

# **EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN AUSTRALIA: A STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL IDEOLOGY**

**Case Study**

*The University of Queensland Business School*

In this report, the term 'Sovereign Citizens' is used in reference to anti-government ideology. While Sovereign Citizens is not a clear or stable category, it is the term used within many media articles collected for this research and hence use of the term here. The authors and funders do not ascribe to the ideology.

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Image: AAP/James Ross [29]

# RATIONALE FOR THIS CASE STUDY

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This case study examines how the Sovereign Citizen movement was reported in the Australian media over a two-year period. It is intended to help readers think through the processes through which protest activities and causes are legitimised or delegitimised by the media, as a proxy for public sentiment.

The case study should be read as a companion to our two research reports:

1. *'Terrorism and violent protests: where do these disruptive events meet?'* [1]
2. *'Is the social legitimacy of protest in Australia in flux?'* [2]

These reports explain that, despite the blurred boundaries between some terrorist activities and other acts of civil violence, society's responses to these activities can vary according to the perceived legitimacy of the underlying cause. While a variety of protest groups were included in our earlier reports, this case study focuses on the Sovereign Citizens movement, with its underlying premise of denying the laws of a country.

We explain the distinct nature of the Sovereign Citizen protest activity and how it is legitimised or delegitimised through media reporting. The case covers three waves of media reporting related to specific protest activities attributed to the Sovereign Citizen movement. We then pose some questions for discussion to facilitate use of the case study and the earlier reports as learning resources.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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This case study identifies how Sovereign Citizens are reported by media in Australia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is helpful to read with cross-reference to our two prior reports explaining how the media constructs the social legitimacy of violent and disruptive protests within society. The Sovereign Citizen movement became more prominent through protest activities during COVID-19 when public health orders limiting interactions and freedom of movement were at their height. We observed that media reporting on Sovereign Citizen disruptive protest activity is concentrated in three peaks during which the Sovereign Citizen movement is increasingly characterised as illegitimate.

This case study is intended to provoke thought on the dynamic nature of social legitimacy for specific causes and types of protests and the degree of disruption they cause by exploring

*how media reporting on Sovereign Citizens in Australia informs our understanding of evolving civil unrest in Australia and its links to extremism.*

As shown in Figure 1, this case study links to our two reports on the social legitimacy of protest and other disruptive events.

Together these two reports and this case study are:

- 1. Terrorism and violent protests: where do these disruptive events meet?[3]*
- 2. Is the social legitimacy of protest in Australia in flux?[4]*
- 3. Extremist movements in Australia: A study of individual ideology*

The first two reports together with this case study provide resources for risk and security professionals, teaching and learning staff, and law societies to probe the fluxing social legitimacy of protest in Australia from a variety of perspectives.



**Figure 1 This case study is supported by the first two reports**

This case study is intended to help readers think through the processes by which society engages with and legitimises or delegitimises protest activities and causes over time. By doing so we illustrate that not all protest causes are equal: some are viewed as beneficial to society while others are not. While a variety of protest groups were included in our earlier reports, we now focus on the Sovereign Citizens movement, to consider the distinct nature of their protest activity and how it is legitimised or stigmatised by Australian media as a proxy for society. At the end, we pose some questions for discussion to facilitate use of the case study and the earlier reports as learning resources. We include links to all sources cited in this report in Appendix D. Readers are encouraged to read the first two reports, which are now briefly introduced, before reading this case study.

Our first report '[Terrorism and violent protests: where do these disruptive events meet?](#)' examined the evolving nature of terrorism and violent protests to better understand the different legitimacy society grants to each type of event. The face of terrorism has shifted significantly since September 11, 2001, an event that triggered a strong legislative response globally, including in Australia. More recently, social fragmentation and alienation, much of it linked to COVID-19 restrictions, has seen increasing participation in protests, with police claiming that some protests are the most violent they have seen in two decades [5]. While protests have legitimacy in a democratic society, the social legitimacy accorded to protest activities can vary when these protests involve significant economic disruption and violence.

Report 1 identified 30 events between December 2019 and November 2021, seven of which were terrorist acts and the remainder protests or other disruptive events, of which five involved violence. We found that the lines between the activities involved in violent protests and terrorist acts were becoming blurred as each caused significant disruption and harm. Nonetheless, the protest activities we examined were generally reported in the media as legitimate, whilst terrorist activities were clearly illegitimate, including through legislation.

The democratic right to protest is largely well-accepted and supported by the Australian public. The right to protest is made up of three important rights;

- *the right to freedom of peaceful assembly,*
- *the right to freedom of association, and*
- *the right to freedom of speech.*

The democratic right to protest is largely well-accepted and supported by the Australian public.

The right to protest is made up of three important rights; the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of association, and the right to freedom of speech.' which are guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [6], to which Australia is a party. However, societal acceptance of protest is neither static nor uniform.

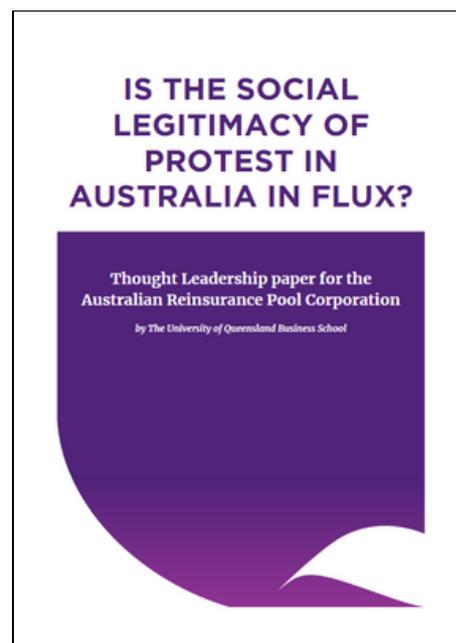


To capture the dynamic aspects of [Social legitimacy of protest in Australia](#) we studied 10 of the most disruptive protests from December 2019 until November 2022. The causes of these protests were COVID-19 and climate change related. In addition to analysing media articles, we interviewed 31 stakeholders affected by, or involved in, protests. Some causes and types of protests were obviously and intentionally disruptive, such as those blocking roads, trains, or ports, in the cause of demanding climate action, or in opposition to COVID-19 related restrictions, such as lock downs and vaccination. Such protests attract significant media attention to specific protest groups, like Extinction Rebellion or Blockade Australia, calling into question their disruptive effects upon society [7], even as legislative, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement activity aim to contain their effects [8]. This report, therefore, explores the changing social legitimacy of such disruptive protest activities [9], as it is reflected in public discourses such as the media and public inquiries, and in legislative changes that criminalise some types of protest-associated activities [10]. We show that, where causes are deemed worthy by some parts of society, a degree of disruption is accorded social legitimacy, generating a backlash against legislation that criminalises disruptive protest activities.

However, other forms of protest are more secretive and subversive, so that their potential disruptions to society are hidden and perhaps underestimated. One such movement, with the umbrella name Sovereign Citizens (also referred to as 'SovCits'), come together behind a cause of not being subject to the law of the

countries in which they reside [11]. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, their protests were largely invisible within Australian public discourse and not consistently reported upon in mainstream 'broadsheet' media, as opposed to tabloid and other sources.

Yet, the Sovereign Citizen movement, originating overseas but rapidly diffusing to many countries, including Australia, had already been described as a form of domestic terrorism [12]. More recently their profile was raised during disruptive protests in response to COVID-19 public health orders that imposed restrictions on Australian communities. The disruption created by this movement has been magnified by its ability to coalesce with other causes; especially conspiracy theorists, right wing extremists, and those with extreme religious beliefs. This magnification has led to media scrutiny, calling into question the legitimacy of the Sovereign Citizen movement and its potential links to extremism.



## 2

# OBJECTIVES OF THE CASE STUDY

This case study on the changing awareness and social legitimacy of the Sovereign Citizen movement within Australian media is intended as a resource for learning and reflection on our prior reports. When protest movements are brought to public attention, they may either gain legitimacy or become stigmatised and potentially criminalised within a society.

We examined when, where, and how the Sovereign Citizen movement was reported in mainstream and tabloid news outlets from 1 December 2019 to 28 February 2023 to develop this case study.

Our methods are outlined in Appendix A. Section 3 of the case study characterises the Sovereign Citizen movement in the media.

We then explain three peaks in the evolving characterisation of the Sovereign Citizen movement in Section 4, as the basis to consider how media reporting on Sovereign Citizens in Australia informs evolving understandings of disruptive protest and its potential links to extremism.

We conclude with discussion questions in Section 5.



Image: AAP/James Ross [30]

## 3

## THE SOVEREIGN CITIZEN MOVEMENT IN THE MEDIA

Sovereign Citizens behave in ways that oppose social norms and hence become the focus of media reporting and of interest to the wider public audience. Media reporting on Sovereign Citizens conveys much about their activities, the demands they make of authorities and their ideology, revealing that they reject and proudly flout the governing laws and institutions of their countries.

*'A Sovereign Citizen is someone who believes they are not subject to the law of the country they live in, and do not respect the authority of the police' (M002).*

For example, not registering vehicles as demonstrated in this media report: *'A self-proclaimed "sovereign citizen" has had a bizarre run-in with police as she attempted to defend her "right" not to display number plates and handed over a very obviously fake identification card. [...] which includes the words: "First Breath Location: Earth"' (M481).*

Sovereign Citizens often film themselves breaking the law and their subsequent interactions with police and other government officials.

During such interactions, Sovereign Citizens usually refuse to give their name or acknowledge their surname to authorities, believing that governments have no authority over them: *'I'm just me, Brent, a living man... the corporation has no authority over the living man' (M372).* According to Kaz Ross, an expert from the University of Tasmania, *'followers of Australia's SovCit movement believe co-operation with police is akin to entering into a contract with a corporation' (M065).* When arrested, Sovereign Citizens call for vengeance, such as one campaigner who posted a series of videos on social media *'using threatening language and inciting others to arrest government ministers and public officials after documents purporting to be arrest warrants were handed to Perth Police Station' (M361).*

This blatant disregard for laws and those upholding them is further displayed in disruptive behaviour in court proceedings where Sovereign Citizens use pseudo-legal documents, deliberately cause delays, make demands, and do not follow instructions. Sovereign Citizens argue that they do not need to pay taxes or fines and, as a result, their court appearances can escalate to become costly and time consuming.

For example, Sovereign Citizens are likely to have bail refused because the accused are unlikely to adhere to bail conditions, believing such conditions do not apply to them: *'A prosecutor opposed bail, arguing Mr Harder was likely not to turn up to court because he had "Sovereign Citizen"-style beliefs and no ties to the ACT' (M306)*. Magistrates describe Sovereign Citizen arguments as 'bizarre'.

'They say things like, *"I am not the corporate person named" – they demand to see the authority of the judicial officer, the Australia Act, and the Magna Carta [...]* these arguments have never held any weight or succeeded in any court' (M483). These reports reveal that Sovereign Citizens view themselves as functioning separately from Australian society. This separateness, as we explain in Section 4, became particularly poignant during COVID-19.

To enact their belief in government conspiracies as applying excessive control, Sovereign Citizens make demands of police and other government officials when their paths cross. For example, Sovereign Citizens claim that they must give consent to legislation before they can be prosecuted under that same legislation. *'Technically, you must consent to legislation. However even still, they cannot arrest you for an offence such as speeding,' she wrongly claimed on social media' (M015)*.

Unsurprisingly, Sovereign Citizens typically do not give consent and instead demand police answer their questions. They may also issue a schedule of fees to police for taking their time when pulled over and asked for their drivers' licence, issued a speeding ticket, or having the registration details of a vehicle checked. Sovereign Citizens take a particularly strong stance on property trespass, posting signs demanding that police and government officials leave their property. For example, a sign on a Sovereign Citizen property includes a no-trespassing order for *'all men, women, persons and entities including police / government / sheriff / bailiff / process server / council / private investigators / corporations' (M399)*.

Sovereign Citizens further demand the arrest of politicians and the eviction of government officials from government buildings to *'restore power to the people' (M338)*. Not only do Sovereign Citizens reject state authority, they also believe they have the right to make demands over state authority.

**Property signs suggesting the owners hold Sovereign Citizen beliefs, where Australian laws do not apply to them**



Image: Matrix News for Daily Mail Australia [13]



Image: Eric Tlozek/ABC News [14]

Sovereign Citizen behaviour described in media reports ranges from mildly annoying to potentially becoming a danger to society. At the milder end of their characterisation, Sovereign Citizens are portrayed as having conspiracy theory-based, anti-science, anti-reason beliefs that are stigmatised by others as stupid, crazy, and irrational. For example, Sovereign Citizens promote *'baseless claims about the dangers of 5G technology, complicated fantasies about "Sovereign Citizens" and bewildering beliefs about coronavirus are being mashed together to form a vast, dark meta-conspiracy theory' (M131)*. Sovereign Citizens are criticised for wasting public resources, slowing down the court system (M268, M392), and selfishly acting in their own interests without consideration to broader society (M092). Commentators further argue that Sovereign Citizens' blanket anti-government stance means they should have to forgo the benefits of an orderly, collectively law-abiding society such as medical care and using public roads (M005, M006). Sovereign Citizens are further portrayed as responding to criticism in an aggressive manner and *'having a tantrum' (M530)*. In these reports, Sovereign Citizens are portrayed as mostly harmless disruptive pests.

Some media reporting, however, points to more serious behaviour that may be considered illegitimate by society. For example, at the other end of their media characterisation, Sovereign Citizens are portrayed as difficult to contain and an unknown, potentially dangerous quantity alongside extremist or even terrorist groups. *'QAnon adherents, anti-government militias, Sovereign Citizens and jihadist and white supremacist groups have co-opted emerging communication technologies [for example, encrypted messaging apps] in a way that has security agencies such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation concerned'* (M223). As such, containing Sovereign Citizens and associated groups during COVID-19 protest activities reportedly cost the nation in increased security needs. *'Police costs for managing "annoying" anti-vaccine and Sovereign Citizen protests had blown out to almost \$2.5 million, as protesters converged on Canberra ahead of the delivery of the federal budget on Tuesday'* (M368).

Such behaviour during COVID-19 is partly attributed to rejection from family, friends, and colleagues. *'The common thread for many of them, however, was they had nothing to go back home to. Some had lost their jobs for refusing to get vaccinated; others had been socially ostracised from family, friends and colleagues'* (M325). Under increased pressure and without the grounding force of social networks during COVID-19, Sovereign Citizens behaviour escalated.



Image: Crikey [31]

Experts believe societal conditions at the time were ripe for 'online' radicalisation of the Sovereign Citizen movement (M319) with *'social media platforms like Telegram operat[ing] like radical "echo chambers" for the disillusioned'* (M325). Sovereign Citizen's perceptions of their thwarted ability to exercise their identity and the curtailment of their activities by the everyday judicial and legislative system can lead to radicalisation and extremism. It is not uncommon for Sovereign Citizens to adhere to conspiracy theories, arguing that governments have agendas of control that extend beyond what most of the public see, resulting in a strongly anti-government motivation behind their actions and a desire to wake others up to hidden forces.

During this period, Sovereign Citizen ideology crept into Australia's political process. Sovereign Citizens formed the Great Australia Party (M387). They also infiltrated otherwise legal elections to hand out their own false ballot papers under an unofficial political party: *'A Sovereign Citizen group under the banner of Common Law Earth has decided to hold its own election but in a no-point-redesigning-the-wheel move, its own election will be held on the same day as the federal election, offering its own candidates on separate ballot papers, while using AEC [Australian Electoral Commission] ballot boxes'* (M380).

Media reports observed that fringe political players and micro-parties (small political parties that don't receive enough votes to be elected in their own right) sought to expand their remit from anti-immigrant and/or anti-vaccine causes and, so, courted Sovereign Citizens (M381). While false ballot papers and non-sanctioned elections have limited influence on legitimate political processes, the expansion of micro-parties to include Sovereign Citizen individuals and ideology brings Sovereign Citizens into a position where they could potentially impact Australia's political process; an interesting juxtaposition given Sovereign Citizens reject government authority and structure. Expert opinion in media reports indicates that Sovereign Citizens are more extreme in their beliefs and actions than police and intelligence may publicly say (M436, M465), meaning that their potential involvement in the political process is greatly concerning.

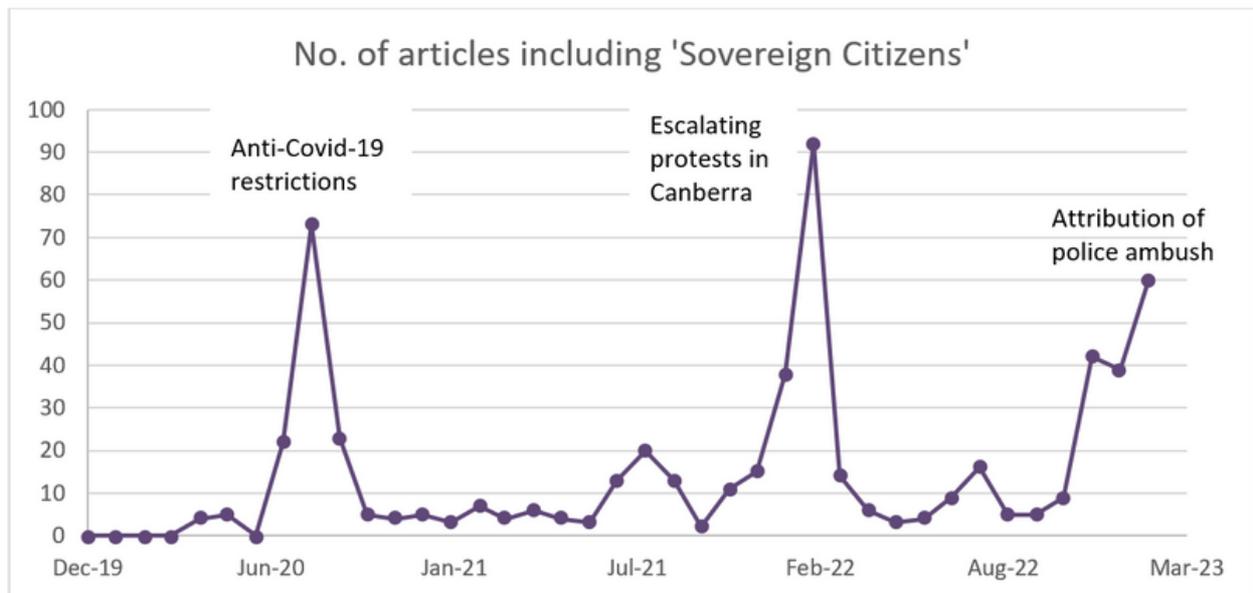
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# PEAKS IN MEDIA ATTENTION ON THE SOVEREIGN CITIZEN MOVEMENT

Media interest in Sovereign Citizens intensified around three particular events between 1 December 2019 and 28 February 2023 (Figure 1).

The three events were:

- i) protests about vaccination and lock-down measures for COVID-19 in Melbourne,
- ii) setting fire to Old Parliament House and the truckers’ convoy to Canberra, and
- iii) the religiously motivated killing of police in Southeast Queensland for which there was overlap with Sovereign Citizen ideologies.



**Figure 1 Three peaks of media interest based on number of articles that include reference to 'sovereign citizens' from 1 Dec 2019 to 28 Feb 2023 based on FACTIVA search.**

## 4.1

## THE FIRST MEDIA PEAK: JULY 2020 – SEPTEMBER 2020

Media attention on Sovereign Citizens intensified when COVID-19 public health orders enforced restrictions on individual movement and required people to wear masks and take other health precautions. The implementation of enforceable public health orders drew the ire of Sovereign Citizens who retaliated against businesses and authorities who enforced the public health order conditions: *'On July 7, Mr Cassar filmed himself berating Victoria Police officers as they enforced the five-day "hard lockdown" on public housing towers on Racecourse Road in Flemington' (M009)*. Sovereign Citizens further defied COVID-19 public health orders by illegally crossing state borders: *'Footage has surfaced of several people throughout Melbourne similarly threatening cops at border checkpoints as they enforce Daniel Andrews' lockdown orders to stem the spread of COVID-19' (M013)*. When caught breaching border controls, conversations between authorities and Sovereign Citizens followed the same general pattern: *'the driver refuses to provide personal details or cooperate with authorities, arguing that they are simply exercising their rights and that they would be willing to go to the High Court' (M015)*. Examples surfaced of Sovereign Citizens flouting public health orders in ways that directly threatened the wellbeing of others: *'the anti-masker started to "scream at the top of her voice that she was a sovereign citizen" and started to cough on the victim who was afraid for her safety' (M088)*. Here, media reporting characterises Sovereign Citizens as believing in their right to act outside the law without penalty and also draws attention to their potential harm to others both directly and in risking the health and safety of the broader population.

During this period, Sovereign Citizens joined with other groups who shared anti-government ideologies, such as anti-vaccination groups and conspiracy theorists. The groups participated in violent and disruptive protests against necessary public health orders as a curtailment of their freedoms. While the boundaries between these conspiracy-based groups is unclear, COVID-19 restrictions on freedoms drew similar reactions and behaviours amongst the groups and provided fertile common ground for furthering beliefs and recruiting new members. Sovereign Citizens shared their methods for avoiding penalties for breaching restrictions, including posting 'cheat sheets' on social media in an effort to help other protestors avoid fines (M015).

Sovereign Citizens also shared information on how to deal with police. *'Drivers are also encouraged to demand the officers' name, position and station in writing - and insist another officer arrests them if they fail to provide the details immediately'* (M013, M015). In addition to attending protests together and the online sharing of information between groups, such groups also defied lock-down laws to gather in secret to decry restrictions and those enforcing them. *'COVID deniers meet Saturdays at 6pm in a gym in locked-down Cranbourne to discuss what one attendee described as 'the putrid conduct of police, government and media'* (M015).

Authorities lamented the way protests raised the public profile of sovereign citizens. *'What COVID has done is brought to the forefront certain elements of the community that do espouse anti-government rhetoric'* (M129). While this raised profile likely attracted new recruits, it also led to public condemnation.

*'They're taking every opportunity to leverage the current situation to serve their own ridiculous notions about so-called "sovereign citizens", about constitutional issues and about how 5G is going to kill your grandkids. It's bats\*\*\* crazy nonsense'* (M124).

Media reports further highlighted how such anti-social behaviour unnecessarily endangers community members living with chronic illnesses, for whom COVID-19 may become a death sentence (M115). Following public condemnation of Sovereign Citizen actions, media reports called for improved legal and constitutional frameworks for debating civil rights because *'increasingly, wingnuts like "sovereign citizens" are stealing these issues to deploy in their own interests'* (M123). Following this peak in disruptive and violent protests and blatant disregard for public health orders, Sovereign Citizens were put on the counter-terror police watch list (M129), whereby Sovereign Citizens may be subject to surveillance and other restrictions such as limitations on owning firearms [15].

## 4.2

## THE SECOND MEDIA PEAK: JANUARY 2022 - FEBRUARY 2022

Media interest in Sovereign Citizens intensified again in December 2021 when a fire occurred at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Canberra for which Sovereign Citizens were charged. *'The heritage building, which houses the Museum of Australian Democracy, had its ornate front doors completely destroyed in the attack' (M242). 'The two men [charged with the Old Parliament fire] are key organisers of a group of self-styled "sovereign citizens" who have adopted the rhetoric of Indigenous self-determination to push anti-vaccination beliefs and other conspiracy theories' (M257).* Media reports show Sovereign Citizens talking proudly of the arson attack on a symbol of government. *'We had to burn that door down to get our message across' (M231). 'All the while, these criminal acts were triumphantly live-broadcast by far-right "sovereign citizen" and "freedom" movements as badges of honour' (M242).* Media reports also explained that prior to the fire, Sovereign Citizens had tried to align themselves with Indigenous calls for sovereignty (M354). However, Indigenous community elders quickly distanced themselves from Sovereign Citizens following the arson attack.

*'While featuring a very small number of Indigenous activists, the fire and recently arrived protesters were roundly condemned by Aboriginal leaders at the Tent Embassy' (M354).*

While media coverage initially focused on the Old Parliament House fire, attention soon turned to further protests and the resultant court cases. In February 2022, the largest public demonstration ever held in Australian Capital Territory (ACT) occurred; the 'Convoy to Canberra' protest attracted 20,000 protestors. *'Protesters have been making their presence known in the city [Canberra] since January' (M346).* While the Convoy to Canberra began as a protest by truck drivers against COVID-19 restrictions, the event attracted other anti-government groups including sovereign citizens, anti-vaccination, and conspiracy theorists. *'Trucks, vans and cars had made their way to the nation's capital last week in protest against a variety of grievances ranging from vaccine mandates to an unfounded belief in the illegitimacy of the Australian government' (M280).*

Media reports on these protest activities highlighted sovereign citizens' misappropriation of official Australian symbols. Sovereign Citizens carried the Australian Red Ensign flag (M344); an Australian flag traditionally flown at sea by registered merchant ships. When flown upside down at sea, the flag is a symbol of a ship in distress and needing urgent assistance. Sovereign Citizens commandeered the Red Ensign flag and displayed the flag upside down to indicate their rejection of 'unlawful' COVID-19 public health orders. Commentators in media reports state that Sovereign citizens' interpretation and use of the Red Ensign degraded the flag's real meaning.

*'These days the Australian red ensign is more associated with tinfoil-hat-wearing Sovereign Citizen protests than the merchant fleet it once adorned' (M363).* Overall, media reports of the sovereign citizens' arson attack, misappropriation of government symbols and attempt to align with the Indigenous sovereignty cause characterises Sovereign Citizens as rejecting Australia as a self-governing state with authority over its citizens for the purpose of maintaining an orderly society and the well-being of others. They often feel empowered and emboldened to do that by the termination of residual constitutional links between the United Kingdom and Australia by The Australia Act 1986.

#### **Sovereign Citizen misuse of Australian and Red Ensign flags in February 2022**



Image: AAP/Mick Tsikas [16].

Media coverage of Sovereign Citizen activities during this second peak indicates an escalation in behaviour to include damaging government property and misuse of symbols of government. According to some media reports, this escalation is unsurprising given Sovereign Citizens' methods for achieving their mission. *'SovCits speak routinely of violent uprisings. There can be no negotiations. The only way forward is storming buildings, mass arrests and summary executions – parliamentarians, governors and the governor-general, health bureaucrats, journalists, anyone they don't like'* (M286). As a result of this escalation, authorities are becoming increasingly concerned.

*'The agency [ASIO] was growing more concerned about extremism linked to conspiracy movements including those with anti-government Sovereign Citizen beliefs, pointing to events at Old Parliament House in January'* (M450).

The Sovereign Citizen movement had already become a concern to Australia's security but now the perceived risk of harm was worsening. Prior activity from the movement was either scattered nuisance individuals or state capital-based disruptive protests (Melbourne in the first peak). Now, by targeting Canberra, the nation's capital, and symbols of national government (Old Parliament House) Sovereign Citizens joined others with overlapping ideologies, prompting Australia's security agencies to speak publicly about their concerns.

#### **Magistrates witness a sharp rise in Sovereign Citizen cases brought before the local courts**



Image: ABC Midwest and Wheatbelt/Kenith Png [17].

## 4.3

## THE THIRD MEDIA PEAK: DECEMBER 2022 TO FEBRUARY 2023

Media coverage of Sovereign Citizens intensified acutely in December 2022 when their name emerged in relation to an abhorrent incidence of violence resulting in the death of two police officers, an innocent civilian neighbour and the three perpetrators during a siege in rural Queensland. The violence was first attributed to Sovereign Citizens based on one perpetrator's behaviour, including online posts espousing anti-government beliefs. *'The YouTube channel, which has now been deleted, contains many posts referencing COVID conspiracies, anti-vaccination and sovereign citizens' (M461).*

*"... ' had been active on a prominent Sovereign Citizen site, shared pandemic conspiracies, and labelled himself an "extremist", while an account linked to his wife, '...', had interacted with a US-based conspiracist' (M465).*

*'The comments came after evidence emerged of links to other conspiracy theorists in the US and a glut of online posts made by one of the shooters – '...' – that appear to demonstrate a series of ideological influences, including elements of fundamental Christianity and the conspiracy-fuelled Sovereign Citizen movement' (M474).*

However, after further investigation, authorities declared that the siege was motivated by religious extremism. *'The deadly ambush of two Queensland Police officers and a civilian on a property last year has been declared an act of domestic terrorism linked to the Christian fundamentalist belief system known as "premillennialism"' (M558).*

While the motivation for the deadly siege was ultimately attributed to extreme religious beliefs and away from Sovereign Citizens, prior stigmatisation of Sovereign Citizens meant that it was a plausible link between the deplorable actions of the perpetrators and Sovereign Citizen ideology. This stigma extended beyond the siege event itself with media reports calling for broader consideration of what, or who, should be considered a terrorist threat.

*‘(The shooting will) change how researchers and government agencies calculate the risk of violence that they pose, because we now have a clear example – a precedent – of this type of conspiratorial behaviour leading to violence,’ Lydia Khalil, expert in extremism and a research fellow at the Lowy Institute and Deakin University, told the Guardian.’ (M444)*

Calls for improved monitoring of anti-government groups brought to light citizen-run social media pages that identify Sovereign Citizens and their theories and beliefs. *‘The woman, who was not named, runs a social media page called ‘Cookeer Watch’, which she uses to expose the wild theories and beliefs held by these so-called Sovereign Citizens’ (M508).* In contrast, journalists express concern at obtaining the right mix of informing the public without spreading the rhetoric when reporting not just the siege itself but all anti-government groups. *‘For journalism, it’s the hardest of calls: how to get the right mix of reporting, analysis and, yes, mockery of the conspiracy noise without lending the credibility of the craft to the amplification of the political signal that noise is trying to send’ (M463).* During this intense peak in media coverage, Sovereign Citizens continued to engage in conflict, notably when pulled over by police fake identification was used and number plates were not displayed by a self-proclaimed Sovereign Citizen (M481).

In another case, when pulled over for driving an unregistered vehicle, police were forced to smash the car window to apprehend the driver. *‘This time a South Australian police sergeant was left with no choice but to smash the car window of a “sovereign citizen” who maintained he didn’t need a license to drive on state roads’ (M482).* In justifying their behaviour, Sovereign Citizens maintain their stance that police have no authority over their members. *‘Without the number plate and without the licence, I’m not actually under your membership’ (M479).* In non-traffic related events, Sovereign Citizens threatened violence against the court system and individual businesses. *‘The letters, penned by ‘...’, targeted several country Queensland courthouses, claiming the courts had ‘no jurisdiction’ to punish him before warning the courthouses would be ‘blown up’ by ‘information bombs’ (M476).* Earlier in December, there was coverage of a dispute in WA when a sovereign citizen, unhappy with the sale of his home, threatened to disrupt the business of his realtor, and then breached court restraints (M534).

Despite not being ultimately responsible for the deadly siege, Sovereign Citizens still engaged in dangerous and threatening behaviour during this period. While this behaviour is not protesting en masse against COVID-19 as public health orders had largely been disbanded by this point, it is individual-level protest against an orderly society’s rules and regulations with the potential to harm others.

# 5

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

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It is evident from our two studies and this case, that people's beliefs in particular causes can be accompanied by violent and disruptive protest activities that go beyond the legal rights associated with protest in a democratic society. Such activities, which include deliberate harm to people and property, can pop up in unexpected places and, as different disenfranchised groups coalesce, can quickly expand if intelligence is not attuned to a background threat. Society can be better prepared only with a deeper understanding of the motivations and triggers that might spark unacceptable disruption and violence in society from particular anti-government ideologies like those of Sovereign Citizens.

To address our question, *how does media reporting on Sovereign Citizens in Australia inform our understanding of evolving civil unrest in Australia and its links to extremism?* we examined Sovereign Citizen protest activities over more than two years, in media articles from before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. This period comprised occasions when their protests were reported as largely harmless but also trace an evolution in which they were increasingly characterised as extreme and likened to domestic terrorism.

While Sovereign Citizens protested against Australia's local, state, and federal governments before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, their individual actions were minor and largely invisible to broader society. Examples of these individual actions include refusing to: pay rates and taxes, register vehicles, obtain a driver's license, and vote. While these activities continued during COVID-19, the workload of law enforcement and justice system officers was greatly increased when Sovereign Citizen protesters also revolted against government public health orders. While their claims against the government, framed in legal 'gobbledegook', held no sway in Australian courts [18] they remained disruptive to law enforcement and court workloads and this disruption impeded more legitimate cases.

Sovereign Citizen protest expanded and evolved to include new activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government mandates to contain the spread of COVID-19, together with social fragmentation and alienation of parts of the community, prompted intense periods of protest activity by Sovereign Citizens. This intensifying of protest activity was particularly noticeable when Sovereign Citizens joined those with similar anti-government ideologies arguing their 'freedoms' were infringed. While protests may have started out lawfully they did not always remain so, as indicated in the first media peak, when Sovereign Citizens intentionally broke laws by occupying sites of significant community cultural significance or were violent, damaging buildings and threatening individuals [19]. This is when their actions became stigmatised. The next media peak occurred when Sovereign Citizens shifted their attention to the nation's capital. Here Sovereign Citizen protesters joined others to block roads and access to workplaces in Canberra. Together protesters were united in their opposition to government COVID-19 lock downs, vaccines, and other controls. Further stigmatisation occurred during the third media peak, when the media found it plausible to report on Sovereign Citizens as capable of the most extreme form of violence: murder. While this event was subsequently shown to be associated with extreme religious beliefs, the plausibility of these claims show how much the Sovereign Citizen ideology had been stigmatised.

Despite the actions of Sovereign Citizens gaining the attention of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) (M419), it is unclear from the analysis of media reports what actions they can carry out to intervene upon this movement. While legislative controls might contain the activities of disruptive protests [20], it is unlikely that the same types of intervention would control Sovereign Citizens, whose key cause is not abiding by the laws of the countries in which they live.

Another challenge of containing violent and highly disruptive Sovereign Citizen activities is their loose affiliation. The broad anti-government yet fluid ideology of Sovereign Citizens aligns itself with other causes, such as anti-vaccination protestors. This reveals diffuse ways they disrupt society making intervention hard. It appears comparatively straightforward to contain the activities of organised extremist movements whose overt intent to be violent is more clearly articulated (e.g., The Base and Sonnenkrieg Division, added to Australia's terrorist list in 2021 and National Socialist order added in 2022 [21]).

The nature of protest activities is not static but fluxing. Interactions between Sovereign Citizens, governments and other society members responding directly to COVID-19 government mandates evolved over time. The peaks in media interest reveal the shifting geo-political focus of protests and novel ways of protesting. But even between those peaks when protests were relatively small and individual in nature, they have cumulative impacts that are highly disruptive to law enforcement and the justice system.

We now pose some questions to prompt reflection upon the findings of our two reports and this case study as a learning resource.

**FOR INSURANCE  
PROFESSIONALS  
AND SCHOLARS**

In what ways could Australia's insurance industry better protect businesses from disruptive and violent protests?

**FOR LEGAL  
PROFESSIONALS  
AND LAW  
SCHOLARS**

To what extent could legislative changes mitigate Sovereign Citizen behaviour?

To what extent would legal changes that protect against extremist movements be proportionate action and weighted against the right to protest?



**FOR OTHER  
PROFESSIONALS  
AND STUDENTS**

What role does media play in framing society's understanding of fringe movements in Australia?

Which protest ideologies help or hinder democratic rights to protest in Australia and how do they do this?

What role does media play in framing society's understanding of fringe movements in Australia?

Which protest ideologies help or hinder democratic rights to protest in Australia and how do they do this?

What actions can governments take to intervene upon the most violent and/or disruptive actions of Sovereign Citizens when they don't obey laws anyway, yet still protect the right to protest?

What ethical considerations of journalists and media outlets are critical when deciding whether to cover particular violent and disruptive forms of protest?

Is the societal right to protest being hi-jacked by those with extremist ideology?

To what extent does the use of labels, even a stigmatised label, give support to ideologies?

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A METHODS

### GATHERING AND INTERPRETING DATA

Consistent with others who use media as a proxy for public discourse, [22], [23] we examine society's emerging and shifting knowledge of sovereign citizens. By interpreting media articles, we reveal meaningful patterns of an emerging societal problem and its links to civil unrest, with a view to complementing and extending our existing study on disruptive protest in Australia and informing future research directed at government policy around extremist ideologies.

We assembled a database of 584 media articles on Sovereign Citizens in Australia from 1 December 2019 until 28 February 2023 by searching the media database Factiva for their full name as well as the abbreviation 'SovCit'. These data complement data gathered for our two previous studies on disruptive and violent protests [24], [25]. Documents were imported and analysed within NVivo to identify which media outlets reported on their activities as well as the content contained in those articles. NVivo was used to facilitate coding, and thus grouping, qualitative data to themes (see Appendix B). Data were organised so that we could also review temporal patterns of reporting during the study period. We were interested in how and when the media reported on what Sovereign Citizens did and said, as well as how society viewed the actions of those identifying as having aligned ideologies.

### DATA QUALITY, INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

We make the following observations on data quality. Having 584 articles refer to Sovereign Citizens does not mean they all give equally valued insights. Often, a single mention of Sovereign Citizens was sufficient for an article to be included in our sample even if their inclusion in that article was cursory (e.g., M116 & M119). In those instances, articles were of less value. The amount of data we gathered from individual articles is related to the attention given to sovereign citizens. It was common to have one incident that involved a Sovereign Citizen repeated in multiple media articles: each mention was not necessarily a separate incident. It was common for the same quote to be found in multiple media articles from different sources. For example, articles M090, M092, M093, M094, M096, M097, M108, M109, M110, M113, M124, M125, M128, M136 described Sovereign Citizens in relation to their adherence to a 5G conspiracy theory during COVID-19 using the same quote in each article: one example was sufficient for interpretation purposes. When we found verbatim copied content from one media source to another article we did not include the second article. Sovereign Citizens were, on occasion, described as having ideologies in common with other movements, e.g., with QAnon (M131), but once the article departed from discussion of Sovereign Citizens and moved onto the beliefs of others, that discussion was not included in our data.

# APPENDICES

## IDENTIFYING PEAKS IN MEDIA ATTENTION

Our review of temporal patterns in media reporting spanned 1 December 2019 – 28 February 2023 to overlap with our earlier studies [26],[27]. We found no articles referring to Sovereign Citizens until April 2020. This timing coincides with the beginning of Australian Government public health orders to protect public health and limit activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (declared on March 11, 2020 World Health Organisation [28]) and a long weekend when people would usually have travelled but for jurisdiction-specific restrictions. On 14 April 2020, Miragenews.com (M001) and on 15 April 2020, The Daily Telegraph (M002) report on a single breach of public health orders that initiates reporting on Sovereign Citizens during the study period. Table A1 categorises the data in peaks and troughs in media attention to sovereign citizens, while Figure 1 in the body of this case study, plots the frequency of articles across the study period.

**Table A1 Temporal pattern of media interest in Sovereign Citizens based on number of articles referring to them**

			First Peak			Second peak		Third peak
Phase		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Phase (ref Figure 1)	Dec 2019- Mar 2020	Apr 2020- Jun 2020	Jul 2020 - Sep 2020	Oct 2020 - Jun 2021	Jul 2021 – Dec 2021	Jan 2022 - Feb 2022	Mar 2022- Nov 2022	Dec 2022 – Feb 2023
Media interest	Nil	Low	High	Low	Mod (low Oct)	High	Low (moderate Mar and Aug)	High
		1-9 articles/month	>21 articles/month	1-9 articles/month	10-20 articles/month	>21 articles/month	1-9 articles/month	>21 articles/month

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX B CODING SCHEME FOR ANALYSIS

### GATHERING AND INTERPRETING DATA

A coding scheme of seven codes was incrementally created within NVivo (qualitative research software) to assist with interpretation and analysis of media articles. They are listed in Table B1 with the number of sub-codes identified for each, giving an indication of the variety of content within each code as well as the relative few sub-codes under some codes. The 'temporal pattern' code was applied to text in media articles that reported on trends over time (e.g., X becoming more frequent or intense).

**Table B1 Coding scheme developed for analysis of media articles**

<b>Coding scheme</b>	<b>Number of sub-codes</b>	<b>Number of sub-codes dominating each code</b>
Actions by Sovereign Citizens	64	12
Beliefs and motivations of Sovereign Citizens	9	3
Demands made by Sovereign Citizens	9	2
Identity of Sovereign Citizens	16	3
Societal view of Sovereign Citizens	74	4
Media sources reporting on Sovereign Citizens	80	20
Temporal pattern of Sovereign Citizen activities as reported in media	19	2

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## APPENDIX C MEDIA OUTLETS REPORTING ON SOVEREIGN CITIZENS

Table C1 Number of articles reporting on Sovereign Citizens by media outlet (Dec 2019-Feb 2023)

Media Source	No.	Media Source	No.
The Canberra Times	73	au.news.yahoo	1
Daily Mail/Mail Online	56	Blacktown Advocate	1
news.com.au	51	Blue Mountains Gazette	1
The Australian	47	Byron Shire News	1
Crikey	37	Campaspe News	1
The Daily Telegraph	25	Central Western Daily	1
The Age	24	Coffs Coast Advocate	1
Sydney Morning Herald	20	Daily Liberal	1
The Advertiser	20	Deniliquin Pastoral Times	1
AAP	19	Eastern Riverina Chronicle	1
The Guardian	18	Fox Sports	1
ABC News	17	Gatton Star	1
The Courier Mail	13	In QLD	1
Herald Sun	12	Kalgoorlie Miner	1
The Mandarin	12	Macarthur Chronicle Campbelltown	1
NT News	11	Maitland Mercury	1
WA today	11	Moorabbin Kingston Leader	1
Brisbane times	8	Newcastle Herald	1
Financial Review	7	news24	1
Gold Coast Bulletin	6	On Line Opinion	1
Canberra Star	5	Penrith Press	1
Illawarra Mercury	5	PUBT	1
The Border Mail	5	QLD Country Life	1
The Conversation	5	Raw story	1
Townsville Bulletin	5	Riotact	1
Cairns Post	4	Riverina Herald	1
The Chronicle	4	SBS The Feed	1
Frankston Standard Leader	3	Shepparton News	1
Sunshine Coast Daily	3	Miragenews.com	1
The West Australian	3	The Australian Financial Review	1
Ballarat Courier	2	The Daily Mercury	1
Bendigo Advertiser	2	The Epoch Times	1
Geelong Advertiser	2	The Gympie Times	1
Mamamia	2	The Independent	1
Nine.com.au	2	The Newcastle Herald	1
SBS News	2	The Telegraph	1
Smart Company	2	The Times	1
The Mercury	2	The Weekend Australian Magazine	1
Wagga Daily Advertiser	2	Wagga News	1
Albert & Logan News	1	World Socialist Website	1

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