

## Article

# The Fight to Remain Compliant

## Public Sentiment, Pandemic and Policing the Second 2020 Victorian Lockdown

**Paul Bleakley**

*University of New Haven, USA*

### Abstract

Before 2020, the idea that an entire country would grind to a halt with businesses closed and freedom of movement curtailed at a moment's notice would have seemed a fantasy, but the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the way the public experiences control in a lockdown setting. While lockdowns have occurred around the world, one of the stricter examples of this policy occurred in Melbourne, Australia, where a 112-day shutdown lasted from July to October 2020. Such an extensive lockdown begs the question of how compliance with such restrictions over a lengthy period of time is maintained. This article offers a sentiment analysis of online discourse on the Facebook pages of four Melbourne news sources (*The Age*, *7 News Melbourne*, *9 News Melbourne* and *NewsTalk 3AW*) at key points during the second lockdown, to assess attitudes toward compliance (or, importantly, non-compliant behaviours). It shows that, despite media coverage suggesting resistance, the general public largely remained supportive of restrictive lockdown measures throughout the crisis, indicating that it is possible to achieve compliance from the majority of the public in strictly enforced lockdowns, despite the intervention of small-but-enthusiastic sets of anti-lockdown activists.



## Introduction

As countries around the world have spent 2020 grappling with the significant human toll of COVID-19, the public health response to the pandemic has sparked questions regarding the willingness of a population to comply with lockdown regulations. While the precise conditions of “lockdown” differ between jurisdictions, the term has entered the lexicon in 2020 as a way to describe an enforceable stay at home order, including the closure of non-essential businesses and restrictions on travel to-and-from an affected locale (Caulkins et al., 2020). In many countries, local or national lockdowns have been the standard course of action when community transmission of the virus reaches an unsustainably high level, and have typically been constructed as a temporary “circuit breaker” measure that is put in place to put a stop to unsafe interactions and, in turn, lower infection rates and avert additional strain being put on health services (Koh, 2020). Perhaps the earliest localised lockdown occurred at the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, on 23 January 2020 – two days before the first confirmed case of the virus in Australia was identified in a traveller recently returned from the region (Qian and Hanser, 2020). Wuhan was the first, but certainly not the last place to adopt a lockdown strategy: following the failure of local lockdowns in Northern Italy to curb the spread of COVID-19 in late February, the Italian government imposed the world’s first national lockdown on 9 March 2020, a policy soon adopted by other nations as the virus continued to spread unabated (Caselli et al., 2020).

As the research conducted by Reicher and Stott (2020) highlights, the level of repressive policing that occurs when enforcing a lockdown is a central component in the calculation of how likely a community is to participate in non-compliant behaviours. The response of police is, in turn, determined by the distinct public health strategy adopted by a government. While a general, growing consensus developed throughout 2020 that some degree of mandated, collective social action was needed to avert the rampant spread of COVID-19, the extent of this action has been a matter of extensive debate. Baker et al. (2020) identify five common non-pharmaceutical strategies for combatting the pandemic that emerged during 2020. The first is, conversely, to take no action at all – a strategy common in the early stages of the pandemic, but increasingly less observed as the seriousness of COVID-19’s impact became more apparent. The second identified strategy was “mitigation” in which the priority of the state is to flatten the peak and prevent COVID-19’s spread getting worse, but without taking proactive steps to *lower* infection rates (Baker et al., 2020: 1). The next strategy, one of the most common in North America and Europe, is “suppression” wherein measures like lockdowns and business closures are imposed, often for short periods when hospital admissions reach a critical point. The final two strategies that Baker et al. identify are the most strict and, in some views, repressive: common in Asian countries, “elimination” is a strategy in which lengthy, often pre-emptive actions are taken to force virus transmission levels to zero, while “exclusion” is practiced in isolated countries where COVID-19 was yet to arrive, to prevent others bringing the virus in the first place.

Unlike their northern neighbours, countries in southeast Asia had been at the epicentre of the H151 influenza (or “bird flu”) crisis, and were both socially and politically primed to enter

into a similarly repressive state response to combat COVID-19. The general acceptance of lockdown in these countries is perhaps anecdotal evidence that previous experience of a public health crisis makes compliance with public health orders more likely, though there are too many other sociocultural variables to consider making generalisations that would apply to North American and European countries at this stage. The public health response to COVID-19 in Australia is somewhat different to the overt elimination strategy observed in New Zealand and much of Asia. In the view of Dr Nick Coatsworth (2020), the Australian government's Deputy Chief Medical Officer, eliminating COVID-19 is a "false hope ... it's unrealistic - and it's dangerous". Coatsworth argues that total elimination is impossible without completely sealing borders (using an exclusionary policy), particularly as global transmission of the virus remains at such high levels. Instead, the Australian government has described its policy as "aggressive suppression": adopting "whatever measures necessary, including the difficult decisions to reintroduce restrictions and close borders, to shut down community transmission where it occurs" (Coatsworth, 2020). The distinction drawn between elimination and aggressive suppression by Coatsworth is, by and large, a semantic issue rather than a substantive difference: if the goal of elimination is to achieve a persistent zero-transmission rate, not simply flattening the curve of infections as in most suppression strategies, then Australia has pursued a pseudo-elimination strategy regardless of what label it has chosen to apply.

By late March, much of Australia had progressively entered into a nationwide lockdown in response to 1,600 active cases in the isolated island nation. Lasting (approximately) from March to May, lockdown was pursued as a national policy agreed by federal and state leaders as part of this aggressive suppression strategy, via some of the most sweeping control measures seen in the nation's relatively short history (Blakely et al., 2020). While the national lockdown eased in May, a resurgence of the virus in the Melbourne metropolitan area saw parts of Victoria begin a second lockdown from 7 July 2020; initially announced by Premier Daniel Andrews as a six-week action, the second lockdown was extended for 112-days total, until eventually the state recorded zero new cases on 26 October 2020 (Smith, 2020). Although this lockdown was seemingly smaller in scale, effecting one city in comparison to the national lockdown experienced earlier in the year, its impact (in context) cannot be ignored: with around five million residents, the population of Melbourne alone makes up around 20 percent of the total Australian population. Geographically, it is the largest metropolitan area in the country, encompassing almost 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> (City of Melbourne, 2021). Given the proportion of Australians affected by the Melbourne lockdown, the policy became a significant point of contention in the overarching Australian experience of COVID-19. The Victorian lockdowns were criticised by some as overly punitive and heavily policed compared to other lockdowns around the country (and the world) and, in some sectors, derided for committing to a zero case number before beginning to "reopen" (Smith, 2020). This article examines the potential lasting impacts of the strictly enforced elimination strategy in Victoria, the state which experienced the most severe and prolonged lockdown. Further, this article discusses whether vocal anti-lockdown activists in the state accurately reflect the collective community attitude towards Victoria's policy of aggressively policing a public health issue to ensure compliance.

## **Literature Review**

Before turning to the specifics of the 2020 Victorian lockdown, we must examine the contemporary resurgence of the anti-vaccination (or “anti-vax”) community, which has emerged as a committed vanguard of the COVID-sceptic, anti-lockdown movement in Australia. Hussain et al. (2018) refer to the anti-vax movement as “a regression in modern medicine” (1) and, further, one which “poses a dire threat to people’s health and the collective herd immunity” (5). While Hussain et al. propose several explanatory factors for the current state of anti-vax support, including the “misguided” support of celebrities and debunked medical studies, they point to the crucial role that the Internet has played in increasing the public’s access to medical information – accurate or otherwise (2018: 3). Multiple research studies suggest that the online anti-vax community is largely sustained by an “echo chamber” that forms on social media: in their study of six popular anti-vax pages on Facebook, Smith and Graham determined that anti-vax proponents “utilise social media to foster online spaces that strengthen and popularise anti-vaccinations discourses” (2019: 1310). Their analysis of these discourse sites revealed anti-vax as a “highly ‘feminised’ movement” where the majority of participants are women, and also revealed that (despite giving the appearance of being a global movement) the online anti-vax community is, in fact, propped up by a relatively small group of enthusiastic activists (Smith and Graham, 2019). Like Smith and Graham, Mitra et al. (2016) also focused attention on the prevalence of anti-vax rhetoric on social media, this time drawing on four years’ worth of longitudinal data on Twitter. In their study, Mitra et al. found pre-existing distrust of government to be a pre-condition of anti-vax attitudes, suggesting that the most effective approach to combat anti-vax rhetoric may not involve the normal authoritative sources like government and public health agencies – groups that the anti-vax community are already predisposed to doubt.

The anti-vax community has proven especially strong in Australia, where vaccine hesitancy has a long-established history, predating the COVID-19 pandemic. In 1994, the Australian Vaccination Network (now known as the Australian Vaccination-risks Network, or AVN) was created as a special interest lobby group dedicated to a range of anti-vaccine campaigns, including opposition to mandatory vaccination policies and the promotion of fringe scientific studies purporting health risks associated with vaccines (Aechtner, 2021). The AVN has been described as a “strong hold of the anti-vaccination movement” due to its active role as a facilitator and distributor of misinformation (Murray, 2009). While the current official membership of the organisation is unclear, the AVN’s official Facebook page (which is secure, and requires individuals to “sign up”) boasts 18,921 followers (as of 19 January 2021). The influence of anti-vax rhetoric in Australia, from the AVN or otherwise, is also reflected in vaccine-confidence data: in a 2017 study by Chow et al. on parental attitudes it was found that less than half (48 per cent) of Australian parents had no concerns about vaccines, and over 20 per cent believed that vaccines caused conditions such as autism. Rozbroj et al. (2019) note that a variety of demographic and psychosocial factors were predictors of anti-vax sentiment in Australia: they specifically list low socio-economic status, poor access to services, lack of trust in healthcare and high use of the Internet as predictors for social resistance to vaccination. Again, these findings are of significance to the current study. If, as Hussain et al. (2018) also argue, higher engagement with the Internet

and a lack of access to services are indicators of susceptibility to anti-vax rhetoric, there is perhaps no better time for such attitudes to take root than in the midst of a pandemic and lockdown, where Internet usage is generally higher than usual and public services are under severe strain (Ramsetty and Adams, 2020; Alheneidi et al. 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic the anti-vax community has, to some extent, evolved: while concern over the potential harmful medical effects of vaccination is still central to anti-vax rhetoric, the community has also turned its broadly anti-establishment lens to public health efforts to control the virus, becoming as much “anti-lockdown” as anti-vax. It bears noting that, though many in the anti-vax community are also (likely) critical of COVID-19 mitigation efforts like lockdown, this anti-lockdown contingent is not exclusively made up of ardent anti-vaxxers. The unique conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a resistance to government efforts motivated by a broader range of factors, including individuals not ordinarily anti-vax, but who are sceptical of the unusually fast development and rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine program. Others falling under this category do not question the existence of COVID-19 or the efficacy of vaccines, but are more concerned about the limits on freedom and impacts on business caused by extended lockdown policies (Lin et al., 2021). It is necessary to make this point so as not to conflate the ideology and experience of committed anti-vax campaigners with the social media analysis conducted as part of this research: while it is probable that some of the comments analysed in this study do come from conventional anti-vax advocates (or are otherwise informed by the rhetoric of this group) it is just as likely that anti-lockdown sentiment derives from another reason, whether listed here or otherwise. This is important, as it contributes to the understanding of the response to COVID-19 lockdowns not as a discrete case of being anti-vax or not, but as a complex issue with a variety of factors at work.

For some historically marginalised groups, the repressive intervention designed to target COVID-19 exists against a backdrop where repressive policing is part of their traditional relationship with the state. In a preliminary study looking at policing of public health orders (like lockdowns) in the United States, United Kingdom and France, Reicher and Stott (2020) identify several potential determinants of disorder in a lockdown-style setting: these include perceived structural inequalities fomenting anti-authoritarian perspectives, a historical context of socio-political oppression and the specific style of repressive policing as part of maintaining a lockdown policy. Ahmed Kadry (2020) refers to some examples of this “repressive policing” in the United Kingdom, where he suggests that “notable incidents including the use of drones to enforce lockdown widely [were] criticised as an overstep by policing and policing being out of touch with the communities it is meant to serve”. Ulrike M. Vieten (2020) also supported Reicher and Stott’s contention that existing structural inequalities are deeply intertwined with public health compliance, albeit in a different sense: Vieten notes that, in the United States, “pandemic populism” (and anti-lockdown activism) has largely been the domain of a generally privileged, white far-right, whereas the interests of marginalised racial or classed communities are not represented. Like Jen Schradie (2020) also argues, Vieten points to the mobilisation of anti-lockdown campaigners in this context as an example of a broader right-wing rhetorical messaging in social media echo chambers, not unlike those identified by Smith and Graham (2019) as

central to the indoctrination of anti-vax community in their own study. The shared digital space of radicalisation – social media – is seemingly central to the convergence of a general anti-lockdown agenda between two unlikely allies: the political far-right and the alternative left.

## Methods

In order to assess the implications of lockdown and related public discourse on compliance and anti-establishment attitudes, it is essential to engage in a critical observation of both media outputs and, importantly, audience response to this material. The first step in this process was to conduct a survey of relevant media and, in doing so, identify critical focus points for deeper qualitative analysis. The ubiquity of COVID-19 related news reports throughout 2020 means that any deep content analysis can only be partial: a fully comprehensive analysis is precluded due to the vast amount of media in circulation that focuses on the same issue (Mutua and Ong'ong'a, 2020). Initial selection of content here has been conducted with reference to both temporal and geographical considerations placed at the forefront. While assessing the impact of lockdown Australia-wide is a worthy project in itself, this research will specifically focus on the place where lockdown unquestionably hit hardest – Victoria – and, thus, media selected has been limited to state-based outlets only: daily newspaper *The Age*, Victoria television news affiliates *9 News Melbourne* and *7NEWS Melbourne* and popular talkback radio station *3AW*. Online searches of media from these sources were (at least, primarily) restricted to the 112-day period of the second Victoria lockdown, extending from 7 July to 26 October 2020. From this initial (and considerable) return of responses, the research survey identified several key “points of interest” where major events (such as “hotel quarantine bungle” in which internationally-acquired COVID-19 cases spread to the community) triggered a spike in media commentary. From the survey, a shortlist of pivotal “days” of the lockdown was identified for closer examination: the first day that the lockdown of Melbourne’s metropolitan area was imposed (7 July), the arrest of anti-lockdown activist Eve Black (29 July), the arrest of pregnant Ballarat woman Zoe Buhler for inciting others to breach lockdown (2 September), the arrest of 74 anti-lockdown protesters (13 September) and Daniel Andrews’s apology to the inquiry into hotel quarantine (25 September), which occurred a month prior to the lockdown’s conclusion on 26 October 2020.

The identification of these five events for further exploration was important for several reasons, not the least of which being to focus analysis on a manageable number of sources. Another benefit to this selection process was that it allowed for closer examination of audience response to these events via digital ethnographic observation – a key element of this study, which is concerned with audience response to control policy and, conversely, non-compliance with this policy. Just as each of the events listed above resulted in media reports, these reports were also posted to the social media pages of the news organisations listed above. In turn, these posts triggered community response allowing for a sentiment analysis of comments. Sentiment analysis is, at face value, a relatively basic form of content analysis that is used to identify whether audience responses are positive, negative or neutral (Kiritchenko et al., 2014). Using sentiment analysis of comments in response to the events identified as important to the Melbourne lockdown allows for a simplistic rendering of whether the general trend was pro- or anti-

lockdown. Even having restricted this analysis to the five events listed above, the vast amount of data posed a challenge: for example, a single Facebook post from *7 News Melbourne* on 29 July 2020 announcing the arrest of Eve Black returned more than 2,423 “direct” responses (i.e. not a reply to another comment). This trend was observed across the majority of social media posts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) across all events, and so a more targeted approach was warranted.

This research limits its sentiment analysis to a sample of the first 100 direct comments on Facebook posts only, offering indicative insights into audience attitudes. Limiting the analysis of comments in this way allowed for a manual sentiment analysis, useful in that it permitted the researcher to more easily account for elements that often confound an automated approach to social media discussion, such as the use of sarcasm or subcultural references that may not be immediately obvious, but have clear implications when examined with the specific context taken into consideration. Data from December 2020 claims that 16.5 million Australians (or 66% of the population) are active monthly users of Facebook, making it the most reliable social media platform to evaluate general sentiments (Ramshaw, 2020). The same data found that Australians are the sixth-most active Facebook commenters in the world, further justifying the decision to focus on this site specifically for observation. In spite of the proven (and substantial) use of Facebook as a medium for public discourse in Australia, social media analysis is not without its challenges – particularly when it comes to determining the extent to which sentiment on social media aligns with actual public sentiment.

Some of these issues are driven by user demographics: as Biernatowska et al. (2017) concluded, gender is a major variable in social media studies when considering that women tend to be more engaged users of platforms like Facebook and are more discerning about the opinions they post when compared to male users. Based on this, it is a potential limitation that this study may capture a sentiment that is biased towards a female perspective, rather than a more representative sample. Another potential limitation is the challenge of evaluating social media discourse in the midst of a dynamic event. As Ebrahimi et al. (2017) assert in their discussion of Twitter sentiment analyses in election campaigns, it is “empirically challenging” to develop algorithms that accurately gauge public sentiment in such a context because (holistically) there are too many constantly changing factors, prompted by the ongoing unfolding of events, to account for (70). The same can certainly be true of COVID-19 which, over 2020, has proven perhaps even more unpredictable than the election campaigns that Ebrahimi et al. wrote about. While it is impractical to suggest that any social media analysis of a dynamic, global event like the COVID-19 pandemic can truly account for all potential variables, the methods here nevertheless reflect an attempt to do so – first, by focusing in on specific events to analyse a direct social media reaction, allowing for more control and appreciation of context, and then by ensuring that a manual sentiment analysis is conducted, permitting the application of this contextual understanding to the comments made to better enable recognition of shifting dynamics.

## **‘Dictator Dan’ – Rhetoric of authoritarianism in the Victorian lockdown**

By nature, policing a public health concern like the COVID-19 pandemic requires the state to impose greater restrictions on the general public than usual. Ordinarily, in a post-industrial democratic nation like Australia, public interaction with the police is minimal and (where it occurs) typically passive. When an event like COVID-19 forces this relationship to shift, with police now tasked with enforcing new rules limiting personal liberties, there is a strong chance that the state makes itself vulnerable to claims of being heavy-handed or, worse, authoritarianism (Cooper and Aitchison, 2020). While all states and territories in Australia imposed some level of restriction on its citizens as part of its aggressive suppression strategy, no Australian leader experienced the backlash of this perceived “authoritarianism” quite as much as Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, particularly after his decision to place the approximately five million residents of the greater Melbourne area into a second lockdown in July 2020 (Shuttleworth, 2020). Until the COVID-19 pandemic hit his state, Andrews was seen (and often criticised) as one of the most progressive leaders of an Australian state or territory: since being elected Premier in December 2014, Andrews and his left-wing Labor government had ushered in contentious legislation legalising euthanasia, established Victoria’s first safe injecting rooms for drug users and established a royal commission into domestic violence (Alcorn, 2018). Despite this record, the government’s repressive approach to the elimination of COVID-19 during the second lockdown triggered a revision of Andrews’s record: far from a doyenne of country’s progressive movement, Andrews was now dubbed (by some) “Dictator Dan” and accused of curtailing the freedom of Victorians in pursuit of a political agenda (Murphy, 2020).

Though the strict enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions in the second lockdown exacerbated the claims of authoritarianism, the origins “Dictator Dan” label has been traced by Graham et al. (2020) to 17 May 2020 – more than a month before lockdown conditions resumed. While Graham et al. acknowledge that the term was “in low circulation” before this date, their social media analysis indicates that it entered into mainstream discourse after a Tweet from state Liberal politician Tim Smith in which he questioned whether Andrews should be called “Chairman Dan” (an allusion to Communist dictator Chairman Mao) or “Dictator Dan”; while “Dictator” lost the poll with 45.6 per cent of the public vote, it has enjoyed lasting resonance in anti-Andrews social media discourse (Graham et al., 2020). However, the same study questions the authenticity of this apparent anti-Andrews sentiment: Graham et al. examined the top 50 Twitter accounts using the #DictatorDan hashtag, as well as similarly popular #DanLiedPeopleDied and, for contrast, a pro-Andrews #IStandWithDan. The research showed that 54 per cent of the top 50 accounts posting anti-Andrews hashtags could be treated as “sockpuppets ... created by people using fake profiles for the sole purpose of magnifying their view” (Graham et al., 2020). Around 10 per cent of accounts posting #DictatorDan or #DanLiedPeopleDied were responsible for around three-quarters of the approximately 122,000 anti-Andrews Tweets analysed – a number 2.5 times lower than the number of #IStandWithDan Tweets, at 275,000.



What this shows is that, largely, the “Dictator Dan” label that entered the Victorian cultural zeitgeist cannot be considered as an organic (or generalisable) public backlash to Andrews’s lockdown policy. Instead, the term (a) derived from a political opponent of Andrews, (b) was propagated on social media by a relatively small, yet vocal, minority of opponents, (c) many of these opponents posted from anonymous, unverifiable accounts and, perhaps most importantly, (d) the actual number of Tweets *supporting* Andrews was more than twice as high as those who perceived his actions as “dictatorial”. This observation of anti-lockdown rhetoric being propagated by a small, motivated group on social media – giving the appearance of being part of a much larger social trend – is reflective of the same patterns observed by Mitra et al. (2016) and Smith and Graham (2019) in regard to the online anti-vax community. The extent to which the anti-vax community and anti-Andrews community online overlap is unclear, however there is reason to believe there is some degree of crossover, considering much of the anti-Andrews rhetoric targeted the lockdown policy in a way that echoes the views of virus sceptics. Nevertheless, actions in early July 2020 just prior to the second lockdown being imposed seemingly reinforced the perspective that Andrews was indeed pursuing an authoritarian path: on 4 July 2020, Andrews deployed Victoria Police to surround nine public housing towers in North Melbourne, confining 3,000 residents to their homes for between five and fourteen days due to confirmed COVID-19 cases at the complex (Boseley, 2020b; Glass, 2020). The affected population was not told of the impending lockdown before armed police arrived to surround the building, with Victorian Ombudsman Deborah Glass later issuing a scathing report stating, “the rushed lockdown was not compatible with the residents’ human rights ... [and was] contrary to the law” (Glass, 2020: 4). Glass advised the state to issue an apology to residents, but this was rejected by the Andrews government, with Housing Minister Richard Wynne saying “we make no apology for saving people’s lives” (Boseley, 2020b). It is clear that the Andrews government’s commitment to aggressive suppression, bordering on elimination by any other definition, compounded the niche conception of Andrews as a “dictator” and, in turn, contributed to a greater split in the public’s views on the necessity as such strictly enforced lockdown regulations in Victoria, just as the second lockdown was about to begin.

As the second lockdown continued, anti-Andrews rhetoric persisted and – while not necessarily focused on authoritarian aspects of the government’s policy – served to undermine public confidence in Victoria’s COVID-19 strategy. This trend towards undermining the government’s strategy can be observed in online discourse around Andrews’s appearance at the public inquiry into mistakes made in Victoria’s hotel quarantine program, where illicit encounters between private security guards and quarantined international arrivals was attributed to the resurgence of the second wave of COVID-19 transmissions in June 2020 (Coate, 2020). Despite using his 25 September 2020 appearance before the inquiry to issue an apology, the online response was largely unforgiving. A news article on Andrews’s inquiry appearance posted by Melbourne’s daily newspaper *The Age* received 494 comments total; of the first 100 of these comments, only 14 expressed a positive view on the Premier, most applauding him for being “respectful and truthful” and not shying away from public criticism (The Age, 2020c). After removing four comments expressing a neutral (or unrelated) sentiment, there remained 82

comments that are generally negative towards Andrews. This is particularly notable given *The Age* has traditionally been seen as a moderate, if not left-leaning, news source in comparison to the more conservative local newspaper *The Herald Sun* (Muller, 2017). However, of these 82 negative comments, most focused on Andrews’s perceived failures to manage hotel quarantine, or to take responsibility for its failures: despite the focus on the “Dictator Dan” label, only five referred to concepts related to authoritarianism – indeed, only two of those five explicitly used the word “dictator” (one “Dictator Dan” and one “Dan is communist and a dictator gone wild”) (The Age, 2020c).

The result of this analysis supports Graham et al.’s (2020) determination that the Andrews-as-authoritarian narrative was primarily being pushed by a small, committed group of anti-Andrews (and anti-lockdown) activists online. The responses on *The Age* post show that, while anti-Andrews rhetoric was high at this critical time in the second lockdown, the animus levelled at him was at his government’s failure to control the virus, not any anti-lockdown sentiment. Indeed, on the contrary: one interpretation is that anti-Andrews rhetoric here revolves around the inability to apply more *strict* controls on the public, rather than the opposite. Though seemingly unusual, contemporaneous research undertaken during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States suggests preferences for authoritarianism transcend the left-right political binary. Examining responses to nineteen “putatively authoritarian pandemic-mitigation policies” in a sample of 550 people, Mason (2020) concluded that support for COVID-19 lockdown policies was not based on political persuasion but, rather, how prone an individual was to authoritarianism more broadly – that authoritarian respondents from both right and left found common ground in many aspects of the response to the “menu of normally taboo authoritarian policies [that] appears on the table of mainstream public debate” during a crisis like that COVID-19 pandemic (5).

Costello et al. (2020) also make the same argument, suggesting that there are psychological similarities between authoritarians at both ends of the political spectrum, such as (a) their shared belief that the world is dangerous and (b) a common view that state control is needed to address these threats. The argument presented here is that, perhaps, anti-Andrews rhetoric should not be evaluated based on the conventional binary models of politics but, rather, with reference to cross-political preferences for authoritarianism. Based on this framework, it might be argued that sentiment towards Andrews shifted not because of a public shift towards the political right and clamour for greater restrictions, but instead because the emergence of an authoritarian push made of left *and* right was a prevalent force. Indeed, an Australia-wide survey conducted by Murphy et al. early in the pandemic in April/May 2020 found that “Australians cared less about health risks to them or to others and seemed more motivated to comply with COVID-19 restrictions out of a sense of duty to support authorities” (2020, 489). In addition, the conservative right in Victoria largely adopted a line that lockdown was harmful to the economy, and so did not provide a viable alternative for those arguing for tighter restrictions (Graham et al., 2020). If this is the case, it reflects a no-win scenario for Andrews: on one hand, a considerable segment of the population with preference for authoritarianism who felt he was

not going far enough and, on the other, a much smaller-yet-enthusiastic cohort labelling him a “dictator” for imposing any lockdown at all.

## **Anti-lockdown ‘stunts’ – public responses to overt acts of non-compliance**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, social media played a major role in capturing both spontaneous and orchestrated acts of non-compliance by citizens opposed to mask-wearing or, indeed, lockdown. This is unsurprising, given the widespread saturation of social media in society and, perhaps more pertinently, the heightened engagement with these media within the anti-vax community found in studies by Hussain et al. (2018) and Rozbroj et al. (2019). When acts of non-compliance “go viral” and receive considerable attention, both on social media and (after that) in the mainstream media, it has the effect of signal boosting a single act and augmenting its sociocultural impact. The disproportionality of act and impact that is achieved using social media “clicktivism” is essential to what Smith and Graham (2019) described as “small world” networking in the anti-vax community, where a relatively small cadre of active campaigners gives the impression that a far larger group exists; it is also reflected in the findings of Graham et al. (2020) regarding the #DictatorDan rhetoric on Twitter, where the label entered into the lexicon despite being pushed by a far smaller group than actually existed. Such a phenomenon can inherently compromise public perceptions on compliance, especially in a situation like COVID-19: at a time when most citizens are confined to their homes in a lockdown setting, the belief (erroneously promoted on social media) that non-compliance is commonplace can have a major influence on support for ongoing collective efficacy strategies and, indeed, the strict enforcement of these strategies by the state.

Early in the second Victorian lockdown, 28-year-old Eve Black became synonymous with the use of social media to push an anti-lockdown, COVID-sceptic agenda. Black recorded a video of herself at a police checkpoint in Bunyip, south-east of Melbourne, refusing to answer questions about her reasons for travel and (instead) reading a scripted response until, frustrated, police waved her through the checkpoint (Dexter, 2020). Though Black claimed the recording was “only meant for a close group of friends” her video came to the attention of the mainstream media and experienced a significant signal boost: posts on *The Age*, *3AW*, *7 News Melbourne* and *9 News Melbourne* Facebook pages six days later, when she was arrested for breaching lockdown restrictions, were “liked” more than 19,800 times (more than 9,300 on the *7 News Melbourne* page alone), with 5,152 comments across all four posts. In sharing Black’s story (and, in most cases, video footage) across these major media platforms, what began as a relatively inane act of non-compliance became a symbol of anti-lockdown activism. However, sentiment analysis of the first 100 comments on each of the four posts indicates that, in this case, Black’s viral act of non-compliance triggered more backlash than it did galvanise support for her anti-lockdown position. In every instance, comments supportive of police arresting Black on 29 July 2020 were a clear minority: of the 400 comments sampled, a total of 26 (6.5 per cent) were either positive towards Black’s “guts” in standing up for individual freedoms or, alternatively, negative towards the heavy-handed actions of Victoria Police (The Age, 2020a). The vast majority of commenters were happy

that “karma” caught up with Black. Many openly praised the police’s action, calling it “one for the constabulary” and asserting that “she deserves everything coming to her from Vic Pol [Victoria Police]” (9 News Melbourne, 2020a; NewsTalk 3AW 2020a). Contrary to the suggestion of non-compliance, most commenters not only supported police but instead called for stricter penalties, including mandatory jail time. Response to Black’s arrest indicates that, far from mirroring non-compliant behaviour, Victorians rejected the flagrant breach of lockdown rules in overwhelming numbers. More crucially, commenters suggest greater consequences for people breaching the regulations like Black. Far from being non-compliant, the public instead called for *stricter enforcement* of compliance, again supporting the hypothesis that a preference for authoritarianism existed in Victoria separate from traditional political allegiances (Manson, 2020).

In a sense, Victoria Police acceded to this public call for stricter enforcement in the wake of the Eve Black incident, notably with the proactive arrest of pregnant anti-lockdown campaigner Zoe Buhler on 2 September 2020. Buhler, 28, was arrested for her role organising an anti-lockdown event on Facebook and charged with inciting others to break lockdown rules (McGowan, 2020). Like Black’s story, Buhler’s arrest went viral on social media when footage emerged of police handcuffing the expectant mother and taking her into custody while she was still in her pyjamas. There is little question that Buhler’s arrest had far more potential to garner support for the anti-lockdown cause, with the optics of police arresting a pregnant woman for a Facebook post raising the issue of free speech and its intersection with the enforcement of compliance during the Victorian lockdown (Zhou, 2020). However, again, the comments on articles pertaining to Buhler’s arrest indicate widespread support for curtailing these rights when used to promote non-compliant anti-lockdown activity. A selection of four Facebook posts by Victorian media sources on (or immediately after) Buhler’s 2 September arrest reveals a total of 5,316 direct comments. This is significantly lower than the number recorded in the Eve Black incident discussed above, but it must be recalled that the Black arrest occurred after six days of coverage, whereas these posts were made within 24 hours of Buhler’s arrest, leaving less time for the public to learn about the story and develop opinions. A survey of the first 100 comments on each Buhler-related post reveals 86 comments (21.5 per cent) supportive of Buhler or, more commonly, against the “draconian” actions of Victoria Police in arresting her (The Age, 2020b). The increase is, of course, a considerable increase on 6.5 per cent supportive of Eve Black’s actions several months earlier. Despite the 15 per cent increase in support for Buhler as opposed to Black, the overall total rate of support is still not even close to achieving 50/50 parity. Those opposed to Buhler’s actions typically asserted that her pregnant conditions was “no excuse” for inciting others to break lockdown and put public health at risk (7 News Melbourne, 2020b).

To an extent, the increase in support for anti-lockdown rhetoric could be attributed to Victorians tiring of prolonged lockdown. This “lockdown fatigue” was especially notable considering the nature of the exit strategy was to aim for a period with zero new COVID-19 infections in the state, an objective seen by many as impractical given the rampant spread of the virus worldwide. The longer the COVID-19 lockdown continued, the more of an economic impact was registered as well, with studies indicating that the City of Melbourne alone

experienced a 22 percent drop in economic output in 2020 (compared with projections) and saw 75,000 jobs lost (City of Melbourne, 2020). Alternatively, support for Buhler could be explained as a matter of optics: whereas Black was openly mocking in her breach of COVID-19 regulations, Buhler was taken from her home for making a seemingly “innocuous” Facebook post – as a result, the vision of her arrest offers a far more sympathetic portrayal than Black’s did. There is, however, another intervening factor: many commenters (even some in favour of Buhler’s arrest) queried why an anti-lockdown protester was charged with incitement when Black Lives Matters protests had been allowed to proceed during the lockdown without similar action being taken (Meade, 2020; 9 News Melbourne, 2020b; NewsTalk 3AWb). There is, thus, the potential that non-compliance was not facilitated by anti-lockdown activists like Buhler directly, but rather by a perceived inconsistency in policing strategy towards these distinct protest movements. As noted above, in the Black case there was a high proportion of commenters demanding stricter enforcement of lockdown, not loosening of restrictions.

Again, the pejorative references to police tolerance of the Black Lives Matters protests reflect a public sentiment to lockdown in Victoria that went beyond conventional political binaries of progressive and conservative. The Black Lives Matter protests were, inherently, motivated by left-wing political values; the negative responses to Buhler’s arrest suggest that the same group calling for tighter restrictions are also those critical of these protests going forward under pandemic conditions. It is difficult to reconcile, then, where these commenters fit on the ideology spectrum – they do not fit into a neat conservative categorisation, as their criticism of Black Lives Matter suggests, but nor do they fit into a traditional leftist category, as their preference for state intervention indicates. Instead, it appears that (once again) findings from researchers such as Costello et al. and Murphy et al. prove correct – the psychological tendency towards authoritarianism, especially in a time of crisis, goes beyond ordinary political boundaries and can, in turn, prove confounding when measuring public reactions and sentiment to dynamic events. In closing, it appears that while Buhler received a greater level of personal support than similar anti-lockdown activists, the backlash to her arrest still did little to promote the cause among the general public, who largely maintained the view that any person inciting non-compliance deserved to be dealt with seriously by Victoria Police.

### **Hitting the streets (or not) – comparing anti-lockdown protests to compliance data**

The period around Zoe Buhler’s arrest saw a peak in anti-lockdown protest action, including an incident where around 250 “freedom” protesters marched through Melbourne’s iconic Queen Victoria Market on 13 September 2020, only to be met by the Victoria Police riot squad and dispersed. Seventy-four protesters were arrested as a result of this rally, with 176 infringement notices handed out for breaches of COVID-19 regulations (Boseley, 2020a). As with the Eve Black incident in July, footage of the police clashes with these “aggressive” anti-lockdown activists gives the impression of a considerable group committed to non-compliance with public health laws – once again, the impression this event offers is far greater than the reality of public sentiment. While there were fewer Facebook postings on this event compared to the Black and

Buhler incidents (indeed, there was no post made by *The Age* on the day and a post from *NewsTalk 3AW* did not come until four days later) a sentiment analysis of the posts that were made indicate a growing tendency to rationalise anti-lockdown activity or, more over, an opposition to perceived “heavy-handed” police responses (7 *News Melbourne*, 2020c).

There were 1,170 comments made across three posts about the 13 September event (9 *News Melbourne* and 7 *News Melbourne* on the day, *NewsTalk 3AW* days later), with more than 2,729 comments when accounting for replies as well. Of the 300 comments sampled, 105 (or 35 percent) were either positive towards the protesters or (more frequently) criticised police use of force in dispersing them (37 per cent on the 7 *News Melbourne* post, 49 per cent on 9 *News Melbourne* and 19 per cent for *NewsTalk 3AW*). In the view of many, it was not the protesters but, instead, police who “wreaked havoc” and caused the Queen Victoria Market to shut down, costing struggling stallholders business (7 *News Melbourne*, 2020c). Police actions at the Market were described as “brutality” and like “some communist country being overrun by the intimidating Police Force” (9 *News Melbourne*, 2020c). The tone of comments on the *NewsTalk 3AW* post (2020c) was somewhat different to the other samples: the majority of the 19 percent who expressed support for protesters did so with a caveat, noting that they understood the reasons for the protest but were concerned that such actions would lead to further lockdown. Despite these reservations, the comments have been treated as generally supportive of anti-lockdown activists, though (admittedly) still showing favour for compliance, if not trust in the state government.

While anti-lockdown sentiment remained relatively low overall, at 35 percent, the steady increase of this rate from the Eve Black incident on 29 July to the protest on 13 September gives reason for concern in terms of the longevity of lockdown compliance. That more than a month passed between the two events is unquestionably a key element in explaining this trend: after 46 further days in lockdown, it is (in some ways) understandable and expected that Melburnians’ commitment to the regulations would begin to wane. However, Victoria Police data collated in the second Victorian lockdown suggests otherwise: over the initial three weeks after the new rules came into effect, Victoria Police issued only 42 fines to citizens for not self-isolating as directed, after doorknocking 3,000 people subject to the order – a negligible non-compliance rate of 1.4 percent (Thorne, 2020). The number of fines issued for breaking curfew (i.e. without being subject to a specific self-isolation direction) was higher, with police issuing 1,762 fines from 4 August to 31 August 2020. Even so, by the start of September this rate was on a downward trajectory, dropping from 89 fines in a 24-hour period on 17 August to 60 fines on 31 August 2020, only two weeks later (Handley, 2020). Again, while not indicative of full compliance, it does suggest that at the same time that the level of anti-lockdown (and anti-government) rhetoric seemed to rise on social media, actual compliance with the COVID regulations continued to improve, based on police data.

The strict nature of police enforcement in Victoria, while drawing criticism in relation to the 13 September protest, most likely played a significant role in promoting compliance: fines for not self-isolating when directed were high, at almost AUD\$5,000, while fines for breaking

curfew were also high at AUD\$1,652 (Thorne, 2020; Handley, 2020). Along with Victoria Police's proactive enforcement of the rules, this strategy of severe penalties coupled with proactive enforcement was seemingly effective in controlling threats to collective efficacy during the second lockdown. However, later actions by the state government may prove to undercut this effectiveness were Victoria to succumb to a third lockdown, either because of COVID or another public health crisis. Despite 19,000 penalty notices being handed out between July and October 2020, a new policy was implemented in January 2021 with police instructed to not proceed with charging offenders who had not paid their fines, issuing a caution instead. The Victoria Police union said the decision sent "a concerning message" that the government (and, indeed, police) were not serious in their actions enforcing the COVID-19 regulations, and posed a risk to "wilful compliance" (Houston and Webb, 2021). The result of the Victorian government's decision to not aggressively pursue outstanding lockdown fines remains to be seen, but (as the police union suggests) present yet another potential risk to public faith in the state's approach to lockdown.

## **Conclusion**

Despite ardent hopes around the world that the COVID-19 virus will be brought under control with the widespread public dissemination of vaccines, the sociological impacts of the pandemic will undoubtedly continue. As governments consider the flaws in their response to the pandemic, from a healthcare and economic perspective, their thoughts will also turn to the policy of lockdown that was used to control the virus and, in countries like Australia who acted swiftly, largely eliminated community transmission of COVID-19. The rapid onset of COVID-19 highlights the need for greater understanding of how lockdown is received by the public, and the best ways to ensure compliance. What is clear from the events of 2020/21 is that countries where lockdown was not strictly enforced experienced challenges in utilising the method as effectively as possible to mitigate viral transmission (Frowde et al., 2020). Cities like Melbourne, where an extended and heavily-enforced lockdown was put in place, ultimately succeeded in eliminating COVID-19 and, thus, present a useful case study for other nations who struggled to galvanise community compliance with public health orders. By studying the response to various events during Melbourne's second lockdown, this article has been able to offer insight into how the attitudes to lockdown exhibited by Melburnians changed over time, as the 112-day lockdown continued. What this social media analysis found was that, for the most part, community compliance remained high throughout the second lockdown: sentiment analysis revealed that support for adhering to lockdown measures never fell below 65 percent and, even then, data from Victoria Police indicates that issuing of penalty notices for breaching self-isolation and curfew orders continued to fall over time (Thorne, 2020; Handley, 2020). It is apparent that compliance with a strictly-enforced lockdown is possible to achieve in a state of crisis where public health is at stake, even in situations (as was the case in Victoria) where trust in government was at a low.

The research does, however, identify some risks for employing such a strategy in future. While support for compliance did not fall below 65 percent (based on the data presented here), it was nevertheless on a downward trend as lockdown stretched on. While only 6.5 percent of

commenters expressed support for Eve Black’s defiant actions in July, that number had risen to 35 percent when the (much more aggressive) anti-lockdown protest was carried out at Queen Victoria Market on 13 September 2020. From this, it can be inferred that the longer a strict lockdown continues, the more likely it is that public support for it will fall and, in turn, negative responses to examples of police enforcement will increase. While police assert that actual compliance remained high (despite this online discourse) the decision to not pursue penalties issued to COVID rulebreakers could have significant repercussions for later enforcement actions, impacting on coerced compliance should another lockdown be required. However, at the same time online opposition to lockdown increased, it did not follow a path reflective of the anti-vax community: there was little scepticism of whether COVID-19 was real, or conspiratorial theories about vaccination found in the discourse of other nations grappling with anti-lockdown behaviours (Vieten, 2020). Instead, focus was directed at Daniel Andrews and his government’s mishandling of programs like hotel quarantine, suggesting a political partisanship to the anti-lockdown debate rather than adherence to an alternative ideological agenda like libertarianism or vaccine scepticism.

In a sense, this is good news: while the use of terms like “Dictator Dan” are unquestionably hyperbolic, the focus on political leadership in a crisis indicates a sense of “business as usual” among Melburnians who judged the success or failure of the COVID-19 response largely on fact, not misinformation and conspiracy. Again, while there were elements of this observed throughout, these were relatively minimal, generally supporting the findings of Graham et al. (2020) regarding the use of the #DictatorDan moniker on Twitter in the same period. Ultimately, this study shows that compliance with the 112-day second lockdown in Victoria remained high throughout, in spite of rising anti-government rhetoric online and the attempted incitement of a small core of anti-lockdown activists like Eve Black, Zoe Buhler and the 13 September protesters. While public sentiment invariably turned against the Victorian government for several perceived failings, this did not trigger widespread rejection of lockdown orders and, indeed, actual compliance appears to have increased, rather than fallen. There have been several further COVID-related lockdowns in Victoria since the lengthy 112-day lockdown of 2020 and, given the potential for more in future, this research offers some level of hope that strict measures can (and will) be accepted by the public, even if the political costs are high.

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