

Masculinities, Citizenship and Right-Wing Populism in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In the settler-colonial context of Australia, this paper addresses the specific framing of masculinity with which right-wing populism seeks to engage. It reports on a recent online survey completed by 335 men. Their written responses pointed to troubles in their lives, including difficult relationship and career circumstances. However, they did not hold the vicissitudes of neo-liberal economics to account, but rather assigned blame to the 'other'; women, feminism, queers, immigrants and so on. Many informants expressed strong mistrust of government. Divisive right-wing populist ideas routinely circulate on social media platforms; the men's main source of news/information. Quite a few articulated nostalgia for an old-fashioned 'tough' gender order.

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Introduction

This paper reports on a 2020–2023 mixed methods study that investigated the research question: *To what extent does the perceived decline of male privilege and societal status play a role in populist right-wing recruitment in Australia?* This question was prompted by previous studies that have found right-wing populism to be primarily supported by men (Mudde 2019; Stern 2019), especially men who view their traditional gendered entitlements as under threat (Kimmel 2018). To date, not much research has been carried out on that topic in Australia. In presenting our analysis, we define populism as a political way of thinking that divides society into two antagonistic groups; the so-called 'pure' people (who are variously oppressed), and their opposite, the so-called 'corrupt elite' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Sengul 2022; Vieten and Poynting 2022; Ostiguy 2020). Right-wing populism encourages the defence of a national culture, identity, and economy against perceived attacks by outsiders (the 'other'), and by 'outside' influences such as feminism and LGBTIQA + rights (Nilan et al. 2023).

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In short, right-wing populist propaganda typically colonises contemporary problems and issues to push a corrosive politics of fear and anxiety among traditionally-identified men¹ (Agius et al. 2022; Roose and Cook 2022; Ralph-Morrow 2022; Christley 2022; Deckman and Cassese 2021; Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff et al. 2019). The idea of white male victimhood² is strongly encouraged (Lütjen 2022; Banet-Weiser 2021). Online, far-right influencers like Andrew Tate, Gavin McInnes and Jordan Peterson reach out evocatively to white cis-men, digging into their insecurities, attempting to draw them into harassment campaigns against women as a kind of game where hate content is the ammunition, and the target is depersonalised. The online hate network of the like-minded establishes a broad landscape of virile masculinity. Avenging hero discourse has wide cultural appeal for young men and constitutes fertile ground on which the Far Right can build frameworks of persuasion (Nilan 2021). Supporting and repeating far-right discourse can then be understood as not only fun, but a heroic act that symbolically re-asserts the white patriarchy; offering a way out of white victimhood.

Taking one example, a popular source of hate content for the manosphere is the Proud Boys, a transnational all-male white supremacist group with a violent agenda that is misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-immigration (Campbell 2022). It has active chapters in Australia. The Proud Boys represent ‘a robust symbiosis between misogyny and white supremacy’, celebrating the ideals of western civilisation while arguing for white male victimhood (DeCook 2018: 485). Members of the Proud Boys participated in the attack on the United States Capitol building on 6 January 2021. In Australia, men wearing the Proud Boys logo have fronted rallies protesting against the cancellation of the official Australia Day parade, COVID restrictions, Gay Pride and so on. Canada and New Zealand have banned the Proud Boys as a terrorist organisation, but Australia has not done so.

Gaston and Hilhorst (2018: 33) propose a link between those experiencing ‘social pessimism’ and the appeal of ‘populism’. It seems men in precarious work (Standing 2011), and in marginal labour market positions (Mudde 2014), may be more drawn to far-right discourse than those in more stable and rewarding work situations. As Elliott (2019) points out, there are semantic links between masculinity and constituent statuses of race, class, work and heterosexuality that are impressed on young men as they grow up, offline and online. When those elements of (white) masculine habitus (Bourdieu 1990) meet the increasingly precarious and uncertain structures of an unstable labour market, of fluid gender identity and gender relations, then some men do flounder (Kimmel 2010; Standing 2011). They become more vulnerable to populist rhetoric that constructs them as the racialized victims of feminism and affirmative action (Marantz 2019). Many of the men in our sample supported the discourse of white male victimhood. They were nostalgic for the (white) heteronormative past of Australia and had little trust in current state and federal governments.

The feeling of nostalgia is an example of affect, the experience of feeling or emotion. Ahmed (2014) has pointed out at length how emotions keep us invested in relationships of power. In terms of right-wing populism, Leser and Spissinger (2023) argue that the rhetorical and visual elicitation of ‘ordinary’ affects such as fear, shame, pride, nostalgia, anger, and even affection and love, work to produce legitimacy, render far-right politics appealing and contribute to the normalisation of far-right discourse. By such means, affinities are built and consolidated as deeply felt constituents of everyday life.

Nostalgia is a recurrent theme in right-wing propaganda because it matches the mood of certain sections of the male population. Inglehart and Norris (2017: 445) argue that conservative populism routinely refers to a mythical 'golden past' when society was less diverse, the nation was actively defended, and traditional gender roles were not questioned. In a UK survey, 63 per cent of people in Britain claimed life was better when they were growing up, compared to only 21 per cent who feel life is better now (Gaston and Hilhorst 2018: 3). That same nostalgia for a lost golden age – including traditional gendered expectations – was evident in responses to our Australian survey.

Right-wing populist rhetoric varies, yet promotion of gender stereotypes is a common feature (Van Valkenburgh 2021; Christley 2022: 1141). When it comes to men and their identity, ideals of hegemonic masculinity³ shore up the structures of male domination (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), yet not all men feel validated. Thus Connell (1995) coined the term 'protest masculinity' to capture pro-violent behaviours emerging from contradiction between marginalised men's perceptions of the powerful and their own sense of powerlessness. Australia has a specific history of patriarchal gender roles stemming from white settler colonialism (Waling 2019). Frontier masculinity is central to Australia's foundational myth, one in which men (not women) conquered the land, taming and transforming it for white settlement (Cook 2021). Flood (2020) argues the long-term outcome is a 'man box'; a set of unquestioned expectations that Australian boys and men should always be tough, aggressive, risk-taking, stoic, heterosexual, emotionally inexpressive and dominant. Yet increased immigration, along with recognition of women's rights, has challenged older patriarchally-organised structures of a 'white' Australia.

Australia has seen numerous pro-inclusion workplace and labour market reforms. It seems some (white) Australian men believe those reforms have disadvantaged them. They feel they have lost privileges that should have been rightfully theirs (Roose et al. 2022; Roose and Cook 2022). Men's rights discourse in Australia certainly encourages what Kalish and Kimmel (2010) call the 'aggrieved entitlement' of conventional masculinity. There is considerable overlap between male supremacy and white supremacy (Ralph-Morrow 2022). Thereby, gender conservatism can readily feed the racialised discourse of right-wing populism (Stern 2019) through the semantic funnel of white male victimhood (Banet-Weiser 2021).

Right-wing Populism

In this paper we do not ascribe intrinsic coherence to right-wing populism; a loose set of ideas that range from ultra-nationalism to anti-elitism, from misogyny to rampant xenophobia (Khalil 2022). The populist narrative of white male victimhood constructs the (oppressed) 'pure people' as white men with conservative views working in traditional masculine occupations. Typically, the alleged oppression of such men is not ascribed to the precarity of late-modern capitalism, but to suspect government forces enforcing the ambit claims of the untrustworthy and threatening 'other', variously defined (Roose et al. 2022; Banet-Weiser 2021; Kelly 2020; Stern 2019; Graff et al. 2019).

In Australia, the discourse of white male victimhood gains political traction from the ever-widening gap between traditional male breadwinner expectations, and deep changes in the labour market and the economy, as well as relationship norms. Traditionally-oriented men may feel displaced and disappointed. Those feelings are amplified by the

so-called ‘manosphere’ – online communities that circulate misogynist material (Copland 2021; Ging 2017; Kelly 2017). The hammered-home message from the populist right-wing is that the ‘other’ (gender- and racially-defined) has undermined (white) men (Johanssen 2022; Stern 2019; Banet-Weiser 2021; Roose et al. 2022) and dishonoured their historical achievements, all with government support. Yet Waling’s (2019) study failed to find any single, unified gender crisis among Australian men. Men who do feel in crisis are likely to be negatively positioned in the labour market (Roberts 2018). Their troubling work and family circumstances may lead them to find the artfully matched themes of right-wing populism compelling. With that in mind, we designed a survey as the first element of data collection, including both closed and open questions that invited written responses on the men’s opinions and ideas.

Methodology

The survey data here is drawn from 2021 to 2023 project on why some men in Australia might be drawn to support far right thinking. The survey sought answers to the following research question:

To What Extent Does the Perceived Decline of Male Privilege and Societal Status Play a Role in Populist Right-wing Recruitment in Australia?

The term ‘recruitment’ here includes tacit support for right-wing populist ideas. The online anonymous survey was the first project instrument to be developed. Sampling was purposive. Men were invited via a Facebook advertisement which asked: *What does it mean to be a man in Australia today?* It was accompanied by images of urban and rural men of different ages and fields of work. 335 valid survey responses were received. The men certainly had something to say. Many wanted to register their discontent. Despite the open nature of our invitation, the majority of men who responded were in occupations that roughly match the contemporary definition of *working class* (see AFR 2019). Since the mid-1970s, there has been a significant decline in traditional blue-collar work in Australia, and at the same time, a re-definition of working class. The term now includes lower-paid clerical, retail, call-centre, health and technical workers (AFR 2019).

Our survey yielded both quantitative data and qualitative data. While most questions were closed format, some were open, inviting a written response. Open questions offer the opportunity for informants to use their own language and expression, yielding personal, sometimes unexpected viewpoints (Krosnick 2018; Creswell and Creswell 2017). Answers to closed questions were analysed descriptively using SPSS(v23). Written responses were treated as qualitative data and analysed thematically. For each thematic section below, brief consideration of the quantitative data is followed by examples from the qualitative data. It should be noted that the survey was conducted at the height of the COVID19 pandemic in Australia, when many cities and states were in lockdown and strict public health measures were in place. People were feeling the pressure. Those conditions undoubtedly influenced survey responses. Support for right-wing populism rose rapidly in Australia during the pandemic and its aftermath (Richards 2022). Rather than a deficit, we regard the timing of the survey as a fortuitous opportunity to gain frank views from the men who responded.

Results

Snapshot of the Sample

We found 59 per cent of the men were aged 35 and under. This roughly follows the population age distribution. In Australia men have a median age of 37 years due to shorter life expectancy compared to women (ABS 2022; AIHW 2022). Over half the men were in a committed relationship, either married or de facto. The rest were single, widowed, divorced or separated. That ratio differs from the national average. In the 2021 census, 65 per cent of Australian men were in a committed relationship (ABS 2021a).

Less than 20 per cent of survey respondents held a Bachelor's Degree, which is markedly less than the national figure of 44 per cent of men aged 25–64 (Statista 2021). Just under a quarter of the men were not employed. This is higher than the relatively low 2021 Australian percentage of unemployed men (see AIHW 2021). Unemployed respondents were more often older men. Rapid rise in the number of Australians with a post-school qualification means that older men with 'blue collar' work histories may struggle to find a job (Rayner 2018: 12). Only 57.3 per cent of survey respondents were working full time. That figure contrasts with Australian labour force data that shows the participation rate of men aged 25–55 in full-time work remains at around 80 per cent (Gustafsson 2021). The four most common fields of work for survey respondents were: construction; agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining; professional, scientific and technical services; and public administration and safety; all fields traditionally dominated by men.

How Did They Feel?

In developing the survey questions, we took emotions into account, following Kim's (2013) argument about intensified white working-class male anger in conditions of economic transformation. We used the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) instrument to ask respondents to identify feelings they experienced frequently and recently.

Over half the men reported feeling anxious or stressed as their first choice answer. For traditionally-oriented men, anxious feelings may indicate fear about what it means for the old heteronormative gender and workplace order to be disrupted; an iteration of affect that may favour support for a right-wing populist position (see Christley 2022). On the other hand, the survey timing of the Covid-19 pandemic must be taken into account. Given the timing of the survey, we asked a specific question using a scale about how the COVID19 pandemic made them feel:

The majority indicated feeling pessimistic or highly pessimistic due to COVID19 restrictions and requirements. Correlation was tested between the variables of recent negative affect (Table 1) and scores on the scale for COVID19 pessimism/optimism (Table 2), using Spearman's rho. The correlation was found to be significant at 0.01 level. It seems the pressure of the COVID19 pandemic and its accompanying restrictions may have amplified anxiety and stress. Strong affect was certainly expressed in nihilistic written comments such as, 'scared the world is ending' (R78, 27, jobseeker, separated), 'it totally destroyed my life. I lost my income and my house. I will be homeless and living in my car by September' (R10, 55, unemployed, divorced), and 'democracy is dead and politicians no longer represent the people' (R57, 54, machinery operator, married). Much

Table 1. Question 27 – feelings in the past month.

Choice #1 (n = 308)	Feeling	%
Choice #1 (n = 308)	Anxiety	34.4
	Stress	21.8
	Sadness	14.3
	Frustration	11.4
Choice #2 (n = 244)	Frustration	30.7
	Stress	22.1
	Feeling worthless	12.3
	Anger	9.8

anger was directed at government and politicians. ‘The government is both more incompetent, more corrupt and more tyrannical than I thought’ (R175, 24, jobseeker, single).

The pandemic may have exacerbated the historically low rate of government trust. Trust in government in Australia was only 44.6 per cent in 2019, quite a lot less than most other industrialised nations (OECD 2020). This may have implications for citizenship amid rising right-wing populism (see Turner 2019). For example, one respondent wrote – with populist conviction – ‘the wealthy elites are controlling us at every point in life. They’re pushing for the great reset’. He added threateningly, ‘I for one will not allow it to happen’ (R231, 29, part-time retail, single). Another government-blaming respondent wrote of the COVID19 pandemic, ‘the government interfered with the course of nature and prevented the culling of the weakest of our population’ (R288, 27, labourer, married). The Darwinian/eugenics principle cited by R288 was commonly expressed in online far-right discourse during the pandemic (Bagenstos 2021). As Khalil (2022) points out, there is an increasing overlap between far-right rhetoric and environmental paradigms.

Information Sources

We know that carefully honed far-right algorithms channel men’s online masculinist interests, encouraging belief in white victimhood, anti-feminist, and homophobic propaganda, and alleged corruption of government, intellectual, and scientific elites (Marantz 2019). Digital anonymity guarantees the wide dissemination of fake news, conspiracy theory, and hate speech (Nilan 2021). A closed question asked respondents about their main source of news and information. Over half (56.8 per cent) of respondents indicated social digital media. Australians are certainly not immune to the influence of globally-disseminated right-wing populist social media. They both absorb content and create it. For example, one study claims that Australia has been the fourth-largest producer on QAnon content worldwide (Gallagher et al. 2020). We asked a further closed question about their most frequently used social media.

Table 2. Question 36 – effect of COVID19 on feelings/mood (n = 296).

Scale	%
Highly pessimistic	30.4
Pessimistic	30.1
Neutral	22.0
Optimistic	10.5
Highly optimistic	7.1

Ever-popular Facebook was nominated most often, followed by Instagram and YouTube. Those three platforms, although regulated, have been identified as significant for wide promulgation of intolerant and hate-based rhetoric (Cooper 2010). Other regulated platforms included Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp, as well as platforms with little to no moderation such as Telegram, TikTok, Reddit, Parler, Gab, Discord, 4Chan/8Kun, Signal and so on. Many such sources disseminate right-wing populist content, conspiracy theories, and the doxa of white male victimhood (Lütjen 2022).

Of course, we do not know exactly what content the survey respondents routinely take up from social media, but many written comments closely echoed the rhetoric of groups like the Proud Boys, especially anti-government sentiments and claims for white male victimhood. In Australia, Peucker and Fisher (2023) have identified a hyper-partisan online media ecosystem at the far-right fringes, operating through not only niche platforms like Gab, but spilling out into moderated platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Gender

Respondents were asked to rank attributes of 'being a man' that were important to them, using a 1–5 scale where 1 is most important (Table 3).

Attributes ranked as desirable more or less approximated the ideal of masculinity in Australia (Waling 2019); a man who is 'brave, dependable, and strong, emotionally stable, as well as critical, logical, and rational' (Coston and Kimmel 2012: 98). He should also be prosperous and powerful (Connell 1995). A subsequent open question asked for comments on the advantages of being a man. Some written responses extolled traditional paternalism. For example, 'men have [the] privilege of being caretakers of the vulnerable by protecting, providing for, and presiding over, families and communities' (R181, 24, machinery operator, married). Asked to write down the ideal attributes of a man, some listed apparently humorous attributes like, 'drink vb⁴, fish, hunt, ride dirt bikes, and yell: yeeeeee yeeee' (R129, 26 farm worker, de facto), and 'to be a man you need a dick⁵, that's about it' (R182, 23, labourer, de facto). Others were more serious. For example, one respondent listed the attributes of 'intelligence, pride, creativity, will' (R141, 34, unemployed, single), while another wrote, '[to] be your own man, be yourself and be damned what others think, follow the man in the mirror' (R3, 73, retired, de facto). Nationalist nostalgia was certainly evident, 'Australian men have long been a perfect example of masculinity, mateship and hard work' (R317, 22, labourer, de facto). That comment resonates strongly with right-wing discourse in Australia.

Taking a local example, we found that influential far-right groups in Australia like True Blue Crew routinely feature grand statements such as:

Table 3. Question 16 – chosen attributes of viable masculinity.

Attribute	Most important/important %
Make decisions (<i>n</i> = 328)	54.3
Can solve your own problems (<i>n</i> = 331)	54.1
Be respected (<i>n</i> = 331)	48.9
Control emotions (<i>n</i> = 331)	46.8
Have a steady job (<i>n</i> = 332)	45.5

Political correctness has swept through this great country and our 'so called leaders' have been pathetically drawn into it and complicit in the destabilization of white Australian culture.

The proffered solution is for 'real aussie' men to band together as 'mates' to form a 'crew' and protect 'the traditional morals, values, and Aussie pride that paved the way for the great nation we love and call home' (True Blue Crew Facebook site, n.d. cited in Nilan 2019).

In the written answers there was acknowledgement of changing norms, for example, 'I think what it means to be a man in Australia is something that is undergoing a rapid shift in recent years' (R221, 26, clerical worker, single). Yet change was not viewed positively. Blame was routinely assigned to the gendered 'other', for example, 'the perceived "liquidity" of gender is diluting manhood and womanhood' (R56, 54, unemployed, separated). Some respondents directly blamed feminism, 'men have capitulated to the experiment of feminism, which has been a colossal failure on almost every metric' (R147, 41, community worker, married). Strong claims were advanced on this topic, for instance, 'women and leftist men are dictating the discourse on what it should be to be a man' (R91, 24, sales, single), 'most men today are more female than women 50 years ago' (R19, 23, labourer, married), and 'good white men are being over-run by girly boys and lesbians with blue hair and non-binary dickheads [*sic*]' (R102, 22, jobseeker, single).

Younger men frequently lamented the loss of the masculine role model, for example, 'I'm too young to have experienced much, but it seems as though the idea of a true blue Australian man has completely faded' (R294, 18, agricultural worker, single). Another young man wrote, 'things seem to be changing, we have three distinct types of men in Australia now; Eshays⁶, "men" from Melbourne, and true blue aussies. If I had to pick one, real aussies would win out' (R317, 22, labourer, de facto). The discourse of 'true blue aussie' masculinity was ubiquitous in written responses.

Claims for white male victimhood were also frequent, including; 'I think average working class white Australian males have it the hardest out of anyone in society, we are the victims of reverse racism' (R205, 23, construction worker, de facto), and 'men are the most hated upon group in Australia. The most oppressed group in the world [are] straight white Christian males' (R82, 30, technician, de facto). In the view of these respondents, white hetero-normative masculinity is definitely under attack (see Kelly 2020). However, as Baker (2018) points out, taking the victim position is not beneficial for men because it is not conducive to their wellbeing. In fact, adherence to the traditional masculine role is associated with a range of psychological problems among boys and young men. It contributes to 'higher risk behaviours', as well as poorer mental health outcomes, higher rates of smoking and substance abuse, higher rate of suicide, documented failure to seek early medical advice, inadequate diet, higher rate of incarceration, and so on (Baker 2018: 145). Yet at the same time, engaging right-wing misogynist discourse may have compensatory value for (white) men who feel like victims because they have somehow missed out; in their career, in relationships, in making their views heard (Graff et al. 2019; Kelly 2017). Demands to reinstate traditional gender roles have accompanied the rise of right-wing populism (Ralph-Morrow 2022). For instance, the Italian far-right political party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) recently won election on a platform that includes policies against LGBTQ + rights (Anarte 2022). Similarly, the Sweden Democrats, a right-wing party that recently

gained power, is committed to turning back the clock to the days when – as they say – women were women and men were men (Faiola 2021).

In the survey we asked a closed question about women's rights (Table 4).

In general, respondents indicated support for women's rights in the home. However, many more indicated women's rights have gone 'too far' in society and in politics. That view echoes the propaganda of groups like the Proud Boys and True Blue Crew. At the same time though, we need to view this view against a background of structural change. Profound economic and workplace shifts over four decades in Australia have seen a significant decline in men's full-time blue-collar work, along with growth in contract and part-time work, even in skilled and highly skilled sectors (Roberts 2018). Women are in the full-time workforce in much greater numbers at the same time as higher educational credentials are required for entry-level work across the board (ABS 2021b). Traditionally, the majority of Australian men worked full-time hours while women either did not work, or took up part-time employment (Kulick 2022). Today the double income (loan-repaying) family is the norm (ABS 2021b). At the same time, more precarious, short term and contract work has been growing apace (Standing 2011; Vallas and Schor 2020).

Australian living costs are high. Increased precarity in the labour market signals expansion of socio-economic inequality in Australia, possibly intensifying the sense of loss that the men equate with a fading away of traditional masculine expectations. Today, even men who complete technical/vocational training can experience periods of labour market insecurity. That drives anger and resentment, and may activate nostalgic desire for a return to fixed gender roles. Nadim (2016) suggests there can be critical implications for men's identity formation when their status as the actual or potential breadwinner becomes precarious.

An open survey question invited respondents to write anything they wanted about being a man in Australia today. Only 166 of 335 men wrote answers. Of those, nearly three quarters indicated white male victimhood, along with support for traditional gender norms. For example, 'I think that being a WHITE ANGLO SAXON MALE IN AUSTRALIA NOW YOU GET TREATED DIFFERENTLY TO WHAT WE WERE 30 YEARS AGO' (R12, 55, machinery operator, married, original emphasis), and 'I'm a white, heterosexual, middle aged male. Apparently, I'm what's wrong with the world. Identity politics has insidiously devalued men in our society' (R32, 55, construction

Table 4. Question 23 – have women's rights gone too far? ($n = 323$).

Sphere of Influence	%	Response
In the home?		
No	67.9	Majority support women's rights in the home
Yes	19.9	
Maybe	13	
In society?		
No	46.1	Less than half support women's rights in society
Yes	33.1	
Maybe	20.7	
In politics?		
No	57.1	Just over half support women's rights in politics
Yes	28.6	
Maybe	14.3	

manager, divorced). One younger respondent wrote, ‘I feel as though traditionally masculine traits and roles are being demonised and a lot of modern issues facing men are being ignored’ (R108, 29, health worker, de facto).

As Banet-Weiser (2021: 61) points out, while people in positions of privilege have historically claimed to be aggrieved or injured by those who threaten their dominance, we have witnessed ‘a significant shift in the contemporary moment, where individual men publicly and assertively claim to be victims’; a previously derogatory identity category. The comments of older respondents often mirrored the discourse of Australian fathers’ rights groups and other misogynist groups that blame feminism for family and marriage breakdown (Flood 2010). For example, one respondent advised men to ‘type in MGTOW’ if they wanted guidance about what is happening to men in Australia. MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) is an anti-feminist, misogynist online community. In a similar vein, the far-right United Patriots Front in Australia urges online followers to engage the discourse of white male victimhood as a self-evident ‘truth’ (Richards 2019). Certainly, right-wing True Blue Crew invites Australian men to engage a primordial white masculinist view as seminal to their own subjective concerns (Nilan 2021). All such sources foreshadow return to a time before the advent of feminism, political correctness and multiculturalism.

Politics

A closed survey question asked about future voting preference. Australia is one of few countries worldwide to have made voting compulsory. We asked the question in 2021, ahead of a looming federal election in May 2022 (Table 5).

In that election May the centrist Australian Labor Party won government, but with a reduced margin due in large part to the success by the Greens (Chowdhury 2022) and the so-called ‘Teal’ (green-leaning) Independents, most of whom were well-educated professional women. According to Gittins (2022), rich educated professionals swung 11–12 per cent against the conservative Coalition parties in the 2022 election, while the country’s working poor – the fifth of polling booths paying the lowest rent, earning the lowest incomes and with the least skills – swung only 3–4 per cent against the Coalition. Yet the respondents to our survey showed a different pattern. Percentage-wise there was more support for the Coalition, the far-right One Nation party, and much less support for the Greens and Labor, compared to total population voting patterns as they emerged in the 2022 election aftermath. We also detected the trend of mistrusting mainstream parties. Christley (2022) found that in Europe, strong gender-traditional attitudes

Table 5. Question 33 – voting preference forthcoming election ($n = 304$).

Party	%	Interpretation
Labor	23.7	Higher support by only a small margin, lower than national trend
Other	22.7	United Australia Party; Shooters, Fishers and Farmers; Socialist Alliance – higher than national trend
Coalition	17.4	Lower than national trend
Independent	16.8	Higher than national trend
One Nation	10.2	Higher than national trend
Greens	5.9	Lower than national trend
Nationals	3.3	Lower than national trend

increased the likelihood of a voter supporting the populist right-wing over mainstream parties. In the UK, Green and Shorrocks (2023) identified gender resentment as one factor prompting some men to vote for Brexit in 2017. In the US, gendered nationalism, skewed by normative beliefs about masculinity, was found to be significant in voting for Donald Trump (Deckman and Cassese 2021).

Gaston and Hilhorst (2018: 17–18) found that in Europe and the UK, many citizens believe that governments turn ‘a blind eye’, and choose to ‘forget us’. Conspiracy ideas about endemic corruption in politics flourish on social media, and encourage adoption of an anti-government stance (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Some survey comments followed that same trend, for example, ‘[the] rift between Government and the people whom they are voted to represent has grown wider’ (R235, 23, unemployed, single). An older man wrote, ‘I see government now as a self-serving, corrupt organisation with disgustingly selfish people in jobs that they are barely capable of’ (R116, 40, administrator, married). In the eyes of quite a few, no government can ever be trusted, thus, ‘all governments lie’ (R76, 27, retail, single). A young man wrote, ‘the government cares less about people and more about the market’ (R221, 26, clerical worker, single). It should be borne in mind that the Australian Labor Party’s traditional blue-collar base has steadily fractured over the last 50 years (AFR 2019).

A subsequent closed survey question used a five-point Likert scale to ask men whether they agreed or disagreed with a set of sociopolitical statements (Table 6).

There was almost unanimous endorsement of the statement, ‘I support Australian democracy’. We regard this with caution. Support for democracy in principle may not necessarily signal satisfaction with democracy in practice. As Seippel and Strandbu (2017: 418) point out, right-wing sympathisers may be eager to communicate their support for democracy, so long as they are the ones defining what it means. The populist right wing does not somehow exist outside normal democracy (Vieten and Poynting 2022). Rather, it represents a kind of ‘pathological normalcy’ in contemporary western democracies (Mudde 2010: 1167). Thus, expressed support for democracy in a country like Australia may implicitly reference the patriotic theme of settler colonial nationalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Fahey et al. 2022; Diamond 2021). For example, a new far-right, anti-immigration party – *Reignite Democracy Australia*, contested seats in the 2022 federal election (Khalil 2022: 171). Moreover, *Identity and Democracy* has been a far-right political bloc in the European Parliament since 2019. In the case of survey question 26, the statement *I support Australian democracy* could possibly have been read as a proxy for ‘I support the Australian way of life’, which may infer white nationalism.

The second highest agreement on Question 26 was with the statement: ‘The government should protect working class men’. It appears to confirm the respondents’ identification with the traditional masculine blue-collar base of the ‘aussie battler’ breadwinner (Waling 2019). One man wrote in response to a subsequent open question, ‘the everyday

Table 6. Question 26 – socio-political statements ($n = 320$) 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree.

Statement	Response	%
I support multiculturalism	From strongly agree to agree	62.8
Muslims don't want to fit in	From strongly agree to agree	31.6
The government should protect working class men	From strongly agree to agree	63.4
I support Australian democracy	From strongly agree to agree	78.1

working man is just disposable' (R160, 29, job-seeker, single). R160 had a Certificate III/IV Trade qualification, but was unemployed at the time of the survey. A man in his thirties wrote, 'traditional blue-collar jobs [are] disappearing' (R239, 35, community service worker, *de facto*). Another young man claimed, 'there is a lack of purpose and meaning to young men's lives (...) There is pessimism surrounding being able to own a house, find a good partner and raise a family' (R113, 31, technician, divorced). Women were often held to account, for instance, '[the] pay gap is total bullshit. As a 23-year-old apprentice mechanic it absolutely shocks me to see a new girl start up at my work as a receptionist and get paid twice the amount for simply answering phones' (R287, 23, tradesman, single). Another man concurred, 'the [gendered] wage gap is a myth created by misreading data' (R7, 33, public service, married). Both comments deny the factuality of the gendered wage gap in Australia (ABS 2021b), which was wider than the OECD average in 2021 (OECD 2020). Stahl, McDonald and Young (2021: 111) found that working-class Australian men deeply endorse traditional understandings of men's work such as a 'hard day's work deserves a fair day's pay'. When they feel their work is not valued highly enough, they get resentful.

Discussion

Through interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative survey data we propose a positive answer to the initial question of whether perceived decline of male privilege and societal status plays a role in garnering populist right-wing support by men in Australia. We suggest an elective affinity; a non-random coherence between two or more separate systems of meaning, where the contents of one system of meaning influence people to pursue the other system of meaning (Weber 1905). In this case the elective affinity appears to be between misogyny and right-wing populism. For example, male supremacy and white supremacy have always shown considerable overlap (Ralph-Morrow 2022; Stern 2019). The elective affinity feeds the discourse of white male victimhood which inflects so much of far-right appeal for men who feel disenfranchised.

The main themes from the survey data themes were nostalgia for past heteronormative masculinity, misogyny and white male victimhood. There was some disillusionment with government and mainstream political parties, yet strong support for Australian democracy – at least in principle. Many of the men reported feeling stressed and anxious. Together, those findings of affect suggest a combination of social pessimism and populist thinking, similar to what Paul Gilroy (2005) describes in the UK; obsessive online repetition of white (male) victimhood and loss of identity feeds directly into an anxious, melancholic mood. As Crenshaw (2011) states, it is not so much about the objective conditions that radical right sympathisers experience, but about how they perceive their situation in terms of grievance and injustice. Many written survey comments certainly indicated the sense of aggrieved masculine entitlement (Kalish and Kimmel 2010), which in itself constitutes affect.

Overall, many men's responses implied anxiety and resentment about their lives, their career circumstances, and their relationships with women. Anti-government sentiment was intense for some, as was active misogyny. They seemed sympathetic to far-right discourse that reaches out to men at an emotional and experiential level (Roose et al. 2022), suggesting that white male victimhood is widely shared and regarded as normal. Affective

evocation of the ordinary and everyday increases the apparent legitimacy of far-right discourse (Leser and Spissinger 2023). In Australia it seems segments of the male working class, in itself long the cornerstone of the unionised left, might come to support the anti-feminist, anti-immigration far right as an expression of frustration and disappointment at growing inequality and everyday income struggle. That identity construction echoes Connell's (1995) framing of 'protest masculinity' – men's status-recouping behaviours emerge from a sharp contradiction between the idealised image of the powerful and their own sense of powerlessness.

We identified nostalgia for the heroic patriarchal legacy of the traditional white male breadwinner. We also found resentment of how women and gender diverse people have moved into positions of authority in the workforce and into public life in Australia, and disappointment that hetero-normative expectations of nuclear family life are questioned. Finally, we identified mistrust of mainstream political parties. Quite a few of the men in the survey pointed to social and cultural changes that disempower traditional (white) Australian men who approximate the ideal of the 'aussie battler'.

There is little indication in the survey data to suggest any of the men held extremist far-right views as defined by Carter (2018), or were contemplating direct action. Yet at the same time, many respondents wrote words and phrases that mirror populist right-wing discourse, some of them quite sophisticated; such as [gender]'liquidity', 'insidiously devalued' and 'capitulated to the experiment of feminism'. Reading back into the data, we suggest that the men in our sample, the majority of whom work in blue-collar labour sectors, feel left behind and let down by a range of economic and social changes. It may be that utilising clever-sounding right-wing populist language signifies as an act of self-empowerment. That also implies spending a lot of time online.

No account of contemporary Australian right-wing populist masculinity can be grasped without acknowledging the powerful persuasive force of social media, given how many respondents indicated extensive use of digital sources for news and information. The online world is now so vast in scale that even net-savvy millennials tend to occupy only a relatively small niche of contacts with whom they share ideas and feel comfortable. In affective terms, that online filter bubble makes the digital world seem safe and comfortable. Yet while the secure bubble of the apparently like-minded is reassuring, it carries its own risks. It can increase the likelihood of an 'echo chamber' effect, where something is judged to be true because it comes from someone you know, and appears in a lot of places simultaneously, leading to confirmation bias.

Krendel (2020) found that men who are part of the digital manosphere typically construct themselves as victims, insecure and unhappy. In terms of affect, they are resentful and want to blame someone. The survey data indicate who and what Australian men routinely blame: the government, women, feminists, LGBTQ+, allegedly 'weak' men, and so on. They rarely held to account the fractured socio-economic system in which they are embedded, preferring to demonise the government and politicians. It is understandable that they resent work precarity and economic injustice, but online manosphere rhetoric blames feminism, culture wars and gender diversity for those things, and they repeat it. Moreover, despite criticising aspects of representative democracy, their survey responses did not suggest any form of a viable alternative. That in itself suggests an epistemic gap into which further right-wing populist propaganda can be poured.

Conclusion

When investigating any affinity between men and the far right, recognising the affective aspects of discourse and practice is important for understanding the attraction and durability of right-wing populism. Our research so far supports the premise that far-right appeal to white men in Australia operates at emotional, visceral and symbolical levels, not merely political. We identify implications for policy and practice. At present, most government and critical journalistic attention in Australia and elsewhere is focused on men involved in far-right extremism and plotting for violence. Yet, when it comes to a loosely-affiliated politico-social movement like right-wing populism, radicalism represents only the tip of the phenomenological iceberg; sitting above a wide groundswell of implicit support. We urgently need to attend to the endorsement of ‘ordinary’ people, men in particular, for divisive populism. Moreover, the prejudicial gender attitudes expressed by many men who responded to our survey should give cause for concern. It suggests that, for some cohorts of Australian men, little has shifted in their patriarchal heteronormative discourse in recent times, despite the best efforts of social justice reformers and diversity advocates.

Notes

1. Traditionally-identified men reference their behaviour and attitudes to a set of conventional standards and expectations for men that strongly enshrine perceived gender differences.
2. The phrase white male victimhood connotes the feeling of some men that they are now socially stigmatised for being male and for being white.
3. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a gender-normative pattern in which stereotypically male traits are idealised as the masculine cultural ideal, to justify how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women and other groups considered to be feminine.
4. VB is Victoria Bitter, sometimes described as the working man’s beer in Victoria.
5. Penis.
6. Eshay is a slang term for a rowdy time-wasting young Australian man.

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