della Porta and Diani as 'informal networks, based upon shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest'⁴⁴ are an accurate descriptor of the anti-lockdown freedom movement. Consequently, we have selected key aspects of social movement theory as a frame to guide our research and to inform the coding of the data collected to understand and analyse this movement.

There has, historically, been a lack of theoretical and conceptual tools to inform the analysis of extremism, yet social movement theory can offer a useful framework. As Beck notes, social movement theory, 'due to its integrative and interdisciplinary nature is uniquely positioned to contribute a necessary conceptual framework for the study of political violence and terrorism.'⁴⁵ We contend that this includes anti-government extremism and concur with Futrell, et al. that extremist movements are not a fundamentally different unit of analysis when it comes to the application of social movement theory to understanding their formation. Extremist movements, like all social movements, incorporate the same factors, "personal and collective grievances, political and religious ideologies, networks and interpersonal ties, and enabling environments and support structures" as any other type of movement.⁴⁶

Social movement theory may be understood as attempting to explain the 'origins, growth, decline and outcomes of social movements'⁴⁷, including the social, cultural, and political manifestations and consequences of such movements including violence⁴⁸ It is, as Gunning, notes,

'neither homogenous, nor a theory in the strictest sense of the word', rather, '[i]t contains a broad set of analytical frameworks for exploring social movement dynamics.⁴⁹ For this study, we draw upon the concepts of relative deprivation, the concept of social isolation and its impact on emotion stemming from the concept of 'mass society,' and political opportunism. We also draw upon the concept of technological affordances, which have enabled social movements to coalesce, spread their narratives and organise online, while, in many instances, protesting simultaneously in the streets.

The concept of relative deprivation as a contributor to the formation of social movements extends back well over half a century; however, there has been a more recent interest in its relevance to explaining more recent manifestations of violent extremism and terror in the context of increasing inequalities.⁵⁰ Emotional responses and actions are triggered when an individual's expectations or anticipated trajectory is not attained in comparison with that of another social group.⁵¹ This may include a sense of deprivation in relation to economic resources, power, and social status, resulting in feelings of resentment, humiliation, and anger. However, as Kunst and Obaidi note, a sense of relative deprivation can also trigger collective action for those not directly impacted by inequality but who perceive themselves or the wider group with which they identify to be victims.⁵²

Individual subjective levels of deprivation can also engender grievance and can play a role in the development of social movements⁵³ as well as opening up political opportunities for protest and anti-government action.⁵⁴ Theories on the development of 'new social movements,' particularly movements made up of actors of diverse motivations and ideologies with no clear class or structural basis, posit that social movements are developed through confirmations of collective and individual identity⁵⁵ with that expression of identity often rooted in shared grievance.

Similarly, to the concept of relative deprivation and grievance, the notion of 'mass society,' grounded in the classic works of Durkheim, Arendt, and Mannheim amongst others dates back to the early origins of social movement theory. The concept emphasises the significance of social upheaval in shaping the attraction to social movements and was initially grounded in the assertion that the 'new urban masses' were comprised of uprooted and isolated individuals and were hence 'vulnerable to new forms of demagoguery and manipulation by the media.'⁵⁶

As cities became prosperous and middle classes flourished, many assumed that the preconditions for relative deprivation theory had faded away. However, amidst rapidly increasing social and economic inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns had the contrary impact of legally requiring citizens to stay in one place for prolonged periods, resulting in an immense psychological and social upheaval and uprooting of daily life.⁵⁷ It is in this context of this disruption that people would increase their online activity, 'seeking alternative cognitive and social structures'⁵⁸ and gaining significantly increased exposure to conspiracy theories. Much as the emergence of print media as a mass industry was influential in the context of the 'new urban masses;' it is the loss of control and loss of certainty that contributed to the increased consumption of social media where conspiracy theories proliferated.⁵⁹

Political opportunity theory ties into this approach. Political opportunity or (political process)

theory asserts ‘activists’ prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilising supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependant.⁶⁰ Variables including the form and substance of the grievance(s), the mode of their transmission, and government or institutional actions and responses combine to play an important role in shaping the development of the social movement and their actions to shape society. The technological affordances of social media, offering anonymity, secure communications ensuring protection for authorities, and the opportunity to engage directly in order to share grievances and plan, in real time, with other participants during protests as well as the use of memes, humour, and anonymous meeting rooms have all, for the first time, played a role in the development of a mass, albeit amorphous, social movement.

These concepts, to be elaborated upon in the analysis of data, provide an important frame for understanding the emergence of a dynamic social movement whose participants appear to vary in orientation, yet share many, largely unrecognised similarities—particularly around the narratives, motivations, and forms of action expressing anti-government sentiments and beliefs.

Methodology

To better understand how the Australian anti-lockdown freedom movement evolved as a cohesive social movement despite its diversity, and to provide insights into the development and dynamics of this movement, we collected online data from the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel. We chose the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel because it was the first expression of the Australian anti-lockdown movement, and because it was the genesis of the wider Australian anti-lockdown movement. It was also the Telegram channel from which the leadership and main organisers of protest action most often posted, and its Telegram posts and discussions were most often reposted to other Australian Freedom Rally pages.

At its height, which occurred during the time of our data collection, the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel consisted of more than 16,000 members and several hundred thousand posts, more than 44,000 photos, and 24,000 videos. With the assistance of our research assistant, we collected and analysed posts from sample periods from the inception of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel, September, 2020, until November, 2021. This period covered a 13-month period that coincided with the movement’s development and growth and that encompassed significant periods of anti-government actions and expressions.⁶¹

By joining the channel, we were then able to download the content directly from Telegram for the sample periods we wished to analyse. The data were then stored on NVIVO for analysis. We collected data from online posts during the following sample periods: the week the Telegram channel was created, September 4–11, 2020 (271 posts); February 4–11, 2021 (218 posts); July 4–11, 2021 (528 posts); September 20–21, 2021 (1671 posts); and November 15–18, 2021 (960 posts). Our overall data sample consisted of 3648 original posts.

This implicit or passive data collection on the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel was possible because as a public Telegram channel, used as a tool for broadcasting **public** messages to large audiences, it was accessible by username search within the Telegram application. After

joining this public channel (no permissions or requirements were needed to join), we were able to collect posting data. We did not attempt to access or incorporate private messaging data that may have emerged from the channel.

Passive data collection as a collection method has the advantages of obtaining data that are observable and objective and do not rely on self-reporting or the interpretations of the subject of study. Nevertheless there are limitations to both passive data collection and on relying on samples, instead of the entirety, of the Telegram channel's online postings.

This data set was not fully comprehensive, as we collected data from select time segments and did not capture or analyse all data in the channel. There were periods, particularly in November 2021, when the channel's administrators shut off the public channel and we were unable to incorporate any further posting data from this period into our analysis. This was due to an increasing number of individuals using the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel to make violent threats against Victorian members of parliament and government. We can only speculate that this was done to avoid further law enforcement scrutiny of the movement and for the reputational concerns and management of the movement, which had consistently taken pains to claim it was nonviolent.

There are also limitations to qualitative data analysis. The coding and analysis of the data set are subject to interpretation by the collectors and analysts. Different data samples taken from different time periods may reveal different prevalence of sentiments or core themes, or indeed different themes. However, given the consistency in core themes across the time points captured in the data set, we are confident that the sample data collected and analysed is indicative of the sentiment and core themes prevalent across the entirety of the Telegram channel's posting data and therefore of the movement itself.

With limitations acknowledged, we then coded the collected data in order to conduct a thematic qualitative data analysis. Our coding was informed by our application of social movement theory and any reoccurring themes observed in the data.

Coding Framework and Analysis

In analysing the online posting data from the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel, we sought to examine the following. Firstly, we sought to obtain evidence that would either confirm or negate our proposition that the anti-lockdown movement was an anti-government extremist movement; or was it, as self-advertised, concerned with peacefully upholding human rights and liberties?

Secondly, given the diverse nature of the lockdown movement, we sought to understand how it coalesced into a cohesive social movement. We sought answers by examining the narratives shared and actions expressed as well as examining the stated driving motivations for involvement in the anti-lockdown movement in the online posts collected from the channel.

When examining the posting data, we coded them along the following three categories, "narra-

tives,” “motivations,” and “forms of action”—key categories to understand social movement development. Posts were often cross coded as many contained elements that included analysable data on one or more of the three coding categories.

Table 1 explains the various subcodes that were applied across the broad coding categories and a description explaining what those subcodes delineate.

Table 1: Codes and Subcodes

| Narratives | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <i>Posts expressing the following or utilising the following narratives' frames:</i> |
| Anti-government | Government as tyrannical, fascist, authoritarian, communist, illegitimate; government is the enemy of the people; government is the source of crisis ⁶² |
| Anti-institution | Institutions including—mainstream media, Big Tech, Big Pharma, medical establishment—are corrupt, ineffectual, and not serving the interests of the public |
| Anti-elite | Global elites are corrupt; there is a ‘global cabal’; New World Order conspiracy theory narratives, anti-Semitic narratives or conspiracies |
| Conspiracy | QAnon, Pandemic, and other COVID related, anti-vaxx; 5-G conspiracies |
| Human rights/civil liberties concerns | Criticising public health/anti-lockdown response/government pandemic response is anti-democratic and/or violates human rights/civil liberties; accusations of police brutality/targeting/unfair police action; suppression of free speech |
| Forms of Action | |
| | <i>Posting footage of or calling for participation in or stating intention to do forms of action that include:</i> |
| Protest Light | Circulating and signing petitions, online operational security, contesting fines, legal action against state; not complying with COVID restrictions; supporting anti-lockdown politicians; resisting vaccine mandate; Red pilling—‘awakening’ others and yourself to ‘the truth’ |
| Protest Heavy | Participating in illegal protest (in context of pandemic restrictions); violent protest action; protest targeting specific individuals/government officials/politicians; engaging in confrontation with police; vandalism; destruction of property |
| Violent Extremism | Calls for assassination or violence against specific individuals/government officials/politicians, terrorism, other ideologically motivated violence, sovereign citizen action, and/or ‘paper terrorism’ ⁶³ |
| Building Solidarity | Encouraging and motivating the movement; creating atmosphere of mutual support and unity |
| Motivating Factors | |
| | <i>Expressions of motivating factors such as:</i> |
| Deprivation/Grievance | Deprivation and/or grievance due to: economic struggle due to pandemic conditions, lack of freedom of movement, perceived/real human rights violation, perceived/real police brutality/overreach/unfair police action, belief that being unfairly targeted, by authority, being deplatformed from mainstream social media; inaccurately portrayed by media, double standard vs. other forms of protest (i.e. BLM) concern for children’s future/children’s future is compromised |
| Anger, Anxiety, Alienation | Emotions of anger, anxiety, alienation arises from pandemic conditions and/or government response |

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Conspiracy Theory | Articulated in the post that conspiracy is the motivating factor behind their action. Differs from the conspiracy-n in that conspiracy-n is outlining the narrative or stating the conspiracy |
| Ideology | Ideological belief or position |
| Representation | Desire for 'purer' representation, creating a movement to speak for 'real people'; grassroots action |
| Seeking Specific Policy Change | Seeking to change specific public health rule, specific mandates without broader anti-government sentiment expressed |

Findings

Anti-Government Narratives

The sample Telegram posting data of the Melbourne Freedom Rally movement confirmed that it was overwhelming anti-government. Many of its participants' online postings expressed extreme anti-government sentiment that challenged the legitimacy of government and framed the government as tyrannical. This is demonstrated by posts that asserted, "[h]ow the treasonous political parties have deliberately destroyed our nation and our future." This post was accompanied by a link to videos explaining the specific steps of 'treasonous politicians' or memes with slogans that "politicians are the virus." This belies Melbourne Freedom Rally propaganda that they were simply a movement advocating for human rights, civil liberties, and the easing of stringent public health measures. While there were posts that included narratives about upholding civil liberties and human rights, they were often cross coded with anti-government narratives. For example, posts articulating concerns about quarantine monitoring by military personnel, perceived police brutality during protests, or "intrinsic value of human rights" also end with the hashtag or discussion referencing the Nuremberg trials, implying that government officials should be tried, imprisoned, or put to death. "How to start a normal life," stated one poster: "arrest the corrupt politicians for this corona scam and restart the Nuremberg trials." There were often posts, like this one, that pushed back against the identification of their movement as extremist or associated with neo fascists by hurling back that label against the government. Referring to the premier, "Why Daniel Andrews is the very definition of a Nazi," one poster wrote, going on to list all the public health measures enacted as evidence of his fascist tendencies.

While the analysis of the narratives shared on the Freedom Rally justifies the categorising of the anti-lockdown movement as an anti-government movement, which type is not as clear cut. The fact that this movement constituted and coalesced in opposition to the Australian government's lockdowns, it is most obviously a candidate to be labelled as an "issue driven" anti-government extremism as defined by Jackson.⁶⁴

But there is a limitation in identifying the Freedom Rally movement solely as an issue-driven extremist movement. Again, as Jackson notes, an issue-driven anti-government extremist movement will abate once that issue or policy area is resolved. However, the lockdown measures have ceased in Australia and the Freedom Rally movement remains and has continued its anti-government actions both online and offline, albeit with less intensity.

Additionally, as even Jackson concedes, the distinction between issue-driven anti-government extremism and ideological anti-government extremism, as well as other types of anti-government extremism is often blurred. The qualitative analysis of the narratives present in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel does indeed reveal that the movement blurs the boundaries between various forms of anti-government extremism and exhibits qualities of various other types of anti-government extremism, such as—anti-government extremism that rejects the legitimacy of democratic governance as a matter of principle; anti-government extremist manifestations against politicians and government representatives; and anti-government extremism motivated and expressed through the spread of conspiracy theories.⁶⁵

Conspiratorial Narratives

Conspiratorial narratives were rife among the posts of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel. In this way the Melbourne Freedom Rally echoes other global forms of anti-government mobilisations around government responses to the pandemic in that conspiracy theories have played a central role.⁶⁶ Analysis of the posts also reveals that conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19, like the Plandemic conspiracy theory or Agenda 21 conspiracy theory, also intersected with other broader conspiratorial narratives and movements such New World Order and other anti-elite and anti-Semitic conspiracies.

The anti-lockdown freedom movement can be considered a complex form of anti-government extremism because it both blurred the boundaries between typologies, as discussed above, and because it combines and conflates anti-government, anti-establishment, and anti-institutional narratives and sentiment. And what connects these three “anti-expressions,” as we will call them, are conspiratorial beliefs and narratives. The sharing and belief in these conspiratorial narratives contribute to the complex identity of this anti-government movement.

Conspiracy theories often concoct connections between various powerful institutions and figures *outside* government and those holding political power *within* government. In our qualitative analysis we found that the ‘anti-government’ narratives reflected this, with anti-government narratives often conflated with anti-institutional and anti-elite narratives.

For example, anti-government sentiment and narratives were most expressed as government being co-collaborators with, corrupted by, being unable to control, or are indeed led by, powerful global elites. At times, these narratives were accompanied by QAnon-related conspiracies, such as this one: “You’re going to have to fight your way out of it or wait from Trump and Q to save you.” More often than not, the anti-elite narratives were anti-Semitic. Government and institutional elites were referred to as “Goy slaves” in service of their “Hebrew masters.”

There were also numerous conspiratorial references and narratives around mainstream institutions such as the mainstream media (MSM), Big Tech, and medical establishments. They believe that these institutions have failed the public because they are corrupt and controlled by elites with their own vested interests that work against ‘the people.’ One post referencing the state premier calls him the “pharma fascist premier” while others complaining of being deplat-

formed on mainstream social media for anti-vaxx postings point to this as evidence of collusion between Big Tech and Big Pharma in the service of government.

Yet another sample post judges, “The media is a military level propaganda machine they should be wearing uniforms. They look at everyday Australians as the enemy.” Numerous videos were shared explaining how COVID-19 was a biological weapon and that Big Pharma had a motive to make money out of the spread of COVID-19. Still others involved discussions around how vaccines were not only money-making enterprises for Big Pharma but that vaccines were somehow an instrument of government control, that they were a type of microchip.

While it’s clear that conspiracy theories were important to the social movement’s development, how much of this is an organic convergence of like-minded individuals with a conspiratorial mindset versus a deliberate introduction of conspiracy theory narratives and discourse for political opportunity is unclear. On one hand, conspiratorial narratives were readily expressed and shared by many, if not most, of the posters and commenters of the Telegram channel, indicating that participants on the channel already had a predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking. On the other hand, the administrator of the Telegram channel had the declared objective of purposefully creating a social and political movement to introduce far-right conspiratorial narratives to a broader ‘normie’ audience that was drawn to the movement through their disagreements and grievances with the Australian governments’ public health response to the pandemic.⁶⁷

Journalistic investigations into McClean uncovered separate online communications where he wrote, “We have a LOT of very NORMIE people coming in from banners and [Facebook] groups that are not ready for the JQ [Jewish Question] yet, ... are new to this side of politics and discourse...”⁶⁸ Referring to Victorian State Premier Daniel Andrews who was the public face of the pandemic response, “We start at ‘Dan Bad’ and go right through to “No Coercive Vaccines” and get into the Pedo suppression orders and NWO agenda and One world government as a concept to be opposed... I wish it were different [but] we need to take it one step at a time.”⁶⁹

Motivations

These ‘anti’ expressions tied together through conspiratorial narratives not only identify the anti-lockdown movement as a complex anti-government extremist movement, the identification of the prevalence of conspiratorial narratives among the data samples also allow us to understand how the anti-lockdown movement emerged as a social movement grounded in genuinely held perceptions of relative deprivation, societal upheaval, as well as being driven by the political opportunism of actors such as McClean and other anti-lockdown freedom rally movement influencers.

Research reviews into motivation for believing in conspiracy theories find that on an individual level, belief in conspiracy theories helps one to make sense of the world in uncertain times, provide a sense of control, and to confer a sense of specialness to conspiracy believers, as holders of unique knowledge.⁷⁰ But once held, conspiracy belief can then, in turn, become a motivating factor for social movement development, particularly the in-group development of social iden-

tity⁷¹ and the identification of targets of social movement grievances. Shared belief in conspiracy theories also helps create an alternative worldview that participants can collectively identify. They also create solidarity with like-minded believers, helping to create bonds between them and a strong in-group identity.⁷²

The conspiracy theories expressed and discussed in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel served not only as a framing device⁷³ but as a motivating factor in mobilisation,⁷⁴ as belief in conspiracy theories has an important role in coalition building⁷⁵ and mounting challenges to authority.⁷⁶ The shared anti-expressions and conspiratorial beliefs about the illegitimate and corrupt nature of government and institutions also helped to bind the diverse actors of the movement together.

Conspiracy belief also interacts with and helps to assuage anger, alienation, and anxiety that had developed from living under the stress of the pandemic, but specifically the lockdowns. Even by conservative estimates, the mental health impacts of the lockdowns, on top of the collective and individual stress of the pandemic, are substantial and wide reaching, with anxiety and post-traumatic stress presenting as the most common psychological effects.⁷⁷ For Victoria, christened the ‘most locked down city,’ the psychological effects and impacts were significant.⁷⁸ It is therefore not surprising that anger, alienation, and anxiety would feature as a prominent motivating factor for individual participation in the anti-lockdown movement.

Furthermore, the technical affordances of social media have played a key role. The use of social media and online communications has allowed negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and alienation to spread contagiously,⁷⁹ thus developing intergroup emotions which serve as collective motivation for action.⁸⁰ The shared feeling of these emotions, deriving from a shared experience under lockdowns, has united an otherwise-diverse array of actors into this relatively cohesive anti-government social movement.

Emotions such as anger, anxiety, and alienation also serve to sustain group identity and drive mobilisation when they are coupled with perceptions of deprivation and grievance against government or society. Social movement theory posits that shared perceptions of collective relative deprivation, sustained by negative emotions, can predict collective protest intentions and actions.⁸¹

The COVID-19 pandemic, according to Grant and Smith, has revealed and amplified shared grievances.⁸² For the participants in the anti-lockdown freedom movement, there is indeed a shared identification of deprivation and grievance. In the analysis of the online posting data, they feature prominently as motivating factors. One example of shared deprivation that showed up frequently in the channel was around limitations placed on employment. Vaccination requirements and work limitations placed on the construction sector in particular resulted in mass mobilisation of protest action by the anti-lockdown movement.

One illustrative post was of a recorded video of a person complaining angrily about how their freedoms are being taken away, particularly their right to work, as a result of Dan Andrews’s “no jab, no play” and “no jab, no job mandates” for the construction industry. Their depriva-

tions and grievances were identified by participants of the movement as stemming from the Victorian government and its elected officials and the corrupt elites of whose interests they serve—thus making the government illegitimate and thus deserving of being overthrown by anti-democratic means.

Other posts, like one by a user who writes, “The war is against the middle class. They want to wipe out the middle class of western democracy so that the only poor who ever complain are left for the elite’s labour.” The user then went on to connect this expression of deprivation to conspiratorial narrative, referring to Agenda 21, a United Nations plan for sustainable development which conspiracists have claimed is really a plot by the UN to wipe out 90% of the world’s population.

In addition, the anti-lockdown movement was also driven by a perceived grievance against the Victorian Labour government for the “blatant selective enforcement of ... restrictions on the basis of political alignment,”⁸³ frequently pointing to the double standard of allowing Black Lives Matter protests to proceed under lockdown in contrast to the heavy-handed police response against anti-lockdown protesters, that many in the anti-lockdown movement blame for the protest violence.

While the identification of motivation based on ideological belief and desire for representation was present among the sample data, it was not as prevalent as other motivating factors such as conspiracy belief and individual motivations such as relative deprivation and grievance and feelings of anger, anxiety, and alienation. However, while ideological belief was not as prevalent in the sample data, as discussed, ideological actors—particularly various far-right extremists and far-right politicians—were seeking to exploit these motivations.

Forms of Action

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the picture of what were considered acceptable forms of political dissent and what should be considered anti-government or even violent extremist action. What constituted anti-government action during a declared state of emergency was what would have been considered lawful political dissent and expression in a non-emergency, democratic context. Protest, under a state of emergency and lockdown conditions, was now a form of provocation⁸⁴ and labelled as ‘extremist,’ an inherently subjective, comparative, and politicised label. Given this context, we found it difficult to utilise existing frameworks that differentiated between social movement protest action and violent extremism⁸⁵ to categorise the forms of actions taken by the anti-lockdown freedom movement. We also resisted attempts to classify all protest action as violent extremism as we consider it important to preserve the distinction between violent extremism and terrorism and social protest, as freedom to protest and freedoms of association and expression remain core identifying features of democratic societies.

However, it must be acknowledged that the actions of the anti-lockdown movement *are* ambiguous and fall within the grey zone. Advocacy, protest, dissent, and industrial action lie outside legislative frameworks for what constitutes a terrorist act and are generally not considered violent extremism. However, this is provided that such conduct does not explicitly intend to cause

a serious risk to public safety, which in a state of emergency and during pandemic restrictions, these protests did do according to government.

We did not attempt to answer this complexity in our analysis. Instead, we sought to develop our own three categories of forms of action to work around this ambiguity: 1) protest light, 2) protest heavy, and 3) violent extremism—categories which are further described in the coding table. Data collected reveal overwhelmingly that the forms of action taken by the movement would fall under the category of ‘protest heavy’—which includes the participation in illegal protest (in the context of pandemic restrictions), violent protest action, protests targeting specific individuals/government officials/politicians, engaging in deliberate confrontation with police, vandalism, and destruction of property—again, belying claims by the movement that they are nonviolent.

Analysis of the online posting data shows much of the rhetoric of the movement has been violent and anti-democratic; the offline/real-world actions of the anti-lockdown movement have followed this violent rhetoric. Much of this user-generated content posted to the channel in the form of videos and images showed instances of participation in violence, particularly confrontations with police who were deployed to shut down the protests. But in highlighting their violent confrontations with police, the user content was often accompanied by commentary about the corrupt, violent, and authoritarian nature of the authorities and law enforcement. To illustrate this point, one poster writes, “The cops are PAID MURDERERS. They have the right to do whatever they want without punishment.” An image that was reposted widely was of a manipulated Victoria Police logo that included a swastika and the phrase, “Uphold the Reich.”

Less prevalent but still present in the movement was violent extremist action, which we define as encompassing calls for assassination or violence against specific individuals/government officials/politicians, terrorism, other ideologically motivated violence, sovereign citizen action, and/or ‘paper terrorism’. Posts stating, “this is war,” “they [referring to politicians] should be shot” were also present. Posts could be particularly evocative. A poster referring to one politician writes, “People like this should be shot. Firing squad the bastard. I hope he dies slowly. Painfully. The c***.”

Hybrid-Action

For some online social movements, their actions are limited to or predominantly are online, what’s more commonly referred to as ‘slacktivism.’ But the offline protest action and online posting activities of the anti-lockdown freedom movement often coincided. For example, there was a high volume of online posts to the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel during significant offline protest action organised by the anti-lockdown movement.

Online posts included live footage of offline action during protests and commentary on real-world protests and other forms of civil disobedience in real time. Again, this was especially the case in September 2021, where the majority of posts in that sample period were of recorded footage of the large, violent protests across Victoria spurred by the announcement of public-health measures that further restricted the construction sector. These protests occurred

when the Victorian Government imposed an industry-wide shutdown and mandatory vaccine mandate for the construction industry. During these protests the head office of a well-known construction union, the CFMEU, was mobbed and attacked, and protesters descended and desecrated the Victorian war memorial, the Shrine of Remembrance.

Online posting continued when a certain offline protest action, or other anti-government action and expression ended, with online postings acting as a continuation and further expression of these actions. This indicates that online postings did not displace offline or ‘real-world’ action but the two complemented and augmented each other, making this a truly hybrid movement. This is consistent with previous research evidence that found, contrary to the perception that online activism hinders offline protests, online and offline activism of social movements are positively related and intertwined as online actions can help mobilise offline action.⁸⁶

But likewise, we also found that the offline action of the freedom movement, such as real-world gatherings and protests, were intertwined with online activity and served a dual purpose. The offline actions were a form of protest in and of themselves. They were also opportunities to connect individuals who first became involved in the movement via computer-mediated communications to meet and network face-to-face. But they were also opportunities to further create online content. The Telegram channel was filled with user-generated content of offline action of channel followers—creating a symbiotic feedback loop of offline/online activity.

Embedded in a Global Social Movement

Online connectivity also embedded the Victorian anti-government lockdown movement within the global anti-lockdown movement—both in terms of narrative and coordinated protest action. Much of the vocabulary, symbology, and tactics employed appear to be drawn directly from the American far-right and conspiracy movements, embedding the Melbourne Freedom Rally as part of a transnational phenomenon, but one which operates in an Australia-specific political and social context and responds to specific grievances engendered by Australia’s COVID response.

Aided by the digital environment, influencers and leaders of the Freedom Movement have also engaged directly with international extremist influencers and actors. For example, Monica Smit a leader of a separate, but associated, organisation with the Melbourne Freedom Rally and who is part of the broader anti-lockdown movement, appeared on US extremist conspiracist Alex Jones’ program.⁸⁷ Australia featured prominently in US anti-government discourse and cited as an example “Covid Tyranny” or of pandemic conditions allowing otherwise democratic nations to slide into authoritarian conditions in the name of public health.⁸⁸

A number of Australian-based protests promoted by the Melbourne Freedom Rally, specifically those in July 2021, were also branded as being a part of the World Wide Freedom Rally. These protests were organised online via a variety of social media platforms and promoted under the hashtag #WewillALLbethere.⁸⁹ Investigations later revealed that these protests were organised by German conspiracy theory influencers and anti-lockdown activists and helped drive anti-lockdown protests in Australia⁹⁰ as well as 129 other coordinated protests worldwide.⁹¹

The administrator of the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel confirmed, 'We've been working with an international coalition of people from over 100 cities around the world to put this event on.'⁹² The online promotion of the protests by the German actors helped spark the creation of other local Australian channels of the Freedom Rally Movement. Prior to the appearance of the World Wide Freedom Rally, the Melbourne Freedom Rally was the only prior online/offline manifestation of the Freedom Rally movement.⁹³

The anti-lockdown freedom movement in Australia, although it arose from the context of the particularly strict and prolonged public health measures, was also connected to the wider phenomenon of pandemic protests against public health measures happening globally and organised by movements similarly embedded in conspiratorial narratives and beliefs. In addition to the World Wide Freedom Rally, the Canadian 'Freedom Convoy' protests, which also included a diverse cross sector of society, were reflections of similar dynamics and also engaged in anti-government extremist rhetoric and action.

There were similar anti-government pandemic-related protest actions that cross-pollinated with far-right actors, ideologies, and conspiracies occurring around the world. In the United States and Europe, COVID-19 restrictions generated vehement opposition. In 2020, for example, the FBI disrupted the plotted kidnapping of Michigan's governor by extremists motivated by her enacting statewide coronavirus restrictions and there were similar mass protests, violent plotting and attacks, and storming of legislative assemblies. The Telegram posting data also revealed that there were many posts about these other global movements. Melbourne Freedom Rally channel participants amplified global opposition, connected their efforts to other global movements, and found encouragement and derived motivation from similar international expressions of opposition to public health measures.

Conclusions and Questions for the Future

The pandemic crisis and ensuing state of emergency declarations brought about the convergence of disparate actors of varied ideological and philosophical underpinnings. The Australian anti-lockdown movement accommodated many different types of actors with various affiliations, beliefs, and motivations, eventually coalescing into a social movement centred around extreme anti-government and anti-establishment and anti-institutional sentiment, (which we distinguish and define as distinct from but related to anti-government sentiment). In applying the concepts found in social movement theory we have been able to better understand how a cohesive movement formed, grounded in shared relative deprivation, conspiratorial worldviews, emerging from disruption, and opportunistically guided and shaped by conspiracy-minded, far-right, anti-government actors.

An important question moving forward is this: how will the anti-lockdown movement evolve as a social movement beyond its emergence under a state of emergency? Will it outlast pandemic restrictions and their aftermath? How will the threat of protest violence and violent extremist threats and action associated with this movement evolve?

According to the latest public assessments by the Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the threat of violent extremism by individuals involved in the anti-lockdown movements and those with associated anti-government conspiratorial beliefs has abated. In his responses during parliamentary testimony during Senate estimates, the Director General Mike Burgess stated, “The volatility has reduced somewhat, in particular around the COVID [measures], so there’s less angst these days. We’re not subject to mandates... Some of that feeling does live on, but the number of cases we’ve been looking at, they’ve reduced significantly.”⁹⁴

However, merely months prior to the director general’s statements about the reduction in the threat, there was an unprecedented attack against Queensland police officers who conducted a welfare check on three related individuals, Gareth, Nathaniel, and Stacey Train, at their rural Queensland property. Two police officers were ambushed and killed by the Trains and a neighbour was also killed in the shootout. The Trains were subsequently shot dead by police following the siege.

The Trains were motivated by extreme anti-government conspiratorial and millennialist beliefs.⁹⁵ While Gareth Train had a yearslong history of conspiratorial beliefs and a record of posting conspiratorial anti-vaxx, anti-government, particularly anti-law enforcement, content on various forums, it is also clear that, as an ISD report examining his online posts concluded, “the pandemic and the associated government restrictions and vaccination campaigns played a significant role in radicalising him further into conspiratorial beliefs, and perhaps in spurring extreme action.”⁹⁶

Gareth Train posted online, echoing similar posts in our data collection, that the pandemic restrictions were a form of “military intervention” by the government and that politics was only a diversion. Train was also reported to have posted comments online in solidarity with the anti-lockdown protesters but he also questioned their tactics of ‘peaceful demonstrations’ and insisted that they will inevitably have to address the ‘corporate soldiers, aka police,’ with violence.⁹⁷ The example of the Wieambilla attack reveals that while there may be less intensity in context of protests or other forms of mass action, anti-government and pandemic-related conspiracy beliefs remain important as motivating factors for violent extremism even as pandemic restrictions have eased.

There also remains a committed core of individuals involved in the freedom movement who remain committed to their views and broader activism.⁹⁸ Their activism can have sustained, though complex impacts on democratic governance. The extremist anti-government sentiment of the Freedom Rally movement has grown alongside persistent trust deficits within Australian democracy⁹⁹ and mainstream anti-establishment sentiments and perceptions that Australian political and economic systems are ‘broken’ or government is not responsive to the needs of average citizens. According to the Ipsos’ “Broken System Index” there is widespread sentiment that the political status quo ignores the priorities of the average voter and that the current political system is geared towards the benefit of elites within Australia.¹⁰⁰ While these majority sentiments around the effectiveness and integrity of democratic governments are different to

anti-government extremism, they are not entirely distinct. These persistently high and continuing public sentiments about the deficiencies of democratic government and political leaders and other elites, can interact, bolster, and sustain anti-government extremism, contributing to broader reductions in the legitimacy of democratic government.

Currently, little is understood about the different political opportunities that anti-lockdown activists have sought to exploit in the aftermath of the pandemic. While some may have withdrawn back into everyday life, others may continue to engage in further activism. Some have sought to enter electoral politics, as some leaders and key organisers of the anti-lockdown movement have done in Australia, so far with little success.¹⁰¹ Some, like McClean, may be hindered by bail conditions that prohibit their involvement in any political activities. Still others become further entrenched in their conspiratorial worldviews and disillusionment with government and move towards more explicit violent extremist activity. But as one participant in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel posted, “Dan Andrews state of emergency ends in a few days. What happens next? We continue to fight for the people. We continue to learn and educate. And we definitely, definitely unite.”

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