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PERSPECTIVE ESSAY

Rethinking masculinity in politics: Measuring what matters

Claire Gothreau[1] and Amanda Friesen[2]

[1]Lebanon Valley College, Annville, USA and [2]University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada
Corresponding author: Claire Gothreau; Emails: claire.m.gothreau@dartmouth.edu; gothreau@lvc.edu

Abstract
Amid growing public discourse about a "masculinity crisis," political scientists have sought to measure masculinity as an identity distinct from binary sex. This paper advances a continuous framework for assessing self-perceived masculinity rather than fixed categories. We review measures of masculinity used across the social sciences, zeroing in on self-perceived measures and what they have contributed to the political science literature. Drawing on original survey data, we show that continuous masculinity (and femininity) predict political participation, attitudes on force issues, and broader ideological orientations. We conclude by calling for renewed attention to masculinity as a political identity—one that can be measured continuously and helps explain patterns of backlash, hierarchy maintenance, and participation in contemporary politics. Integrating expectancy–discrepancy models of masculine identity, we propose new directions for understanding how feelings of masculine threat and loss shape political behavior in an era of shifting gender norms.

Keywords: masculinity; political behavior; gender and politics; gender identity; measurement

Introduction

The discourse around the masculinity crisis ranges from discussions about men's declining educational attainment, job prospects, suicide and addiction rates, to their alignment with extreme political ideologies. Despite the fact that men have dominated the political sphere in the United States and around the world, empirical explorations into the role of masculinity in politics (and the purported masculinity crisis) have only recently been undertaken. Explorations in the field of political science have looked at how beliefs about masculinity, masculine identification, and threats to masculinity shape voters' macro views of the entire country (Deckman & Cassese, 2021), vote choice (Gidengil & Stolle, 2021), political ambition (Peterson, Palmer, & Bosanko, 2024), and policy attitudes (Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2013). This work has generated important new insights into the role of gender identity and gender ideology, and masculinity more specifically, in politics.

But what does it mean to measure masculinity, and why does it matter for understanding political behavior, especially among men aligned with right-wing extremism or grievance politics? Masculinity is not only a set of beliefs or attitudes, but rather, an identity that can be core to one's self-concept. In this perspective piece, we first review the measures of masculinity employed in political science and what we have learned from this growing literature. We then show, with original survey data, how broadened measures of masculine (and feminine) identity can shed important light on intra-gender variation in political attitudes and participation that we miss when we only use categorical measures of gender.

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Though we do not directly measure the masculinity crisis in the present paper, we argue that to understand this possible "crisis" among men, gender backlash, and the role of masculinity in right-wing extremism and in shaping political attitudes, we have to consider not only how men think about gender relations and hierarchies, but also their own perceived and aspirational levels of masculinity (Stanaland, Gaither, & Gassman-Pines, 2023). Rather than treating masculinity as a peripheral or background variable, we should think of it as a central identity that can motivate political engagement, shape political attitudes, and structure alignment with broader ideological movements. Discerning how men understand themselves in relation to masculinity could reveal insights into personal identity and how central it is to self-concept. This involves moving beyond beliefs about gender more broadly to examine the identity-based, psychological stakes of being a man in a rapidly changing political and cultural landscape. By studying masculinity as an identity that is subject to threat and changing levels of salience, we gain a clearer window into men's political behavior, grievances, and alignment with extreme ideologies. We end this piece with suggestions for measuring masculine self-identification as not just a background or control variable. In particular, we recommend that scholars measure not only strength of identification with masculinity, but also aspirational levels of masculinity, and the differential between those measures. This "masculinity gap" or discrepancy between self-perceived and desired levels of masculinity may explain why some men gravitate toward extreme political ideologies, grievance politics, and anti-egalitarian sentiments.

Masculinity, measurement, and political behavior

The fields of psychology, sociology, and gender studies have long been generating insights into the role of masculinity in our broader culture and how it shapes attitudes and behaviors in individuals.[1] Though there is no singular, universally agreed-upon definition of masculinity, there are influential conceptualizations of masculinity developed over the years. These theoretical through-lines across definitions and concepts have shaped the way scholars theorize about masculinity and measure it. Generally, common notions of masculinity are viewed as mostly socially constructed, hierarchical in nature, and often experienced as contingent. Masculinity can be understood within a framework that recognizes that biological sex assigned at birth can, but does not always, directly overlap with gender identity. We start from the simple definition that "gender broadly refers to aspects of the self in relation to society typically associated with men (masculine) or women (feminine)" (Schneider & Bos, 2023).

From traits to structures: Early measures of masculinity

Early work on masculinity focused on gendered personality traits—the idea that people have both stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine" characteristics (Bem, 1981; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974). These scales were developed to assess how individuals conform to or internalize culturally defined traits associated with masculinity or femininity, often independent of their biological sex. For example, the commonly used Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) consists of a battery of different traits that are consistent with masculine and feminine sex roles (Bem, 1981). Importantly, these scales treat masculinity and femininity as distinct dimensions instead of a single continuum. According to Bem, individuals can be "sex typed," or generally in line with conventions of sex roles, or they could deviate from traditional sex roles and be in alignment with traits culturally ascribed to the opposite sex. For example, a woman could identify as very high in stereotypically masculine traits. Furthermore, individuals could score high in both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits (e.g., an androgynous personality type), or very low, which the BSRI deems as "undifferentiated." There have been challenges to this popular paradigm, specifically that the BSRI creates a top-down definition of what it means to be feminine or masculine,

[1]See McDermott and Cassino (2025) for a detailed overview of measures of masculinity across disciplines.

rather than allowing individuals to interpret these identities and their associated traits for themselves (Gidengil & Stolle, 2021; Schneider & Bos, 2023).

Other explorations of masculinity focus less on individual traits that signify masculinity in individuals and more on structural and cultural notions of ideal masculinity. For example, sociologists have developed the notion of hegemonic masculinity—a culturally exalted form of masculinity that legitimizes (some) men's dominance at the top of society and women and other marginalized groups' positions at the bottom (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Most men do not fully subscribe to or embody hegemonic masculinity, but they may still aspire to and benefit from its dominance. Measures building on the original theory of hegemonic masculinity generally focus on attitudes about gender relations and power dynamics as well as prescriptive and proscriptive social norms that govern men and masculinity (Thompson & Bennett, 2015).[2] Rather than approaching masculinity as a set of particular traits or characteristics, like the BSRI or the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence et al., 1974), this perspective defines masculinity as an ideology that encompasses particular social norms guiding and sanctioning men and their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. As Thompson and Bennett state (Thompson & Bennett, 2015:p. 115), "From this perspective masculinity ideologies are properties of particular times, places, and groups, not individuals. They influence—although they do not wholly determine—how people think, feel, and behave in gender-salient matters." For example, the Male Role Norms Scale (MRNS) includes dimensions that tap status, toughness, and anti-femininity norms (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). These measures, rather than measuring traits or perceived levels of masculinity, capture attitudes, dogmas, and expectations of the socially constructed gender ideal for men.

In parallel, psychologists developed models of masculinity that emphasized its precarious and performative nature. According to Precarious Manhood Theory, masculinity is seen as a hard-won and easily lost social status. This is in contrast to femininity, which is culturally perceived as more innate, stable, and rooted in biology (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). When masculinity is under threat, men often respond with extreme demonstrations of their gender identity. This phenomenon is articulated in the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis, which finds that masculinity threats increase support for dominance-oriented political attitudes, aggression, and risk-taking (Gothreau & Haas, 2025; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Willer et al., 2013). Instead of measuring masculinity threat as a stable trait, most scholars have taken the approach of inducing a sense of masculinity threat in an experimental setting, and then measuring downstream effects on attitudes or behavior (Bosson et al., 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vescio, Schermerhorn, Gallegos, & Laubach, 2021; Willer et al., 2013). Alternatively, some have measured masculinity threat as a disposition (Bosson et al., 2021), such as the Precarious Manhood Beliefs (PMB) scale, which includes the items "Other people often question whether a man is a real man" and "It is fairly easy for a man to lose his status as a man."

Importantly, there are also explorations into masculinity that emphasize masculinity in relation to other identities like race, class, and sexuality (Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2014). For example, studies of Black masculinity examine how Black men define manhood in ways that are distinct from the conceptions of white men (Chaney, 2009; Hunter & Davis, 1992). The takeaway from this work is that masculinity is not monolithic but often also racialized. Race-specific adaptations of scales, such as the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI), attempt to capture these nuances (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003).

Self-perceived masculinity as identity

Finally, and most relevant to this perspective piece, there are measures that focus on self-perceived masculinity. Instead of defining what masculinity is in terms of traits, stereotypes, cultural ideals, or precariousness, these questions allow individuals to simply report how masculine they feel or view themselves, or how central masculinity is to their self-concept. Often these measures are on a continuous

[2]See Thompson and Bennett (2015) for a thorough review of measurements of masculinity ideologies.

scale, and the question posed is something like "How masculine do you consider yourself to be?" (Magliozzi, Saperstein, & Westbrook, 2016) or "Sometimes, one talks about individuals having both feminine and masculine characteristics. To what extent would you say that you have masculine and feminine characteristics, respectively?" (Coffe et al., 2023; Gidengil & Stolle, 2021; Wängnerud, Solevid, & Djerf-Pierre, 2019). The goal of these items is to tap into people's "gendered sense of self" (Magliozzi et al., 2016). In political science, these measures are often used in examining the relationship between self-perceived masculinity and political identity (Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2021), policy attitudes (Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017), vote choice (Gidengil & Stolle, 2021; C. Gothreau, Laustsen, & Haas, 2025), and populist radical right support (Coffe et al., 2023). Some of these continuous measures are unidimensional scales running on a single continuum from feminine to masculine, while others treat femininity and masculinity as separate dimensions.

Building on this framework, some scholars have added another layer of complexity by measuring not just self-perceived masculinity and femininity but also *centrality*—how important one's gender identity is to their overall sense of self. For example, Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2020) look at sex, gender, and protective measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were asked about their gender identity on a unidimensional scale running from "completely masculine" to "completely feminine" as well as how important being a man or being a woman was to their overall identity. They find that men's gender identity was strongly related to their attitudes about wearing a mask, particularly when their masculine identity was core to their self-concept, suggesting the importance of combining gendered self-identification with the salience of that identification in shaping one's overall self-concept.

Together, these measures reflect a growing interest in understanding masculinity (and femininity) not as a fixed set of traits or roles, but as a subjective identity that varies across individuals and contexts—and one that has measurable implications for political behavior. Table 1 provides an overview of measures of masculinity commonly used in the social sciences.

What we've learned: Masculinity beyond binary gender

The incorporation of measures of masculinity (and femininity) has broadened our understanding of many topics in political behavior, revealing important intra-gender variation that binary measures alone cannot capture. For example, masculinity is positively related to nascent political ambition, offering us a more nuanced picture of the gender gap in running for office (Peterson et al., 2024). Similarly, McDermott (2016) finds that masculinity—measured through a battery of gendered personality traits—predicts higher levels of political interest and engagement, even after accounting for binary gender. American men who identify as more masculine are also more likely to be Republicans (Pao & Roundy, 2025), further demonstrating the explanatory power of masculinity beyond biological sex or gender identity. Recent work by Gidengil and Stolle (2021) shows that intra-gender differences among women and men exceed inter-gender differences between men and women in terms of support for Donald Trump. Though the binary partisan gender gap is large, the gap between hypermasculine men and weakly masculine men is larger. They state "Overall, the differences among men far exceed the differences between women and men, and those differences far exceed the differences among women" (Gidengil & Stolle, 2021:p.1820).

Furthermore, much scholarship has investigated the gender gap in support for populist radical right (PRR) parties, with women being less likely to support them (Coffé, 2018; Harteveld, Van Der Brug, Dahlberg, & Kokkonen, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015). Building on this literature, Coffe et al. (2023) demonstrate that people's self-assessment of their own masculine features predicts support for PRRs. Sexist attitudes both mediate and moderate the effect of masculinity on PRR voting. Similarly, Coffé (2019) finds that self-perceived masculine personality traits positively predict support for the Dutch radical right party, PVV. Related work by Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) also identifies strong associations between authoritarian values—often coded as masculine—and PRR support across Europe.

Table 1. Overview of common measures of masculinity

Approach	Key measures/Examples	Description	Representative citations
Trait-based	Bem sex role inventory (BSRI); Personal attributes questionnaire (PAQ)	Self-ascribed personality traits culturally defined as "masculine" (e.g., assertive, independent) and "feminine" (e.g., nurturing, gentle). Treats masculinity/femininity as separate dimensions; allows for "androgynous" or "undifferentiated" identities.	Bem (1981); Spence et al. (1974)
Structural/Ideological	Hegemonic masculinity; Male role norms scale (MRNS); Conformity to masculine norms inventory (CMNI)	Attitudes and beliefs about gender hierarchies, dominance, toughness, and anti-femininity norms. Defines masculinity as a social ideology rather than a personal trait.	Connell and Messerschmidt (2005); Mahalik et al. (2003); Thompson and Pleck (1986)
Threat/Precariousness	Precarious manhood beliefs (PMB); Masculine overcompensation paradigms	Beliefs that masculinity is tenuous and must be proven through behavior; responses to masculinity threat in experiments (aggression, risk-taking, dominance attitudes).	Bosson et al. (2009); Vandello and Bosson (2013); Willer et al. (2013)
Self-perceived masculinity (Identity)	Unidimensional self-placement scales ("How masculine do you consider yourself?"); Bidimensional scales of masculinity and femininity	Subjective self-identification with masculinity/femininity; captures gendered sense of self, independent of traits or norms.	Coffe et al. (2023); Gidengil and Stolle (2021); Magliozzi et al. (2016)
Centrality/Aspirational measures	Gender identity centrality scales; Masculinity "gap" (self versus desired)	How central masculinity is to overall self-concept; discrepancies between perceived and aspirational masculinity as predictors of grievance, backlash, or extremism.	Cassino and Besen-Cassino (2020); Stanaland et al. (2023)

Beyond vote choice, masculinity is associated with support for particular policies. DiMuccio and Knowles (2021, 2023) provide evidence that masculinity threat increases men's support for aggressive policies like the death penalty and the bombing of an enemy country. They also find a correlation between masculine anxieties and Trump's vote share in 2016. Masculinity has also been linked to policy domains beyond aggression and security. Research on environmental attitudes shows that pro-environmental behaviors are often feminized, and that men who strongly identify with masculinity are less likely to support or engage in "green" acts (Brough et al., 2016). Attitudes generally around climate change can be predicted by sexism in the United States (Benegal & Holman, 2021), and much of the variation in attitudes about climate costs and benefits exists among men, across various countries and economic contexts (Bush & Clayton, 2023). Similarly, gun ownership and anti-gun control attitudes have been linked to masculine identity and expression (Carlson, 2015). Finally, Harrison and Michelson (2019) find that threatened masculinity among men predicts opposition to transgender rights. This aligns with the precarious manhood and masculinity overcompensation literature, which posits that masculinity is a tenuous social identity that requires maintenance and validation, often through displays of dominance or aggression.

Taken together, this growing body of research highlights that masculinity operates as a powerful ideological and behavioral orientation in its own right—one that cuts across binary gender lines and helps explain patterns of political ambition, engagement, partisanship, attitudes, and even political extremism that may otherwise be obscured.

Continuous measures and intra-gender variation

In an effort to move beyond binary sex and gender categories, as well as present an alternative to trait inventories that can potentially become outdated as gender roles change or be too costly to incorporate in a survey, we have asked participants across several datasets about the strength and salience of their personal gender identities. More specifically, respondents responded to the extent to which they identify as masculine or feminine, regardless of gender or sex assigned at birth. To explore the value of this approach, we draw on data from three original surveys, each of which includes continuous measures of masculinity and femininity alongside a range of political outcomes—including political participation, ideological orientation, and support for gender-related (and non-gender-related) policies. In each study, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they personally identify with masculinity and femininity, typically on a 0 to 10 or 1 to 7 scale. Masculinity and femininity were always treated as two separate and distinct dimensions, allowing respondents to, for example, identify as high or low in both constructs. These self-reported identity measures allow for the analysis of intra-gender variation—capturing differences among men, or among women, that are often obscured in binary gender comparisons[3] Across all three studies, masculinity and femininity vary within binary gender. Men, on average, report higher levels of masculinity and women, on average, report higher levels of femininity, yet there is overlap in the distribution of both constructs across binary gender groups. Supplementary Appendix B contains density plots of masculinity and femininity, subset by binary gender, across all three studies. To assess the impact of gender identity on our outcome measures, we estimate a series of regression models that incorporate continuous measures of masculinity and femininity both independently and in interaction with respondents' binary gender identifications. More specifically, we begin with baseline models that estimate differences between men and women using conventional binary indicators. We then introduce masculinity and femininity to determine whether reported gendered self-perceptions account for additional variation in political attitudes and behaviors above and beyond binary gender. Lastly, we estimate interaction models between respondents' gender identification and self-reported masculinity and femininity, again, to look at the intra-gender effects of masculinity and femininity. In this fully saturated model, we also include controls for demographic variables that traditionally predict political behavior. All figures are derived from the fully saturated models.

Control variables: Though we are chiefly interested in the relationship between binary gender, continuous gender identity, and the interaction between the two, we include a variety of control variables in our fully saturated empirical models to ensure that any correlations we find are robust to potential confounding variables that are also correlated with political attitudes and behavior. More specifically, we include age, race, educational attainment, and income. In Studies 1 and 2, we include controls for political party identification. In Study 3, because party identification was not asked, we control for political ideology.

Study 1: Masculinity and political participation

To explore the connection between binary gender, masculinity and femininity measures, and political participation, we leverage an original dataset of 1,017 participants who completed an online survey. Participants in this study were recruited in 2022 in the United States using the survey recruitment platform, Forthright (see Gothreau, Alvarez, & Friesen, 2023 for more details on the design). See Supplementary Table A1 for demographic characteristics of the sample. Upon consenting to participate

[3]We focus on intra-gender variation within the binary gender categories for a few reasons. First, because the majority of individuals still identify within the binary framework, our primary interest is in understanding how individuals who share the same gender category differ based on continuous gender perception. Secondly, while it is possible that continuous measures alone could meaningfully predict different political outcomes across the full sample, we argue that these measures derive much of their theoretical meaning from their relationship to normative binary sex role expectations that are socialized. In other words, perceptions of one's femininity and masculinity are most consequential when considered in relation to the binary category in which they identify.

in the study, participants first completed a set of demographic questions, including a traditional categorical gender measure and a continuous measure where respondents placed themselves on two dimensions—masculinity and femininity. Participants also completed an experimental task and answered questions about women in politics. Additionally, respondents completed a battery of questions about political participation. Extant research in political science finds that women are generally less politically engaged and participate less frequently in many political activities than men, with the notable exception of voting, where women tend to have higher turnout rates (Lawless & Fox, 2010; Pruysers & Blais, 2014). However, we also know from McDermott (2016) that masculinity, measured with a gendered personality trait battery, is positively associated with political interest and engagement regardless of categorical gender.

To see if self-perceived masculinity (and femininity) relate to political engagement, we ran OLS regression models and regressed a political participation composite scale on gender and self-reported femininity and masculinity, following the strategy outlined above.[4] Table 2 contains full regression results. Consistent with prior research (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2009; C. M. Gothreau, 2021), women report participating in various political acts at a lower rate than men (p0.01) in Model 1. However, in Model 2, the effect of binary gender becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero, while both masculinity and femininity emerge as significant and positive predictors of participation (p0.01). Those who identify as more masculine and those who identify as more feminine report participating in political acts more frequently. This pattern suggests that gender differences in political participation are better explained by variation in individuals' gendered self-perceptions.

Figure 1 displays predicted political participation by both binary gender identification and across low (10th percentile), medium (50th percentile), and high (90th percentile) values of masculinity and femininity, separately for men and women based on estimates from the fully saturated model. Consistent with the regression results, we see that higher levels of masculine and feminine identification are associated with higher levels of participation for both men and women. Interestingly, predicted values suggest that femininity may be a somewhat stronger predictor of participation among men, whereas masculinity appears to be the slightly stronger predictor for women. Importantly, these differences are not statistically indistinguishable, which is reflected in the non-significant interaction terms. However, this pattern is consistent with the notion that identification with the "non-traditional" continuous gender identity (masculinity for women and femininity for men) is associated with higher levels of political participation. Rather than reinforcing inequality, these "non-traditional" ways of identifying may motivate higher levels of engagement. At minimum, these results suggest that gendered self-identification may help structure political participation and explain variation across participants more effectively than binary gender alone.

Study 2: Masculinity and policy attitudes

To further explore the relationship between binary gender, masculinity and femininity self-identification, and political participation and attitudes, we draw from another original dataset. In fall 2020, 1,043 participants completed an online survey in the United States, also through the survey recruitment platform, Forthright (see Friesen, Ksiazkiewicz, & Gothreau, 2021 for more details on the design and sample). See Supplementary Table A2 for demographic characteristics of the sample. Again, upon consenting to participate in the study, participants completed demographic questions, including a traditional categorical gender measure and a continuous measure where respondents placed themselves on dimensions of masculinity and femininity. Participants also completed questions about food preferences (for another study), the Big Five Inventory, Wilson-Patterson issue attitudes, and a risk-

[4]The political participation composite scale was created by taking the mean of participation in the following activities: signing a petition, participating in a political protest, attending a school board meeting, donating money to a political campaign, seeking out political information, and posting about politics on social media. The composite variable was rescaled to run from 0 to 1 (Cronbach's = .89).

Table 2. OLS regression results study 1

	Dependent variable:		
	Political participation		
	Binary	**Femininity and masculinity**	**Fully saturated model**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**
Binary gender	−0.047***	−0.036	−0.055
	(0.016)	(0.033)	(0.079)
Masculinity		0.154***	0.090
		(0.045)	(0.066)
Femininity		0.141***	0.154***
		(0.042)	(0.058)
Education			0.158***
			(0.031)
Age			−0.100**
			(0.048)
Race			−0.026
			(0.019)
Income			0.070**
			(0.029)
Democrat			0.071***
			(0.018)
Republican			0.020
			(0.021)
Binary*Masculinity			0.093
			(0.089)
Binary*Femininity			−0.050
			(0.083)
Constant	0.351***	0.203***	0.172***
	(0.011)	(0.042)	(0.064)
Observations	1,002	995	995
R^2	0.008	0.024	0.106
Adjusted R^2	0.007	0.021	0.096

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

taking battery. Additionally, respondents answered a series of questions about attitudes on salient political issues and political participation. Public opinion research has documented significant gender differences in public opinion and policy attitudes. For example, women are more likely than men to support gun control measures, access to abortion, and increases in spending on social welfare programs (Gothreau, Arceneaux, & Friesen, 2022; Lizotte, 2019, 2020).

Using the same multi-step process described in Study 1, we ran OLS regression models, regressing a political participation composite scale on gender and self-reported femininity and masculinity to replicate our results in Study 1.[5] Table 3 details the full regression results. Interestingly, we find no

[5]The political participation composite scale was created by taking the mean of participation in the following activities: signing a petition, participating in a political protest, attending a town meeting, and donating money to a political campaign. The composite variable was rescaled to run from 0 to 1 (Cronbach's = .86).

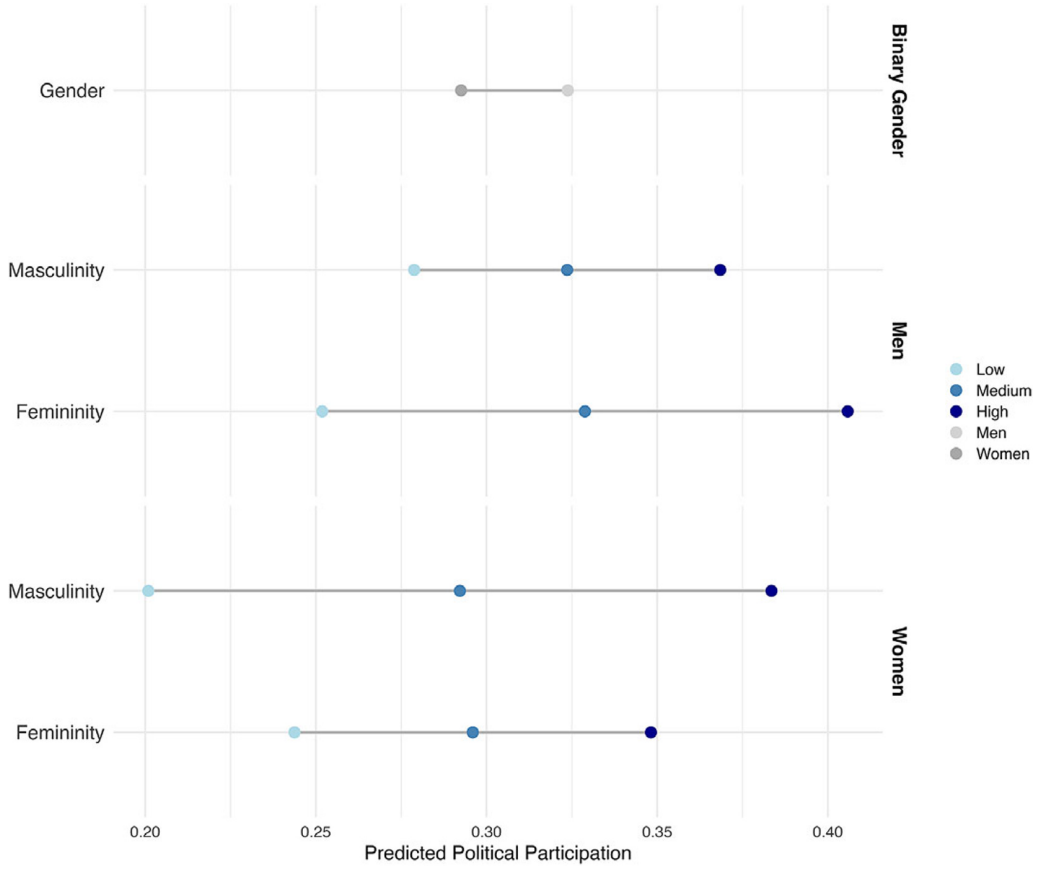


Figure 1. Predicted political participation by binary gender and continuous gender identity (Study 1).

statistically significant correlation between binary gender and political participation in Study 2 ($p = 0.44$). However, when we incorporate masculinity and femininity into the regression model, replicating the results in Study 1, masculinity and femininity emerge as significant and positive predictors of political participation ($p < 0.01$). Again, this pattern advances the notion that gender differences in political participation are more effectively explained by variation in gendered self-perceptions.

Figure 2 displays predicted political participation by both binary gender identification and across low, medium, and high values of masculinity and femininity. Consistent with the regression results in which we find statistically significant interactions, masculinity is more strongly associated with participation among women than among men, while femininity is more strongly associated with participation among men than among women. These findings give more credence to the prior suggestion that identifying with masculinity and femininity in gender atypical ways is associated with increased political engagement. Men who identify in the 90th percentile of femininity report higher levels of political participation than those in the 10th percentile of femininity. Conversely, women who identify in the 90th percentile of masculinity report higher levels of participation than women in the 10th percentile. By contrast, masculinity among men and femininity among women are comparatively weaker predictors of participation.

Prior research has also established correlations between gender identity, including masculinity measures, and policy attitudes (Brough et al., 2016; DiMuccio & Knowles, 2021). We focus on force issues, more specifically support for gun rights and the death penalty. There is a documented gender gap

Table 3. OLS regression results study 2

	Dependent variable:		
	Political participation		
	Binary	**Femininity and masculinity**	**Fully saturated model**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**
Binary gender	−0.013	−0.002	−0.041
	(0.017)	(0.030)	(0.097)
Masculinity		0.204***	0.045
		(0.041)	(0.068)
Femininity		0.191***	0.260***
		(0.037)	(0.052)
Education			0.153***
			(0.031)
Age			−0.053
			(0.036)
Race			−0.002
			(0.018)
Income			0.076***
			(0.029)
Democrat			0.085***
			(0.018)
Republican			0.017
			(0.021)
Binary*Masculinity			0.210**
			(0.085)
Binary*Femininity			−0.183**
			(0.073)
Constant	0.342***	0.072	0.079
	(0.012)	(0.049)	(0.079)
Observations	1,008	999	994
R^2	0.001	0.035	0.124
Adjusted R^2	−0.0004	0.032	0.115

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

as it relates to issues of force, with men, on average, being more supportive of punitive policies like the death penalty and less supportive of policies like increased gun control (Lizotte, 2020). We speculate that considering intra-gender variations in masculine and feminine identification may reveal even more insight into how these gendered self-perceptions condition the effect of binary gender on political attitudes.

OLS regression results can be found in Tables 4 and 5. In our baseline models, we do not see a gender difference in support for gun rights, though we do see that women, compared to men, are significantly less supportive of the death penalty ($p < 0.01$). Adding the continuous gender identity measures to both "force issue" models adds explanatory power, though patterns are inconsistent. As it relates to gun rights, masculinity is a positive predictor ($p < 0.01$), and femininity is non-significant. Regarding death penalty support, both masculinity and femininity are negative predictors ($p < 0.1$ for masculinity and $p < 0.05$ for femininity). Looking at the fully saturated models with the interaction terms is more instructive. Masculinity predicts support for gun rights strongly among men and more weakly among women,

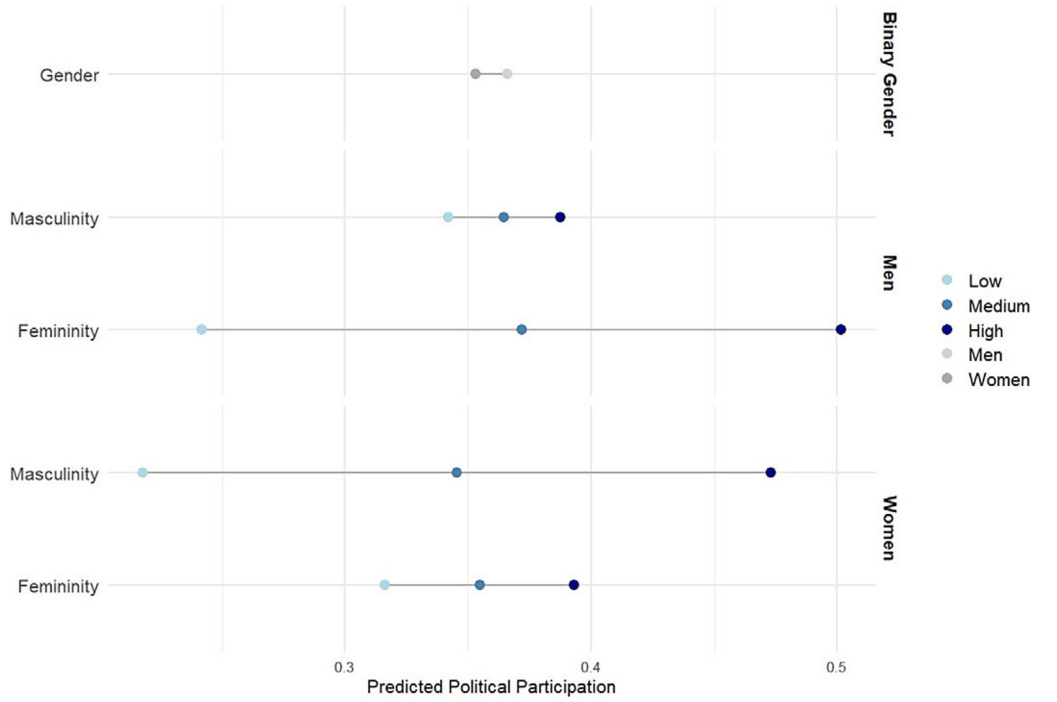


Figure 2. Predicted political participation by binary gender and continuous gender identity (Study 2).

which can also be seen in the left-hand panel of Figure 4. Conversely, femininity predicts support for gun rights among women but not among men ($p < 0.1$). The pattern of predicted effects suggests that gendered self-identification may structure attitudes toward gun rights differently across gender groups, aligning with traditional gender roles and other conservative attitudes. Turning to support for the death penalty, we see significant interaction terms in the fully saturated model ($p < 0.01$). Among men, higher levels of femininity are associated with lower support for the death penalty, while masculinity shows no significant relationship. Among women, however, masculinity is associated with lower support for the death penalty, whereas femininity has little effect. This can be observed in the right-hand panel of Figure 4. Consistent with patterns observed in earlier models, binary gender itself is no longer a significant predictor once continuous gender identity measures are included. Taken together, these results underscore that the political consequences of masculinity and femininity are contingent on both respondents' binary gender and the policy domain in question. Masculinity does not uniformly increase support for "hard" or conservative policies.

The results from Study 2 replicate some of the pattern observed in Study 1. Across different participatory and attitudinal outcomes, the effect of binary gender diminishes once continuous measures of masculinity and femininity are incorporated into the empirical models. Though categorical gender is still important, particularly when interacted with continuous measures, our results suggest that intra-gender variation in gendered self-identification needs to be taken into consideration. At the same time, the effects of masculinity and femininity are not uniform across respondents. Our findings provide evidence that intra-gender variation in masculinity and femininity is an important and undervalued source of heterogeneity in political behavior and attitudes (Figure 3).

Study 3: Masculinity and right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation

Thus far, we have shown that gender identity measures predict various patterns of political participation and political attitudes on force issues. We now zoom out and turn to broader ideological orientations and

Table 4. OLS regression results

	Dependent variable:		
	Gun rights		
	Binary	Femininity and masculinity	Fully saturated model
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Binary gender	−0.030	0.072	0.108
	(0.025)	(0.047)	(0.143)
Masculinity		0.244***	0.350***
		(0.064)	(0.101)
Femininity		0.072	−0.019
		(0.058)	(0.078)
Education			−0.254***
			(0.045)
Age			−0.011
			(0.053)
Race			−0.015
			(0.027)
Income			−0.013
			(0.043)
Democrat			−0.230***
			(0.026)
Republican			0.163***
			(0.031)
Binary*Masculinity			−0.224*
			(0.125)
Binary*Femininity			0.198*
			(0.108)
Constant	0.677***	0.411***	0.530***
	(0.018)	(0.077)	(0.117)
Observations	1,004	999	994
R^2	0.001	0.016	0.200
Adjusted R^2	0.0004	0.013	0.191

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

predispositions that shape attitudes toward hierarchy, social order, and group dynamics. More specifically, we look at Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) (Altemeyer, 1981) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). In Study 3, we examine whether self-perceptions of masculinity and femininity are related to these more latent orientations.

We draw from another original dataset of 1,200 participants recruited through the survey recruitment platform Prolific in May 2022 (see Gothreau & Laustsen, 2025 for more details on design and sample). See Supplementary Table A3 for demographic information on Study 3. Upon consenting to participate in the study, participants completed demographic questions, including a binary gender measure as well as a continuous measure of masculinity and femininity. They also completed a 12-item RWA battery and an eight-item SDO battery. After these items, participants completed a candidate conjoint experiment as part of another study. We generated mean summary scales for both measures that run from 0 to 1 (Cronbach's α, RWA = .91; Cronbach's α, SDO = .93).

Table 5. OLS regression results

	Dependent variable:		
	Death penalty		
	Binary	**Femininity and masculinity**	**Fully saturated model**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**
Binary gender	−0.086***	−0.090*	−0.015
	(0.027)	(0.050)	(0.150)
Masculinity		−0.134**	0.081
		(0.068)	(0.105)
Femininity		−0.132**	−0.335***
		(0.061)	(0.081)
Education			−0.071
			(0.048)
Age			0.202***
			(0.056)
Race			−0.053*
			(0.029)
Income			−0.056
			(0.045)
Democrat			−0.174***
			(0.028)
Republican			0.258***
			(0.032)
Binary*Masculinity			−0.400***
			(0.131)
Binary*Femininity			0.380***
			(0.112)
Constant	0.476***	0.655***	0.528***
	(0.019)	(0.081)	(0.122)
Observations	1,005	1,000	995
R^2	0.010	0.017	0.215
Adjusted R^2	0.009	0.014	0.207

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

We once again ran a series of regression models to explore whether self-perceived masculinity and femininity relate to ideological orientations. Table 6 contains full regression results. In our baseline models, consistent with prior work (Schmitt & Wirth, 2009; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007; Wilson & Liu, 2003), women, on average, report lower levels of SDO and RWA ($p < 0.01$). Adding the continuous measures, we see that both masculinity and femininity are not significant predictors of SDO. Femininity is a negative and significant ($p < 0.1$) predictor of RWA, while masculinity is non-significant. The non-significant interaction terms in the fully saturated model suggest that masculinity and femininity do not operate differently for men versus women in predicting SDO. However, we do see a significant interaction between binary gender and masculinity ($p < 0.01$) when it comes to RWA that indicates that increased masculinity aligns with more authoritarian attitudes among men, but works in the opposite direction among women. This shows masculinity is not a stable ideological predictor—it operates relationally with gender category expectations. Furthermore, there is a significant interaction

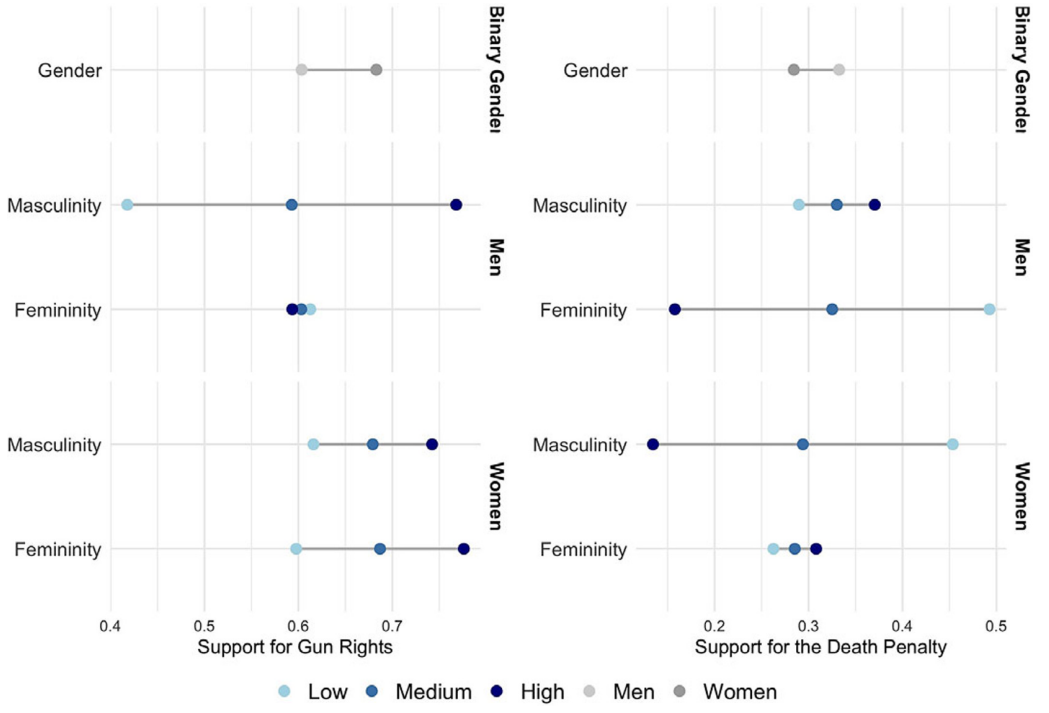


Figure 3. Predicted support for gun rights and the death penalty by binary gender and continuous gender identity (Study 2).

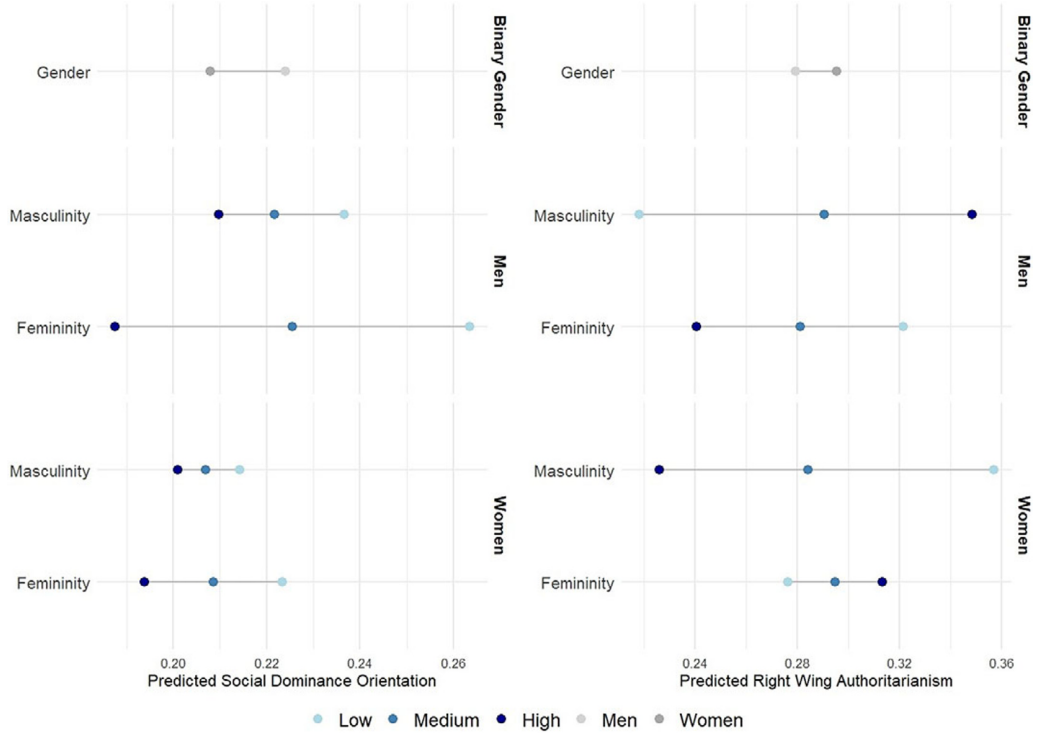


Figure 4. Predicted SDO and RWA by binary gender and continuous gender identity (Study 3).

Table 6. OLS regression results

	Dependent variable:					
	Social dominance orientation			**Right wing authoritarianism**		
	Binary	**Femininity and masculinity**	**Fully saturated model**	**Binary**	**Femininity and masculinity**	**Fully saturated model**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**
Binary gender	−0.061***	−0.023	−0.042	−0.025**	−0.005	0.089
	(0.012)	(0.026)	(0.072)	(0.012)	(0.025)	(0.057)
Masculinity		−0.007	−0.027		−0.046	0.131**
		(0.044)	(0.064)		(0.043)	(0.051)
Femininity		−0.062	−0.068		−0.074*	−0.073*
		(0.043)	(0.052)		(0.043)	(0.041)
Education			0.032			−0.031
			(0.024)			(0.019)
Age			−0.037			0.033
			(0.032)			(0.026)
Race			−0.003			−0.064***
			(0.012)			(0.010)
Income			0.027*			−0.008
			(0.015)			(0.012)
Ideology			0.385***			0.447***
			(0.016)			(0.013)
Binary*Masculinity			0.014			−0.262***
			(0.077)			(0.062)
Binary*Femininity			0.042			0.106*
			(0.072)			(0.057)
Constant	0.254***	0.267***	0.135**	0.378***	0.423***	0.187***
	(0.009)	(0.040)	(0.059)	(0.009)	(0.039)	(0.047)
Observations	1,190	1,190	1,189	1,190	1,190	1,189
R^2	0.020	0.023	0.368	0.004	0.006	0.579
Adjusted R^2	0.019	0.021	0.363	0.003	0.004	0.575

Note: $p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

between binary gender and femininity ($p < 0.1$) that indicates that for men, an increase in feminine identity is associated with a reduction in authoritarian attitudes, whereas for women, once both the continuous term and the interaction term are taken into consideration, there is little consistent effect. This interaction is only marginally significant; therefore, we interpret this result with caution.

These results suggest that masculinity is not just linked to issue attitudes but may contribute to broader ideological orientations that structure how individuals think about authority and conventionalism, extending the earlier findings from Studies 1 and 2. Whereas atypical gender identification was associated with higher participation, traditional or more "gender-congruent" gender identification appears more closely aligned with authoritarian worldviews. Whereas atypical gender identification was associated with higher levels of political participation in our earlier studies, here we find that more gender-congruent reports of identification—particularly higher masculinity and lower femininity among men—are associated with stronger authoritarian ideological orientations. Importantly, rather than uniformly increasing authoritarianism, masculinity operates differently depending on how it aligns with expectations tied to respondents' binary gender category. Masculinity predicts high levels of right-

wing authoritarianism among women but lower levels among women. Once again, these results are not causal, and therefore it is difficult to establish the ordering of gender identity and broader ideological orientations, but these findings suggest that there is a strong relationship between gendered self-concepts and ideology, particularly attitudes about authority, obedience, adherence to traditional norms and values, and order.

Summary of results

Taken together, the results across the three studies suggest that continuous gender identity measures capture meaningful variation in political behavior and attitudes above and beyond binary gender alone. However, these effects operate differently across different outcomes and domains. In Studies 1 and 2, we find that identifying in gender-atypical ways is associated with higher levels of political participation. Although our results are only correlational, this may suggest that individuals who have gendered self-concepts that depart from the traditional paradigm that men are masculine, and women are feminine, may be particularly politically engaged. This could conceivably be because they see gender identity as more salient or contested for them, or having a more liberal worldview could allow them to feel more comfortable identifying atypically. Conversely, the policy attitudes explored in Study 2 demonstrate more domain-specific patterns. Masculinity among men is associated with greater support for gun rights, while lower femininity among men predicts higher support for the death penalty; among women, masculinity, rather than femininity, is associated with lower support for the death penalty, and continuous gender identity plays a more limited role in structuring attitudes toward gun rights. Study 3 reveals that gendered self-identification is also related to broader ideological orientations and that more "traditionally" gender-typed identities are associated with higher levels of authoritarianism for men, whereas masculinity functions in the opposite direction for women. This suggests that the meaning of masculinity is contingent on how it aligns with expectations around individuals' binary gender. Collectively, these findings, although not causal in nature, establish that continuous measures of masculinity and femininity can reveal patterns of intra-gender variation that are meaningful and politically relevant. Future research should unpack how well self-placement on masculine/feminine scales lines up with traditional gender role measures like the BSRI, whether these one-dimensional items can be used in lieu of longer batteries, or if we miss important nuance in what part of self-identification is driving political behaviors.

Call for research

We have provided evidence for the importance of gender identity, within binary gender or sex, for understanding political attitudes and behavior. Masculine and feminine gender measures operate in unique patterns across participation in politics, different kinds of policy issues, and broader orientations like SDO and RWA. The positive relationship between atypical gender identity, masculine women and feminine men, and higher levels of political participation is particularly intriguing. It is possible that more political people have knowledge about more inclusive and wide-ranging conceptions of gender, thus leading them to feel comfortable reporting a feminine or masculine identity "against type." It is also possible that when people embrace different gender identities than their binary sex or gender, they feel their gender identity and expression may be under attack, threat, or just generally, inherently political. For the purposes of our current argument, we urge scholars to unpack more of what it means for men to feel comfortable scoring higher on femininity scales and how best to uncover true conceptions not subject to social desirability bias.

Regarding force-based policy attitudes, again, within-gender variation in masculinity is an important predictor, beyond the traditional binary gender gaps in these attitudes. How closely are masculinity conceptions tied to support for gun rights and the death penalty? Could messages about preservation of masculinity while advocating for gun control or against the death penalty, shift these attitudes among

men for whom masculinity is important? Or do we risk a backlash where appeals to masculinity in support of gendered policies result in further benevolent sexism (Hunt & Friesen, 2021)?

Finally, the variation between masculine/feminine identity within binary gender and SDO and RWA call for more research into which identities and preferences are strongest, most salient, and likely to develop first. In other words, how do people arrive at strongly or weakly masculine self-concepts? Do they adopt these orientations because of their subscription to social hierarchy and authoritarian views? Or, from an evolutionary psychology perspective, do their sex roles emerge first, and this strong sense of "being a man" leads to this other basket of ideas? Longitudinal studies and genetically informed samples could help uncover some of these relationships.

Age and generational cohorts are a key interaction for these questions-particularly with the recent conversations about larger gender gaps emerging or persisting for younger generations. Though when it comes to partisan voting in the U.S., the Gen Z gender gap in voting for Biden/Harris versus Trump decreased from the 2020 to 2024 election (see Cassese and Long (n.d.) for a broader discussion about the nuances of the Gen Z gender gaps, both due to how age groups are divided and whether Gen Z women are the ones moving further left than older women).

For our current call for research, we see the future of this work further examining self-identification, particularly as it relates to societal gender norms. We find the work of Stanaland et al. (2023) particularly compelling, in their approach to understanding aspirational masculinity. They set up this framework in an "actual" self (how masculine am I?) compared to an "ought" self (how masculine should I be?) and an "ideal" self (how masculine do I want to be?). These levels vary among men. What matters less here is not one's actual level of masculinity (as we test in our studies above) but the discrepancy between the ought or the ideal and one's actual self. That is, a man with "medium" actual self-reported masculinity who believes that a "medium" level is ideal may display different characteristics and behaviors than a man who is "medium" in actual masculinity who thinks he needs to be (ought) and wishes to be (ideal) more masculine. In the face of threats to this masculinity, those with higher discrepancies may exhibit aggressive behaviors toward others or internalize feelings of shame or anxiety (Stanaland et al., 2023). So again, it is not binary gender itself or gender identity that may drive sexism or outgroup attitudes, but instead, the compensation around men feeling their actual selves are far from obligatory or aspirational masculinity. We believe this framework can contribute to the body of work already explaining various gender gaps in policy positions or even the role of hostile and benevolent sexism (Gothreau et al., 2022). For example, does sexism have the same predictive power across levels of masculinity discrepancy? What comes first? Does fragile masculinity lead to sexism, does sexism or misogyny precede masculine identity and perceptions, do they co-develop? What are the implications for political participation and issue preferences? If society embraced broader thinking around "ought" or "ideal" masculinity, would men in lower levels of "actual" masculinity be relieved from the discrepancy challenges? In fact, if masculinity were given a range of meanings within society, this could even shift self-evaluations of "actual" levels, if there were no longer a narrow archetype.

Understanding masculine identity expectancy-discrepancy-threat is a practical measurement tool that can easily be incorporated into survey research and experimental designs. Researchers can capture trait-based self-conceptions and preferences and examine these correlations with political participation, issue attitudes, and broad orientations like SDO and RWA. But actual, ought, and ideal masculine levels can also be incorporated into experimental designs, perhaps in the way policies are framed by the media or elite messaging around parties, candidates, and issues. Furthermore, just as the appearance of political candidates can influence their electoral success and perceived competence, how we understand the influence of gender expression might be explained by a perceiver's personal masculinity expectancy-discrepancy-threat. In sum, we see the exploration of masculinity foundations as an important and fruitful direction for research into gender and politics.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/pls.2026.10025.

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assistance with code-related tasks. The tool was not used to generate original arguments or conclusions. Responsibility for all content, interpretations, and final revisions rests entirely with the author.

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