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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 that suggests some affinity between disenfranchised (white) working-class young men and radical right ideas. Survey data were collected for a project on masculinity and the far right in Australia. A total of 203 young male informants worked primarily in 'blue collar' sectors of the Australian labour force. Some survey responses located 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

Citation: Nilan, P.; Roose, J.; Peucker, M.; Turner, B.S. Young Masculinities and Right-Wing Populism in Australia. *Youth* **2023**, *3*, 285–299. https://doi.org/10.3390/youth3010019

Academic Editor: Todd Michael Franke

Received: 26 October 2022
Revised: 8 February 2023
Accepted: 14 February 2023
Published: 20 February 2023

1. Introduction

This paper contributes to the field of youth studies by examining resonance between the discourse of disenfranchised (White) working-class young men and right-wing populism [1–9]. This is important because right-wing masculinist discourse may constitute grounds for engaging political violence, even though such events might rarely eventuate. In a project on masculinity and the far right in Australia, we posed the research question: To what extent does the perceived decline (downward social trajectory) of male privilege and societal status play a role in populist right-wing recruitment? We understood the term recruitment in the broadest sense including the emergence of support for right-wing populist ideas and propositions. As well as older men dealing with negative perceptions of shifts over time in the labour market and gender relations, it was anticipated that young men might be coming to those experiences of change from a different generational standpoint [4,6,9]. A significant characteristic of right-wing populism is the reference to a mythical golden past age when society was less diverse, the nation was actively defended, and traditional gender roles were unquestioned [2,3].

Here, we analysed survey data. Over half of the total of 335 male (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 [9]) respondents were aged 35 and under, with a quarter were aged 25 or younger. We selected the 203 younger informant responses for analysis. The young men worked primarily in 'blue collar' sectors of the Australian labour force. In class terms, they occupy the position of the working class, that is, their relationship to the capitalist means of production is that they typically exchange their physical labour power for wages or salaried contracts, although nowadays, the category also includes low-level white-collar work and all kinds of low-paid service work.

Specific survey responses and written comments located 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 found themselves, which 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 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 that young men in insecure work are more likely to find populist right-wing ideas attractive [19]. There can be critical implications for the formation of men's identity 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. 67). Steven Roberts analysed the current generation of young working-class men in Australia and found that 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 the recognition of women's rights: in work, in protection from discrimination, and in wages and life choices. Some Australian men believe that they are disadvantaged by those developments; losing privileges that should rightfully be 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]. However, if we take politics in the broad sense, this 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 as 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 [9].

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. This 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 [20]. 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 the Internet/social media, but the sheer intensity of their networked engagement means coming into contact with 'fringe' ideas [5] (p. 710). Accordingly, online hate groups target their sites, chat room discussions, iconography, and posts to a youth constituency [33]. This has produced a small but significant 'dystopian' cluster of extreme right youth on the Internet in Australia [34]. In the U.S., three variables were identified as salient for youth susceptibility to online hate: being White, being male, and harbouring a sense of political grievance [5]. There is debate about whether online far right hate is driven by socioeconomic crisis or identity crisis [35]. The former assumes a 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 [36] (p. 980). Let us briefly consider these 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 the recognition of diversity. Some claim a resulting 'crisis' of masculinity, one characterised by uncertainties over livelihood, social identity, sexuality, work, and relationships [37]. However, it should be noted that not all men currently experience a sense of crisis. Some may feel relieved by recent change and 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 [38]. Men who do feel in crisis are more likely to be disadvantageously positioned in the labour market due to the decline in 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' [39] (p. 416). Therefore, it is important for us to study how contemporary young White men in the precariat might come to find populist right-wing ideas attractive.

2. Methodology

The project from which these data were drawn set out to provide some answers to the question of why some men in Australia might be drawn to joining or supporting groups that endorse a far right viewpoint. One methodological component was an online survey. A survey is a useful research method for collecting data quickly from a large group of respondents. According to Krosnick, the survey method itself provides a measure of reliability, and the results should in principle be generalisable [40] (p. 95). While most of our survey questions were in a closed format, others were open, inviting a written response. Open questions offer the opportunity to answer using the informants' own language, terms, and expressions, yielding personal, sometimes unexpected comments [40] (p. 98). While some survey respondents wrote nothing, others wrote at some length. In this case, the online survey sampling was purposive in the sense of targeting only Australian men. Sampling for a survey may be random or purposive [41]. Potential respondents were invited via a Facebook advertisement that 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 the 388 online responses, 335 proved valid. A total of 203 respondents were men aged 35 and under. The data here came from the younger men's responses. However, for the sake of consistency in reporting, respondents were numbered below according to the full dataset of 335.

Our survey yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. We analysed the quantitative data using SPSS (v23) for bivariate analysis. The qualitative data from the written comments were analysed thematically according to keywords of the project research question cited above: gender, politics, and to a lesser extent, the labour market experiences. In drawing together the two forms of data, we applied tests of correlation to the sample, then enriched the quantitative findings with examples from the qualitative data. It should be noted that our research was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia in 2021, when many cities and states were in lockdown. That period saw many people living under considerable stress. There is no doubt that those circumstances affected our data including the matter of whether the men who responded to the survey were working or not. On the other hand, the Australian government provided appropriate income support to people whose jobs were negatively affected over the two years of the pandemic, so the level of hardship was not as extreme as it might otherwise have been.

Snapshot of Sample

Of the 203 younger respondents—aged 35 and under, 58.6% were working full-time, with only 6.9% looking for work. A total of 55% were single and 29.2% were in a de facto relationship; 53.5% ticked 'no religion' and 19.3% ticked 'Catholic'. For education, only 16.7% 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]. However, 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 that they were technicians and trade workers, with 17.8% labourers. The four most common fields of work (https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/industry-profiles/ (accessed on 25 July 2022)) 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 [42]. In summary, the re-definition of 'working class' now includes lower-paid clerical and administrative white-collar workers [43], which more or less describes the sample of young men surveyed.

3. Information Sources

We turn first to sources of information, since 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 [44,45]. A survey question asked respondents about their main source of news and information (see Table 1).

Table 1. The 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 the responses to this question. The Pearson's two-tailed *t*-test was applied to the nominal variables of age (Question 2) and the main source of news/information (Question 29). The correlation was significant at the 0.01 level, confirming that younger respondents more frequently nominated social/digital media as their main source of information. This finding echoes the claims of Costello et al. [5] that young people today rely almost exclusively on online sources for news and information.

The next question asked about frequently-used digital platforms (see Table 2).

Table 2. The 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 [33]. In February 2022, the largest demographic group of Facebook users worldwide was those aged 25–35, with more young males [46]. For Instagram, the majority of users worldwide is aged 18–34 [47]. The second most popular social media platform worldwide, most Facebook users are in the age group 15–35, and males outnumber females [48]. A recent Australian study of youth and social media confirmed the routine, everyday use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube [49], not only for connection and sharing, but for news and information [50]. The young men also mentioned Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Parler, Discord, 4Chan/8Kun, and Signal. These platforms routinely disseminate right-wing populist content, conspiracy theories, and the compensatory doxa of White male victimhood [51]. Researchers have identified a hyper-partisan online media ecosystem at the far-right fringes in Australia, operating through not only niche platforms such as Gab, but spilling out into more conventional platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube [52]. 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 [11,31–34,45].

4. Gender

As previously mentioned, 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 was most important (see Table 3 below). The attributes of masculinity were drawn from the literature in the field [3,8,22,29,38].

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 top four attributes listed in Table 3 approximates the stereotype of contemporary (White) masculinity in Australia: decisive, authoritative, rational [38]. The ideal man

should be 'brave, dependable, and strong, emotionally stable, as well as critical, logical, and rational', as well as prosperous and powerful [53] (p. 98). However, amid socio-economic crises, fractures in the transition to male adulthood, and egalitarian social change, 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 such as 'drink vb (VB is Victoria Bitter, sometimes described as the working man's beer in Victoria) fish hunt ride dirt bikes and yell yeeeee yeeee' (R129, 26 farm worker, de facto), and 'to be a man you need a dick (penis), that's about it' (R182, 23, labourer, de facto).

There was acknowledgement of a 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' [38] was much in evidence, for example, 'things seem to be changing, we have three distinct types of men in Australia now; Eshays (eshays is a slang term for Australian young men from poorer backgrounds, the equivalent of a British 'chav.'), "men" from Melbourne, and *true blue aussies*. If I had to pick one, real aussies would win out' (R317, 22, labourer, de facto, our emphasis). 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 [54]. 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 [55].

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 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 that women's rights had gone too far *in society*. A total of 55.7% answered Yes or Maybe, and less than half answered No. This suggests that young men are troubled by women claiming rights and taking up positions in the public sphere. This resonates with the virulent propaganda of right-wing misogynist groups such as the *Proud Boys*. The *Proud Boys* are certainly concerned by the alleged 'replacement' of White people by people of colour [56], but are prone to hysteria when it comes to the imagined 'replacement' of men in positions of power by women [57]. 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 that they have somehow missed out in their career, in relationships, and in making their views heard. Let us briefly examine the local background of structural change.

Table 4. Have women's rights gone too far? Younger men.

	Response	%
In the home (n = 194)		
	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

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 a 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 [58]. 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% of couple families with children under 15 had mothers who were employed. Moreover, 80.8% of wives in couples with children between 10 and 14 years of age were employed [58]. 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 [59]. Australian living costs are also high. As one young man lamented, 'it's fxcking 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 the 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. This drives anger and resentment, and may activate a nostalgic desire for return to fixed gender roles. However, we know that there is an association between measures of traditional masculine role adherence and a range of psychological and educational problems among boys and young men [60]. 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 [61] (p. 145).

The final survey question invited the 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 provided a written response.

Table 5 shows that 73% of the 89 younger respondents who wrote an answer indicated strong support for traditional gender norms. The 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 and confirmed that support for patriarchal norms was expressed more often 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).

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

In conclusion, White male victimhood was a frequent discourse expressed throughout the young men's survey comments. It certainly mirrors the prevalence of misogynist, populist right-wing 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' [62]. Similarly, *True Blue Crew* invites young White male Australians to engage a primordial White masculinist view as seminal to their own subjective concerns [63]. Across the board, populist right-wing propaganda online promises men a return to a time before the perceived restrictions of feminism and political correctness [64].

5. Politics

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

A total of 22.7% of the young men indicated that they would support Labor, and the same percentage for the Coalition, with 16% for the Greens, which 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, and the so-called 'Teal' Independents, most of whom were well-educated professional women [65]. In the 2019 election, young voters moved further to the left, while older voters moved to the right [66] (p. 18). In the 2022 election, electorates with the highest rate of voters under 30 saw unprecedented support for the Greens [65]. However, 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 (see Table 6).

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 include the United Australia Party; Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party on the right, and the Socialist Alliance on the left.

They also showed stronger support for right-wing populist ideas. For example, '[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 this 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 [67]. However, even though the impact on voting of engaging in manual or non-manual work has declined [42], some young survey respondents appear to harbour a residual legacy of the traditional (male) blue-collar voting base. Many written comments indicated a resentful mistrust of mainstream parties.

Another question asked about the socio-political attitudes.

As Table 7 shows, 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 possibly points to the specific phenomenon of Islamophobia; the belief that Islam and Western cultures are incompatible [68].

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

The most unanimous agreement was with the statement, 'I support Australian democracy.' The 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 it seems that satisfaction with democracy across the board declined rapidly in Australia up to 2019 [69]. Right-wing sympathisers may be eager to communicate their support for democracy, so long as they are the ones defining what it means [39] (p. 148). In this case, the telling word is probably 'Australian'. The survey statement 'I support Australian democracy' might possibly 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 the 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 [67].

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 a deficit 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). Sometimes, the younger informants refuted the idea of 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 [58], which was still wider than the OECD average in 2021 [70]. 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 enough, they get resentful [18] (p. 111).

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

Table 8 indicates 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.

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

6. Feelings

Research has established the distinctiveness of (White) working class male stress and anger in conditions of economic transformation [19,22,71]. Following that lead, we adapted the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) instrument in a question asking about negative feelings.

Table 9 indicates stress was the most common first choice, followed by anxiety and sadness. Frustration, stress, and feeling worthless were often second choices. Stress was probably influenced by the survey timing. In mid-2021, at the height of the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath [72].

A subsequent question invited respondents to indicate how the COVID-19 pandemic made them feel.

The majority (63.7%) in Table 10 indicated that they felt either pessimistic or highly pessimistic; often expressed in nihilistic comments such as 'scared the world is ending' (R78, 27, jobseeker, separated). Many written comments condemned 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% in 2019, quite a lot less than most other industrialised nations [73]. This trend has the potential to dampen the discourse of citizenship amid rising right-wing populism [74]. 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 COVID-19 pandemic, 'the government interfered with the course of nature and prevented the culling of the weakest of our population' (R288, 27, labourer, married). This

Darwinian/eugenics principle was one commonly expressed in far-right political discourse during the pandemic [75].

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

	Feeling	%
Choice #1 (n = 185)		
	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

Table 10. Effect of COVID-19 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

7. Discussion

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

- Information primarily gained from social/digital media;
- Frequent 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 firm 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 [39]. Kathleen Blee has usefully pointed out the inherent problems of looking for evidence of a distinct far right movement where one does not exist [76]. 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/misogynist 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 [64]. 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 in-principle support for democracy 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 hetero-normative masculinity. Echoing earlier findings in the literature [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 [77]. 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 right-wing is not 'alien' to mainstream values in contemporary Western democracies but represents what Cas Mudde calls 'pathological normalcy' [78] (p. 1167). Populist right-wing rhetoric re-interprets mainstream values like nationalism and gender heteronormativity within a paradigm that repudiates difference and diversity. In this 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 supported the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vest) movement in France. They imply a similar critique of representative democracy, but do not necessarily ally themselves with any established political position or institution [79]. Many felt stressed, frustrated, and anxious. It is highly possible that everyday engagements with the ideological online rabbit-holes of Facebook and YouTube serve to inflame and amplify their troubled feelings in the direction of White male victimhood, and a deep mistrust of government.

8. Conclusions

Reflecting back on the survey data, we acknowledge that the survey had some limitations. It was not created to directly measure the men's affinity with right-wing ideas. Rather, we posed an open research question, so the survey items and the method of recruiting respondents were also quite open. However, the data we collected was rich and informative. For the young men in our sample, the majority of whom were employed in what were once called 'blue-collar' labour sectors, the data suggest that they 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 their peers offline and online to blame feminism, culture wars, gender diversity, political correctness, and so on. In this 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. This in itself suggests a semantic gap into which far-right political propaganda might be poured in the future.

In terms of avenues for future enquiry, a next step would be to identify young men who actively support right-wing populism and ask them why they do so. This would require a sensitive approach to recruitment since that position carries a stigma, so it would have to be carefully planned to ensure full confidentiality for the informants. 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. However, when it comes to a very loosely-affiliated politico-social movement such as 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.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, B.S.T., J.R., M.P. and P.N.; methodology, B.S.T., J.R., M.P. and P.N.; formal analysis, P.N.; investigation, B.S.T., J.R. and M.P.; writing—original draft preparation, P.N.; writing—review and editing, P.N.; funding acquisition, B.S.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The study reported here was funded by the Australian Research Council; Funding Number: [DP200102013].

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University (protocol code 2020-64H, approved 30 July 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is currently unavailable because the full project is not yet completed and more data is being collected at present.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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