

# Young Masculinities and Right-Wing Populism in Australia

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**Abstract:** This paper offers insights into the nexus of youth, masculinity and right-wing populism in Australia. Here we make reference to a wide body of international literature on the topic. There is some affinity between disenfranchised (white) working-class young men and the radical right. Survey data were collected for a project on masculinity and the far right in Australia. 203 young men worked primarily in "blue collar" sectors of the Australian labour force. Some survey responses locate them partly or potentially within the field of the populist right-wing, with many expressing anti-government sentiments and the discourse of white male victimhood. The majority were nostalgic for stereotypical masculinity. While right-wing populist movements across the world certainly differ, they often share a discourse promoting traditional gender roles.

**Keywords:** far-right, masculinity, class, entitlement

## Introduction

It seems there is some affinity between disenfranchised (white) working-class young men and the radical right [1- 9]. The survey data analysed below were collected for a project on masculinity and the far right in Australia. Over half of 335 male<sup>1</sup> respondents surveyed were aged 35 and under, with a quarter aged 25 or less. We selected the 203 younger informant responses for analysis. The young men worked primarily in 'blue collar' sectors of the Australian labour force. Specific survey responses and written comments locate some of them partly or potentially within the field of the populist right-wing. For example, many were anti-government and also promoted the discourse of white male victimhood. The majority were nostalgic for stereotypical masculinity. While right-wing populist movements across the world certainly differ, they often share a discourse promoting traditional gender roles [10,11].

The majority of younger survey informants seemed angry at the situations in which they find themselves. That is not surprising. Young Australians under the age of 35 are the first group to be less well-off than the generation before them in terms of annual income, employment prospects and home ownership [12]. They face both the ever-upward credentialling of the labour market, and increasingly precarious work conditions [13]. Australia currently ranks third in the OECD for income and has the ninth highest average earnings in the

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terminology male/men to refer to cis-gendered men. We avoid using the popular but static concept of 'toxic' masculinity in favour of understanding masculinity(ies) as a relational identity.

OECD [14]. Nevertheless, Australian living costs are high. Struggles to save while shoring up a secure position in the labour market impact negatively on young people's capacity to achieve secure housing and/or home ownership [15]. Challenging labour force and education trends intensively fracture the usual steps of transition to adulthood [16], especially for less well-off young workers. Thus, young men with less education can find themselves at a distinct labour market disadvantage [17,18]. It seems young men in insecure work are more likely to find populist right-wing ideas attractive [19]. There can be critical implications for men's identity formation when their status as the actual or potential breadwinner becomes precarious [20]. Calls for a return to traditional gender roles may exert a pull, operating as 'reactionary rehabilitation' for white masculinity facing an uncertain future [21] (p. 68). Steven Roberts analysed the current generation of young working-class men in Australia. He found their worldview had been negatively impacted by neo-liberal de-industrialisation, and profound changes in educational expectation. They expressed not only a sense of grievance, but nostalgia for the male breadwinner certainties of the past [22]. In Australia, older patriarchally-organised structures of society have been re-organised by recognition of women's rights; in work, in protection from discrimination, and in wages and life choices. Some Australian men believe they are disadvantaged by those developments; losing privileges that should rightfully have been theirs [23].

### *Right-wing populism and white male victimhood*

Judith Bessant points out that young people are often criticised by an older generation for being disengaged from the politics that shape their lives [4]. Yet if we take politics in the broad sense, that claim is hard to reconcile with the evidence of informal youth engagement, both positive and negative. In generational terms, young people are at a critical point in the development of political awareness. They are forming their worldviews and making their first voting decisions [24]. Since categorical nationalism has become much more popular among young people, it is increasingly imbricated in the boundaries of 'us' and 'the other' which are fundamental to right-wing populism.

When we speak of the populist right-wing, we do not intend to assign intrinsic coherence to a loose set of ideas that range from anti-elitism, to entrenched misogyny and homophobia, to xenophobia, and everything neo-conservative in between, including ultra-nationalism, primordial nostalgia for past white supremacy, and endorsement of the patriarchal nuclear family. Rather, we build from the understanding that populism divides society into two antagonistic groups; the so-called 'pure' people, and their opposite, the so-called 'corrupt elite' [25-27]. Right-wing populism is founded on the further idea of the (threatening) cultural 'other'; usually manifesting as prejudice/intolerance of ethnic minorities [28]. We also acknowledge the current prevalence of white male victimhood discourse [2] [6,7] [29] which is often deeply entwined with right-wing populist rhetoric [1].

In the right-wing populist narrative of white male victimhood, the 'pure people' of Cas Mudde's definition [9] are understood as white men with conservative views working in traditional masculine occupations. The 'corrupt elite' that oppresses such men is not imagined within the palimpsest of late-modern capitalism, but rather as distant and suspect government forces fuelled by the claims of women, feminists, LGBTQ+ people, and so-called 'limp-wristed' men; as well as health experts, leftists and #metoo. That narrative of oppression gains gravity from the ever-widening gap between traditional white male breadwinner expectations, and deep changes in the labour market and the economy. The widening gap can produce in some young men a feeling of 'aggrieved entitlement' – the sense that something valuable has been taken away from them unfairly [30] (p. 454). Resentment is then channelled into the standard discourse of white male victimhood by the digital propaganda of the so-called

‘manosphere’. The term manosphere refers to online communities that circulate misogynist material [1] [21] [31]. The online ‘hate’ message is that feminists, LGBTQI+s, left-leaning individuals, people of colour, and so on, have undermined (white) men [32]. It is typically accompanied by longing for ‘a lost patriarchal social order’ [1] (p. 34).

Digital tools assist in driving the global far right to the front and centre. Not only are contemporary young people avid users of internet/social media, but the sheer intensity of their networked engagement means coming into contact with ‘fringe’ ideas [33] (p. 710). Accordingly, online hate groups target their sites, chat room discussions, iconography and posts to a youth constituency [34]. This has produced a small but significant ‘dystopian’ cluster of extreme right youth on the internet in Australia [35]. In the US, three variables were identified as salient for youth susceptibility to online hate: being white, being male, and harbouring a sense of political grievance [33]. There is debate about whether online far right hate is driven by socioeconomic crisis or identity crisis [36]. The former assumes lack of job certainty and constrained life prospects [9]. The latter rests on insecurities related to globalization and so-called ‘woke’ condemnation of xenophobic and misogynist attitudes [37] (p. 980). Let us briefly consider those claims.

The first thing to note is that much has altered in the economy, in the workplace, the home and in politics. The second significant trend lies in more and more compelling calls for equality and recognition of diversity. Some claim a resulting ‘crisis’ of masculinity, one characterised by uncertainties over livelihood, social identity, sexuality, work, and relationships [38]. However, it should be noted that not all men currently experience a sense of crisis. Some may feel relieved by recent change and are keen to adapt. For example, a recent study of men and identity found a variety of Australian masculinities that did not match up with the idea of a single, unified gender crisis among men [39]. Men who do feel in crisis are more likely to be disadvantageously positioned in the labour market due to the decline of heavy industries, reduced demand for physical labour, development of the service economy, and widespread upskilling [19] [22]. It seems that ‘political sympathies and attitudes established early in life tend to endure through to adult life’ [40] (p. 416). So, it is important for us to study how contemporary young white men in the precariat might come to find populist right-wing ideas attractive.

## Methodology

The project from which this data is drawn set out to provide some answers to the question of why some men in Australia are strongly drawn to joining or supporting far right groups. One methodological component was an online survey. A survey is a useful research method for collecting data quickly from a large group of respondents. The method is reliable and the results are in principle generalisable. While most of our survey questions were closed format, others were open, inviting written response. Open questions offer the opportunity to answer using informants’ own language, terms, and expressions, yielding personal, sometimes unexpected comments [41] (p. 98). While some survey respondents wrote nothing, others wrote at some length. Sampling for a survey may be random or purposive [42]. In this case, the sampling was purposive. Potential respondents were invited via a Facebook advertisement which asked the question: What does it mean to be a man in Australia today? - juxtaposed with images of urban and rural men of different professions and ages. Of 388 online responses, 335 proved valid. 203 respondents were men aged 35 and under. The data here comes from the younger men’s responses. However, for the sake of consistency in reporting, respondents are numbered according to the full dataset of 335.

Our survey yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. We took account of the quantitative data using SPSS(v23) for bivariate analysis. The qualitative data from written

comments were analysed thematically. In drawing together the two forms of data, we applied tests of correlation to the sample, then filled out quantitative findings with examples from the qualitative data. It should be noted that our research was conducted at the height of the COVID19 pandemic in Australia in 2021, when many cities and states were in lockdown. That period saw many people living under considerable stress. (Ethical review committee: Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee; Approval number: 2020-64H)

### *Snapshot of sample*

Of the 203 younger respondents - aged 35 and under, 58.6 per cent were working full time, with only 6.9 per cent looking for work. 55 per cent were single and 29.2 per cent were in a de facto relationship. 53.5 per cent ticked 'no religion' and 19.3 per cent ticked 'Catholic.' For education, only 16.7 per cent indicated a Bachelor's Degree. Most ticked either (Trade) Certificate III/IV Level qualification, or Secondary Education – Year 10 and above. Some young men from lower SES backgrounds may repudiate education and training due to the corporeal regulation and status meritocracy of educational institutions [18]. Yet in this case, it is worth noting that some of the young survey respondents may have been concurrently in apprenticeship training and working. Almost a third said they were technicians and trade workers, with 17.8 per cent labourers. The four most common work fields<sup>2</sup> were: construction; agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining (all traditional male occupations); and retail (new). Since the mid-1970s, there has been a significant decline in traditional 'blue-collar work' in Australia and a concomitant rise in the sales and service sector for male employees. The same period has also seen a rapid rise in the percentage of Australians with a post-school qualification [43]. In summary, the re-definition of 'working class' now includes lower-paid clerical and administrative white-collar workers [44]. That more or less describes the sample of young men surveyed.

### **Information sources**

We turn first to sources of information, since that is important for grasping further trends that emerged in the data. We know that young people today are avid users of internet/social media and are intensely engaged with digital networks [45, 46]. A survey question asked respondents about their main source of news and information.

Table 1: Main source of news and information for younger men (n=183)

Source	%
Digital and social media	66.1
TV and radio	13.1
Other	9.3
Newspapers	6.6
Friends and family	4.9

Age was clearly important for responses to this question. Pearson's two-tailed t-test was applied to the nominal variables of age (Question 2) and main source of news/information (Question 29). The correlation was significant at 0.01 level, confirming that younger respondents more frequently nominated social/digital media as their main source of information. That finding echoes the claims of Costello *et al* [33] that young people today rely almost exclusively on online sources for news and information.

<sup>2</sup> <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/industry-profiles/>

The next question asked about frequently-used digital platforms.

Table 2: Most frequently-used digital and social media by younger men

Choice	Media	%	N =
#1	Facebook	97.3	N = 183 (20 did not answer)
#2	Instagram	39.8	N = 171 (32 did not answer)
#3	YouTube	31.8	N = 129 (74 did not answer)

Preferences may be indicative, because these three platforms – Facebook, Instagram and YouTube - have previously been identified as significant for the promulgation of intolerant and hate-based rhetoric [34]. In February 2022, the largest demographic group of Facebook users worldwide was those aged 25-35, with more young males [47]. For Instagram, the majority of users worldwide is aged 18-34 [48]. The second most popular social media platform worldwide, most Facebook users in the age group 15-35, and males outnumber females [49]. A recent Australian study of youth and social media confirms the routine, everyday use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube [50]; not only for connection and sharing, but for news and information [51]. The young men also mentioned Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Parler, Discord, 4Chan/8Kun and Signal. Those platforms routinely disseminate right-wing populist content, conspiracy theories, and the compensatory doxa of white male victimhood [52]. Researchers have identified a hyper-partisan online media ecosystem at the far-right fringes in Australia, operating through not only niche platforms like Gab, but spilling out into more conventional platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube [53]. Of course, we do not know exactly what content the young survey respondents take up from social/digital media, but the flavour of many written comments strongly implied ideas drawn from right-wing populist sites and feeds.

## Gender

As mentioned previously, the survey collected data for a project on masculinity and the far right in Australia. Accordingly, we asked questions about gender. Respondents were first asked to rank attributes of being a man on a 1-5 scale where 1 is most important.

Table 3: Attributes of viable masculinity for younger men (n=185)

Attribute	Most important/important %
Make decisions	47.0
Can solve your own problems	45.6
Be respected	43.8
Control emotions	43.3
Fit and strong	41.0
Have a steady job	40.6

The list in Table 3 approximates the stereotype of contemporary (white) masculinity in Australia; decisive, authoritative, rational, strong and reliable [39]. The ideal man should be 'brave, dependable, and strong, emotionally stable, as well as critical, logical, and rational', as well as prosperous and powerful [54] (p. 98). Yet amid socio-economic crises, fractures in the transition to male adulthood, egalitarian social change, and the proliferation of online misogyny and conspiracy theories of all kinds, many men struggle to find a viable identity in traditional terms. Nevertheless, one informant wrote, in glowing nationalistic terms, 'Australian men have long been a perfect example of masculinity, mateship and hard work' (R317, 22, labourer, de



facto). Others wrote apparently humorous comments like, ‘drink vb<sup>3</sup> fish hunt ride dirt bikes and yell yeeeeee yeeee’ (R129, 26 farm worker, de facto), and ‘to be a man you need a dick<sup>4</sup>, that’s about it’ (R182, 23, labourer, de facto).

There was acknowledgement of change in norms of Australian masculinity, 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). Another wrote, ‘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). The idea of ‘true blue’ [39] was much in evidence; for example, ‘things seem to be changing, we have three distinct types of men in Australia now; Eshays<sup>5</sup>, “men” from Melbourne, and true blue aussies. If I had to pick one, real aussies would win out’ (R317, 22, labourer, de facto). Blame for the waning of traditional masculine norms was assigned to others, for example, ‘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). When young men comment disparagingly on the traits or behaviours of other kinds of men it asserts their own claims to masculinity. Morally proclaiming the ‘right’ kind of traditional heterosexual masculinity may signal affinity with right-wing populism [3]. For instance, a far-right political party (Brothers of Italy - *Fratelli d'Italia*) has just won in Italy, with a platform that includes policy against LGBTQ+ rights [55]. Similarly, 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 [56].

Many written comments in the survey expressed the discourse of white male victimhood. For example, ‘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 their view, white heteronormative masculinity is definitely under attack. Feminism was a frequent target of blame. A subsequent question asked directly about women’s rights.

Table 4: Have women’s rights gone too far? Younger men

In the home (n=194)	Response	%
	No	71.7
	Yes	17.5
	Maybe	10.8
In society (n=194)		
	No	44.3
	Yes	32.5
	Maybe	23.2
In politics (n=193)		
	No	57.5
	Yes	27.5
	Maybe	15.0

Table 4 shows that while women’s rights may be progressing *in the home* (almost three quarters indicated No – they had not gone too far), almost twice as many young respondents felt women’s rights have gone too far *in society*. 55.7 per cent answered Yes or Maybe, and

<sup>3</sup> VB is Victoria Bitter, sometimes described as the working man’s beer in Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> Penis.

<sup>5</sup> Eshays is a slang term for Australian young men from poorer backgrounds, the equivalent of a British ‘chav.’

less than half answered No. It suggests the young men are troubled by women claiming rights and taking up positions in the public sphere. That resonates with the virulent propaganda of right-wing misogynist groups like *Proud Boys*. *Proud Boys* are certainly concerned by the alleged 'replacement' of white people by people of colour [57]; but are prone to hysteria when it comes to the imagined 'replacement' of men in positions of power by women [58]. We need to consider the complexities of gender identity and other socio-cultural factors that are constituted at the interface of hetero-normative masculinity and the populist right wing [1]. At that point of discursive struggle, engaging right-wing populist misogynist discourse - online and offline - may have compensatory value for young (white) men who feel they have somehow missed out; in their career, in relationships, in making their views heard. Let us briefly examine the local background of structural change.

Profound economic and workplace shifts over four decades in Australia have seen a significant decline in men's full-time unskilled and semi-skilled blue-collar work, along with growth in contract and part-time work, even in skilled and highly skilled sectors [22]. Women have entered 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 [59]. Traditionally, the majority of adult men worked full-time hours while women either did not work, or took up part-time employment. Today the double income family is the norm. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that as of June 2021, 73.7 per cent of couple families with children under 15 have mothers who are employed. Moreover, 80.8 per cent of wives in couples with children between 10 and 14 years of age are employed [59]. In short, the labour characteristics, pay and conditions historically associated with the male breadwinner model of the family no longer apply. At the same time, more precarious, short term and contract work has been growing apace [19], leading to what some call the 'gig' economy – a highly fragmented and insecure work sector [60]. Australian living costs are high. As one young man lamented, 'it's fxxking hard, especially for young men who are trying to create a future for themselves as give-back to their parents' (R280, 20, mining worker, single). The ever-rising cost of living and increased precarity in the labour market signal 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 young men who complete technical/vocational training can experience periods of labour market insecurity. That drives anger and resentment, and may activate nostalgic desire for return to fixed gender roles. Yet we know there is an association between measures of traditional masculine role adherence and a range of psychological and educational problems among boys and young men [61]. Adherence to norms of traditional masculinity contribute to higher risk behaviours for men, 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 [62] (p. 145).

The final survey question invited respondents to write anything they wanted about being a man in Australia today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was further nostalgia for traditional forms of masculinity. Proportionally, fewer younger than older respondents gave a written response.

Table 5: Invited reflections on being a man in Australia today for younger men (n=89)

Nature of comment	Response %
Supports patriarchal/traditional gender norms	73.0
Supports alternative framing of masculinity	21.3
Other topic	5.6

Table 5 shows that 73 per cent of 89 younger respondents indicated strong support for traditional gender norms. Pearson's two-tailed t-test was applied to the variables of age (Question 2), and support for patriarchal/traditional gender norms (Question 40), across the total dataset of 335 men. The correlation was significant at the 0.01 level. We confirmed that support for patriarchal norms was expressed more by older rather than younger men on this question. Even so, certain comments from younger respondents exemplified nostalgia, for example, 'men and women have different but valuable roles in Australian society - we must honour and cherish them both' (R232, 30, telecommunications, single), and '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).

In conclusion, white male victimhood was a consistent discourse throughout the young men's survey comments. It certainly mirrors the prevalence of misogynist, far-right rhetoric online. For instance, the *United Patriots Front* in Australia urges online followers to engage the discourse of white male victimhood as a self-evident 'truth' [63]. Similarly, *True Blue Crew* invites young white male Australians to engage a primordial white masculinist view as seminal to their own subjective concerns [64]. Across the board, populist right-wing propaganda online promises men a return to a time before the perceived restrictions of feminism and political correctness [65].

## Politics

The project set out to collect data on masculinity and right-wing politics. Accordingly, one survey question asked about future voting preference. Only 75 of 203 younger men answered, possibly indicating some apathy to mainstream politics.

Table 6: Younger men's voting preference for future election (n=75) – mid-2021

Party	%
Coalition	22.7
Labor	22.7
Other	20.0
Greens	16.0
Independent	8.0
Nationals	5.3
One Nation	5.3

\* Examples of Other were United Australia Party; Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party; Socialist Alliance.

22.7 per cent of the young men indicated they would support Labor, and the same percentage for the Coalition, with 16 per cent for the Greens. That was in mid-2021. May 2022 saw the Labor Party take government, but with a reduced margin due in large part to success by the Greens [66], and the so-called 'Teal' Independents, most of whom were well-educated professional women. In the 2019 election, young voters moved further to the left, while older voters moved to the right [67] (p. 18). In the 2022 election, electorates with the highest rate of voters under 30 saw unprecedented support for the Greens [66]. Yet as Table 6 shows, the young male survey respondents in 2021 indicated more support for the right-wing One Nation party and for Other, and less support for the Greens compared to the generational voting pattern observed in the 2022 election.

They also showed stronger support for right-wing populist ideas. Thus, '[the] rift between Government and the people whom they are voted to represent has grown wider' (R235, 23, unemployed, single). This comment hints at a distant elite oppressing the ordinary



people. Some informants wrote that they did not trust any political party, for instance, ‘all political parties are inherently flawed’ (R204, 20, retail, single). In that populist discourse, no government can ever be trusted, ‘all Governments lie and are not an ally. The Australian Government and all the state and territory governments are no exception’ (R76, 27, retail, single). The Labor Party’s traditional blue-collar base has fractured over the last 50 years [68]. Overall, the impact on voting of engaging in manual or non-manual work has declined [43]. The young survey respondents would appear to harbour either a residual legacy of the traditional (male) blue-collar voting base, or a resentful mistrust of mainstream parties - in favour of a right-wing populist representation.

Another question asked about socio-political attitudes.

Table 7: Younger men’s agreement with statements; 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree

Statement	Response	%
I support multiculturalism (n=194)	Strongly agree/agree	67.2
Muslims don't want to fit in (n=192)	Strongly agree/agree	26.5
The government should protect working class men (n=192)	Strongly agree/agree	69.8
I support Australian democracy (n=193)	Strongly agree/agree	73.5

Some of the same respondents who agreed that ‘Muslims don’t want to fit in’, agreed or strongly agreed with support for multiculturalism and democracy. This apparent contradiction points to the specific phenomenon of Islamophobia; the belief that Islam and western cultures are incompatible [69].

The most unanimous agreement was with the statement, ‘I support Australian democracy.’ Pearson’s two-tailed t-test was applied to the nominal variables of age (Question 2) and younger men’s responses to ‘I support Australian democracy’ (Question 26 – statement 6). The correlation was significant at the 0.01 level, confirming that younger men more strongly supported democracy, even though satisfaction with democracy across the board declined rapidly in Australia up to 2019 [70]. Right-wing sympathisers may be eager to communicate their support for democracy, so long as they are the ones defining what it means [40] (p. 148). In this case the telling word is probably ‘Australian.’ The survey statement ‘I support Australian democracy’ might be read as a proxy for ‘I support the Australian way of life’.

The second highest agreement on this question was with the statement: ‘The government should protect working class men’. Once again, age seemed important. Using Pearson’s two-tailed t-test, a correlation was confirmed as significant (0.01) between the variables of age (Question 2), and reaction to the statement, ‘The government should protect working class men’ (Question 26 – statement 8). While older men in the sample more often agreed that the government should protect working class men, younger men agreed less. This suggests that older men may have a greater sense of white male working class self-identification compared to younger men in the earlier stages of their working and social lives. It also seems to confirm that the traditional blue-collar base of the Labor Party has dropped away over the past few decades [68].

Yet clearly the majority of young respondents were concerned about their situation as ‘working-class’ men. For instance, one wrote that, ‘the working everyday 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. Another wrote, ‘traditional blue-collar jobs [are] disappearing’ (R239, 35, community service worker, de facto). One man in his thirties deplored perceived lack of opportunity to realise key attainments of adult masculinity; ‘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). Often

their expressed resentment refuted gender inequality in the workforce, for example, '[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), and 'the [gendered] wage gap is a myth created by misreading data' (R7, 33, public service, married). Both comments deny the fact of the gendered wage gap in Australia [59], which was wider than the OECD average in 2021 [71]. A report by Stahl, McDonald and Young found that young 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 [18] (p. 111).

A further survey question asked respondents to rank their attitudes towards significant socio-political phenomena.

Table 8: Younger men: Selected socio-political issues; (0= Progressive; 10 = Conservative)

Phenomenon	% higher than 5	Attitude
Same sex marriage (n=184)	64.7	Conservative
Asylum seekers (n=184)	67.4	Conservative
Religious beliefs (n=184)	69.6	Conservative
#metoo (n=179)	67.0	Conservative

The majority of young men allied themselves with conservative attitudes on some of the contentious socio-political issues that dominate the media in Australia today. Responses to this question appear to confirm intolerant discourse elsewhere in the survey, particularly in the written comments, where we found instances of misogyny, homophobia/transphobia, and racism.

## Feelings

Research has established the distinctiveness of (white) working class male anger in conditions of economic transformation [72]. Following that lead, we adapted the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) instrument in a question asking about negative feelings.

Table 9: Most common feelings for younger men in the past month

Choice #1 (n=185)	Feeling	%
	Stress	39.8
	Anxiety	36.8
	Sadness	31.8
	Frustration	10.3
Choice #2 (n=152)		
	Frustration	28.9
	Stress	24.3
	Feeling worthless	13.8
	Anger	11.8

Stress was the most common first choice, followed by anxiety and sadness. Frustration, stress, and feeling worthless were often second choices. Proportionally fewer respondents identified anger. Stress was probably influenced by the survey timing. In mid-2021, at the height of the COVID19 pandemic, many states in Australia were in lockdown and/or had applied strict public health measures. People felt the pressure. Support for right-wing populism

rose rapidly in Australia in the context of the global COVID19 pandemic and its aftermath [73].

A subsequent question invited respondents to indicate how the COVID19 pandemic made them feel:

Table 10: Effect of COVID19 on feelings/mood for younger men (n=176)

Scale	%
Highly pessimistic	30.7
Pessimistic	33.0
Neutral	22.2
Optimistic	9.1
Highly optimistic	5.1

The majority (63.7%) indicated they felt pessimistic or highly pessimistic; often expressed in nihilistic comments such as, 'scared the world is ending' (R78, 27, jobseeker, separated). Many written comments pointed the finger at government management of the pandemic, for example, 'the government is both more incompetent, more corrupt and more tyrannical than I thought' (R175, 24, jobseeker, single). The pandemic probably exacerbated the historically low rate of trust in government. Government trust in Australia was only 44.6 per cent in 2019, quite a lot less than most other industrialised nations [74]. This trend has potential to dampen the discourse of citizenship amid rising right-wing populism [75]. 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 and I for one will not allow it to happen' (R231, 29, part-time manual worker, single). Another 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). That Darwinian/eugenics principle was one commonly expressed in far-right political discourse during the pandemic [76].

## Discussion

The main survey data trends for younger men were identified as follows:

- Information primarily gained from social/digital media
- Occasional discourse of misogyny and white male victimhood
- Evidence of nostalgia for past heteronormative masculinity
- Some disillusionment with government and mainstream political parties
- Support for democracy
- Conservative attitudes on contentious socio-political phenomena
- Relatively high levels of stress

There was no clear pattern in our survey data to suggest the young male informants were headed towards a right-wing populist affiliation as defined by Mudde [9]. Furthermore, their socio-political orientations do not fit neatly into a simple left-right political divide [40]. Kathleen Blee has usefully pointed out the problem of looking for evidence of a distinct far right movement where one does not exist [77]. At the same time though, there is no doubt that the majority of the younger survey respondents felt politically disenfranchised. Their written comments were often aggrieved and aggressive, implying thoughts and feelings that resonate with populist right-wing discourse. Comments hinted at nostalgia for a mythical 'golden past'

when society was less diverse, the nation was actively defended, and traditional gender roles were not questioned [65]. Overall, their responses constituted an us-and-them binary of white male victimhood that distinguishes them explicitly from women - and by frequent implication - from non-whites.

The data suggest that support for democracy (in principle) may not necessarily signal satisfaction with democracy (in practice). It also appears to confirm that the populist right wing does not somehow exist outside 'normal' democracy [27]. Thereby, expressed support for democracy may implicitly reference settler colonial nationalism, especially when coupled with conservative ideas about traditional heterosexual masculinity. Echoing earlier findings [1], the young men were nostalgic for a lost patriarchal social order in Australia. A recent study suggests that men who are part of the digital manosphere typically construct themselves as victims, insecure and unhappy. They are resentful and want someone to blame [78]. Our survey data indicate who and what they are blaming: the government, women, feminists, LGBTQ+, so-called 'weak' men, and so on, but rarely the neo-liberal socio-economic system in which they are embedded.

Arguably, the populist radical right is not 'alien' to mainstream values in contemporary western democracies but represents a kind of 'pathological normalcy' [79] (p. 1167). Populist right-wing rhetoric re-interprets mainstream values like nationalism and heteronormativity within a paradigm that repudiates difference and diversity. In that sense, the political position of young (working class) Australian men who completed our survey might be productively compared to that of young white male identitarians who support the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vest) movement in France. They imply a similar critique of representative democracy, yet do not necessarily ally themselves with any established political position or institution [80]. Many felt stressed, frustrated and anxious. It is highly possible that everyday engagements with the ideological rabbit-holes of Facebook and YouTube serve to inflame and amplify their troubled feelings in the direction of white male victimhood, and deep mistrust of government.

## Conclusion

Reflecting back on the survey data, we suggest that the young men in our sample, the majority of whom are employed in what were once called 'blue-collar' labour sectors, feel left behind and let down by a range of economic and social changes. They resent work precarity and financial struggle, but are encouraged by peers offline and online to blame feminism, culture wars, gender diversity, political correctness, and so on. In that context, some young men may defend traditional gendered ways of demonstrating autonomy and pursuing status, calling upon historical masculine norms. They may be partly blinded to the actual conditions of their lives, and to ongoing gendered inequality, by the sheer abundance of online populism. Despite criticising aspects of representative democracy, their survey responses did not suggest any form of a viable alternative. That in itself suggests a semantic gap into which far-right political propaganda might be poured in the future.

There are implications for policy and practice here. At present, most government and critical journalistic attention in Australia and elsewhere is devoted to seeking out and investigating men involved in far-right extremism and plotting for violence. Yet, when it comes to a very loosely-affiliated politico-social movement like right-wing populism, radicalism represents only the tip of the phenomenological iceberg. We also need to attend to the groundswell of support from so-called 'ordinary' people for intolerant, divisive populism. Moreover, since the future of the nation depends on the generations to come, young sympathisers with right-wing populist ideas ought not to be left out of the investigative endeavour.

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