PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

FOR THE GREATER GOOD DURING THE
FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Australian Leadership Index

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP FOR THE GREATER GOOD DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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1. Executive Summary

In the space of eight short weeks, the threat posed by COVID-19 and the sudden absence of partisanship from the political landscape ushered in a focus on leadership for the greater good, the likes of which we have not seen for years.

Leadership for the greater good occurs when leaders create value for society in a manner that is transparent, accountable and ethical. Once conspicuous by its absence, during the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership for the greater good seemed to be everywhere, and gratifyingly so in the institutions where it counts most.

As an extension of the Australian Leadership Index—a long-running survey to gauge public perceptions of leadership for the greater good—the Australian public was surveyed for eight weeks between March 17 and May 6 to measure perceptions of the degree to which different institutions showed leadership for the greater good in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Key Findings

1. Perceptions of overall leadership for the greater good reached positive levels for the first time ever in response to COVID-19. Perceptions peaked at the end of April but declined slightly as restrictions began to ease.

2. The government sector recorded sharp increases in perceptions of leadership for the greater good. This increase was particularly apparent in the Federal Government and in many of State Governments, most notably the Western Australian Government.

3. Public health institutions were seen as showing exemplary leadership for the greater good. Private health institutions were also perceived positively, whereas health insurance companies were not perceived to lead in the public interest.

4. Public sentiment about the education sector was mixed. Public education institutions were perceived to show a modest degree of leadership for the greater good. By contrast, private education institutions were not perceived to lead in the public interest.

5. Supermarkets were a standout performer compared to other commercial entities, with the public responding positively to product limits and safety measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Australians considered themselves well-informed about the COVID-19 pandemic and relied heavily on public media and official government information to stay informed.

7. Public media institutions, but not private media institutions, were seen to demonstrate leadership for the greater good during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | About the Australian Leadership Index

2. About the Australian Leadership Index

Overview

The Australian Leadership Index is a national leadership survey that provides a comprehensive picture of leadership for the greater good in Australia.

Made possible by the generous philanthropic support of the Graham Foundation, the Australian Leadership Index is nationally significant for a number of reasons.

Launched in September 2018, it is the largest ever study of leadership for the greater good. Each quarter, the ALI surveys 1,000 people across Australia about their beliefs about leadership for the greater good by Australian a range of institutions in the government, public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

The ALI also reveals how different types of institutions and sectors vary in terms of leadership for the greater good, as well as the drivers of these perceptions, revealing new insights into what leaders and their institutions can do to show leadership for the greater good.

Finally, by making all ALI data freely available via the interactive ALI data portal (www.australianleadership index.org) the Australian Leadership Index provides the public, journalists and leaders with a powerful new tool to help bring forth the leadership Australia needs for the future Australians want.

3 | About the survey

3. About the survey

The survey process

Over the course of 8 weeks, from March 17 to May 6, 2020, ALI surveyed 2,400 people of all ages and locations across Australia, collecting 300 responses per week (see Table 1).

Respondents rated a wide range of institutions from the government, health, education, business and media sectors (see Table 2).

For each institution, respondents rated their perceptions of its leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19 on a five-point scale, where 1 = 'not at all', 2 = 'to some extent', 3 = 'to a moderate extent', 4 = 'to a fairly large extent' and 5 = 'to an extremely large extent'.

After providing ratings of these government, health, education, business and media sector institutions, respondents provided a general judgement about the overall state of leadership for the greater good by Australian organisations and institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to questions about leadership, respondents rated their level of knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic on a five-point scale, where 1 = 'not at all knowledgeable', 2 = 'somewhat knowledgeable', 3 = 'moderately knowledgeable', 4 = 'very knowledgeable', and 5 = 'extremely knowledgeable'.

Finally, respondents were asked to nominate the main sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic. The choices were 'public media organisations (e.g., ABC, SBS)', 'private media organisations (e.g., News Corp, Nine Publishing)', and 'official government information'. Respondents were instructed to select as many sources as apply.

The survey was designed by researchers from Swinburne University of Technology. The research firm, Dynata, collected the data on behalf of the Swinburne research team. Recruitment was designed to ensure that the sample was nationally representative in terms of locality (i.e., States and Territories), gender and age.

Note. When answering questions about State and Local Governments, respondents were asked to answer with reference to their State and Local Governments.

Table 1. Data collection schedule

Week	Data collection period	Description in report
Baseline	March 17 – March 18, 2020	March 18
1	March 19 – March 25, 2020	March 25
2	March 26 – April 1, 2020	April 1
3	April 2 –April 8, 2020	April 8
4	April 9 – April 15, 2020	April 15
5	April 16 – April 22, 2020	April 22
6	April 23 – April 29, 2020	April 29
7	April 30 – May 6, 2020	May 6

Table 2. Sectors and institutions measured

Government sector	Federal Government
	State Government
	Local Government
Health sector	Public health institutions (e.g., public hospitals)
	Private health institutions (e.g., private hospitals, GP clinics)
	Private health insurance companies
Education sector	Public education institutions (e.g., public schools and universities)
	Private education institutions (e.g., private schools)
Business sector	Small and Medium Enterprises (e.g., small local businesses)
	Large national businesses (e.g., retailers than operate in all states)
	Multinational corporations
	Supermarkets
	Travel industry (e.g., airlines, travel agencies)
Media sector	Public media institutions (e.g., ABC, SBS)
	Private media institutions (e.g., News Corp, Nine Publishing)

Calculation of the ALI

These ratings are used to calculate each ALI index score in a similar way to the Net Promoter Score, which is a well-known and easily understood index ranging from -100 to 100.

Each ALI score is calculated as the proportion of people who believe that a given institution shows leadership for the greater good to a 'fairly large extent' or an 'extremely large extent' minus those who believe that the institution shows leadership for the greater good to 'some extent' or 'not at all'.

For example, if 18 percent of people surveyed believe that health insurance companies show leadership for the greater good to a 'fairly large extent' or an 'extremely large extent', but 42 percent of people believe that these companies show leadership for the greater good 'to some extent' or 'not at all', then health insurance companies are awarded an ALI score of -24 (see Figure 1).

Interpretation of ALI scores are straightforward: positive scores indicate that an institution is perceived, on balance, as showing leadership for the greater good and negative scores indicate that, on balance, an institution is not perceived as showing leadership for the greater good.

> *Based on your overall impressions, to what extent do you think health insurance companies are showing leadership for the greater good in response to the COVID-19 pandemic."*

| 13% | 5% | **18** |
| **-42** | **10%** | **32%** | **41%** | |

ALI Score: -24

■ Not at all

■ To some extent

■ To a moderate extent

■ To a fairly large extent

■ To an extremely large extent

Figure 1. Calculation of the ALI

This store is temporarily closed due to reasons beyond our control.

We hope to be able to reopen soon.

Thank you for your understanding.

MAKE EVERY MEAL
AN ADVENTURE
WITH KIDS' PAK™

INCLUDES SUB,
DRINK, SNACK
& AN ACTIVITY

TOASTED
RITES

4 | Timeline of key events during the COVID-19 pandemic

4. Timeline of key events during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 3. Timeline of key events in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic	
Date	**Event**
January 25	Australia confirms its first four cases – one in Victoria, three in New South Wales (NSW).
January 29	Queensland confirms its first case. The Queensland Government declares a public health emergency in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic.
February 1	The Federal Government announced a ban on anyone arriving from, or transiting through, mainland China from coming to Australia, unless they had been outside China for 14 days.
February 2	South Australia (SA) confirms its first two cases.
February 3	Australians evacuated from Wuhan and quarantined on Christmas Island for 14 days.
February 5	The Federal Government announces a 14-day ban for non-citizens arriving from China.
February 21	Western Australia (WA) confirms its first case.
February 29	Arrivals from Iran blocked.
March 1	First death recorded (Diamond Princess traveller). At least nine cases are linked to the Diamond Princess cruise ship. 26 cases in Australia.
March 2	Tasmania confirms its first case.
March 3	38 cases in Australia. RBA first central back to cut interest rates.
March 4	Northern Territory (NT) confirms its first case.
March 5	Australia bans travellers from South Korea (in addition to previous bans from mainland China and Iran). Introduces enhanced screening on travellers from Italy.
March 9	80 cases in Australia.
March 10	107 cases in Australia.
March 11	126 cases in Australia, which includes Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson. COVID-19 declared a pandemic. Arrivals from Italy blocked.
March 12	Australian Capital Territory (ACT) confirms its first case. The government announces its first stimulus package: a $17.6-billion cash handout to businesses, welfare recipients and tourism operators. WHO cautions countries to take the pandemic seriously. McLaren team withdraws from Australian Grand Prix.
March 13	On the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, the Prime Minister (PM) advises ban on non-essential outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people from March 16. Overseas arrivals required to self-isolate for 14 days. Australians urged not to travel overseas. Australian Grand Prix cancelled. Cricket Australia announces three-match series against NZ proceeding without fans. National crisis cabinet proclaimed.
March 14	
March 15	All travellers must self-isolate for 14 days, subject to a fine/jail time. Cruise ships barred from docking for 30 days. WA declares state of emergency and public health emergency. SA declares public health emergency.

4. Timeline of key events during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 3. Timeline of key events in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic

	Date	Event
	March 16	Victoria declares state of emergency. ACT declares public health emergency. All ANZAC Day marches cancelled. Home Medicines Service (pharmacy deliveries to homes) begins.
Baseline data collection	March 17	Tasmania declares a State of Emergency for Tasmania to manage COVID-19.
	March 18	The Governor-General declared that a human biosecurity emergency exists. Non-essential indoor gatherings of more than 100 people banned. Australians abroad advised to book commercial flights as soon as possible.
Week 1 data collection	March 19	Australia announces its borders will close to all but citizens and residents. Ruby Princess docks and 2,700 passengers disembark in Sydney. The following day, three are confirmed to have tested positive to COVID-19. RBA cuts interest rates to lowest in Australian history.
	March 20	873 cases. 7 deaths. Minimum space requirements (four square metres per person) imposed for non-essential gatherings.
	March 21	Bondi beach closed after crowds of people flock to the water, defying ban on outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people. NT announces borders closed effective March 24.
	March 22	Over 1300 cases. 7 deaths. WA and SA close borders effective March 24. PM announced second stimulus: $66 billion to individuals most vulnerable; welfare for Jobseekers doubled; increased support for pensioners/carers; grants available to SMEs; $715million to Australian airports/airlines. Victoria brings forward school holidays to March 24. NSW to enter lockdown by 24 March with non-essential services closed. National cabinet announces restrictions on places of gathering, such as pubs, gyms, cinemas, casinos, places of worship to close as of mid-day Monday (23 Mar). Victoria announces emergency relief packages of food/essential supplies for those in self-quarantine without support.
	March 23	Australia starts to lock down – bars, clubs, cinemas, places of worship, casinos and gyms start to close. Schools close in Victoria and ACT. Tasmania, Queensland and NSW remain open. Queensland to close borders midnight Wednesday. Travellers must quarantine for two weeks. MyGov crashes; considerable lines and wait-time for Centrelink support.
	March 24	Australia starts to lock down – bars, clubs, cinemas, places of worship, casinos and gyms start to close. Schools close in Victoria and ACT. Tasmania, Queensland and NSW remain open. Queensland to close borders midnight Wednesday. Travellers must quarantine for two weeks. MyGov crashes; considerable lines and wait-time for Centrelink support.
	March 25	
Week 2 data collection	March 26	Queensland pupil-free days from March 30; SA pupil-free days from April 6; Tasmania pupil-free days from April 6. WA families encouraged to keep children home from March 30. Victoria school break began March 24, ACT pupil-free days from March 24.
	March 27	3180 cases.
	March 28	460 new cases confirmed – the highest in a single day.
	March 29	Most indoor and outdoor gatherings limited to two people. Australians returning from overseas required to spend fourteen days in quarantine in a hotel.

4. Timeline of key events during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 3. Timeline of key events in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic		
	Date	**Event**
	March 30	The Federal Government announces the $130 billion JobKeeper scheme. VIC announces stage 3 restrictions. 4250 cases.
	March 31	States impose their own social distancing restrictions and penalties.
	April 1	
Week 3 data collection	April 2	The Federal Government announces that families can families can access free childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Australian supermarkets increase in-store social distancing measures. 5136 cases.
	April 3	Government launched Jobs Hubs website; announced early childhood education/ care relief; offering 50% wage subside of apprentices/trainees; public gatherings reduced to 2 people; people encouraged to stay home unless shopping for essentials, receiving medical care, exercising, travelling to work/study; places of worship closed over Easter; evictions on hold for 6 months.
	April 4	Over 1 million cases and 50,000 deaths worldwide. 30 cumulative deaths in Australia. Calls for NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard to resign, after allowing 2,700 passengers of Ruby Princess to disembark in Sydney. Woolworths/Coles restricting number of customers allowed in store at a time.
	April 5	WA closes its borders, effective April 5, 11:59pm. NSW police launch criminal investigation in Ruby Princess response. Health officials are hopeful the curve is flattening. Victoria provides free hotel rooms for frontline health workers. Queensland car rally resulted in 58 infringement notices for disregarding social distancing laws.
	April 6	Death toll reaches 40. Supermarkets introduce limits on number of shoppers inside.
	April 7	A record seven deaths occur in a single day.
	April 8	Australia reaches 6000 cases. Parliament passes JobKeeper package.
Week 4 data collection	April 9	Independent schools ordered to reopen. NSW introduced fines of $5,000 for spitting on health workers. NRL announces aim to restart May 28.
	April 10	Recoveries outnumber current cases (3,141 vs. 3008). Australians warned not to travel over Easter. NSW Arts Minister fined for breaching public health order (for travelling to another home). QLD highlights COVID-19 hotpots in NSW and quarantine for those entering QLD from those locations.
	April 11	Death toll rises to 56. More closures due to crowds at Bondi. COVID-19 detected at BHP mine site in central QLD.
	April 12	
	April 13	Five thousand quarantined and lockdown initiated in North-West Tasmania. Death toll from Ruby Princess is at 61 people. NSW announces rent relief for those who have lost at least 25% of their income.
	April 14	The Federal government announces the COVIDSafe digital contact tracing app. Shares entered a trading halt. Victoria expands testing. WA eviction moratorium.
	April 15	Daily growth in total confirmed cases drops below 1 percent. Tasmania becomes the only jurisdiction with more infections acquired locally than overseas. No new cases in SA. Death toll rises to 63. Victorian students advised to remain home for term two. Western Sydney aged care cluster (10 residents).

4. Timeline of key events during the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 3. Timeline of key events in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic		
	Date	**Event**
Week 5 data collection	April 16	
	April 17	Death toll rises to 65. WA announces a soft school opening on 29 April. Western Sydney aged-care cluster up to 20 residents testing positive. Federal government announces funding for airlines ($165m) and NBN ($150m). Rise in domestic violence in NSW.
	April 18	
	April 19	
	April 20	Tasmania overtakes NSW to become the state with the most confirmed cases per capita. No new cases in 24 hours for QLD, WS, and SA. Third day in a row of SA with no new cases. Virgin Australia goes into administration.
	April 21	Some elective surgery restrictions lifted. NSW schools to reopen one day per week.
	April 22	Senate committee holds first public meeting.
Week 6 data collection	April 23	Ruby Princess, linked to more than 600 cases and 21 deaths, departs Australia. Half a million people have applied to withdraw from Super accounts, $3.8bn. Fourth death in Western Sydney aged care facility. Billionaire Kerry Stokes granted exemption from quarantine.
	April 24	Testing expanded nationally. Death toll rises to 79. Virgin Australia planes blocked at Perth airport.
	April 25	Death toll rises to 80. SA records 3rd consecutive day with 0 cases.
	April 26	WA and Queensland announce easing of restrictions from April 27 and May 2, respectively.
	April 27	WA starts to ease restrictions. COVIDSafe app launched, which achieves 2 million downloads in under 24 hours. Victorian Government announces plan to test 100k people over 2 weeks.
	April 28	NSW announces slight easing of restrictions from May 1. Four more deaths at Newmarch, a Western Sydney aged care facility. COVID-19 linked with Kawasaki disease in children.
	April 29	WA schools resume for term 2. Death toll reaches 90. 12th death at Newmarch, a Western Sydney aged-care facility.
Week 7 data collection	April 30	ACT becomes the first jurisdiction with no known cases. No active cases in ACT. 1.3 million Jobseeker recipients. NT announces an easing of restrictions from May 1.
	May 1	NSW starts to ease restrictions.
	May 2	Queensland starts to ease restrictions.
	May 3	
	May 4	ACT no longer COVID-19 free. 19 VIC cases associated with meat plant.
	May 5	16th resident from Western Sydney aged-care facility dies. Victorian meat plant associated with 11 new cases.
	May 6	17 new cases in VIC (4 in meat plant). SA marks 2 weeks with no new cases.

5 | Overall perceptions of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

The ascent of leadership for the greater good

Since September 2018, when ALI started tracking public perceptions of leadership for the greater good in Australia, the Index had never recorded a positive ALI score for overall impressions of leadership for the greater good across all institutions.

In the four quarters from June 2019 to March 2020, the overall ALI score remained relatively consistent from -11 to -13. However, perceptions changed dramatically as the COVID-19 situation evolved and institutions of all types responded to the unfolding public health crisis.

5. Overall perceptions of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 2 tracks the overall public perceptions of leadership for the greater good, including quarterly tracking from September 2018 to March 2020, and then weekly tracking focused on the COVID-19 pandemic from March 12 to May 6, 2020.

The first week of data collection (March 17–18) marked the start of the Federal Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, culminating in the declaration of a human biosecurity emergency by the Governor-General. In response to these events, the first ever positive ALI score was recorded (+1), which was a marked 14 percentage point increase from the overall ALI score obtained from general tracking conducted earlier in the month.

The second week of data collection (March 19–25) was a turning point in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key events included the announcement of social distancing restrictions, border closures across states, a second stimulus package, and the closure of schools in Victoria and the ACT. In response, perceptions of leadership for the greater good recorded another 14-point increase, to reach +15.

The third week of data collection (March 26–April 1) was another seminal stage in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key events included the announcement of the $130 billion JobKeeper scheme and the recording of the highest, to that point, number of new cases of COVID-19 in a single day. In response, perceptions of leadership for the greater good recorded an 8-point increase, to reach +23.

In weeks four to seven of data collection (April 2–29), public perceptions of overall leadership for the greater good continued to increase on a weekly basis to reach a peak of +34 in the weeks to April 22 (week 6) and April 29 (week 7). Key events during this period included the launch of the COVIDSafe digital contact tracing app, the introduction of free childcare, increased in-store social distancing measures in supermarkets, and the payoff from the cumulative measures enacted to this point; namely, a marked decrease in the daily growth in total confirmed cases.

The eighth and final week of data collection (April 30–May 6) witnessed a 6-point decline in public perceptions of overall leadership for the greater good to +28, which corresponded with easing of isolation restrictions across a number of states.
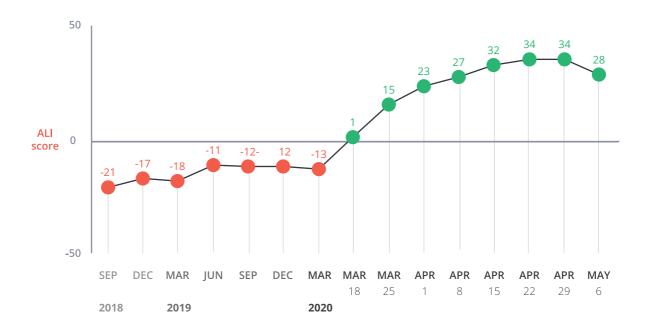

Figure 2. Overall perceptions of leadership for the greater good prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic

5. Overall perceptions of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

Perceptions of leadership across Australia

Although the steep improvements in public perceptions of overall leadership for the greater good were observed Australia-wide, there were notable differences between states and territories over the eight weeks of this study.

Figure 3 compares overall perceptions of leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19 across residents of each state and territory, with results aggregated from March 17 to May 6. Overall, Tasmanian residents perceived the highest levels of leadership for the greater good (+39), while Northern Territory recorded the lowest results (+13). Additional differences across states are explored in relation to state governments later in this report.
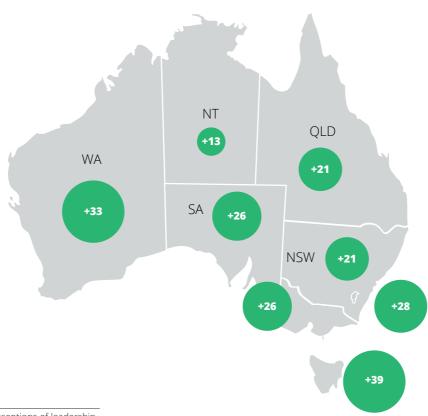
Figure 3. Overall perceptions of leadership for the greater good by states and territories

6 | Leadership for the greater good in the government sector

6. Leadership for the greater good in the government sector

The changing fortunes of government

Since the inception of the Australian Leadership Index, the government sector has been the weakest performer, consistently viewed by the public as not demonstrating leadership for the greater good. However, perceptions of the government sector's leadership for the greater good improved dramatically as government institutions led the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the week to March 18, the first-ever positive ALI score was recorded for the government sector (+9). This was a 30-percentage point improvement in perceptions of the government sector from a week earlier (-21), taken as part of the regular quarterly ALI survey of public perceptions.

As shown in Figure 4, public perceptions of government leadership for the greater good continued to improve over the next six weeks, peaking at +39 in the week to April 29, which is the point at which there were a series of announcements about the easing of social distancing.

Note. Each week's government sector score is calculated as the average of the ratings obtained for Federal, State and Local Governments.

Figure 4. Perceptions of government sector leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

6. Leadership for the greater good in the government sector

What a difference (another) crisis makes

The improvement in public perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic is most remarkable for the Federal Government, particularly in light of the recent bushfire crisis.

Throughout the bushfire crisis, the public consistently judged the Federal Government's leadership as poor. From the beginning (-31, in December 2019) to the end of the bushfire crisis (-25, in March 2020), the Federal Government's ALI score was negative, meaning that most people thought the Federal Government was failing to demonstrate leadership for the greater good.

Fast forward to mid-March, however, and the Federal Government's fortunes changed dramatically. In the week to March 18, the Federal Government's ALI score (+24) surged into positive territory for the first time.

As shown in Figure 5, public perceptions of Federal Government leadership for the greater good continued to improve over the subsequent seven weeks, peaking at +56 in the week to April 29.
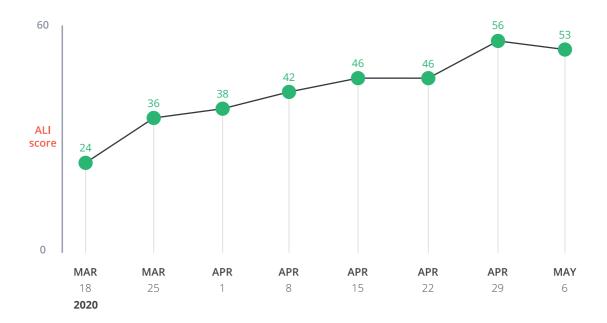

Figure 5. Perceptions of Federal Government leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

6. Leadership for the greater good in the government sector

State governments also grew in public esteem

The pattern of results for State Governments mirrors the Federal Government. However, although each State Government started with a similar score at the start of the pandemic, they showed different trajectories over the subsequent seven weeks (see Figure 6).

The Western Australian Government was the among the highest rated State Governments—a result that became more pronounced over time. By mid-April, the WA Government had an ALI score of +76, the most positive result obtained for any Australian government.

The Victorian Government was the second highest-rated State Government. However, unlike the Western Australian Government, which continued to grow in esteem throughout its response to the pandemic, public perceptions of the Victorian Government's leadership peaked three weeks into the national response and largely held steady over the subsequent five weeks.

The Queensland Government was initially the lowest rated State Government, although its standing improved over time, reaching its highest point at the conclusion of the survey period, and overtaking both New South Wales and South Australia.

The New South Wales Government received consistently lower ratings than other State Governments. Although the New South Wales Government was perceived positively—most people thought the Government showed leadership for the greater good—the ALI scores of the New South Wales Government did not change appreciably over the eight-week survey period.

Finally, public perceptions of the South Australian Government's leadership for the greater good in response to the COVID-19 pandemic peaked mid-way through the eight-week survey, with comparable perceptions of its leadership at the beginning and end of the survey period.

Note: As each state was collected with a smaller number of participants, weekly samples were combined into a series of larger fortnightly samples. Due to the small sample sizes, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory are excluded from this presentation of State Government results.
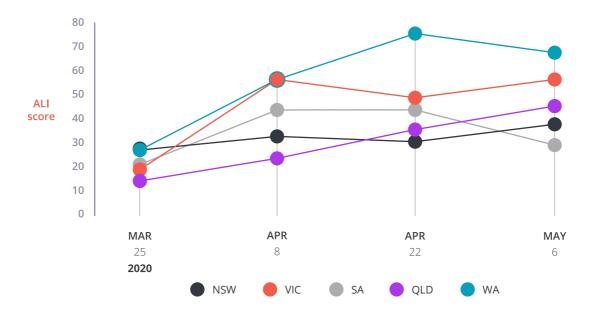

Figure 6. Perceptions of the State Government leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

6. Leadership for the greater good in the government sector

Modest gain for local governments

As shown in Figure 7, local governments also experienced a boost in public perceptions of leadership for the greater good during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the week to March 18, local governments were not, on balance, seen as showing leadership for the greater good, which is consistent with long-standing ratings of local government obtained by the Australian Leadership Index.

In subsequent weeks, public perceptions of local government improved, peaking at +11 in the week to April 29. However, on balance, the best that can be said for local governments is that they were seen as neither helping nor harming the wider public interest.
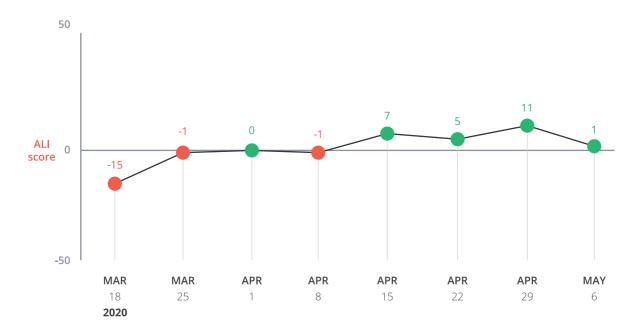

Figure 7. Perceptions of Local Government leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

Note: We present the aggregated results for local government as we lacked a sufficient sample size to report on specific municipalities.

7 | Leadership for the greater good in the health sector

Public health institutions lead the way

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic is, at least in the first instance, a public health crisis, it is little surprise that the health sector played a prominent role in Australia's response to the pandemic. However, perceptions of health sector leadership for the greater good were markedly different for public health institutions, private health institutions, and health insurance companies.

As shown in Figure 8, although perceptions of public and private health institutions' leadership for the greater good are positive, public health institutions lead the way in terms of public perceptions of leadership for the greater good in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, perceptions of public and private health institutions far outpaced perceptions of health insurance companies. Whereas public and private health institutions were consistently perceived as demonstrating leadership for the greater good during the pandemic, health insurance companies were not seen as leading in the wider public interest.
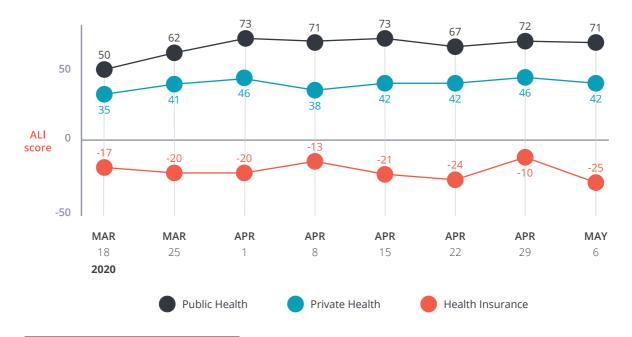

Figure 8. Perceptions of health sector leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

8 | Leadership for the greater good in the education sector

8. Leadership for the greater good in the education sector

Only public schools are seen to serve the public interest

School closures and the attendant opportunities and challenges of home-schooling children featured prominently in media reports about the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As shown in Figure 9, although perceptions of public (-9) and private (-20) education institutions' leadership for the greater good were poor at the beginning of the survey period, there was a marked divergence over the subsequent seven weeks.

Perceptions of public education institutions peaked halfway through the eight-week period of this study and were stable thereafter. By contrast, perceptions of private education institutions peaked halfway through the eight-week period of this study and declined thereafter. Unlike public education institutions, at no point did the public perceive that private education institutions were showing leadership for the greater good.

Figure 9. Perceptions of education sector leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

9 | Leadership for the greater good in the business sector

9. Leadership for the greater good in the business sector

Supermarkets lead the way

A core component of leadership for the greater good is that it is not just the responsibility of the government or public sector. Increasingly, businesses are being expected to show leadership for the greater good, and examples of this emerged throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 10 presents perceptions of the degree to which different types of commercial institutions showed leadership for the greater good in response to the pandemic. Whereas SMEs, large national businesses, and multinational corporations have been tracked since September 2018, supermarkets and travel companies were tracked specifically in response to COVID-19 given the unique impact of their pandemic on their business operations.

Notably, a heavy burden was placed on supermarkets to serve the wider public interest. Early on, supermarkets responded to panic buying and stock shortages by imposing purchase limits on crucial household items. As the situation evolved,

new measures were implemented, including safety screens at checkouts, limits on customer numbers in-store, and new sanitation practices.

As shown in Figure 10, these measures were positively received by the public. Perceptions of supermarkets' leadership for the greater good increased dramatically through March and remained high through to May 6. These perceptions are in stark contrast to other commercial institutions, highlighting the unique impact supermarkets have had through the pandemic.

A particular contrast is seen in the Travel sector. While the travel sector has been hugely impacted by travel bans enacted by the government, public perceptions have not been kind. After a positive, albeit only slight, improvement in the week to March 25, perceptions steadily declined, to reach the lowest point of -31 the week to May 6, putting the travel sector in line with multinational corporations.
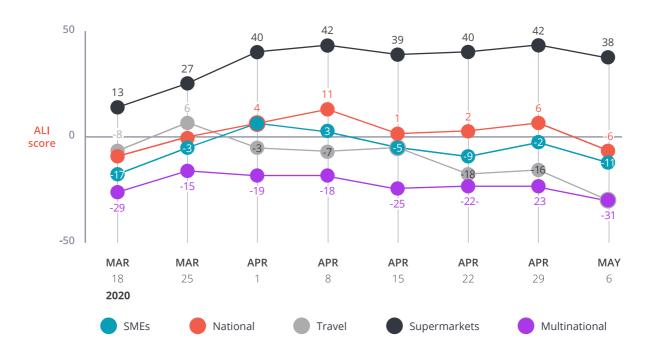

Figure 10. Perceptions of business sector leadership for the greater good in response to COVID-19

10 | Leadership for the greater good in the media sector

10. Leadership for the greater good in the media sector

Public understanding of the pandemic

Australians reported that they gained considerable knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic during the weeks measured (see Figure 11).

In the week to March 18, 25 percent of respondents rated themselves as not at all or only somewhat knowledgeable about COVID-19, which declined to 10 percent in the week to May 6. Most respondents regarded themselves as moderately or extremely knowledgeable about the COVID-19 pandemic.
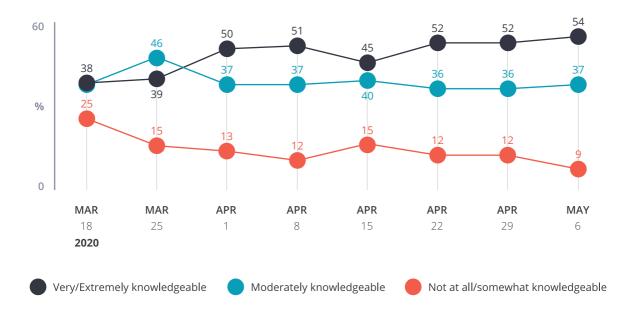

Figure 11. Level of knowledge about COVID-19 pandemic

10. Leadership for the greater good in the media sector

In government we trust

As shown in Figure 12, public media was the primary source of information for most people (66% of respondents) at the beginning of the data collection period, followed by official government information (60%) and private media (54%). However, as the weeks passed, official government information became the primary source for most respondents, public media remained fairly consistent, and fewer participants relied on private media.
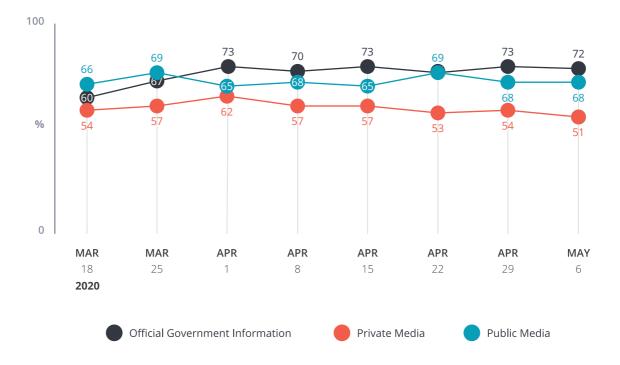

Figure 12. Primary sources of information during COVID-19 pandemic

10. Leadership for the greater good in the media sector

Only public media is seen to serve the public interest

As shown in Figure 13, although public perceptions of public media institutions' leadership for the greater good was neutral at the in the week to March 18, perceptions improved and remained relatively steady for the subsequent seven weeks.

By contrast, perceptions of private media institutions' leadership for the greater good was generally poor. Despite some improvement in public perceptions of private media institutions' leadership for the greater good in the week to April 8, perceptions of their leadership declined steadily thereafter.
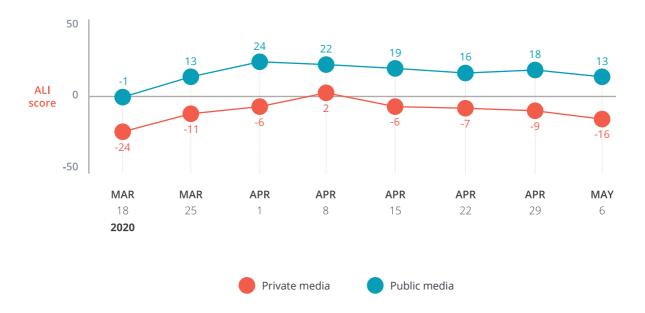

Figure 13. Perceptions of media sector leadership for the greater good during COVID-19 pandemic

11 | Conclusion

11. Conclusion

A promising glimpse of leadership for the greater good

In the space of eight short weeks, the public health threat posed by COVID-19 and the sudden absence of partisanship from the political landscape ushered in a focus on leadership for the greater good, the likes of which we haven't seen for years.

Perhaps the most notable general development was the steep improvement in perceptions of overall leadership for the greater good—a judgement made after careful consideration is given to leadership for the greater good across a wide range of institutions across different sectors.

Since September 2018, when ALI started tracking public perceptions of leadership for the greater good in Australia, the Index had never recorded a positive ALI score for overall impressions of leadership. However, perceptions changed dramatically as the COVID-19 situation evolved and institutions of all types responded to the unfolding public health crisis.

The most striking improvements were found for public perceptions of government, in general, and the Federal Government, in particular. Public perceptions of government leadership for the greater good have remained stubbornly low since the inception of the ALI in 2018, a situation compounded by public perceptions of poor leadership during the 2019/2020 bushfire crisis.

However, what a difference (another) crisis makes. The innovation of a national cabinet that drew together Federal, State and Territory Governments, all focused on averting a major public health crisis, was appraised positively by the Australian public and perceived as demonstrating genuine concern for the wider public interest and leadership for the greater good.

Another significant finding of this survey was the esteem in which the public holds those people and institutions who are on the frontline of protecting and sustaining the public good.

In the public sector, this was exemplified by public health institutions, which were consistently perceived as demonstrating strong leadership for the greater good. In the business sector, this was exemplified by supermarkets, which were marked by their service of the public interest.

What are the prospects for leadership for the greater good?

The ALI was founded on the principle that leaders should act beyond self and vested interests to benefit the greater good, and this leadership should come from institutions across all sectors.

Unhappily, since its inception in September 2018, the ALI has painted a dim picture of the state of leadership across Australia, with the exception of a small handful of institutions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessarily brought the wider public interest to the fore, and institutions across all sectors have instigated measures to protect the greater good.

To be sure, crises, such as COVID-19 pandemic, crystallise a shared understanding of the common good and encourage people and institutions to pull together in a manner not typical of more ordinary times.

Nevertheless, by shining a light on leadership for the greater good, what it looks and sounds like, and how it can be improved, this pandemic may yet have a silver lining for the future.

12 | The ALI research team

12. The ALI research team

The research team comprises researchers with expertise in leadership, large-scale survey design and administration, and advanced data analytics.

Dr Sam Wilson
Co-creator, Australian Leadership Index

Sam has a PhD in social psychology from the University of Melbourne. He teaches leadership development to postgraduates in the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship and conducts research with a range of industry groups. His research interests range from studies of leadership for the greater good to studies of the psychology of voluntary humanitarianism.

sgwilson@swin.edu.au

Dr Tim Bednall
Co-creator, Australian Leadership Index

Tim has a PhD in organisational psychology from the University of New South Wales and is a registered organisational psychologist. He teaches HR Analytics and research methods to undergraduates and postgraduates in the Swinburne Business School. His research interests include workplace learning, employee innovative behaviour and advanced quantitative research methods.

tbednall@swin.edu.au

Dr Jason Pallant
Co-creator, Australian Leadership Index

Jason has a PhD in marketing from Monash University. He teaches Data Empowered Marketing to postgraduates in the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship and conducts marketing research with industry partners in a range of consumer-facing industries. His research interests lie primarily in understanding the drivers of consumer perceptions and behaviour.

jipallant@swin.edu.au

Ms Sylvia Gray

Sylvia is a provisional psychologist completing a Master of Psychology (Organisational) at Deakin University. She teaches into a variety of psychology units at Deakin University and is a research assistant for the Australian Leadership Index project. Her research interests are leadership, burnout and employee wellbeing.

sylviagray@swin.edu.au

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

FOR THE GREATER GOOD DURING THE
FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC