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Participation in anti-authority protests and vulnerability to radicalisation

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Preliminary findings from this research were shared at the Protecting Democracy Conference in London in early 2023. We are grateful for the feedback from attendees at this event whose input has helped shape this report.

Abstract

Using data from a large, national survey of online Australians, we examined the presence of risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation among individuals who participated in an anti-authority protest since early 2020. Our results show that anti-authority protesters exhibited more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than other respondents, including people who had participated in protests in support of other issues or movements. They were also more likely to justify violence in support of their cause and willing to support or participate in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of their group. These findings show that people who participated in anti-authority protests were more vulnerable to radicalisation when compared with other protesters and non-protesters. Our results have implications for responding to protest movements that promote anti-government sentiment, that spread disinformation and that are exploited by malicious actors.

Executive summary

There has been an increase in anti-authority protest since January 2020 involving individuals and groups driven by a range of motives and ideologies. Some of these protests posed a genuine threat to community safety and resulted in violent clashes with law enforcement. Concerns have also been raised about the involvement of extremist actors and their attempts to exploit certain movements, such as protests against the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to pursue their political, social and ideological goals as part of a broader anti-government movement. This includes the risk of mobilisation to violence. To date, there has been no systematic assessment of the extent to which individuals connected to this wider freedom movement may be vulnerable to radicalisation.

This research aimed to better understand the characteristics of people who engaged in anti-authority protests, including those people who had previously never been involved in protest activity. Using data from a large survey of more than 13,000 online Australians, we measured the prevalence of more than 30 known risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation among individuals who participated in an anti-authority protest since early 2020. We then compared this group with respondents who said they had never protested, who had protested but not since January 2020, and who had recently protested but in support of other causes. We also measured the extent to which respondents were willing to justify violence in support of their cause (radicalised attitudes) and willing to support or engage in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of their group (radicalised intentions).

Anti-authority protesters exhibited more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than other respondents, including people who had recently participated in protests in support of other issues or movements.
They were also more like to justify violence in support of their cause and be willing to support or participate in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of their group.

How common was participation in anti-authority protest?

Around one in five respondents to our survey had participated in at least one in-person protest in their lifetime. Recent protest was less common: six percent of respondents to the survey had participated in at least one protest since January 2020. They protested in support of a wide range of causes, which reflected the range of protest activity that has taken place across Australia in recent years. The most common issues or movements were environmental issues or climate change, women's safety and rights, and First Nation rights and Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Among recent protesters, around one in four had participated in what we defined as anti-authority protests against government—protests against government policies on the public health response to COVID-19 or protests against government authority. These anti-authority protesters accounted for nearly two percent of respondents to the survey.

Around half of all anti-authority protesters also participated in a recent protest in support of a different issue or movement since January 2020. Anti-authority protesters were more likely than other respondents who had protested since January (but in support of other issues or movements) to have participated in an in-person protest for the first time.

The concerns or goals for protesting identified by anti-authority protesters were also different to those of other recent protesters. There was a much stronger emphasis on freedom from government overreach and upholding human rights, and exposing government and media lies—themes that are closely aligned with the narratives of the wider freedom movement.

Were anti-authority protesters more vulnerable to radicalisation?

Our detailed assessment of sociodemographic, experiential, psychological, criminogenic and attitudinal factors identified all of the risk and protective factors for cognitive or behavioural radicalisation that were more or less common among anti-authority protesters. When compared with respondents who had never protested, protested before January 2020 but not recently, or protested since January 2020 but in support of other issues or movements, anti-authority protesters:

- were more likely to be male, to attend religious worship on a regular basis, and to have prior military service;
- were more likely to report having been diagnosed with personality or psychotic disorders, but had similar rates of mental health problems overall;
- were more likely to have experienced verbal aggression and physical fights between family members when they were growing up, and more likely to report having been a recent victim of hate speech or bullying, harassment and discrimination;
- were more likely to report having intentionally accessed fringe or radical content and groups online, though no more likely to have been exposed to violent media;
- were more likely to report having family or friends who had also intentionally accessed fringe or radical content online;
- were more likely to report recent negative life events, particularly those related to financial stress;
- were much more likely to endorse conspiracy beliefs, including but not limited to those related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- were more likely to perceive politicians, government and the criminal justice system as less legitimate, were less satisfied with democracy and had lower respect for Australian laws; and
- were more likely to report having contact with the criminal justice system both as a juvenile and as an adult.

Anti-authority protesters exhibited more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than other respondents, including people who had recently participated in protests in support of other issues or movements. They were also more like to justify violence in support of their cause and be willing to support or participate in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of their group, meaning they were more likely to hold radicalised attitudes or intentions than other respondents.

On this basis, we can conclude that respondents who participated in anti-authority protests were more vulnerable to radicalisation than other respondents, including people who had participated in recent protest activity in support of other issues or movements.

Were there differences between first-time anti-authority protesters and those with prior protest experience?

Compared with people who had participated in protest activity before January 2020, first-time anti-authority protesters were less trusting, less likely to perceive politicians and government as legitimate, less satisfied with democracy and more likely to endorse conspiratorial beliefs. However, they were also less likely to be male, to have prior military service and to report recent exposure to fringe or radical online content that depicted violence or say they had been recently bullied, harassed, intimidated, stalked or abused online. They exhibited fewer risk factors for radicalisation overall. While they were equally likely to justify the use of violence, first-time anti-authority protesters were less likely to indicate a willingness to support or use violence.

What are the implications for responding to anti-authority protest and the risk of mobilisation to violence?

These results have important implications for responding to individuals and groups motivated by grievances, inflamed by conspiratorial ideologies, who may be willing to use violence to support their cause. Our findings indicate the need to:

- respond to the immediate risk associated with collective action involving individuals who hold radical attitudes and intentions, without encroaching on people's fundamental right to legal and non-violent protest, which is core to a functioning democracy;
- target extremist actors who seek to exploit social and political issues, like the COVID-19 pandemic, to influence those who may be vulnerable to radicalisation and to pursue their ideological agenda;
- tackle disinformation that promotes harmful anti-government sentiment and encourages beliefs in conspiracy theories by targeting the availability of conspiratorial material and the consumption and influence of that material on people's beliefs;
- provide opportunities for people to express dissent and opposition to government authority without labelling anti-authority protesters as extremists, so as not to push more moderate protesters towards the extremes; and
- monitor the ongoing evolution of movements motivated by anti-government sentiment and conspiratorial ideologies, particularly where malicious actors are involved.

While focused on anti-authority protest that coincided with the pandemic, the persistent threat of disinformation, malicious actors, conspiratorial beliefs and rising anti-government sentiment means that the findings of this study have implications for the evolving extremism threat landscape in Australia and internationally.

Introduction

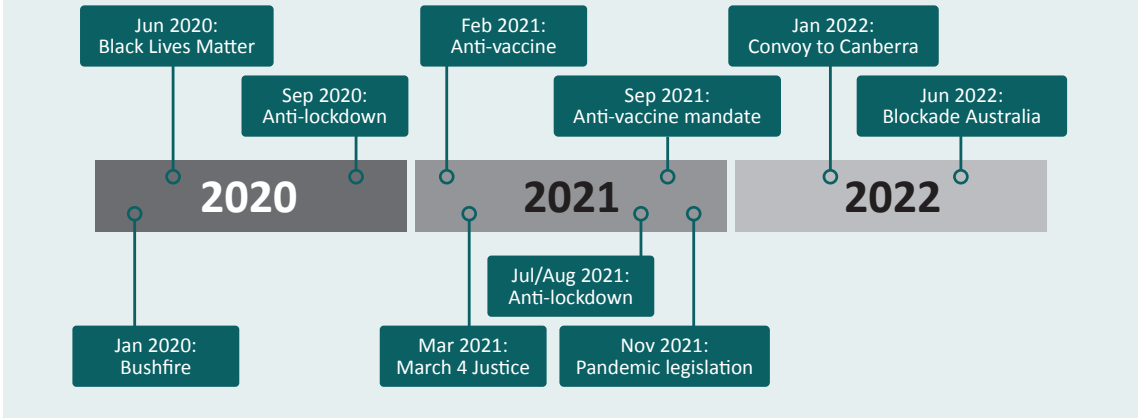
Protest plays an important role in democratic societies. Legal, non-violent protest is a legitimate means through which individuals and groups can publicly demonstrate their disagreement with government policies, social injustices or other causes and demand change.

There has been considerable protest activity in Australia since early 2020. These protests were in support of a range of causes (Figure 1). In mid-2020, thousands of Australians gathered in state capital cities to march against Indigenous deaths in custody and systemic racism, motivated in part by Black Lives Matter protests in the United States following the death of George Floyd (Henriques-Gomes & Visontay 2020), receiving international attention (Regan, Watson & Walsh 2020). There was a women's 'March 4 Justice' in early 2021 in response to high-profile cases of sexual violence (Gorman 2021; Nally 2021). And there have been a number of major protests in support of action in response to climate change. This included nationwide protests following the enormous bushfires on the east coast in the summer before the onset of the pandemic (ABC News 2020; Regan & Yeung 2020), as well as smaller protests such as that by Blockade Australia in Sydney in mid-2022 (McGuire 2022; Thompson 2022).

There was also considerable protest activity related to the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including coordinated national protest activity (Noble 2021). These protests largely coincided with the introduction of public health measures. This includes anti-lockdown protests during protracted stay-at-home measures, first in late 2020 and then in mid-2021 (ABC News 2021a, 2021b; McKinnell 2021), anti-vaccination protests when the vaccine was rolled out in Australia (Noble 2021), and anti-vaccine-mandate protests when rules relating to the vaccination requirements for certain industries were introduced (Marin-Guzman 2021).

What distinguished the pandemic protest activity from other protest activity during the same period was the link with a broader anti-government freedom movement, which largely emerged in response to the public health policies introduced to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. Malicious actors exploited the pandemic to promote anti-government sentiment, often interlinked with far-right or conspiratorial ideologies (Farinelli 2021; McGowan 2021; Meese, Frith & Wilken 2020; Pantucci 2022; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2021). These actors sought to capitalise on the uncertainty associated with the pandemic and discontent with public health measures, seeing it as an opportunity to fuel societal division and pursue their political, social or ideological agenda (Ackerman & Peterson 2020; Roose 2021).

Figure 1: Major protest activity, 2020–22



This anti-government freedom movement and associated protest activity was notable for the level of violence—both threatened and actual—that occurred. This included violent clashes with law enforcement (ABC News 2021b; Seyfort & Zagon 2021). Protest violence is largely situation- and context-specific—for example, it can occur when protests are spontaneous rather than organised (Gustafson 2020; Ives & Lewis 2020), when emotion and tension are heightened and there is some sort of triggering event (Nassauer 2016), or when police employ harder or more repressive tactics (della Porta 2018). It can also be an intentional choice by previously moderate movements who view violence as an increasingly necessary tactic (Futrell, Simi & Tan 2018).

While violent demonstrations by anti-government groups were a major focus during the pandemic, there were other manifestations of anti-government extremism in Australia and abroad. These included the vandalising of healthcare facilities, individual violence related to opposition to government policies (such as wearing face masks), threats or violence towards public officials, the presence of militaristic groups who sought to defend anti-government demonstrations, and the presence of known extremist groups at anti-authority protests (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2022a). In Australia there were several incidents of threats or incitement of violence towards high-profile politicians and government officials motivated by growing anti-government sentiment (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) 2022; Butler 2021; McKenzie & Lucas 2021).

There are various models that can help explain why people involved in these acts of violence may become radicalised and be willing to engage in extremist violence in support of an anti-government movement (Hardy 2018). While there is no single agreed definition of radicalisation, it is best understood as a gradual process by which someone develops or embraces radical views that support the use of violence to promote an ideological or religious cause and, in very rare cases, carries out an act of violence (Hardy 2018; Wolfowicz et al. 2021). It is important to distinguish between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation—the former refers to the process of developing attitudes or beliefs that increase support for or willingness to use violence in support of a particular cause, while the latter refers to the process by which someone becomes involved in acts of violent extremism (violence they think will bring about change; Neumann 2013; Wolfowicz et al. 2021).

Vulnerability to radicalisation is a concept that has grown in prominence, largely because of its relevance to policies and programs that aim to intervene before a person becomes radicalised or engages in extremist violence. It refers to people who demonstrate characteristics that might make them more susceptible to cognitive or behavioural radicalisation when in certain settings (Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023). Vulnerability to radicalisation can be viewed as a consequence of the interaction of a combination of factors, including individual propensity, situational factors and exposure to extremist ideologies (Bouhana 2019; Clemmow, Bouhana & Gill 2020; Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023; Hafez & Mullins 2015). A relevant example of a situational factor is the presence of individuals or groups who are promoting extreme views or advocating violence in support of an ideological goal during a protest.

The presence of extremist groups or individuals as part of the freedom movement—and therefore exposure to extremist ideologies—has been noted (Roose 2021). Certainly, while not uncommon in social movements generally (della Porta 2018), a prominent feature of the freedom movement was its ability to unify an otherwise disparate group of actors. It brought individuals and groups with extreme views together with people unhappy with public health measures. This was no more apparent than during the Convoy to Canberra, where thousands of people marched on Parliament House. This was a collective of people protesting a 'grab-bag' of conspiracies and grievances (Britton 2022; Butler 2022). There were anti-vaccination activists, anti-vaccine-mandate activists, conspiracy theorists, far-right actors, members of the sovereign citizen movement, ultra-religious groups, members of political parties, and self-proclaimed Indigenous rights activists (Wilson 2022). Many of these more extreme groups were present at other freedom protests (McGowan 2021; Roose 2021) and, indeed, have participated in other, more recent protests, focused on other causes (Elias 2023; Ore 2023).

Research has explored the nature of collective action as part of this freedom movement. There is also research into the mobilisation of this action, including the role of the online environment, and the central motives, ideologies and narratives that underpinned the wider extremist movement (Khalil & Roose 2023; Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022). And we also know who some of the key actors have been (McGowan 2021).

Less is known about who has participated in the collective action that formed part of this freedom movement, or the extent to which these individuals may be vulnerable to radicalisation. This is an important gap, since the ability of an extremist movement to recruit, mobilise and retain a network of individuals who support their agenda is key to the strength of that movement and its ability to achieve its political or social goals. Crucially, participation in activism alone—irrespective of the issue or movement—is not sufficient to predict or explain the risk of support for or involvement in political violence (Pavlovic 2023), and there is no straight pathway from activism to radicalisation (Moskalenko & McCauley 2009).

There is, however, a large body of research that has attempted to understand who in the community may be vulnerable to radicalisation. A systematic review and meta-analysis of studies by Wolfowicz et al. (2021) identified 101 risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. The outcomes of this review have been used in recent studies to understand how the interaction of factors influences grievance-fuelled violence (Corner & Taylor 2023), as well as vulnerability to radicalisation in general community samples (Clemmow, Bouhana et al. 2023; Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023). It offers a useful framework to assess the vulnerability to radicalisation among individuals who have participated in protests associated with the anti-government freedom movement, especially given the lack of clarity regarding the concept of vulnerability to radicalisation (Corner, Bouhana & Gill 2019).

This study aimed to build a better understanding of who was involved in anti-authority protests that took place in Australia, and the extent to which these individuals may be vulnerable to radicalisation. Our focus was on individuals who participated in anti-authority protests since January 2020, which we define—for the purpose of this study—as protests against government policies on the public health response to COVID-19 or protests against government authority. Consistent with recent radicalisation research, which has shown the importance of not relying on any single risk factor for radicalisation and considering factors related to individual propensity, situational factors and exposure to extremism (Bouhana 2019), we examined the presence of more than 30 established risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. We also measured attitudes that justify the use of violence (radical attitudes) and willingness to support or participate in violence as part of a movement (radical intentions), and the relationship between risk and protective factors and radical attitudes and intentions. The findings from this research have important implications for responding to individuals and groups motivated by grievances, inflamed by conspiratorial ideologies, who may be willing to use violence to support their cause.

Method

We conducted an online survey that collected information about respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, online activity, experience of recent and early life stressors, access to and engagement with fringe and radical content and groups online, and their social and political beliefs. The survey also included questions about respondents' involvement in protest activity.

Recruitment, sampling and weighting

The survey was conducted by Roy Morgan Research. It was piloted in early October 2022, while the main fieldwork was conducted in November and December 2022. Respondents were recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source panel and panels managed by PureProfile and Dynata. The survey was sent to members of these online panels aged 18 years and over who had voluntarily joined the panel to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys.

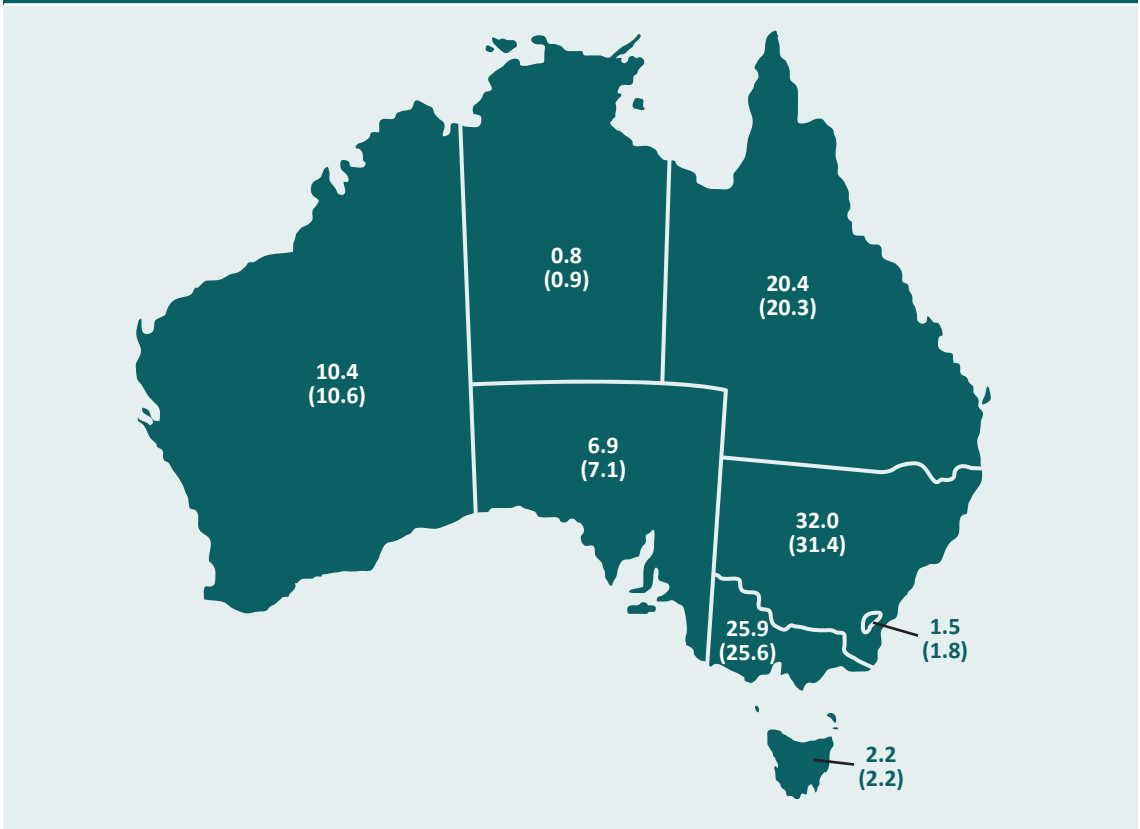
Proportional quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics population data (ABS 2023a). Participants were first recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source panel, which comprises individuals recruited through a rigorous clustersampled, face-to-face survey approach. The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 7.1 percent. Importantly, most respondents (78.3%) who opened the invitation and who were eligible to participate in the research went on to complete the survey.

The survey took respondents an average of 23.8 minutes to complete. The final sample size was 13,302 respondents. We weighted the data by age and usual place of residence to ensure responses were representative of the spread of the Australian population. Additional random iterative method weights were applied to correct for education level, and internet and social media use. All of the results presented in this report are based on weighted data.

Sample characteristics

The distribution of respondents by their usual place of residence is presented in Figure 2. This was broadly in line with population data for the whole of Australia, based on ABS data (in parentheses). The majority of respondents were living in metropolitan areas (73.3%), while 23.3 percent were living in regional areas and 2.6 percent in remote areas (Table 1).

Figure 2: Respondents by usual place of residence (%) (*n*=13,302)



Note: ABS estimated resident population at 30 June 2022 in parentheses
Source: ABS 2023a; Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

As shown in Table 1, 28.9 percent of respondents were aged 18 to 34 years, 48.9 percent were aged 35 to 64 years, and 22.2 percent of respondents were aged 65 years and older. Fifty-one percent of the sample were female, 48.6 percent were male and 0.5 percent of respondents identified as non-binary or some other gender. First Nations respondents accounted for 2.7 percent of respondents, while 8.4 percent of respondents identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or some other non-heterosexual sexual identity; 63 percent were in a relationship; and 36.7 percent had at least one child living at home with them. One in five respondents (21.9%) was born outside of Australia and 5.2 percent spoke a language other than English most often at home. Around one in eight respondents (12.8%) said they had a long-term health condition and were restricted in their everyday activities or needed help or supervision because of their health conditions.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (*n*=13,302)		
	n	%
Age		
18–24	1,439	10.8
25–34	2,408	18.1
35–49	3,444	25.9
50–64	3,055	23.0
65+	2,956	22.2
Gender		
Female	6,770	50.9
Male	6,470	48.6
Non-binary or other gender	62	0.5
First Nations	362	2.7
LGB+ respondents	1,112	8.4
Born outside of Australia	2,919	21.9
Speak a language other than English most often at home	695	5.2
Restrictive long-term health condition	1,708	12.8
Currently in a relationship	8.385	63.0
Children living at home	4,887	36.7
Usual place of residence (remoteness)		
Major city	9,748	73.3
Regional	3,094	23.3
Remote	347	2.6
Highest level of education		
High school	4,222	31.7
Vocational	3,784	28.4
University	5,203	39.1
Employment status		
Employed	8,349	62.8
Other	4,285	32.2
Unemployed	600	4.5
Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage (IRSAD)[a]		
Quartile 1 (most disadvantaged)	2,269	17.1
Quartile 2	2,700	20.2
Quartile 3	3,468	26.1
Quartile 4 (least disadvantaged)	4,748	35.7

a: Denominators include respondents who did not know or declined to answer the question
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Data presented in Figure 2 and Table 2 show that the sample is representative of the spread of the Australian population, particularly in terms of the gender and usual place of residence of respondents. The same was also true in terms of the age of respondents (the other variable used in sampling). Further, despite some of the concerns about non-probability sampling methods and bias (Pennay et al. 2018), there was a high concordance between secondary demographics of the sample—characteristics of the population that were not used in the sampling or weighting procedure—and the Australian population. Some groups, including those born overseas or with a restrictive health condition, were under-represented, most likely as a consequence of the survey method.

Table 2: Selected sociodemographic characteristics of respondents and concordance with population data (%)

	ABS statistics	Survey respondents (weighted)
Female[a]	50.8	50.9
First Nations[b]	2.7	2.7
Born overseas[c]	27.6	21.9
Disability[d]	17.7	12.8
Non-school qualification (20–64 years only)[e]	70.1	70.0
Usual place of residence[f]		
Major cities	72.2	73.3
Regional	25.9	23.3
Remote	1.9	2.6

a: Proportion of estimated residential population as at September 2022 who were female (ABS 2023a)

b: Projected resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as proportion of persons aged 18 years and over as at September 2022 (ABS 2019, 2023a). Denominator for survey respondents includes 104 respondents who did not know or declined to answer the question

c: Proportion of Australians who were born overseas (ABS 2022a). Denominator for survey respondents includes 36 respondents who did not know or declined to answer the question

d: Proportion of persons with a disability (AIHW 2022). Survey estimate is based on Short Form Disability measure, refers to respondents who self-reported at least one current medical condition which has lasted, or is expected to last, for six months or more and which restricts their everyday activities. Denominator includes 541 respondents who did not know or declined to answer the question

e: Estimated proportion of persons aged 20–64 years with a non-school qualification (ABS 2022b). Denominator for survey respondents includes 44 respondents who selected 'Other', did not know or declined to answer the question

f: Estimated resident population, by remoteness areas (ABS 2023b). Denominator for survey respondents includes 113 respondents where this information was unknown

Source: ABS (various); AIHW (2022); Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Measuring protest participation

We asked respondents whether they had ever participated in a protest or rally in-person in support of a political or social movement ('ever protested'). We then asked whether they had participated in an in-person protest since January 2020 ('recent protesters'). Respondents who said they had participated in an in-person protest since January 2000 were then asked the issues or movements they had protested in support of. Several options were provided, and additional free text responses were re-coded into existing or new categories of causes. Anti-authority protesters were identified on the basis that they said they had participated in protests against government policies on the public health response to COVID-19 or protests against government authority. This resulted in four groups: respondents who had never protested, who had protested but not recently, who had recently protested but not in an anti-authority protest, and recent anti-authority protesters. Finally, we asked a question to distinguish between anti-authority protesters who had protested in support of any issue or movement before January 2020 ('repeat anti-authority protesters') and those who had not previously participated in an in-person protest ('first-time anti-authority protesters').

Table 3: Protest groups

Category	Abbreviated	Description
Never protested	Never	Had never participated in a protest or rally in-person in support of a political or social movement
Protested, but not recently	Not recent	Had protested in a protest or rally in-person, but not since January 2020
Protested recently, but not in an anti-authority protest	Recent other	Had participated in a protest or rally in-person since January 2020 in support of a political or social movement other than those we defined as anti-authority
Protested recently in an anti-authority protest	Recent anti-authority	Participated in an in-person protest against government policies on the public health response to COVID-19 or protests against government authority

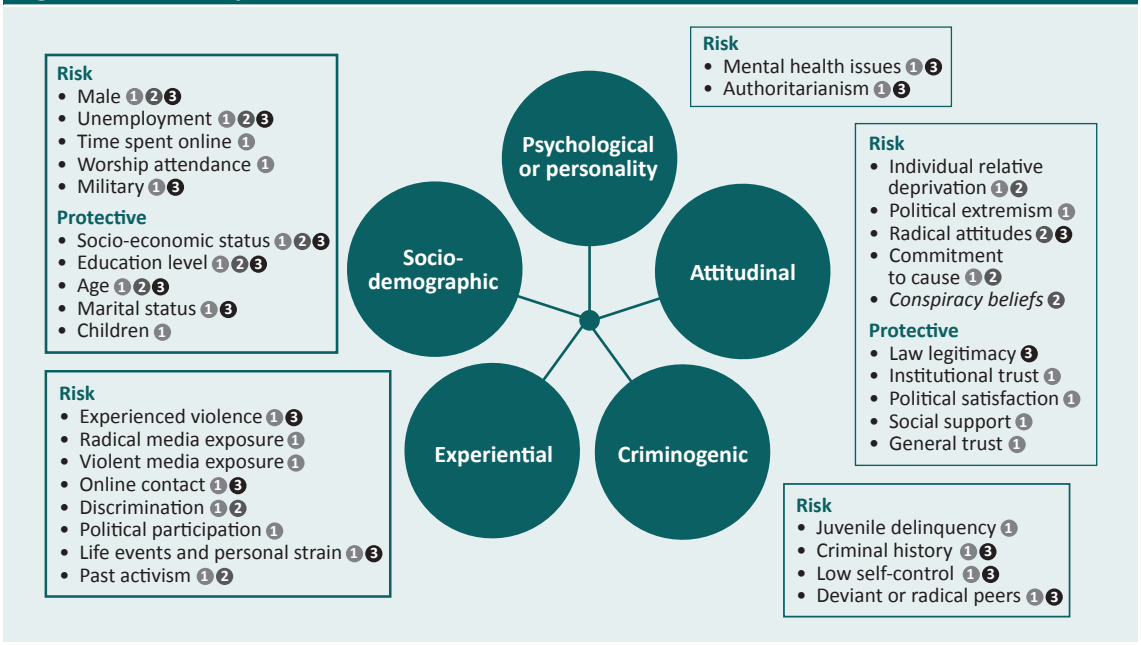
Risk and protective factors for radicalisation

To measure vulnerability to radicalisation, we have drawn upon Wolfowicz et al.'s (2021) systematic review of risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. This examined 127 studies and analysed 101 risk and protective factors (Wolfowicz et al. 2021). These 101 risk and protective factors were organised into five domains: sociodemographic characteristics, experiential factors, psychological or personality factors, attitudinal factors and criminogenic factors. The review also distinguished between risk and protective factors associated with radicalised attitudes, intentions and behaviours.

A recent study by Corner and Taylor (2023) used this systematic review as the framework for analysing cases of grievance-fuelled violence. Other studies have also drawn on this review to measure vulnerability to radicalisation in general population samples (Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023). We adopted a similar approach. As shown in Figure 3, we identified all the relevant risk and protective factors that were measured in our survey and whether they related to radical attitudes (1), radical intentions (2) and/or involvement in radical behaviour (3). These are summarised in Figure 3. In addition to these risk factors, we included conspiratorial beliefs, given the importance of conspiracy theories in recent radicalisation assessments (ASIO 2022), their centrality to the anti-government freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023) and the evidence from studies that show conspiracy beliefs are associated with radicalised attitudes and intentions (Rottweiler & Gill 2022; Uscinski et al. 2022; Vegetti & Littvay 2022).

These formed the basis of our profile of anti-authority protesters and comparison with other people who completed the survey. We wanted to know whether anti-authority protesters were more likely to exhibit these risk factors and less likely to exhibit protective factors, and whether they were more likely to demonstrate radicalised attitudes and intentions.

Figure 3: Risk and protective factors for radicalised attitudes, intentions and beliefs



Note: Numbers refer to statistical relationship between risk or protective factor and radical attitudes (1), radical intentions (2) or involvement in radical behaviour (3). Conspiracy beliefs have been included (but are italicised) because of a recent study by Rottweiler & Gill (2022); however, it was not included in the systematic review by Wolfowicz et al. (2021)

Source: Based on Wolfowicz et al. 2021

Analysis

We began by identifying and describing the different categories of protest activity. Then, for each risk and protector factor, we first compared anti-authority protesters to respondents who had participated in a recent protest in support of other causes, respondents who had participated in protest activity prior to January 2020 but not since, and respondents who had never protested. We then compared first-time and repeat anti-authority protesters. The use of weighted survey data meant we had to use bivariate regression, rather than more conventional methods, with the risk or protective factor as the dependent variable. Categorical variables were analysed using bivariate logistic regression, while continuous variables (eg mean scores for scales based on responses to multiple items) were compared using ordinary least squares regression. We have reported the coefficients from these regressions, and whether the relationship was statistically significant, alongside the descriptive results in the tables.

Limitations

While the sample is large and representative of the spread of the Australian population according to key demographic characteristics, the use of non-probability sampling means this was not a nationally representative sample of the Australian population. We are cautious not to generalise beyond the sample of respondents.

Given the focus of the survey, some respondents may have been reluctant to share information about their protest involvement, or to provide honest responses to questions relating to certain risk and protective factors. While poor quality responses were removed from the sample (eg respondents who completed the survey faster than the minimum acceptable time), it is difficult to assess the validity of the answers to questions. Recent research has shown that direct questioning, even on sensitive or socially undesirable topics, is more effective at eliciting accurate information for risk factors for violent extremism (Clemmow et al. 2020). Likewise, self-administered surveys, such as ours, may be less prone to social desirability bias than interviewer-administered methods (Tourangeau & Yan 2007).

Further, we measured more than 30 different known risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. Research has identified more than one hundred (Wolfowicz et al. 2021). We focused on those that may be more readily identifiable, as well as more dynamic risk factors—that is, risk factors that could be identified when assessing the risk associated with individuals involved in social movements, or that may be responsive to an intervention aiming to reduce vulnerability to radicalisation. We note that there are other important factors that we could not measure due to the length of the survey.

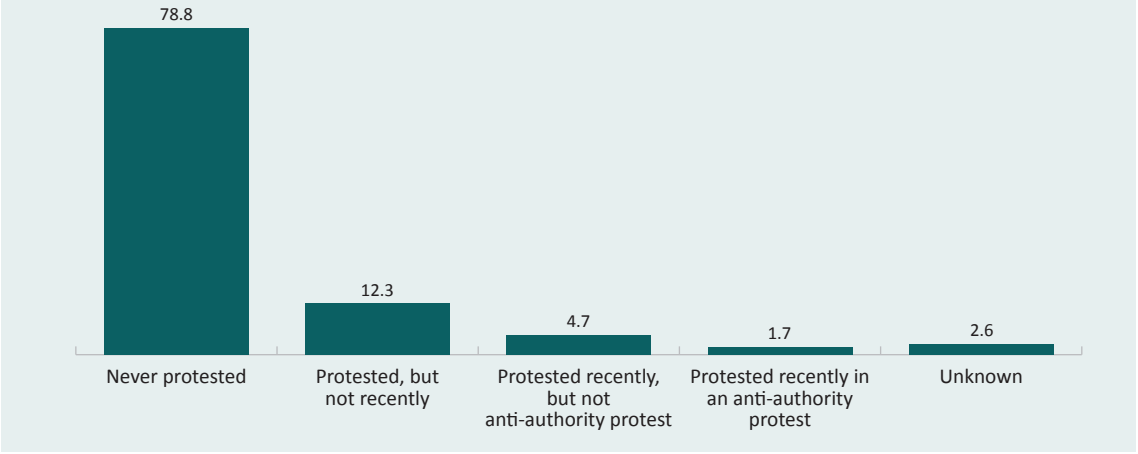
Finally, this was a cross-sectional survey, meaning that it only captured information on risk and protective factors at a single point in time. This prevents us from establishing the sequencing or relationship between different factors, which recent research suggests is useful in analysing trajectories towards radicalisation (Corner, Bouhana & Gill 2019).

Anti-authority protest

Protest participation

The majority of respondents had never participated in an in-person protest (78.8%). Around one in eight (12.3%) said they had protested before January 2020 but not recently, 4.7 percent had protested recently but not in anti-authority protest, and 1.7 percent had recently participated in an anti-authority protest (Figure 4). The remaining 2.6 percent of respondents did not answer the question or said they did not know. We excluded this group of respondents from the analysis that follows.

Figure 4: Protest participation (%) (*n*=13,302)



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

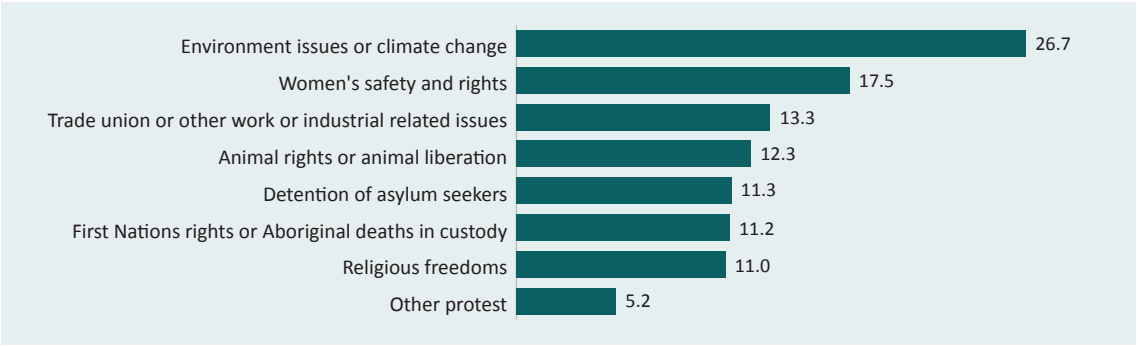
There was a higher proportion of anti-authority protesters who had never participated in a protest before January 2020 than there was among other protesters (Figure 5). Overall, 53.9 percent of anti-authority protesters said they had never participated in an in-person protest before January 2020, significantly higher than the 26.4 percent of respondents who said they had protested in person in support of a different issue or movement.

Figure 5: Protest participation prior to January 2020 (%)

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

Overall, nearly half the anti-authority protesters in our sample had participated in protests in support of other causes since January 2020 (Figure 6). The most common cause was environmental issues or climate change (26.7%), followed by women's safety and rights (17.5%). Many of these other causes are more commonly associated with people at the opposite end of the political spectrum. This has been observed in the United States, where there was a significant overlap between people who protested COVID-19 public health measures and who attended Black Lives Matter protests (Chenoweth et al. 2022).

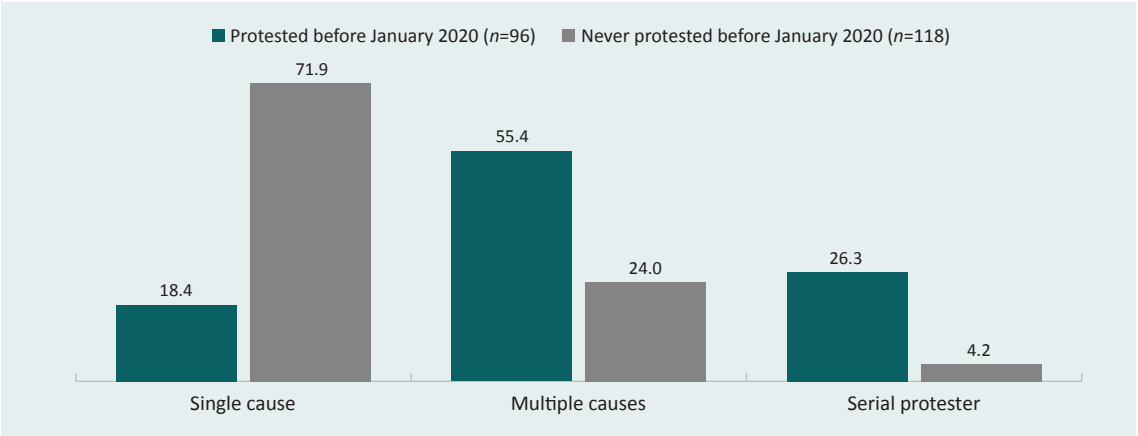
Figure 6: Other protest activity among anti-authority protesters (%) (*n*=220)



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

Anti-authority protesters who had never participated in a protest before January 2020 were much less likely to have protested in support of other causes in the last three years (Figure 7). Specifically, they were more likely to have only participated in protests in support of a single issue or movement (71.9% vs 18.4%) and less likely to have protested in support of two or three causes (24.0% vs 55.4%) or be what we termed a serial protester, meaning they protested four or more causes (4.2% vs 26.3, F=25.6, p<0.001).

Figure 7: Protest frequency among anti-authority protesters, by prior protest (%)



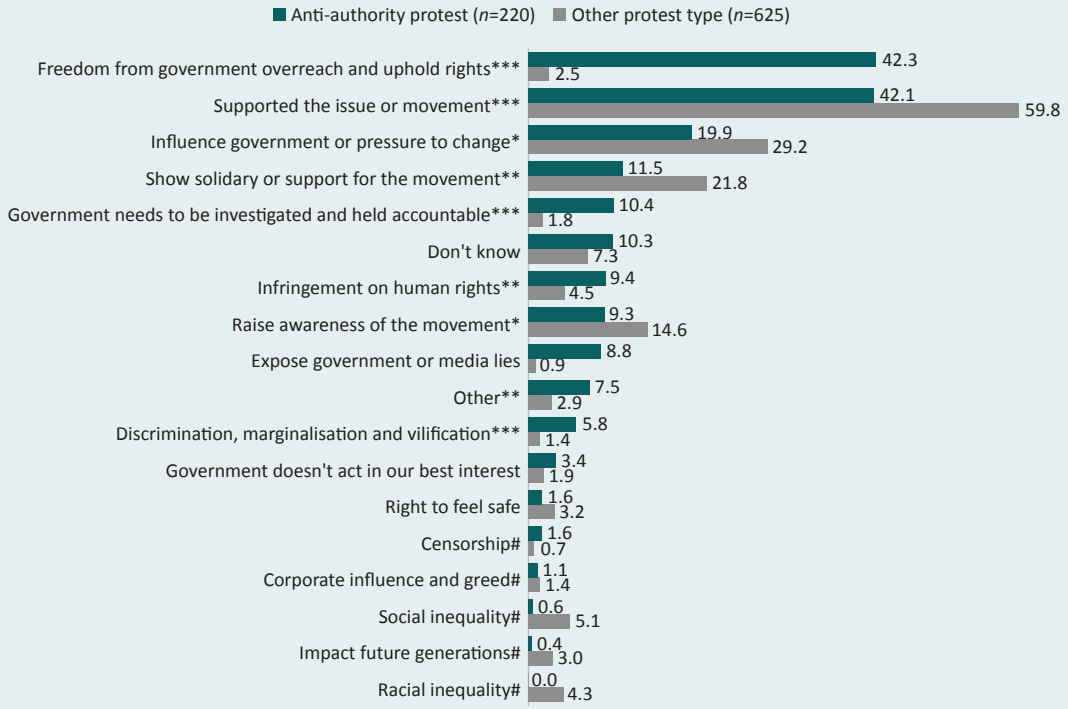
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Respondents who had participated in a protest since January 2020 were asked about the most recent protest they attended, what concerned them about the issue and what they wanted to achieve. Free text responses were then re-coded into categories (Figure 8).

Anti-authority protesters were primarily focused on demonstrating their desire for freedom from government overreach and upholding their rights (42.3% vs 2.5%; F=234.5, p<0.001). Anti-authority protesters were more likely than other recent protesters to say that they were protesting to promote the use of evidence and expose government or media lies (8.8% vs 0.9%; F=27.5, p<0.001), because the government needed to be investigated and held accountable (10.4% vs 1.8%; F=21.8, p<0.001), to show their human rights had been infringed (9.4% vs 4.5%; F=7.0, p<0.01), or because of discrimination, marginalisation and vilification (5.8% vs 1.4%; F=12.2, p<0.001).

While it was a common reason for protesting, they were less likely than other recent protesters to say they participated because they supported the issue or movement (42.1% vs 59.8%; F=18.5, p<0.001). They were also less likely to say that they wanted to influence government or pressure them to make changes (19.9% vs 29.2%; F=6.4, p<0.05), that they wanted to show solidarity or support for the movement (11.5% vs 21.8%; F=9.6, p<0.01), or that they wanted to raise awareness of the movement (9.3% vs 14.6%; F=3.9, p<0.05).

Figure 8: Concerns about or goals for protesting issue or movement, by protest cause (%)



***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05, # Cell sizes too small for analysis
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Social and political beliefs

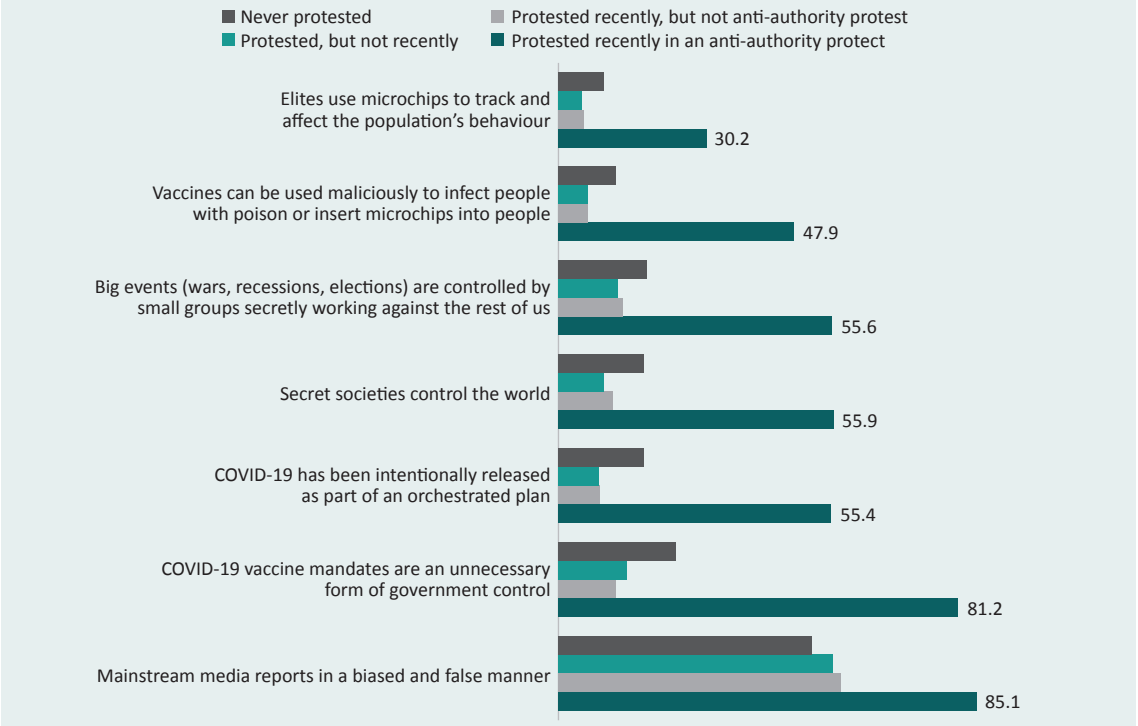
As well as examining their goals or concerns, we also asked respondents various questions about their social and political beliefs. Anti-authority protesters were much more likely than other recent protesters to self-identify as right-leaning on a left–right political spectrum (42.6% vs 8.0%, F=19.9, p<0.001; Figure 9). Conversely, they were less likely to report being left-leaning (18.9% vs 75.4%) than respondents who protested recently in support of other causes.

Figure 9: Position on the left–right political spectrum, by recent protest cause (%)

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

Belief in conspiracy theories was very high among anti-authority protesters, especially when compared with other survey respondents (Figure 10). Respondents were asked about a number of common conspiracies, some of which were related to the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures, ranging from more moderate beliefs (mainstream media reports in a biased and false manner) to more extreme conspiracies. Overall, 85.1 percent of anti-authority protesters agreed or strongly agreed that mainstream media reports in a biased and false manner; however, this was also relatively high among other protest groups (51.5–57.3%). In terms of conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic, 81.2 percent of anti-authority protesters agreed that vaccine mandates were an unnecessary form of government control, 55.4 percent agreed that COVID-19 had been intentionally released as part of an orchestrated plan, and 47.9 percent agreed that vaccines can be used to maliciously infect people with poison or to insert microchips into people. Belief in conspiracies extended beyond the pandemic, with 55.9 percent of anti-authority protesters agreeing that secret societies control the world, 55.6 percent agreeing that big events (wars, recessions, elections etc) are controlled by small groups secretly working against the rest of us, and 30.2 percent agreeing with the statement that elites use microchips to track and affect the population's behaviour.

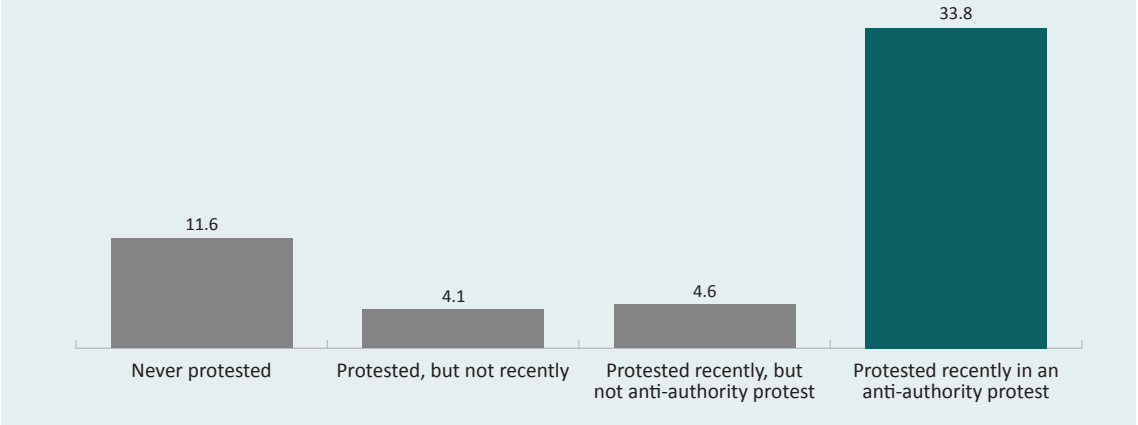
Figure 10: Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statements commonly associated with conspiracy beliefs, by protest group (%)



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

Related to conspiracy theories is the perception that election results are rigged or invalid. Figure 11 shows that one-third (33.8%) of anti-authority protesters believed votes are only occasionally or never counted correctly and fairly in elections, which was substantially higher than among other respondents (F=41.1, p<0.001). This included 18.3 percent of anti-authority protesters who said votes are never counted correctly and fairly.

Figure 11: Respondents who believed votes are occasionally or never counted correctly or fairly in an election (%)

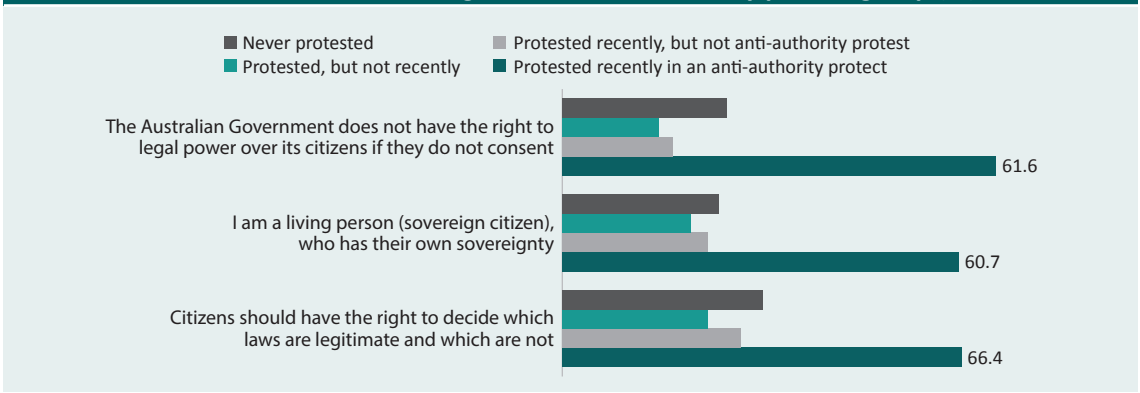


Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

There was also a view that elections were bought by the rich and that foreign governments influence the results of elections. More than half of anti-authority respondents (54.2%) said they believed that the rich buy election results in Australia most or all of the time, which was twice that of any other category of respondent (F=21.9, p<0.001). One-third of anti-authority protesters (32.5%) said that foreign governments influence election results most or all of the time, which was also more than twice that of any other category of respondent (F=13.0, p<0.001).

Respondents were also asked whether they agreed with a number of statements that relate to values frequently associated with members of the sovereign citizen movement. This movement has featured as a major theme within the freedom movement (Roose 2021). Importantly, these questions alone are insufficient to establish whether a person is part of the sovereign citizen movement, or whether they subscribe to the wider set of beliefs associated with that movement. Nevertheless, we observed a statistically significant relationship between protest activity and the level of agreement with these beliefs. As shown in Figure 12, 61.1 percent of anti-authority protesters said they agreed that citizens should have the right to decide which laws are legitimate and which are not, 60.7 percent said they agreed that they were a living person (sovereign citizen) who has their own sovereignty, and 66.4 percent said they agreed with the statement that the Australian Government does not have the right to legal power over its citizens if they do not consent. This was at least twice as prevalent as among respondents who had never protested, who had protested before January 2020 but not recently, and who had protested recently in support of other causes.

Figure 12: Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statements commonly associated with values of the sovereign citizen movement, by protest group (%)



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

Risk and protective factors for radicalisation

This next section summarises the results from a comparison between the four protest categories in terms of the presence of risk and protective factors associated with cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. These are organised into the five main domains.

Sociodemographic factors

Risk factors

Anti-authority protesters were significantly more likely to be male (61.1% vs 39.5–49.1%; Table 4). They were more likely to undertake some form of active religious observance on at least a weekly basis, such as prayer, devotion or attendance at a religious building or place (25.5% vs 14.2–17.7%). Half of anti-authority protesters who engaged in frequent worship identified as Christian (51.5%). There was a higher proportion of anti-authority protesters with prior military service (13.6% vs 7.0–8.7%). We did not observe any consistent differences in terms of unemployment rates or total time spent online for personal reasons.

Protective factors

Anti-authority protesters (19.7%) were more likely than other recent protesters (7.6%) and respondents who had protested but not recently (14.2%), but not respondents who had never protested (18.2%), to reside in the most disadvantaged postcodes. Anti-authority protesters (70.3%) were less likely than other recent protesters (82.7%) and people who protested before January 2020 (82.2%) to report their highest level of education as being a vocational or university (ie non-school) qualification. However, they had a similar education profile to people who had never protested. Anti-authority protesters were more likely to have children at home than other recent protesters (67.0% vs 50.9%). The age profile, marital status and presence of children among anti-authority protesters were similar to most other protesters.

First-time protesters

First-time anti-authority protesters were less likely than repeat anti-authority protesters to be male (53.5% vs 68.5%), spent less time online (3.4 hours vs 4.5 hours), and were less likely to have prior military service (5.6% vs 21.7%).

Table 4: Sociodemographic risk and protective factors measured in the survey

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Risk factors							
Gender	Male (%)	49.1 (−0.5**)	47.5 (−0.6***)	39.5 (−0.9***)	61.1	68.5	53.5 (−0.6*)
Unemployment	Unemployed (%)	4.7 (−0.1)	3.0 (−0.6)	2.8 (−0.7)	5.3	7.6	3.8 (−0.7)
Time spent online	Avg hours spent online (mean)	3.7 (−0.3)	3.3 (−0.7**)	3.7 (−0.3)	4.0	4.5	3.4 (−1.1*)
Worship attendance	Weekly religious worship (%)	17.7 (−0.5**)	16.5 (−0.6***)	14.2 (−0.8***)	25.5	27.8	24.9 (−0.2)
Military service	Any prior military service (%)	8.7 (−0.5*)	7.9 (−0.6*)	8.3 (−0.6*)	13.6	21.7	5.6 (−1.5**)
Protective factors							
Socioeconomic status	Quartile 2–4 (%)	81.8 (0.1)	85.8 (0.4*)	92.4 (1.1***)	80.3	76.7	83.9 (0.5)
Education level	Non-school qualification (%)	65.2 (−0.2)	82.2 (0.7***)	82.7 (0.7**)	70.3	70.9	68.4 (−0.1)
Age	34 years or over (%)	70.0 (0.2)	85.3 (1.1***)	66.1 (0.0)	65.5	66.4	64.6 (−0.1)
Marital status	In a relationship (%)	64.0 (0.0)	62.9 (−0.0)	61.8 (−0.1)	63.0	66.0	60.0 (−0.3)
Children	Children living at home (%)	63.4 (−0.2)	64.3 (−0.1)	50.9 (−0.7***)	67.0	69.3	64.8 (−0.2)

Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (*n*=6). Regression coefficients presented in parentheses. For categorical variables (%), coefficients are based on bivariate logistic regression. For continuous variables (mean), coefficients are based on OLS regression

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

Psychological or personality factors

Risk factors

Survey respondents were asked whether they had ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition and, if so, which type of condition (Table 5). Anti-authority protesters (52.9%) and other recent protesters (53.2%) were equally likely to report having ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition, mainly depressive or anxiety disorders, which was higher than respondents who had never protested (34.8%) or protested but not recently (41.8%). Anti-authority protesters were more likely than other protest groups to report having been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder (6.9% vs 1.6–2.2%), a personality disorder (8.4% vs 1.9–4.2%) or a substance use disorder (10.9% vs 3.9–6.6%). However, the difference in the prevalence of substance use disorders between anti-authority and other recent protesters was not statistically significant.

Authoritarianism was measured using the three-item Authoritarianism—Ultra Short Scale (Heller et al. 2020). However, following piloting, we limited it to two items—relating to submission and aggression—and excluded the item for conventionalism. The reliability between these two measures was low (α=0.4), so we elected not to combine them into a single score. The mean ratings for authoritarian submission—which measures preference for following the rule of a leader—were lower for anti-authority protesters than respondents who had never protested (2.3 vs 2.9). Mean ratings for authoritarian aggression—which measures aggression towards out-group members—were higher for anti-authority protesters (3.3) than other recent protesters (2.8) and respondents who had protested but not recently (3.1), but lower than for respondents who had never protested (3.6)

First-time protesters

There were no statistically significant differences between first-time and repeat anti-authority protesters in terms of whether they reported having ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition or in terms of either measure of authoritarianism.

Table 5: Psychological or personality risk factors measured in the survey

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Risk factors							
Diagnosed mental health condition	Any mental health condition (%)	34.8 (−0.7***)	41.4 (−0.5**)	53.2 (0.0)	52.9	58.5	46.9 (−0.5)
	Psychotic disorder (%)	1.6 (−1.5***)	1.6 (−1.5***)	2.2 (−1.2**)	6.9	7.7	6.7 (−0.2)
	Personality disorder (%)	2.3 (−1.4***)	1.9 (−1.5***)	4.2 (−0.7*)	8.4	10.6	5.7 (−0.7)
	Substance use disorder (%)	3.9 (−1.1***)	5.7 (−0.7*)	6.6 (−0.5)	10.9	11.1	9.8 (−0.1)
Socio-economic status	Quartile 2–4 (%)	81.8 (0.1)	85.8 (0.4*)	92.4 (1.1***)	80.3	76.7	83.9 (0.5)
Authoritarianism	Aggression (mean)	3.6 (0.2**)	3.1 (−0.2**)	2.8 (−0.6***)	3.3	3.4	3.3 (−0.1)
	Submission (mean)	2.9 (0.6***)	2.5 (0.1)	2.4 (0.1)	2.3	2.5	2.2 (−0.3)

Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (*n*=6). Regression coefficients presented in parentheses. For categorical variables (%), coefficients are based on bivariate logistic regression. For continuous variables (mean), coefficients are based on OLS regression

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

Experiential factors

Risk factors

Anti-authority protesters were more likely than other respondents to say they had experienced violence early in life (Table 6). They were more likely to say there was often or almost always verbal aggression between their family members (35.7% vs 21.3–27.9%) and physical fights between family members (21.8% vs 9.1–12.1%) when they were growing up. Recent discrimination was also more commonly reported by anti-authority protesters. They were more likely to say that, in the 12 months prior to the survey, someone had subjected them to hate speech or made derogatory, malicious or threatening comments about their religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or ideology (20.2% vs 4.6–12.3%), or that they had been bullied, harassed, intimidated, stalked or abused online or over a digital device (20.6% vs 5.4–10.4%).

Survey respondents were also asked about their access to fringe or radical content and groups online, including whether they had accessed the content or groups intentionally. Exposure to ideological content online plays an important role in radicalisation (Wolbers et al. 2023) and, in the context of issue-based extremism, has grown with the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories online (Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2021). Nearly half of all anti-authority protesters said they had intentionally accessed fringe or radical content or groups online in the 12 months prior to the survey. Anti-authority protesters were more likely to say they had intentionally accessed fringe, unorthodox or radical political, ideological or religious content online (49.5% vs 7.1–16.2%). They were also more likely to say they had intentionally accessed online groups, communities, servers, clubs or forums that might be described as fringe or radical (42.5% vs 2.4–8.3%). However, anti-authority protesters (24.4%) were just as likely as other recent protesters (23.3%) and respondents who had protested but not recently (19.7%) to have been exposed to violent fringe or radical content online.

Negative life events have been shown to be influential in pathways to grievance-fuelled violence (Corner & Taylor 2023). Survey respondents were asked about whether they had experienced certain difficulties in the 12 months prior to the survey, even if their situation had improved. Anti-authority protesters were significantly more likely than other respondents to say they had experienced an increase in financial stress (61.9% vs 41.7–52.3%) and an increase in the amount of time or money they had spent gambling (17.1% vs 6.5–9.4%). They were more likely than respondents who had never protested, or who had protested but not since January 2020, to experience other difficulties, including an increase in social isolation (48.6% vs 35.8–36.3%) or having been impacted by a recent death (38.8% vs 25.0–29.1%) or the end of a relationship (20.8% vs 8.9–11.3%). The differences between anti-authority protesters and other recent protesters— while present—were not statistically significant.

First-time protesters

First-time anti-authority protesters generally had fewer experiential risk factors than repeat anti-authority protesters; however, there were only two differences that were statistically significant. First, first-time protesters were less likely to report recent exposure to fringe or radical online content that depicted violence (16.6% vs 34.1%, $B = -1.0$, $p<0.01$). Second, first-time protesters were significantly less likely to say they had been recently bullied, harassed, intimidated, stalked or abused online (11.4% vs 29.4%, $B = -1.2$, $p<0.01$)

Table 6: Experiential risk factors measured in the survey

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Risk factors							
Experienced violence	Verbal aggression between family members (%)	21.3 (−0.7***)	23.6 (−0.6***)	27.9 (−0.4*)	35.7	41.8	30.2 (−0.5)
	Physical fights between family members (%)	10.7 (−0.8***)	9.1 (−1.0***)	12.1 (−0.7**)	21.8	24.4	18.6 (−0.3)
Radical media exposure	Intentionally accessed fringe or radical content (%)	7.1 (−2.5***)	16.0 (−1.6***)	16.2 (−1.6***)	49.5	54.8	46.8 (−0.3)
Violent media exposure	Exposed to violent fringe or radical content (%)	9.8 (−1.1***)	19.7 (−0.3)	23.3 (−0.1)	24.4	34.1	16.6 (−1.0**)
Online contact	Intentionally accessed online fringe or radical groups (%)	2.4 (−3.4***)	6.9 (−2.3***)	8.3 (−2.1***)	42.5	47.0	41.0 (−0.2)
Discrimination	Recently subjected to hate speech (%)	4.6 (−1.7***)	6.5 (−1.3***)	12.3 (−0.6**)	20.2	25.8	15.7 (−0.6)
	Recently bullied, harassed, intimidated, stalked or abused online (%)	5.4 (−1.5***)	6.6 (−1.3***)	10.4 (−0.8**)	20.6	29.8	11.4 (−1.2**)
Political participation	Often talk politics with family members (%)	36.1 (−1.0***)	61.4 (0.1)	63.0 (0.1)	59.8	62.2	59.6 (−0.1)
	Often talk politics with friends (%)	33.0 (−1.3***)	59.1 (−0.2)	68.1 (0.15)	64.7	67.6	62.3 (−0.2)

Table 6: Experiential risk factors measured in the survey (cont.)

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Life events and personal strain	Increased financial stress (%)	45.9 (−0.6***)	41.7 (−0.8***)	52.3 (−0.4*)	61.9	66.5	57.1 (−0.4)
	More socially isolated (%)	35.8 (−0.5***)	36.3 (−0.5**)	40.7 (−0.3)	48.6	48.9	48.0 (0.0)
	Increased gambling (%)	9.2 (−0.7***)	6.5 (−1.1***)	9.4 (−0.7**)	17.1	16.4	16.0 (0.0)
	Negatively impacted by end of relationship (%)	11.3 (−0.7***)	8.9 (−1.0***)	15.4 (−0.4)	20.8	24.5	16.3 (−0.5)
	Negatively impacted by death (%)	25.0 (−0.6***)	29.1 (−0.4**)	32.1 (−0.3)	38.8	46.0	32.3 (−0.6)
	Physical health and wellbeing deteriorated (%)	36.9 (−0.5**)	42.3 (−0.2)	41.7 (−0.3)	48.0	55.0	42.1 (−0.5)

Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (*n*=6). Regression coefficients presented in parentheses. For categorical variables (%), coefficients are based on bivariate logistic regression. For continuous variables (mean), coefficients are based on OLS regression

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

Attitudinal factors

Risk factors

As shown in Table 7, there was little difference between anti-authority protesters and other groups in terms of the proportion of respondents who perceived other people to be better off than they were (individual relative deprivation; 22.8% vs 16.5–21.5%). Similarly, when asked about their willingness to donate to a group to which they closely aligned—measuring their commitment to a cause—the proportion of anti-authority respondents who agreed was similar to the proportion of other recent protesters (55.7% vs 59.0%, *B*=0.1). There were mixed results in terms of political extremism, which was measured according to the distance from the centre on a left–right political scale, with anti-authority protesters more extreme than respondents who had never protested (2.3 vs 1.5, *B*= −0.8, *p*<0.001), but less extreme than respondents who had recently protested other causes (2.3 vs 3.0, *B*=0.8, *p*<0.001). However, as noted in the previous section, they sat at opposing ends of the left–right political spectrum.

Anti-authority protesters were significantly more likely to endorse conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy beliefs were measured using a seven-question scale comprising questions about a range of conspiracies, with responses based on a five-point Likert scale. These items had very good internal consistency (α=0.87), and an overall mean score was calculated. The mean score for anti-authority protesters (3.7) was significantly higher than for respondents who had never protested (2.4, *B*= −1.2, *p*<0.001), respondents who had protested but not recently (2.0, *B*= −1.6, *p*<0.001), and respondents who had protested in support of other causes (2.0, *B*= −1.7, *p*<0.001).

Protective factors

To measure law legitimacy, respondents were asked whether they had respect for our laws. Anti-authority protesters were significantly less likely to say they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (61.5% vs 77.8–87.5%). Institutional trust was measured in terms of the perceived legitimacy of politicians, government institutions and the criminal justice system. This was a four-item scale that asked respondents whether the institution acted with honesty and integrity, considered the views of everyday citizens in their decision-making, treated everyday citizens with fairness and equality and treated everyday citizens with dignity and respect (see Voce, Morgan and Cubitt 2024 for more information). Responses were based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never to always, which had good internal consistency (ranging from α=0.88 to α=0.91). Based on this scale, anti-authority protesters were significantly less likely to perceive politicians (2.1 vs 2.6–2.8), government institutions (2.3 vs 2.9–3.1) or the criminal justice system (2.6 vs 3.0–3.3) as legitimate. Political satisfaction was measured by asking whether respondents were satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia. Anti-authority protesters were much less likely to say they were satisfied or completely satisfied (41.9% vs 80.4–83.5%).

We measured levels of social support using a six-item scale for emotional and social loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Tilburg 2006). These items had acceptable internal consistency (α=0.74), with relatively little differences in mean scores observed between the four groups. Anti-authority protesters recorded slightly higher levels of loneliness than respondents who had protested but not recently (3.2 vs 2.9, *B*= −0.3, *p*<0.05). Finally, we also measured levels of general trust using a short, four-item propensity to trust scale, which had good internal consistency (α=0.83; Frazier, Johnson & Fainshmidt 2013). Anti-authority protesters were less trusting than other recent protesters (3.3 vs 3.5, *B*=0.2, *p*<0.05) and respondents who had protested but not recently (3.3 vs 3.5, *B*=0.2, *p*<0.01), but there was no difference with respondents who had never protested.

Table 7: Attitudinal risk and protective factors measured in the survey

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Risk factors							
Individual relative deprivation	Perceive other people better off (%)	21.5 (−0.7)	16.5 (−0.4*)	19.3 (−0.2)	22.8	26.0	19.7 (−0.4)
Political extremism	Distance from centre (mean)	1.5 (−0.8***)	2.5 (0.2)	3.0 (0.8***)	2.3	2.3	2.2 (−0.2)
Commitment to cause	Willing to donate to aligned group (%)	29.8 (−1.1***)	47.3 (−0.3*)	59.0 (0.1)	55.7	54.2	57.8 (0.1)
Conspiracy beliefs	Belief in conspiracies (mean)	2.4 (−1.2***)	2.0 (−1.6***)	2.0 (−1.7***)	3.7	3.4	3.9 (0.4**)
Protective factors							
Law legitimacy	Respect for our laws (%)	86.6 (1.4***)	87.5 (1.5***)	77.8 (0.8***)	61.4	64.5	61.9 (−0.1)
Institutional trust	Legitimacy of politicians (mean)	2.6 (0.5***)	2.8 (0.7***)	2.7 (0.6***)	2.1	2.4	1.9 (−0.5**)
	Legitimacy of government (mean)	2.9 (0.6***)	3.1 (0.8***)	3.0 (0.7***)	2.3	2.6	2.0 (−0.6***)
	Legitimacy of criminal justice system (mean)	3.2 (0.6***)	3.3 (0.7***)	3.0 (0.4***)	2.6	2.8	2.5 (−0.3*)
Political satisfaction	Satisfaction with democracy (%)	82.8 (1.9***)	83.5 (1.9***)	80.4 (1.7***)	41.9	52.4	35.5 (−0.7***)
Social support	Loneliness scale (mean)	3.1 (−0.2)	2.9 (−0.3*)	3.0 (−0.2)	3.2	3.4	3.1 (−0.2)
General trust	Propensity to trust scale (mean)	3.3 (0.1)	3.5 (0.2**)	3.5 (0.2*)	3.3	3.5	3.3 (−0.2*)

Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (*n*=6). Regression coefficients presented in parentheses. For categorical variables (%), coefficients are based on bivariate logistic regression. For continuous variables (mean), coefficients are based on OLS regression

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

First-time protesters

First-time anti-authority protesters were significantly more likely than repeat protesters to endorse conspiracy beliefs, recording a higher mean score across the seven items (3.9 vs 3.4, *B*=0.4, *p*<0.01). They had, on average, lower levels of general trust, recording a lower mean score on the propensity to trust scale (3.3 vs 3.5, *B*=0.2, *p*<0.05). They had lower levels of satisfaction with democracy (35.5% vs 52.4%, *B*= −0.7, *p*<0.001). They were less likely to perceive politicians (1.9 vs 2.4, *B*= −0.5, *p*<0.01), government institutions (2.0 vs 2.6, *B*= −0.6, *p*<0.001) and the criminal justice system (2.5 vs 2.8, *B*= −0.3, *p*<0.05) as legitimate, meaning they had lower levels of institutional trust than repeat anti-authority protesters.

Criminogenic factors

Risk factors

Around one in eight anti-authority protesters reported having had contact with the criminal justice system as a juvenile and one in four as an adult (Table 8). Anti-authority protesters were more likely to say they had been arrested, charged, summonsed, convicted or had any findings of guilt for a criminal offence before the age of 18 (12.4% vs 2.8–5.9%) and also as an adult (24.0% vs 7.1–10.4%). They were also more likely to say they had immediate family members (38.9% vs 4.8–11.3%) or friends (50.2% vs 6.8–17.0%) who had accessed fringe or radical content online. Self-control was measured using the Abbreviated Impulsiveness Scale (Coutlee et al. 2014), a 13-item scale with good internal consistency (α=0.83). While the mean rating of impulsivity (ie low self-control) was higher among anti-authority protesters than respondents who had protested but not recently (2.0 vs 1.9, *B*= −0.1, *p*<0.01), there were no significant differences between other protest categories.

First-time protesters

We did not observe any differences between first-time and repeat anti-authority protesters in any of the criminogenic risk factors measured in the survey.

Table 8: Criminogenic risk factors measured in the survey

		Participation in protest				First-time protester	
		Never	Not recent	Recent other	Recent anti-authority	No	Yes
Risk factors							
Juvenile delinquency	Arrested, charged, summonsed, convicted before 18 (%)	2.8 (−1.6***)	4.5 (−1.1***)	5.9 (−0.8**)	12.4	17.5	8.6 (−0.8)
Criminal history	Arrested, charged, summonsed, convicted as an adult (%)	7.1 (−1.4***)	10.4 (−1.0***)	10.1 (−1.0***)	24.0	29.4	17.8 (−0.7)
Low self-control	Abbreviated Impulsiveness Scale (mean)	1.9 (−0.1)	1.9 (−0.1**)	2.0 (0.0)	2.0	2.0	2.0 (0.0)
Deviant or radical peers	Immediate family members accessed fringe or radical content (%)	4.8 (−2.5***)	10.1 (−1.7***)	11.3 (−1.6***)	38.9	39.4	39.4 (0.0)
	Friends accessed fringe or radical content (%)	6.8 (−2.6***)	13.1 (−1.9***)	17.0 (−1.6***)	50.2	52.7	49.8 (−0.1)

Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (n=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (n=6). Regression coefficients presented in parentheses. For categorical variables (%), coefficients are based on bivariate logistic regression. For continuous variables (mean), coefficients are based on OLS regression

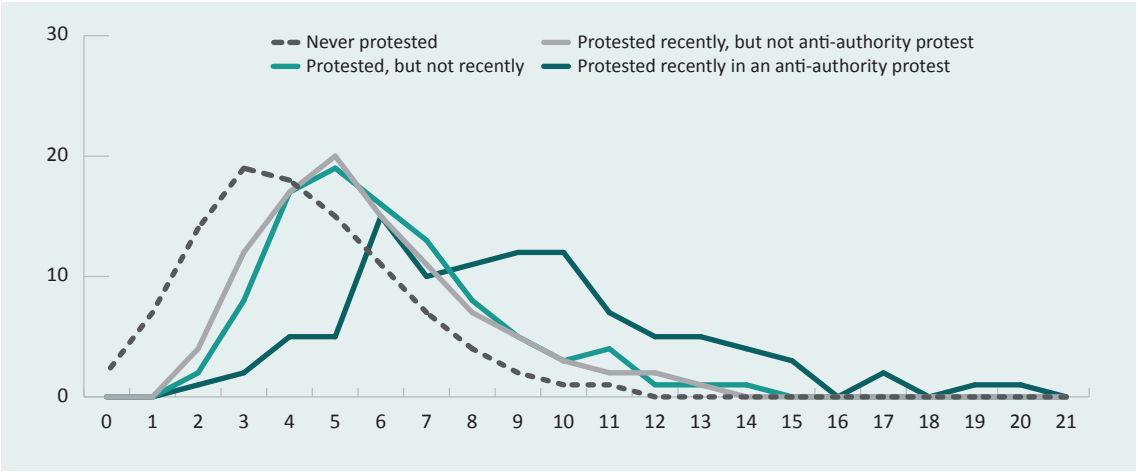
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Total number of risk and protective factors

We used a relatively simple count of risk and protective factors to summarise our results. This was based on the presence or absence of factors measured using a binary variable and, in the case of those factors measured using some type of scale, a mean score indicating overall agreement or endorsement of that factor.

There were, on average, more risk factors present among anti-authority protesters than other respondent groups (Figure 13). The mean number of risk factors among anti-authority protesters (9.0) was higher than among other recent protesters who protested in support of other causes (6.3, B= −2.7, p<0.001), respondents who had participated in a protest but not since January 2020 (5.8, B= −3.2, p<0.001), and respondents who had never protested (4.2, B= −4.7, p<0.001). Indeed, 39.5 percent of anti-authority protesters had 10 or more risk factors present, compared with between 2.6 and 11.6 percent for other respondent groups.

Figure 13: Total number of risk factors for radicalisation, by protest group (%)



Note: Total number of protective factors calculated for all respondents, but excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340)

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

There were fewer protective factors measured by the survey than there were risk factors (Figure 14). Nevertheless, a similar pattern emerged. Anti-authority protesters recorded fewer protective factors (6.0) than respondents who had recently protested in support of other causes (6.9, *B*=0.8, *p*<0.001), respondents who had protested before January 2020 but not recently (7.4, *B*=1.3, *p*<0.001), and respondents who had never protested (6.8, *B*=0.8, *p*<0.001).

Figure 14: Total number of protective factors for radicalisation, by protest group (%)

Note: Total number of protective factors calculated for all respondents, but excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340)

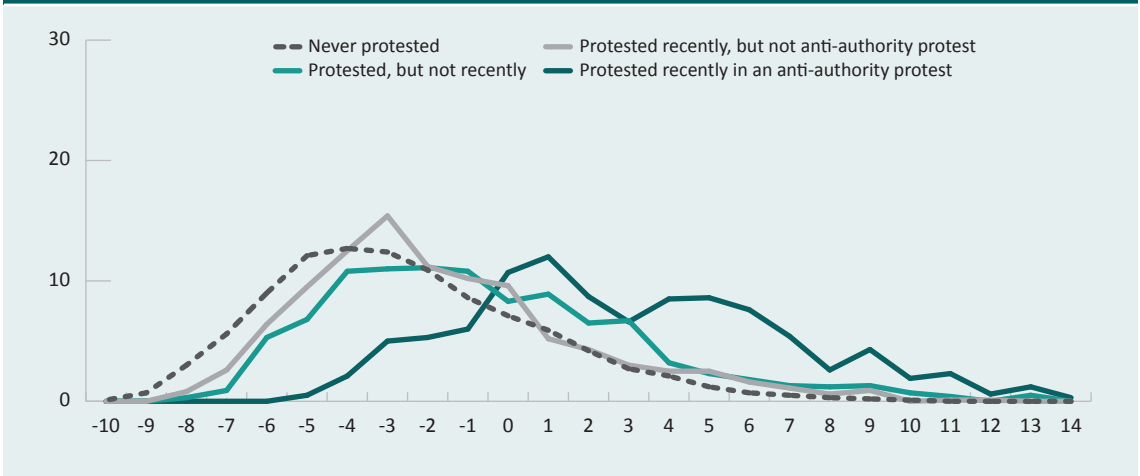
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

As well as determining the overall number of risk and protective factors, we also calculated the net risk score for each respondent, which is simply the number of risk factors minus the number of protective factors (Figure 15). This is not a measure of the actual risk of mobilisation to violence and is not an attempt to provide some sort of actuarial assessment of risk. Risk and protective factors may hold varying levels of importance in shaping a person's vulnerability to radicalisation. They may also interact with one another—one protective factor may buffer against the effects of multiple risk factors, while the combination of certain factors may have a cumulative effect on a person's risk of becoming radicalised (Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023). The net risk score does, however, allow us to easily compare groups based on the presence of risk and protective factors measured in this study.

Nevertheless, this net risk score is useful for two reasons. First, it shows quite clearly the divergence between anti-authority protesters and other protest groups. There is a larger proportion of anti-authority protesters with more risk factors and fewer protective factors. For example, 43.1 percent of anti-authority protesters recorded a net risk score of four or more, compared with 12.5 percent of respondents who protested recently in support of other causes, 9.4 percent of respondents who had protested but not since January 2020, and 5.1 percent of respondents who had never protested.

Second, it also shows that anti-authority protesters were not a homogeneous group: many anti-authority protesters fall well within the range of other groups. Indeed, nearly one-third of anti-authority protesters (29.6%) exhibited at least as many protective factors as risk factors, if not more (ie had a net risk of zero or less than zero).

Figure 15: Net risk score, by protest group (%)



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

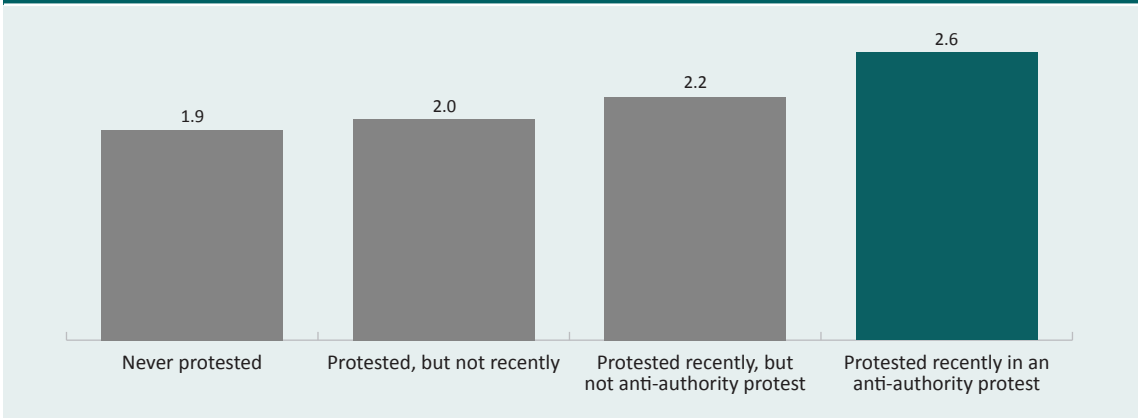
When we compared first-time anti-authority protesters with those who had protested in-person prior to January 2020, we found that first-time protesters had fewer risk factors (8.2 vs 10.0, B= −1.8, p<0.01) and—despite there being no difference in protective factors—a lower overall net risk (2.3 vs 3.7, B= −1.3, p<0.05).

Radicalised attitudes and intentions to use violence

Finally, we compared the protest groups in terms of radicalised attitudes and intentions to use violence. Radicalised attitudes were measured using the Violent Extremism Scale (Nivette et al. 2017). This is a four-item scale that measures the extent to which a person is willing to encourage, endorse, condone, justify or support the use of violence to achieve political, ideological, religious, social or economic goals. These four items had high internal consistency (α=0.87), and an overall mean score was calculated for each respondent.

As shown in Figure 16, mean ratings for respondents who had recently participated in an anti-authority protest (2.6) were higher than for other recent protesters (2.2, *B*= −0.4, *p*<0.001), respondents who had protested but not recently (2.0, *B*= −0.6, *p*<0.001) and respondents who had never protested (1.9, *B*= −0.7, *p*<0.001). There was no difference in mean scores for first-time anti-authority protesters (2.5) and those anti-authority protesters who had protested prior to January 2020 (2.7, *B*=0.1, *p*=0.38).

Figure 16: Mean scores for the Violent Extremism Scale, by protest group



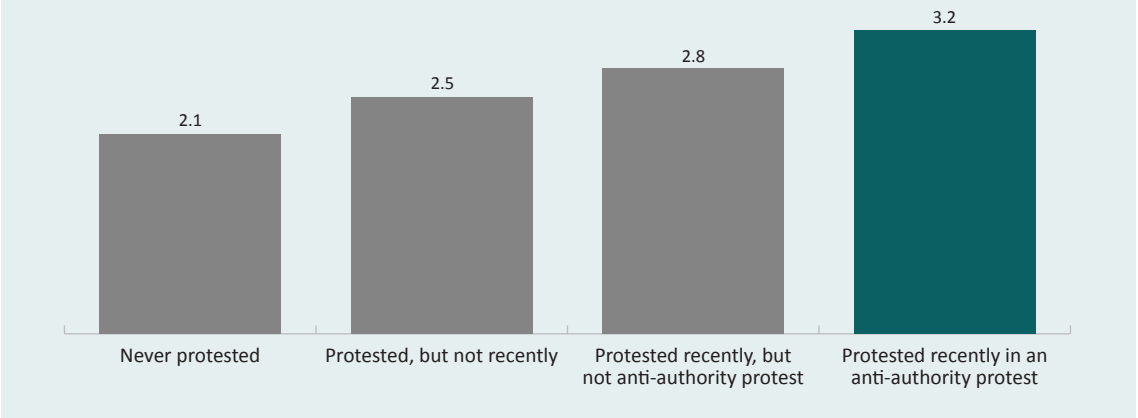
Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (*n*=340), and anti-authority protesters who did not say whether they protested before January 2020 (*n*=6). Scores were calculated for respondents with valid responses to a minimum three items

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

Radicalised intentions were measured using the Radicalism Intention Scale (Moskalenko & McCauley 2009). This is a four-item scale, used extensively to measure vulnerability to radicalisation (Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023; Decker & Pyrooz 2019). It involves first asking respondents to identify a group they most strongly associate with, followed by questions about whether they would be willing to support this group if they used violence, or use violence themselves in support of this group. There was a high internal consistency between items (α=0.85), allowing for an overall mean score to be calculated (Figure 17). We only calculated a score for respondents who identified a group prior to answering the questions about the use of violence. Mean ratings for respondents who had recently participated in an anti-authority protest (3.2) were higher than for other recent protesters (2.8, B= −0.4, p<0.001), respondents who had protested but not recently (2.5, B= −0.8, p<0.001) and respondents who had never protested (2.1, B= −1.1, p<0.001).

First-time anti-authority protesters had a lower mean rating (3.1) than repeat anti-authority protesters (3.4, B= −0.3, p<0.05). This means they were (on average) less likely than repeat protesters to be willing to support or engage in violent or unlawful behaviour. Given they also exhibited fewer risk factors overall, and were no more or less likely to justify violence in support of their cause, first-time anti-authority protesters appear no more vulnerable to radicalisation, despite their strong anti-government views.

Figure 17: Mean scores for the Radicalism Intention Scale, by protest group

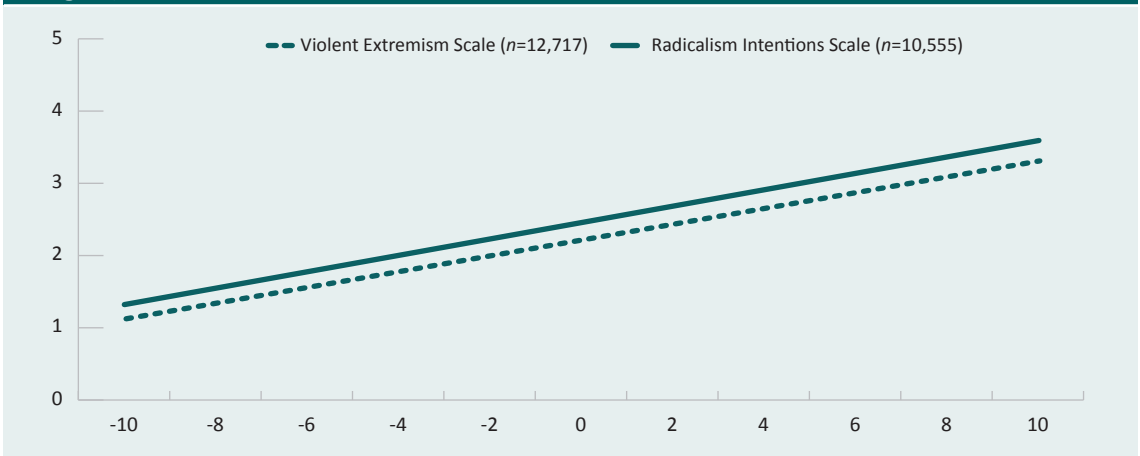


Note: Excludes respondents who did not say whether they had protested (n=340). Scores were calculated for respondents with valid responses to a minimum of three items

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

As a final validation of our approach, we analysed the relationship between the net risk score and radicalised attitudes and intentions. Using ordinary least squares regression, we showed that an increase in net risk was associated with violence supportive attitudes (B=0.1, F=1,824.4, R^2=0.17) and readiness to participate in violent action (B=0.1, F=1,819.9, R^2=0.19). The predictive margins (the predicted score for each scale for respondents at each level of net risk) are presented in Figure 18, and illustrate the clear relationship between the two. Respondents with a higher net risk were more likely to justify the use of violence and be willing to support or participate in violence to protect the interests of their group.

Figure 18: Overall rating of radical attitudes and intentions, by net risk score (predictive margins)



Note: Scores for both scales were calculated for respondents with valid responses to a minimum of three items
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Discussion

In this study we have analysed the characteristics of individuals who had participated in recent protest activity, with a focus on those people who had participated in anti-authority protests. It was undertaken within the context of significant protest activity in Australia and overseas, including protests that involved violent clashes with police and threats to public officials.

Around one in five respondents to our survey had participated in at least one in-person protest in their lifetime. Recent protest was less common; however, a significant minority of respondents to the survey had participated in at least one protest since January 2020. They protested in support of a wide range of causes, which reflected the range of protest activity that has taken place across Australia in recent years. Among recent protesters, around one in four had participated in what we defined as anti-authority protests against government. These anti-authority protesters accounted for a very small proportion of respondents to the survey.

Anti-authority protesters were more likely than other respondents who had protested since January but in support of other issues or movements to have participated in an in-person protest for the first time. They were more likely to identify as right-leaning on a left–right political scale. They were much more likely to indicate that they believed a range of conspiracy theories, including but not limited to conspiracies related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also more likely to agree with statements that reflected some of the values commonly associated with the sovereign citizen movement. Their concerns or goals for protesting were also different to those of other recent protesters, with a much stronger emphasis on freedom from government overreach and upholding human rights, and exposing government and media lies—themes that are closely aligned with the narratives of the wider freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023). At the same time, it was apparent there was considerable variability in the views held by anti-authority protesters.

Vulnerability to radicalisation

Our detailed assessment of sociodemographic, experiential, psychological or personality, criminogenic and attitudinal factors identified all of the risk and protective factors for cognitive or behavioural radicalisation that were more or less common among anti-authority protesters. These are summarised in Figure 19. Anti-authority protesters differed significantly from other protesters in a number of factors. These risk and protective factors were in the direction expected, meaning that risk factors were more likely to be present among anti-authority protesters than other groups, while protective factors were less likely to be present.
We highlight those risk and protective factors in Figure 19 where there was clear divergence, meaning there was a statistically significant difference between anti-authority protesters and respondents who had protested recently but in support of other causes, respondents who had protested before January 2020 but not recently, and respondents who said they had never participated in an in-person protest.

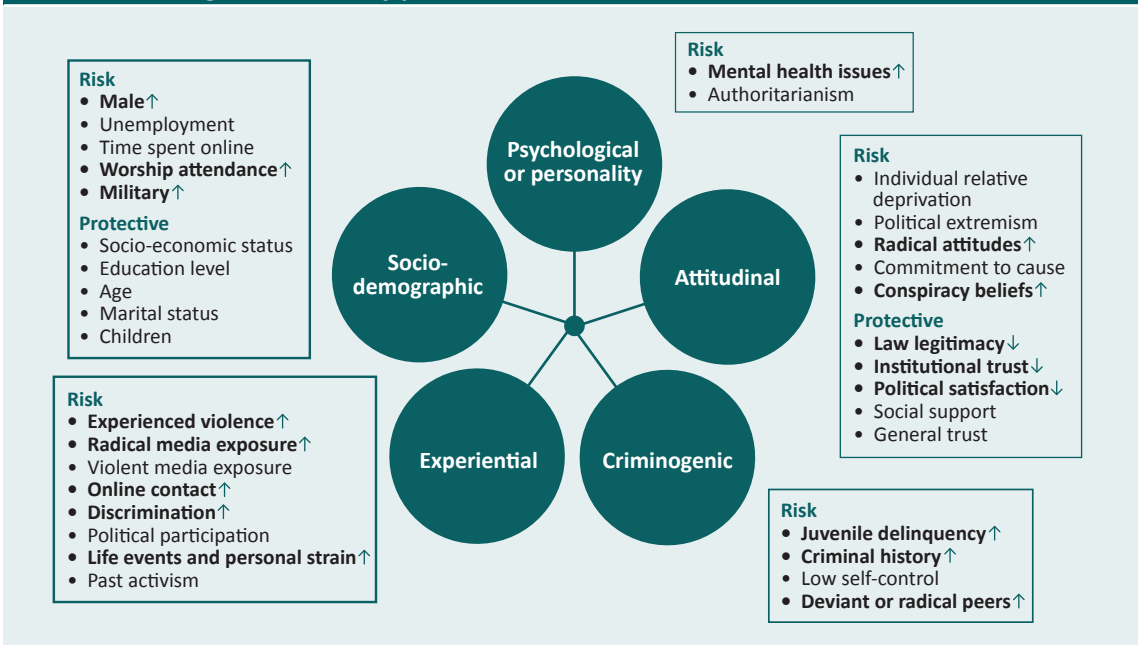
Anti-authority protesters were more likely to be male, to attend religious worship on a regular basis, and to have prior military service. While sociodemographic factors like these are widely studied, prior military service is one of few factors shown to have a strong effect on radicalised behaviour (Wolfowicz et al. 2021). While rates of mental health problems were similar overall, anti-authority protesters were more likely to report having been diagnosed with personality, psychotic and substance use disorders. While research on the links between mental health and extremist violence has generally found little evidence of a direct connection (Sarma, Carthy & Cox 2022), and researchers argue mental illness is insufficient to explain extreme behaviour where it is present (Gill et al. 2018, 2022), there is some evidence of higher rates of mental illness, including psychotic disorders, among lone actors (Misiak et al. 2019; Trimbur et al. 2021).

Anti-authority protesters were more likely to have experienced verbal aggression and physical fights between family members when they were growing up, which is noteworthy given recent evidence linking family conflict to vulnerability to radicalisation (Zych & Nasaescu 2022). They were also more likely to report having been a recent victim of hate speech or bullying, harassment and discrimination. They were more likely to report having intentionally accessed fringe or radical content and groups online—well established now as a risk factor for behavioural radicalisation (Wolbers et al. 2023; Wolfowicz, Hasisi & Weisburd 2022)—though no more likely to have been exposed to violent media. Unsurprisingly, given their motivation for protesting (see Cubitt, Morgan & Voce 2024), and the relevance to grievance-fuelled violence (Corner & Taylor 2023), anti-authority protesters were more likely to report negative life events, especially those related to financial stress. While negative life events were consistently more prevalent among anti-authority protesters, they were also common among other recent protesters, reflecting the important role these have in shaping grievances that motivate participation in protest (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2010; Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans & van Dijk 2011).

Anti-authority protesters were much more likely to endorse conspiratorial beliefs than other respondents. This included conspiracies related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as conspiracies about who controls society and how they wield their power. They perceived the politicians, government and criminal justice system as less legitimate, indicative of lower levels of institutional trust, were less satisfied with democracy and had less respect for our laws. This is consistent with the finding that they were more likely to hold values often associated with the sovereign citizen movement. These anti-government beliefs and conspiratorial ideologies have been central to the freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023), and widely shared by far-right actors seeking to exploit the pandemic (Walkdek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2021). Grievance-fuelled actors, motivated in part by conspiracy theories, with the potential to shift towards violence, were a concern for security agencies at the height of the pandemic (ASIO 2022). Research has shown that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with increased support for violence as part of anti-government social movements (Uscinski et al. 2022; Vegetti & Littvay 2022), while they also increase the likelihood of radical intentions among some people (Rottweiler & Gill 2022). There is evidence that conspiracy theories can act as radicalising multipliers and enablers that strengthen support for extremist ideologies, aid in recruiting, provide a cohesive force, validate beliefs, encourage people to reject alternative worldviews and increase support for violence (Bartlett & Miller 2010; Basit 2021). For this reason, there have been calls for more research into the role of conspiracy theories in radicalisation processes (Emberland 2020).

Finally, anti-authority protesters were more likely to report having a history of juvenile delinquency (based on contact with the criminal justice system) or criminal history as an adult, and were more likely to report having family or friends who had also intentionally accessed fringe or radical content online (ie deviant or radical peers). These differences are particularly significant, given the importance of criminogenic risk factors in understanding vulnerability to behavioural radicalisation (Wolfowicz et al. 2021).

Figure 19: Risk and protective factors for radicalised attitudes, intentions and beliefs observed among anti-authority protesters



Note: Bolded risk and protective factors are those for which anti-authority protesters differed from all other categories of respondents

Consistent with contemporary research which suggests that it is the combination of factors that is important (Clemmow, Bouhana & Gill 2020; Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023; Corner & Taylor 2023), we also assessed the presence of multiple risk or protective factors. Overall, we found anti-authority protesters had more risk factors and fewer protective factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation than other survey respondents, including people who had recently participated in protests in support of other causes. However, the anti-authority protesters in our study were not a homogeneous group. Some had more risk factors and fewer protective factors present, but many did not. For a significant minority, their profile was similar to other protest groups. Likewise, participation in anti-authority protest did not guarantee that a person held anti-government or conspiratorial views. Further work may help explore how these risk and protective factors interact to increase the vulnerability to radicalisation among anti-authority protesters (see, for example, Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023).

Our interest in risk and protective factors was based on a large body of evidence that has linked these to radicalised attitudes, intentions and behaviour (Wolfowicz et al. 2021). We measured radicalised attitudes and intentions using two established, validated scales. We found that anti-authority protesters were more likely to justify violence in support of their cause and more willing to support or engage in violent or unlawful behaviour on behalf of their group, meaning they were more likely to hold radicalised attitudes or intentions than other respondents. Overall net risk, measured by subtracting the number of protective factors from the number of risk factors, was higher among anti-authority protesters and was strongly correlated with the mean scores from the Violent Extremism Scale (radical attitudes) and Radicalism Intention Scale (radical intentions). On this basis, we can conclude that respondents who participated in anti-authority protests were more vulnerable to radicalisation than other respondents, including people who had participated in recent protest activity in support of other issues or movements.

Differences between first-time anti-authority protesters and those with prior protest experience

This study had a specific focus on comparing anti-authority protesters who had protested in support of any issue or movement before January 2020 (repeat anti-authority protesters) with anti-authority protesters who had not previously participated in an in-person protest (first-time anti-authority protesters). This was because, when the study was conceptualised, there was a perception among law enforcement that many anti-authority protesters were first-time protesters. They were people who were not connected to other social movements and were motivated by the conspiracies that emerged or gained momentum during the pandemic or by the anti-government rhetoric that was being fuelled by malicious actors—a trend that was also observed internationally (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2022a). The participation of different groups, coupled with people who had little or no connection to these groups, was a major reason that anti-authority protests seemed unstructured, disorganised and lacking in clear leadership. On the one hand, this arguably weakened the movement, while on the other hand it also presented something of an unknown threat.

Compared with people who participated in protest activity before January 2020, first-time anti-authority protesters were less trusting, less likely to perceive politicians and government as legitimate, less satisfied with democracy and more likely to endorse conspiratorial beliefs. However, they were also less likely to be male, have prior military service and to report recent exposure to fringe or radical online content that depicted violence or say they had been recently bullied, harassed, intimidated, stalked or abused online. They exhibited fewer risk factors for radicalisation overall. While they were equally likely to justify the use of violence, first-time anti-authority protesters were less likely to indicate a willingness to support or use violence (ie to exhibit radicalised intentions).

It is possible that those individuals who participated in anti-authority protests since January 2020, but who had never protested before, were focused solely on the effects of the pandemic and the government response, rather than being connected to a wider social movement.

That they were less likely to exhibit radicalised intentions than people who had previously protested in-person may also reflect the role that protest activity played as an 'extremism-enabling environment' (Bouhana 2019), especially where it connected individuals vulnerable to radicalisation to other individuals or groups with extremist views. The differences between first-time and prior protesters—such as first-time protesters being more likely to be female and not having prior military service—might also reflect what Bouhana (2019) describes as social selection: the process that determines whether someone is more or less likely to participate in place-based activities that expose them to extremism-enabling environments. In any case, results are consistent with the wider evidence that shows anti-government views and conspiratorial beliefs are not, on their own, likely to lead to radicalisation (Bartlett & Miller 2010; Rottweiler & Gill 2022), and instead that it is the combination of factors, including individual propensity, situational factors and exposure to extremist ideologies that increases someone's vulnerability to radicalisation (Bouhana 2019; Clemmow, Bouhana & Gill 2020; Clemmow, Rottweiler et al. 2023; Hafez & Mullins 2015).

While they appeared to be less vulnerable to radicalisation when they completed the survey, it is possible that first-time anti-authority protesters were on a different trajectory to people with prior protest experience. Their exposure to anti-authority protests and the various movements and malicious actors that were present may still encourage more radical views. Strategies focused on first-time anti-authority or anti-government protesters may help intervene to prevent this group from becoming embedded within or influenced by harmful social movements present at in-person demonstrations.

Implications for responding to anti-authority protest and the risk of mobilisation to violence

The findings from this study build on a growing body of research that has explored the motives of contemporary social movements, including the anti-lockdown freedom movement (Khalil & Roose 2023). Our results have important implications for responding to individuals and groups motivated to protest by grievances, inflamed by conspiratorial ideologies and anti-government sentiment, and who may be vulnerable to radicalisation and willing to use violence to support their cause. While the pandemic undoubtedly served as a flashpoint for anti-government sentiment, and the risk associated with grievance-fuelled violence related to public health measures has subsided (ASIO 2023), social movements like the freedom movement continue to exist, protesting about contemporary political issues (Elias 2023).

These findings highlight the need to respond to the immediate risk associated with collective action involving individuals who hold radical attitudes and intentions. We know the vast majority of people who hold extremist beliefs will never act on them (Khalil 2014; Moskalenko & McCauley 2009). What is less clear is how the mobilisation, presence and support of protesters as part of anti-government movements might enable those individuals who may be motivated to act, including those extremist groups and actors who lead that movement. Similarly, we know that vulnerability to extremism is a function of individual propensity coupled with situational factors and exposure to extremism (Bouhana 2019; Futrell, Simi & Tan 2018; Hafez & Mullins 2015): individuals who hold radical attitudes and join social movements involving extremist actors may be especially vulnerable to extremism. There is a risk that individuals motivated by anti-authority views or grievances with government, inflamed by conspiratorial ideologies, could turn to violence to support their cause (ASIO 2022), and they have been a growing population among the caseload of programs that engage with radicalised individuals (Home Office 2023). At the same time, this risk must be managed without encroaching on people's fundamental right to legal and non-violent protest, which is core to a functioning democracy (Radicalisation Action Network 2022b). Efforts should be concentrated on those extremist actors who seek to exploit social and political issues, like the pandemic, to influence those who may be vulnerable to radicalisation and pursue their ideological agenda.

This study reinforces the need to tackle disinformation that promotes harmful anti-government sentiment and encourages beliefs in conspiracy theories. Respondents who had participated in anti-authority protest were much more likely to both intentionally access fringe and radical content and groups online and endorse conspiracy beliefs—suggesting the two are strongly related. While it certainly accelerated following the onset of the pandemic, the intentional spread of disinformation is not unique to the pandemic, and affects a wide range of social issues. Detecting fake news, which is central to the spread of disinformation, is a complex problem, and automated methods are still in their relative infancy (Aïmeur, Amri & Bassard 2023). There is strong evidence regarding the effects of counter narratives on risk factors for radicalisation, particularly when they are targeted at individuals with less engrained extremist views (Carthy et al. 2020). There is less evidence on the effects of counter narratives with respect to conspiracy theories, but evidence does point to lessons for effective communication on policy issues that are susceptible to conspiracy theories (eg Lazić & Žeželj 2021). There is some promising evidence of the positive benefits of inoculation—priming recipients by pre-exposing them to prompts that increase their resistance to persuasion—with research showing it can foster a negative reaction to extremist propaganda and conspiracy beliefs and cause recipients to question the credibility of the source, without the need to provide specific counter arguments to the actual content of the messages (Bonetto et al. 2018; Braddock 2022). Clearly, a combination of efforts targeting the availability of disinformation and the consumption and influence of that material on people's beliefs is needed, especially given the growing evidence of the strong link between exposure to fringe and radical content online and risk of radicalisation, especially behavioural radicalisation (Wolbers et al. 2023; Wolfowicz, Hasisi & Weisburd 2022).

It is important not to conflate participation in anti-authority protests—a form of legitimate political dissent (and legal when not in contravention of public health orders)—with extremist movements. Doing so can have negative consequences. The role of group dynamics, relational mechanisms and competitive escalation between social movements and their opponents—which can include the state—is central to the radicalisation process (della Porta 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko 2008). Waldek, Droogan and Ballsun-Stanton (2021) highlight the importance of providing opportunities to express dissent and opposition to government authority without labelling anti-authority protesters as extremists. Failing to do so can actually lead to further marginalisation and may push more moderate protesters towards the extremes (Peucker 2021). Indeed, our findings, which show that individuals attracted to this social movement may be more at risk of radicalisation, reinforce this point. At the same time, there was considerable heterogeneity in the risk profiles of anti-authority protesters, many of whom were not vulnerable to radicalisation, and responses to this group need to take this into account. This was especially true with respect to the differences between first-time and repeat anti-authority protesters, who may be on very different trajectories towards radicalisation.

Finally, we need to monitor the evolution of social movements. In an increasingly polarised political environment, knowing whether certain social movements, motivated by grievances, conspiracy theories and anti-government sentiment, attract people who may be more vulnerable to radicalisation is important. This is true even though the worst of the pandemic appears to be behind us. We know that ideological movements and the actors who drive them continue to evolve as they seek to capitalise on contemporary social and political issues. The conspiracy theories that were endorsed by anti-authority protesters were not limited to the issues they were protesting; rather, they encompassed a wider array of beliefs about societal control. Some of those people who were encouraged to participate in anti-authority protests at the height of the pandemic may remain committed to the wider anti-government movement. Indeed, this survey was conducted as public health measures were being wound down, and yet anti-government sentiment and support for violence remained strong among anti-authority protesters. They may shift their focus to new issues, while others may join the movement. They may be susceptible to other conspiratorial and disinformation agendas that align with their anti-government beliefs, fuelled by malicious actors. This study has shown that participating in protest does not make someone vulnerable to radicalisation, but that certain social movements may be more likely to attract individuals who are susceptible to radicalisation. Efforts to prevent mobilisation to violence must therefore focus on the movements and actors that pose greatest risk, and this will likely change over time.

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Research Report

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