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Attitudes to a post-Covid Australia

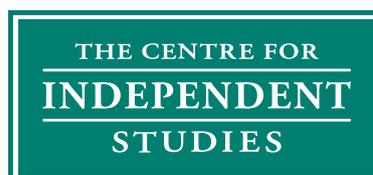
Robert Carling and Simon Cowan



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Attitudes to a post-Covid Australia

Robert Carling and Simon Cowan



Analysis Paper 25

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Introduction

Australia's experience of the coronavirus pandemic shifted markedly in June in response to the emergence of the delta variant. After Melbourne exited lockdown following its second wave in October last year, Australia successfully managed a series of small scale outbreaks.

Following a strategy of elimination some have dubbed 'Covid Zero', for the past 12 months most of the country enjoyed a lifestyle largely free of restrictions. One consequence of this relative success has been a lackadaisical vaccine roll-out that saw Australian vaccination numbers far below our peers like Canada.

However, from May this year, Melbourne has locked down several times — though the more severe restrictions introduced in mid-August were not in place at the time this survey was undertaken. Greater Sydney entered lockdown in late June and is unlikely

to emerge for months. This lockdown expanded to five regional centres and then the rest of the state.

Queensland had multiple partial lockdowns, and Western Australia, South Australia and even the Northern Territory have all also had lockdowns in this time. The ACT has also entered lockdown, but this occurred after fieldwork for this report was complete.

This report explores the extent to which attitudes to Covid, lockdowns and vaccination have changed, and what sort of post-Covid future Australians expect.

The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) commissioned YouGov to poll 1,029 Australians over the age of 18 to research those attitudes. The polling was conducted online from 2 August to 5 August 2021. The results were weighted and are representative of the Australian public.

Attitudes to Covid restrictions

One of the most pressing issues canvassed in the survey is when Covid restrictions should be lifted. These include lockdowns of varying severity; compulsory QR check-ins; venue capacity restrictions; testing and tracing strategies; state border restrictions; and international border closures and quarantine requirements. Restrictions in all states have come, gone, and come back again in a now familiar cycle; but the intent of the survey question was to gauge the public's views on when they should be lifted for good. It is only then that economic and social life can return to anything like normal.

Throughout the experience of the pandemic to date, it has often seemed that the Australian public has a high tolerance for restrictions if it means eliminating Covid-19. State border entry restrictions have generally been popular in the states imposing them. The 'go hard/go early' mantra appears to be widely accepted as the recipe for lockdowns, especially since the arrival of the delta variant. The notion of Covid elimination (Covid Zero) has been put ahead of everything else including other health care and the economy.

However, the responses to the survey paint a more nuanced picture. 71% chose in roughly equal numbers to answer either "only when a vaccine threshold has been met" or "as soon as practicable" — the latter being a choice that draws out those most eager to see the end of restrictions, who comprised a substantial 37% of all respondents.

Q1. When should these restrictions be lifted?

As soon as practicable	37%
Only when a vaccine threshold has been met	34%
Not until Covid has been completely eliminated from Australia	13%
Some restrictions should continue even when the pandemic is over	13%
Don't know	3%

These two options, chosen by a total of 71%, were most strongly favoured by NSW residents (77%), by higher income households (77%), by the most highly educated (77%), and by Coalition voters (78%). There are no surprises there, but it is surprising that when dissected by age group the results showed the elderly (65+) to be most in favour (76%) and the youngest (18–24) least in favour (61%) but still in a majority.

Turning to the other options, only 13% chose "not until Covid has been completely eliminated from Australia" and an equal proportion went for the most demanding option, "some restrictions should continue even when the pandemic is over". The latter option was offered only because a recent UK survey had found more than 20% in favour of permanent restrictions. It is reassuring that the Australian result came in well below 20%, but still surprising that even

13% would favour permanent restrictions of the kind we have had, on and off, for the past 18 months.

These two options chosen by 26% in total found most favour among the youngest (35%); in WA (40%) and SA (37%); by lower income households (31%); those without tertiary qualifications (29%); and Labor and

Greens voters (32%). The only surprise there is the result for the youngest. However, in all cases they were decisively outnumbered by the less demanding options. Surprisingly, the least support for these options among the states was in QLD (20%), where the state government usually puts Covid control ahead of all else.

Attitudes to vaccination targets

Following on from the question about a vaccination threshold to trigger the lifting of restrictions, all survey participants were asked if this were the trigger, what the target should be. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as it is widely publicised government policy, the option “80% or more of the adult population” was the most favoured, though at 43% still short of a majority.

The less demanding option — “once a majority of those most at risk have been vaccinated” — appealed to 18%. Taking these two together, a clear majority of 61% supported either the announced government policy or something less demanding, with the stand-out majorities being in NSW (69%) and among the tertiary educated and Coalition voters (each 67%).

Q3. What should the vaccination target for lifting restrictions be?	
Once the majority of those most at risk have been vaccinated	18%
When 80% or more of the adult population has been vaccinated	43%
When everyone – adults and children – has been vaccinated	10%
When all adults have been offered access to two doses of a vaccine, regardless of whether they have chosen to get vaccinated	22%
Don't know	7%

Very few (10%) wanted the extreme option that everyone — adults and children — be vaccinated before lifting restrictions.

However an alternative strategy based on availability rather than take up was supported by only 22%. This option involved reducing restrictions once the supply of vaccines was sufficient that all adults have been offered access to two doses, regardless of whether they actually chose to be vaccinated or whether they were the vaccines people would have preferred to take. There was not much variation in this response according to characteristics such as age and state.

Taking together the responses to this question about the vaccination trigger and the finding above that 71% favour either a vaccine threshold or “as soon as practicable” for lifting restrictions suggests that if governments fail to deliver on the national cabinet’s four-stage transition to normality, they will incur the wrath of a majority of the public everywhere, but especially in NSW. We are currently in the first phase and the triggers for moving to phases 2 and 3 — which would bring substantial relaxation of restrictions — are 70% and 80% respectively of the population above age 15. These thresholds are likely to be reached by late October and mid-November.

Attitudes to Covid eradication

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a great deal of confusion over whether Australia has been trying to ‘flatten the curve’, suppress the coronavirus or eliminate it. What started as flattening the curve has morphed into suppression and then elimination. While governments have sometimes hesitated to call it ‘elimination’, that is what their actions have pointed to.

To explore further attitudes to permanent eradication of Covid-19 in Australia, all participants were asked to rate the likelihood of eradication being achieved. The responses revealed a clear majority of 62% opting for various shades of likelihood that the virus could not be eradicated.

There were no outstanding variations from that majority in the results classified by state, income, education, or voter identification, but somewhat surprisingly the size of the majority was directly related to age — that is, the oldest were the most resigned to Covid staying in the community (78%) — with the youngest group (18-24 or generation Z) in fact evenly balanced between “likely” and “unlikely”. Perhaps this is a measure of the wisdom of age against the hopefulness of youth!

While the realism of elimination is now subject to reassessment following the arrival of the faster spreading delta variant, already some state premiers are indicating a desire to stick with Covid Zero despite delta, and regardless of vaccination levels.

Q4. How likely or unlikely do you believe it is that COVID-19 can be permanently eradicated in Australia?

Almost certain	4%
Very likely	6%
Fairly likely	13%
Don't know	15%
Fairly unlikely	28%
Very unlikely	20%
Almost certainly not	14%
Subtotal: Likely	23%
Subtotal: Unlikely	62%

Attitudes to permanent post-pandemic restrictions

Finally, the small group in favour of permanent restrictions was asked what kind of restrictions should remain. Respondents could choose as few or as many as they liked from a list of 10, but only three drew majority support — the use of QR codes to record attendance at selected places; masks on public transport and in most enclosed places; and 14 days quarantine on overseas arrivals. However, this group is so small that the results are only of theoretical interest. For example, the most favoured option (permanent use of QR codes) was the choice of only 117 respondents out of the total of 1,029. However, it is quite remarkable that even 117 would want to see such a restriction continue indefinitely.

Q2. What restrictions should be kept in place after the pandemic is over?

Masks on public transport and most enclosed places	66%
Closure of nightclubs, clubs, casinos and other industries	9%
Limits on attendees at major events	40%
Capacity limits in retail stores	22%
Restrictions on how many people can be in your home	14%
Use of QR codes to record attendance at selected places	74%
Night-time curfews	8%
State border entry restrictions	31%
14 days quarantine on overseas arrivals	70%
None of above	3%

Public health orders – enforcement and penalties

One of the more concerning developments during the pandemic has been the extent to which individual citizens have been encouraged by politicians to report their neighbours for breaching the public health orders.

It is likely that this has taken a significant toll on social cohesion, and definitely undercuts any messaging that ‘we are all in this together’.

However, there is no doubt this call has been enthusiastically embraced by the public. Social media

in particular is full of people posting photos of people out in public ‘not taking the pandemic seriously’, or allegedly breaching the health orders.

There are a number of practical problems with this social media blitz: first, there is no evidence that outdoor transmission is a significant factor for Covid spread. Second, many of those people in the photos are in fact not in breach of the health orders. Third, as is so often typical in these circumstances, there is no recognition of the cognitive dissonance that the photo

taker is undertaking the same activities as those in the picture.

These social media posts contribute to the narrative being firmly pushed by politicians that extended lockdowns are the result of people not following the health orders. As NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said

“People who are thinking that the rules are somehow not for them ... you may be the people who spread this and keep us in lockdown for a lot longer than the rest of the community would like.”¹

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian recently made similar comments

“It’s pretty obvious to us, and pretty obvious from the feedback we get from police, that people use the health orders as an excuse to do the wrong thing ... The vast majority of people are doing the right thing. But when a handful don’t, it is a setback for all of us.”²

Victorian Premier Dan Andrews, after making a number of jabs about not wanting to be ‘like Sydney’ also blamed rule breakers

“All I would say to those people breaking the rules, by doing that you are just adding to the number of cases and you will add to the number of weeks locked down.”³

Individuals have been publicly shamed over public exposure of ‘wrong-doing’. Some have been charged with breaching of the health orders (such as a Covid-positive man who travelled to Northern NSW in early August).⁴ However others have not been, such as the limo driver who was at the centre of the initial Bondi outbreak.⁵

For a variety of reasons, the media has been reluctant to push government to substantiate the claim that it is not flaws in the ‘lockdown first’ approach but wrongdoing that is causing the problem. Many in the media have been calling for harsher measures, even absent evidence those measures have any health benefits.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the public have largely accepted the ‘wrongdoer’ narrative with little scepticism, regardless of whether there is any evidence to support it. Indeed, those who think the penalties are too low and enforcement too lax outnumber those who think the reverse by about 3 to 1.

Q5 Do you think penalties for those who breached public health orders are?	
Too low	39%
Too high	14%
About right	47%

Q6 Do you think enforcement against those who breached public health orders has been?	
Too lax	46%
Too strict	14%
About right	39%

Even many of those who responded that the lockdowns should end as soon as possible in question 1, also believe that the penalties are too low and enforcement too lax.

Q5 Do you think penalties for those who breached public health orders are?	Q1 Those who think lockdowns should end as soon as practicable
Too low	23%
Too high	28%
About right	49%

In fact, more of that group think enforcement is too lax than too strict.

Q6 Do you think enforcement against those who breached public health orders has been?	Q1 Those who think lockdowns should end as soon as practicable
Too lax	32%
Too strict	30%
About right	38%

Not surprisingly, among all other responders to Question 1, there was almost no support for the view that enforcement was too strict or penalties too high, with considerably less than 10% of respondents agreeing to either of those positions.

There are some relatively minor variations in response by state. West Australians were particularly unlikely to respond that penalties were too high, while a statistically significant number of Victorians thought they were (8% for West Australia vs 20% for Victoria).

There is more disagreement when broken down by income. There is a statistically significant difference between those on incomes less than \$50,000 and those on more than \$150,000, with those on lower incomes far more likely to respond the penalties are too low (43% to 28%) but neither group believes the penalties are too high. Nor is there a significant difference in terms of attitudes to enforcement.

Trust in Government

Not surprisingly, given the extent to which governments have put unprecedented restrictions on civil liberties, the pandemic has had a significant impact on trust in government and the value of civil liberties as a protection against government action.

The consensus position early in the pandemic was that Australia had responded incredibly well. A Lowy Institute poll from May 2020 found that 93% of Australians thought governments had handled Covid very well or fairly well. In the 2021 version this had risen to 95%, with 65% saying Australia had handled Covid very well.

Overwhelmingly, people were also positive about the performance of government.

However, as Sydney's lockdown extends into months and other jurisdictions clearly approach their own reckoning with delta Covid, things aren't looking nearly as good. In fact, just one in four report trust in government has increased, while 46% report trust falling.

Q9a Which of these is closest to your view?

I have greater trust in governments to make decisions in the best interests of Australians as a result of the pandemic	28%
My trust in government has gone down as a result of how they have handled the pandemic	46%

For Labor and Greens voters in particular, trust has fallen precipitously (20% trust up vs 57% trust down for Labor votes and 20% vs 64% for Greens voters). Some interesting patterns emerge on a state basis

Q9a Which of these is closest to your view? (LABOR)	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA
I have greater trust in governments to make decisions in the best interests of Australians as a result of the pandemic	20%	27%	21%	6%	15%
My trust in government has gone down as a result of how they have handled the pandemic	66%	56%	49%	53%	47%

The largest fall in trust, and the smallest increase in trust, are both in states with Liberal premiers, but it's not clear how this connects to Covid policy, given that

South Australia has been at least as committed to Covid Zero as Queensland and Victoria.

Certainly, the most likely culprit is the federal government, and this reflects both their botched vaccine rollout and some political tribalism.

Coalition voters on the other hand have seen trust in government increase (45% trust up vs 30% trust down), with the biggest variance being an almost 50% loss in trust in government with Coalition voters in Victoria. Notably, despite the recent outbreak in NSW, Coalition voters in NSW have lost the least trust in government.

This suggests that your perception of handling the pandemic, and its impact on your trust in government is inextricably linked to your political identity. It may have been the case early in the pandemic that there was a sense that we all trusted government to do the right thing, but over time we have returned to our political camps.

If we cross-reference these two areas some significant differences emerge. Specifically, we can observe a marked effect that the imposition of penalties, and enforcement of those penalties, has had on people's trust in government.

Both those who believe the penalties are too low / enforcement too lax, and those who believe the penalties are too strict / enforcement too strict, have lost trust in government at a statistically significantly higher level than those who believe the penalties and enforcement are broadly correct.

Yet, notwithstanding the claims that the lockdowns are extended because of rule breakers, many more responders who felt the penalties were too tough had lost faith in government than those who thought it was too little.

Q9a Which of these is closer to your view?	Q6 Do you think enforcement against those who breached public health orders has been?		
	Too lax	Too strict	About right
I have greater trust in governments to make decisions in the best interests of Australians as a result of the pandemic	27%	16%	34%
My trust in government has gone down as a result of how they have handled the pandemic	45%	68%	38%

While it is good that people have not responded positively to the quasi-authoritarian impulses of bureaucrats and politicians, what is concerning is both how quickly our civil liberties were eroded and how little protest has been raised about it.

Questioning the benefits of lockdowns has been a hazardous undertaking in Australian public debate, with a number of prominent public figures and some politicians subject to sustained criticism and abuse for arguing (for example) that there is a trade-off between health and economic outcomes, or that we will have to learn to live with Covid eventually.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that more people support restrictions on civil liberties than oppose them.

Q9b Which of these is closest to your view?	
I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic	43%
The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are	30%

There are some surprising contradictions when this is broken down by political affiliation, with Coalition voters both more likely to be more supportive of government restrictions AND more appreciative of civil liberties, while Greens voters are the reverse.

Q9b Which of these is closest to your view?	Coalition	Labor	Greens
I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic	50%	47%	44%
The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are	33%	27%	23%

The closeness of this overall result masks some huge differences at the state level, especially between NSW and Victoria. In NSW, Labor and Green voters are slightly more likely to support civil liberties — and less likely to support authoritarian government — than at the national level. Coalition voters are slightly the opposite.

Q9b Which of these is closest to your view? (NSW)	Coalition	Labor	Greens
I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic	53%	42%	42%
The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are	29%	33%	30%

However in Victoria the support for authoritarian government measures is massive for Labor and the Greens. Support for restrictions on liberty in Victoria among Labor voters is 25 percentage points higher and appreciation for civil liberties is almost half that at the national level.

Q9b Which of these is closest to your view? (VIC)	Coalition	Labor	Greens
I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic	35%	67%	56%
The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are	50%	19%	21%

It is worth noting that the support of Labor voters for government authoritarianism in Victoria is far above anywhere else in the country (Queensland is 38%, South Australia 37% and even Western Australia is just 45%) and shows just why the #istandwithDan hashtag has such strong support.

Another interesting result is how those on different incomes view the lockdowns.

While it's reasonable to assume that those on lower incomes are more likely to work in industries subject to shutdown as a result of the pandemic (retail, for example) and face-to-face essential services (supermarkets and food service), this demographic is more supportive of government restrictions than their counterparts on higher incomes.

Despite the commonly asserted claim that those most in favour of lockdowns are those with white-collar jobs that can be done from home, it seems this group is far less supportive of restrictions and more appreciative of civil liberties than their blue collar counterparts.

Q9b Which of these is closest to your view? (VIC)	<\$50k	\$50k – \$99k	\$100k to \$149k	\$150k+
I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic	48%	45%	40%	41%
The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are	28%	29%	33%	32%

The roles of government and business

The policy response to the pandemic has seen both federal and state governments take a greatly increased role in the economy through regulation, financial support for households and business, fiscal stimulus and unprecedented central bank interventions to 'print' money through quantitative easing, lend cheaply to banks and keep interest rates extremely low. The private sector has either adapted where possible to the stay-at-home economy — in some cases very successfully — or been battered by restrictions because they have few ways to adapt (universities, hospitality, events and entertainment, the arts, tourism, aviation).

One view of these changes is that they are essentially temporary, while acknowledging that some changes in work, travel and shopping practices will remain after the pandemic is over. There is another view that the pandemic has demonstrated that government should take a permanently larger role in providing financial support to people and directing the economy. For example, the JobKeeper program led some to say there should be a permanent universal basic income scheme.

There is also a view that government should intervene to ensure there is domestic production of certain critical products.

The survey canvassed these issues firstly by asking whether "Covid had shown governments should have greater control over the economy" or that "free markets have responded well to meeting customers' needs in challenging circumstances", or neither. This was one of the questions with the largest "neither", "don't know" or "none of the above" responses, at 33% of the total.

Q9d. Which of these is closer to your view?	
Free markets have responded well to meeting customers' needs in challenging circumstances	42%
COVID shows governments should have greater control over the economy	25%
Neither	33%

However, of those choosing one of the two options, only 25% wanted greater government control over the economy while 42% thought free markets had done well. The size of the gap between these two increased from younger to older age groups, so that younger people were less inclined to think free markets had performed well, but they still outnumbered those

wanting a bigger role for government. Among states, the preference for free markets was strongest in WA; and by income it was of course strongest at the highest incomes. The strongest vote for government having a greater role in the economy was among the university educated, but still less than those with faith in free markets.

Participants were also asked whether the shift to online interactions (in education, working from home, and shopping) should become permanent after the pandemic or “we should return as close as possible to how life was before”. This revealed a clear majority of 59% in favour of going back to how things were as much as possible, and a sizeable minority of 28% for permanent change. Not surprisingly, the preference

for the old ways was weakest at younger ages and the university educated, but very strong among those above 50.

Q9c. Which of these is closer to your view?	
After the pandemic is over we should continue to encourage more interactions to move online (e.g. schooling and university, working from home, online shopping)	28%
After the pandemic is over we should return as close as possible to how life was before the pandemic	59%
Neither	13%

Attitudes to vaccine passports

With the uncertainty over the feasibility of the elimination strategy in light of the delta strain, as well as the role vaccines will play in the next phase of the pandemic, focus of public debate has begun to shift to the issue of differential treatment for those who are vaccinated and those who are not.

At a base level, there is considerable support for simply making vaccination mandatory.

Q7.1 Except for those with medical conditions that prevent them from taking the vaccine, the federal and state governments should pass laws to make vaccination mandatory	
Strongly agree	18%
Agree	31%
Disagree	20%
Strongly disagree	18%
<i>Subtotal Agree</i>	49%
<i>Subtotal Disagree</i>	38%

Although government policies like ‘no jab, no play’ have been in place for some segments of society, making it illegal not to get vaccinated is a serious step. Perhaps it is no more serious than many of the other impositions on civil liberties that have been introduced to cheering support during the pandemic.

Yet it is unremarkable for patients — especially elderly patients facing invasive medical procedures — to refuse treatment, even if that refusal results in their death. Some people have religious objections to certain treatments.

It is one thing to prohibit people from taking certain drugs or undertaking certain procedures or

treatments; it is another to mandate someone take a medical treatment against their will.

If there is an argument in favour of mandatory vaccination, then, it is the creation of a herd immunity: a protection not merely for the recipient but an indirect protection for everyone from transmission.

Unfortunately, a number of experts have argued that vaccines will not generate this herd immunity protection.⁶ Vaccines may slow the transmission of the virus — though the extent of this is currently unclear — but they definitely do not prevent transmission entirely. Their primary benefit is to make Covid less severe for those who contract it.

This significantly weakens the case for mandatory vaccination for adults. If the choice not to get vaccinated is, in effect, largely a personal decision, then government really has no business making vaccination compulsory. Of course, governments can, and should, encourage people to be vaccinated.

Support is far higher for allowing state governments to refuse entry to unvaccinated people.

Q7.2 State governments should have the right to refuse to allow unvaccinated people to enter the state	
Strongly agree	25%
Agree	36%
Disagree	14%
Strongly disagree	13%
<i>Subtotal Agree</i>	60%
<i>Subtotal Disagree</i>	27%

Of course, complete border closures have become almost commonplace during the pandemic, and this is likely reflected in this response.

The liberal argument is stronger for allowing businesses to treat those who choose to vaccinate differently than those who choose not to vaccinate. People should have the right to choose to associate only with those they choose to associate with. Voluntary association is a liberal principle that has fallen into disuse in recent years, but it remains important.

A significant majority of people thought businesses should be able to require customers to disclose their Covid vaccination status and refuse service or entry to the unvaccinated.

The margin in favour was largest for the oldest age group; in WA among the states; at lowest incomes; and among Coalition voters. This suggests a substantial level of support for so-called vaccination passports as a way of managing the spread of the Covid infection by those who choose to remain unvaccinated.

Of course, in the period transitioning between lockdown / Covid Zero as the primary pandemic management tool, and managing the casualties

from Covid through vaccination, a vaccine passport may be a sensible measure. It might shortcut possible enduring restrictions, as well as provide encouragement for the vaccine hesitant to get vaccinated.

However, if vaccinated people can still transmit the virus (especially at levels similar to the unvaccinated), then the case for vaccine passports seems weaker because relatively little protection is afforded to people by associating only with other vaccinated people.

Q7.3 Businesses should be able to require people to disclose whether they have been vaccinated and refuse them service or entry to venues if they have not

Strongly agree	23%
Agree	31%
Disagree	16%
Strongly disagree	14%
<i>Subtotal Agree</i>	55%
<i>Subtotal Disagree</i>	30%

Covid vs the flu

Since the pandemic began, comparisons have been made between Covid and influenza, particularly on social media. Those who were opposed to lockdowns and major restrictions on freedom would disparagingly suggest that Covid was just a glorified flu virus. Others would specifically cite reproduction rates to suggest that Covid was a far bigger problem than the flu.

Such tropes aren't particularly helpful. Those downplaying the seriousness of Covid must contend with the fact that more than 4.3 million people have now died despite global efforts at pandemic mitigation. Moreover, although this is perhaps less well understood, influenza itself is a dangerous illness.

One obvious comparison is the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, which infected an estimated 500 million people, killing 50 million or more, around the world.⁷ However, even the 'regular' flu can be deadly. ABS data on doctor certified deaths indicates that as many as 1,200 people died from the flu in 2017 and as many as 1,000 in 2019.⁸

Year	Influenza and pneumonia	Pneumonia	Excess
2015	2,820	2,547	273
2016	3,065	2,632	433
2017	4,054	2,847	1,207
2018	2,927	2,800	127
2019	3,803	2,796	1,007

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Provisional Mortality Statistics⁹
 Globally the World Health Organisation estimates that there are 290,000 to 650,000 deaths worldwide from influenza each year.¹⁰

Covid is certainly more serious than the flu, but there does seem to be some incongruity in the relative seriousness of the public health response. Any cases of Covid in the community are causes of national concern, whereas we have long since learned to live with the flu.

While there is an expectation (or perhaps a hope) among some commentators that eventually Covid will come to be treated more like the flu, this is far from certain. The reverse is also a distinct possibility: in the future we may treat the flu more like Covid.

Our poll indicates that a significant proportion of people may prefer this. When asked if the government should implement similar restrictions to those in the Covid pandemic, 37% agreed while just 40% disagreed.

Q7.4 More than 800 people died from the flu in both 2017 and 2019. For future flu seasons, the government should implement similar restrictions to those in the Covid pandemic

Strongly Agree	10%
Agree	27%
No opinion	23%
Disagree	22%
Strongly Disagree	18%
Subtotal: Agree	37%
Subtotal: Disagree	40%

Women were slightly more likely to agree than men, while Gen X (35% total agree, 47% total disagree) and Gen Z (32% total agree and 41% total disagree) had the largest difference between agree and disagree. Interestingly Millennials were the only age demographic group that agreed (39% total agree to 34% total disagree).

When those who were in favour of restrictions were asked what measures they supported, compulsory masks, QR codes and mandatory vaccination all received more than 50% support, while quarantine restrictions were supported by just under half of all respondents.

Q8 What restrictions would be appropriate for future flu outbreaks?

Masks on public transport and most enclosed places	63%
Use of QR codes to record attendance at selected places	51%
Mandatory vaccination	51%
14 days quarantine on overseas arrivals	48%

While it's unlikely governments would implement compulsory quarantine for the flu, given the devastating impact that would have on the tourism industry, it seems far more likely that masks will be compulsory or strongly encouraged on public transport for future flu seasons.

How Australians view themselves

When the various Australian colonies were federated, the power of the central government was deliberately constrained. The intention was for the states to retain much of their power and primacy, rather than the Commonwealth government to be the centre of focus and attention.

In practice, almost as soon as the ink was dry on the proclamation, power began to flow steadily from the states to the federal government.

Several developments accelerated this trend. First, the transfer of income tax powers to the Commonwealth government has led to a general fiscal imbalance between the states and the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is now responsible for providing significant funding for what were traditionally state government responsibilities in health and education.

In part because of community expectations, and in part encouraged by federal politicians, the

Commonwealth is now responsible for policy outcomes in these areas as well.

Second, for decades the High Court consistently interpreted the Constitution in a way that expanded Commonwealth power at the expense of the states. In particular, the broad interpretation of the foreign affairs power and the massive expansion of international diplomacy, gave the Commonwealth carte blanche to legislate in many areas that would otherwise have been left to the states.

Finally, the framers of the Constitution likely underestimated the extent to which power would naturally centralise in the Commonwealth government, as it has done in many federated systems (including the United States and Canada).

In Australia, any semblance that federalism meant competition between the states for best outcomes has been replaced by the idea of co-operative federalism: in practice, this means that the Commonwealth government has an obligation to provide additional resources to help laggard states 'catch-up'.

Some, like former Prime Minister Bob Hawke, have even called for the states to be abolished.¹¹

This change in relative importance over time has been accompanied by a shift in identity from federation to now. Prior to the pandemic, most people would have identified as Australian first and foremost. State identities were largely confined to the sporting field. For many, little thought would have been given to crossing state borders, or seeking medical care in a different city.

Yet, the pandemic has made states important again. State borders have been closed, with police preventing unapproved persons from entering. The Queensland Premier famously said "People living in New South Wales, they have NSW hospitals. In Queensland, we have Queensland hospitals for our people."¹²

In particular, Western Australia has been aggressive in asserting its state interests regardless of the impact on other states.

Polling results in some respects reflect these different attitudes.

Q10 I identify first and foremost as	NSW	VIC	SA	QLD	WA
Australian first	94%	80%	81%	78%	46%
Your state first	6%	20%	19%	22%	54%

There are several important points in these results. The most obvious difference is between Western Australia and the rest of the country. These attitudes at least are not new — after all, Western Australia

attempted to secede from the rest of Australia in 1933. Indeed, at the Western Australian referendum on secession in 1933, 66% of votes were cast in favour of secession.

Clearly WA Premier McGowan's strong 'WA first stance' is very popular: in addition to the results above, his Labor party won 53 of a potential 59 seats at the 2021 state election.¹³

The second obvious point is that people from NSW overwhelmingly view themselves as Australians. In fact, the difference between the 'Australian first' response in NSW and all other states is statistically significant. Maybe the truth is — as some on social media have suggested — that people from NSW mistakenly believe that NSW is Australia.

Maybe this increased sense of nationhood is a reflection of (or necessary precondition for) the outsized financial contribution that NSW makes to the operation of the federation; for example, the GST where NSW receives less than \$1 for every \$1 of GST paid in the state.

It's also possible that the difference is a result of the way that pandemic management has differed between states. States like Queensland and South Australia have emphasised the need to protect their citizens from the impact of Covid. They have regularly shut interstate borders, particularly to NSW citizens. NSW, by contrast, has been more focused (at least until recently) on managing the circulation of the virus without shutting borders.

It's possible that this explains the big gap between NSW and Victoria. Smaller states may naturally focus more on their particular identity, to avoid being lost in the far bigger whole. It makes less sense that Victoria would think the same, particularly given Melbourne's reputation as an international city.

When broken down by gender, the Victorian result seems even more unusual. 86% of men identified as Australian first, while only 75% of women did, a difference that is weakly statistically significant. A stronger statistically significant difference in Victoria is by income, where those with a household income less than \$50,000 are far more likely to view themselves as Victorians first.

This strong difference in Victoria is large enough to drive an overall statistically significant difference, particularly between those earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and those earning less than \$50,000. Once Victoria is omitted from these results, the difference disappears completely, though it is not clear why this should be the case.

There is an interesting variation by age as well, with people between 25 and 50 most likely to say 'Australian' and those 18 to 24 in particular most likely to identify with their state, though again this seems to be driven strongly by Victoria.

A similar pattern begins to appear when breaking these answers down by who the respondent voted for at the last election. Respondents in Victoria who voted for the Liberal party were more likely to identify as Australians (87% to 73%), whereas in NSW the difference between Liberal and Labor was smaller (95% to 90%).

Overall, those who voted for Labor were far more likely to identify with their state than Coalition voters (72% to 88%), although it's not clear whether there

is an effect from having a preponderance of Labor governments at the state level, while the Coalition has mostly been in government at the federal level.

A final, interesting observation is that those educated at the high school level (including both those who completed high school and those who left early) were far more likely to identify with their state (76/77%) than university-educated Australians (86/87%). Full time workers were also more likely, at a statistically significant level, to respond Australian first.

Conclusions

There are reasons for both optimism and pessimism in these polling results. The poll suggests that Australians are unlikely to meekly accept ongoing lockdowns once vaccination reaches critical levels. Only a small minority of people believe we should continue to chase Covid Zero to the exclusion of all else.

Further, to the extent that ongoing restrictions are desired, the favoured restrictions are those that are the least intrusive: check-ins, masks and quarantine.

Moreover, relatively few people are keen to stay in lockdown until everyone is vaccinated.

In part this reflects the belief, no doubt driven by recent experiences in Sydney and Melbourne in particular, that Covid is unlikely to be permanently eradicated in Australia. Ultimately, it seems the public accepts that we will need to live with Covid one way or another.

However, the responses are far less favourable when it turns to the issue of enforcement of penalties for breaching the health orders.

Almost 40% of respondents felt that the penalties were too low, and nearly 50% thought enforcement

had been too lax. Only 14% felt the penalties were too high or too strict. This authoritarian streak of dobbing in our neighbours has been exploited by politicians to bolster support for their, at times draconian, policies.

Australians may have this idealised view of ourselves as larrikins who don't follow the rules, but in reality we are a nation of 'Karens' tut-tutting over people not following 'the rules'.

We have also seen a marked fall in trust in government, bucking trends that indicated Australians felt government had handled the pandemic well. The public may be more supportive of restrictions on civil liberties than they were before the pandemic but perhaps the fall in trust will lead to a greater appreciation of the protections from government overreach over time.

Finally, when it goes to the contentious issue of vaccine passports, it seems that Australians are broadly in favour. Although the idea isn't as developed in Australia as it is elsewhere, the public strongly supports state governments being able to refuse to allow unvaccinated people to enter the state, and businesses to refuse service to the unvaccinated.

Full polling data

The full polling data is available at <https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2021/08/210801-cis-tables.xlsx>

Annexure: Polling questions

Q1. In the name of combatting the pandemic, Australia has targeted elimination of COVID, through a mixture of lockdowns, compulsory QR check-ins, venue capacity restrictions, testing and tracing strategies, state border restrictions; international border closures and quarantine requirements.

When should these restrictions be lifted?

- 1 As soon as practicable
- 2 Only when a vaccine threshold has been met
- 3 Not until COVID has been completely eliminated from Australia
- 4 Some restrictions should continue even when the pandemic is over
- 5 Don't know

If Q1 = 4, ask Q2

Q2. What restrictions should be kept in place after the pandemic is over? (Please tick all that apply)

Randomise codes 1 to 9

- 1 Masks on public transport and most enclosed places
- 2 Closure of nightclubs, clubs, casinos and other industries
- 3 Limits on attendees at major events
- 4 Capacity limits in retail stores
- 5 Restrictions on how many people can be in your home
- 6 Use of QR codes to record attendance at selected places
- 7 Night-time curfews
- 8 State border entry restrictions
- 9 14 days quarantine on overseas arrivals
- 10 None of above (exclusive, fixed)

Q3. What should the vaccination target for lifting restrictions be?

- 1 Once the majority of those most at risk have been vaccinated
- 2 When 80% or more of the adult population has been vaccinated
- 3 When everyone – adults and children – have been vaccinated
- 4 When all adults have been offered access to two doses of a vaccine, regardless of whether they have chosen to get vaccinated
- 5 Don't know

Q4. How likely or unlikely do you believe it is that COVID-19 can be permanently eradicated in Australia?

Flip codes 1 to 7

- 1 Almost certain
- 2 Very likely
- 3 Fairly likely
- 4 Don't know
- 5 Fairly unlikely
- 6 Very unlikely
- 7 Almost certainly not

Q5. During the pandemic police issued fines and warnings to those who have breached public health orders. Do you think penalties for those who breached public health orders are?

- 1 Too low
- 2 Too high
- 3 About right

Q6. Do you think enforcement against those who breached public health orders has been?

- 1 Too lax
- 2 Too strict
- 3 About right

Q7. Australia is also undertaking a mass vaccine roll-out, currently centred on the Oxford-Astra Zeneca and the Pfizer vaccines. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Randomise A to D

- A. Except for those with medical conditions that prevent them from taking the vaccine, the federal and state governments should pass laws to make vaccination mandatory
- B. State governments should have the right to refuse to allow unvaccinated people to enter the state
- C. Businesses should be able to require people to disclose whether they have been vaccinated and refuse them service or entry to venues if they have not
- D. More than 800 people died from the flu in both 2017 and 2019. For future flu seasons, the government should implement similar restrictions to those in the COVID pandemic

- 1 Strongly Agree
- 2 Agree
- 3 No opinion
- 4 Disagree
- 5 Strongly Disagree

If Q7D = 1 or 2, ask Q8

Q8. What restrictions would be appropriate for future flu outbreaks? (Tick all that apply)

Randomise codes 1 to 10

- 1 Masks on public transport and most enclosed places
- 2 Closure of nightclubs, clubs, casinos and other industries
- 3 Limits on attendees at major events
- 4 Capacity limits in retail stores
- 5 Restrictions on how many people can be in your home
- 6 Use of QR codes to record attendance at selected places
- 7 Night-time curfews
- 8 State border entry restrictions
- 9 14 days quarantine on overseas arrivals
- 10 Mandatory vaccination
- 11 None of above (exclusive, fixed)

Q9a. Which of these is closer to your view?

Randomise codes 1 and 2

- 1 I have greater trust in governments to make decisions in the best interests of Australians as a result of the pandemic
- 2 My trust in government has gone down as a result of how they have handled the pandemic
- 3 Neither (fixed)

Q9b. Which of these is closer to your view?

Randomise codes 1 and 2

- 1 I am more supportive of government restrictions on civil liberties because of the pandemic
- 2 The pandemic has shown me how important civil liberties really are
- 3 Neither (fixed)

Q9c. Which of these is closer to your view?

Randomise codes 1 and 2

- 1 After the pandemic is over we should continue to encourage more interactions to move online (e.g. schooling and university, working from home, online shopping)
- 2 After the pandemic is over we should return as close as possible to how life was before the pandemic
- 3 Neither (fixed)

Q9d. Which of these is closer to your view?

Randomise codes 1 and 2

- 1 Free markets have responded well to meeting customers' needs in challenging circumstances
- 2 COVID shows governments should have greater control over the economy
- 3 Neither (fixed)

Q10. Do you think of yourself, first and foremost as...

- 1 An Australian
- 2 A New South Welshman (if in NSW)
- 3 A Victorian (if in VIC)
- 4 A Queenslander (if in QLD)
- 5 A South Australian (if in SA)
- 6 A West Australian (if in WA)
- 7 A Tasmanian (if in TAS)
- 8 A Canberran (if in ACT)
- 9 A Territorian (if in NT)

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About the Authors



Robert Carling

Robert Carling is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. He undertakes research into a wide range of public finance issues and regularly comments in the media on taxation and other budget issues. Before joining the CIS, he was a senior official with the New South Wales Treasury and the Commonwealth Treasury. He has written a number of papers on the pandemic examining issues including the economic cost and recovery, lockdowns and the vaccine rollout.



Simon Cowan

Simon Cowan is Research Director at the Centre for Independent Studies. He is a leading media commentator on policy and politics, and has written extensively on the Covid pandemic. He has appeared before a number of parliamentary committees discussing the budget, health policy, federalism and Constitutional issues.

Related Works

Robert Carling, *The Economic Challenge of Covid-19*, CIS Policy Paper 32 (PP32), July 2020

Robert Carling, *90 Days to Freedom? Why Australia can learn from Canada's vaccination success*, CIS Policy Paper 43 (PP43), August 2021



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