

Exploring the role of university education in reducing the appeal of right-wing populism

Nathan Manning^{1,2}  | Djordje Stefanovic¹

¹School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

²Fay Gale Centre for Research on Gender, School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Correspondence

Nathan Manning, School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, Australia.

Email: nathan.manning@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

Why are university-educated ethnic majority men less likely to support right-wing populism (RWP) than those without university education? To investigate this under-researched question, we conducted an exploratory study using semistructured interviews and thematic analysis with white Australian men from different socioeconomic backgrounds. While some with university education supported RWP, their views aligned with a moderate version of the ideology. Student/graduate supporters of RWP were opposed to hiring practices designed to support gender and ethnic equity. Students/graduates who experienced contact with Others were generally more positive about diversity, but this was not always the case for non-university participants. While students/graduates with RWP leanings tended to see university as a politically biased institution, concerns about political correctness were widespread across the sample. Significantly, numerous students/graduates experienced university education as promoting a pluralist outlook, and this outlook appears fundamentally incompatible with the monist tendencies of RWP ideology. However, findings also suggest that university education is not the only route to a pluralist outlook, nor does it always lead to a rejection of RWP. Hence, developing a pluralist outlook may be more important than university education in reducing the appeal of RWP. The implications of these exploratory findings for future research are discussed.

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Australia, far-right, racism, sociology of right-wing populism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The rise of right-wing populism (RWP), especially visible in the Anglosphere after the 2016 election of President Trump and the Brexit referendum, has attracted much scholarly attention. In accounting for these events, some suggest a cultural backlash against the economic dislocation caused by globalisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Others point to declining popular support for liberal norms and even democracy itself (Mounk, 2018). Still others focus on RWP ideology and voters (Mudde, 2007, 2016) or draw attention to populists' assault on democratic norms and institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). We build on previous insights but take a different approach by exploring why populism is seemingly an unpopular ideology for those with university education.

We start from the underanalysed finding that university-educated people are significantly less likely to support RWP. This is a standard finding on RWP voters in Continental Europe (Golder, 2016; Rydgren, 2007). In the United Kingdom, polling data suggest university graduates supported Remain vs Leave by a ratio of 2:1 in the Brexit vote (Moore, 2016), and in the United States, white Americans without university education vs white Americans with university education supported Trump in a ratio of 2:1 (PEW, 2018). While university education is clearly associated with a significant reduction in the likelihood of RWP support, the nature of this association remains under-researched. With an enhanced understanding of the role of university education in reducing the appeal of RWP, it may be possible to design policies to similarly affect people who do not have university education.

To address the under-researched question of why populism is an unpopular ideology for the university-educated, we conducted an exploratory pilot study with men from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings offer rich insights into the views and experiences of these men and some of the ways university education (or its lack) affected their political views and orientations. While some with university education supported RWP, their views were close to the moderate version of the ideology, in contrast to several participants without university education who held more extreme views. Student/graduate supporters of RWP were opposed to hiring practices designed to support gender and ethnic equity. Regardless of ideological position, students/graduates who experienced contact with Others were generally more positive about diversity, but this was not always the case for non-university participants. While students/graduates with RWP leanings tended to see university as a politically biased institution, concerns about political correctness were widespread across the sample. Numerous students/graduates experienced their university education as promoting a pluralist political outlook, and we argue this is fundamentally incompatible with monistic RWP ideology that advances single right answers as achievable and desirable in social and political life. Findings also indicate that university education does not always lead to a rejection of RWP, nor is higher education the only route to a pluralist outlook as several participants without university education held pluralist outlooks. These findings suggest that one of the key ways in which university education undermines the support for RWP is by promoting a pluralist outlook.

The paper proceeds in five parts. We start by reviewing the current state of scholarly knowledge on the far-right in Europe and North America and on the effects of university education on sociopolitical beliefs. Next, we give an overview of some main findings on the far-right in Australia. We then explain how our research method—in-depth qualitative interviews—enables us to understand lived experiences and self-understandings of white men. We then discuss the main themes that emerged from the interviews—thinking about ethno-racial diversity (immigration, multiculturalism and racism), sense of ethnic competition for work and welfare,

effects of intergroup contact, concerns with “PC” culture at the university, and university's effect on the development of pluralist outlooks. We conclude by discussing the study's limitations and implications of the finding that university education seems to reduce the support for the RWP by promoting a pluralist outlook.

1.1 | State of knowledge on the far-right

When defining RWP, scholars typically contrast it with the extreme right (ER). Unlike the authoritarian and totalitarian ER in the 1930s and 1940s (Mann, 2004), successful far-right parties in contemporary Western Europe accept multiparty democracy as the only valid option: ER parties—those openly antidemocratic—are typically electorally unsuccessful (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).¹ However, the RWP understanding of democracy is illiberal, rejecting rights and freedoms for minority groups and hence fundamental equality among citizens. Supporters are not opposed to free elections, but they do oppose some aspects of civil liberties and human rights. Right-wing populist ideology overcomes a fundamental tension of liberal democracy—that between democratic majority rule and liberal protection of minority rights—by rejecting constitutional limitations on rule by majorities (Mudde, 2007: 236).

While the RWP versus ER distinction seems clear and analytically sound, the empirical record of RWP supporters and parties indicates fluidity and complexity. In an Australian context, Lentini's (2019) work highlights the fluid border between ER activities and the more institutionalised RWP. The standard distinction is not always clear-cut in post-communist Europe, where “mainstream political actors are not necessarily keen to distance themselves from extremist groups and ideas” (Pankowski, 2010: 5). In 2014, Golden Dawn in Greece was an electorally successful and openly antidemocratic party (Ellinas, 2015). Radicalisation from RWP to ER also seems to be emerging in the Anglosphere, with previously conservative parties and voters showing weaker support for competitive elections and rule of law (Beauchamp, 2019). In a recent survey, 45% of US Republican voters expressed support for the 6 January 2021, storming of the US Capitol in an attempt to overturn the US Presidential election results by force (Sanders et al., 2021). Given the often fluid relationship between ER and RWP, in this paper we refer to both ER and RWP as the far-right.

There is consensus in studies of European RWP that its ideological core is ethnic nationalism or commitment to an ethnically homogenous national state (Merkl, 2003; Mudde, 2000; Stefanovic & Evans, 2019). The main threat to an idealised ethnically homogenous community in Western Europe is the growing presence of “non-European” (non-white, non-Christian) immigrants (Mudde, 2000), who are believed to abuse welfare, cause unemployment to soar and commit crimes (Kessler & Freeman, 2005). No RWP party has performed well in elections without mobilising grievances over immigration (Ivarsflaten, 2008), making anti-immigrant attitudes a strong—if not the strongest—predictor of RWP voting in Western Europe (Norris, 2005).

RWP ideology asserts a “moral distinction” between “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 16). A “corrupt elite” has “lost touch” with the “pure people”; it favours alien minorities and promotes culturally “degenerate” ideas, denying the nation's “glorious” history and subverting “normal” gender roles. However, “pure people,” who have retained “common sense” and morality, can be “awakened” by RWP, break the chains of “political correctness” and restore “national greatness.” As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) observe, RWP ideology is essentially monist, in that a plurality of interests and group identities is seen as divisive and to be replaced by a unified national will based on “common sense.” From this position of “common sense,” those with differing interests or views can be easily dismissed as either “stupid” or deceitful.

In recent decades, support for RWP has been attributed to low-income, low-status groups, particularly men, feeling “left behind” in processes of economic globalisation and modernisation (Kitschelt, 1995; Mughan et al., 2003). These “losers” of globalisation feel threatened by new economic and cultural openness and have been drawn to RWP appeals for a strong state that will defend the interest of the nation and its people. Bhambra (2017) made an important intervention into debates about the “left behind,” in highlighting the role of race in support for RWP. Across the Global North, non-whites are over-represented in the working class and are generally more likely to suffer in terms of health, education and unemployment, but show low levels of support for RWP. In addition, Bhambra notes significant RWP support from the white middle-class. More recent work has also highlighted the significance of a perceived threat of social decline in mobilising voters with middle incomes and high social status to support RWP (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021). As such, we need to be cautious of accounts of RWP that focus on the apparent “losers” of globalisation without addressing race or the ways in which those with higher incomes and status may feel threatened and hence drawn to RWP.

To explore the negative relationship between university education and support for the far-right, we need to turn to another branch of literature. As noted above, those with university education are much less likely to support RWP, but current understandings of whether and how university education might undermine support for the far-right are underdeveloped. Longitudinal European studies yield mixed results on whether university has a direct effect on anti-immigrant attitudes. Findings from Belgium (Hooghe et al., 2013), Norway (Velásquez & Eger, 2022) and the United Kingdom (Scott, 2022) indicate university education does have a liberalising effect on students' views toward immigrants or ethnic outgroups. In contrast, studies from Germany (Weber, 2022) and Switzerland (Lancee & Sarrasin, 2015) find no evidence that university education changed attitudes toward immigrants instead, suggesting that those with more favourable views toward immigrants self-select into university education.

Turning to research investigating how university education may shape sociopolitical views, a common explanation points to the labour market advantages tertiary education provides, making graduates less likely to see immigrants as competitors (Cavaille & Marshall, 2019). An alternative explanation draws upon intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and assumes the main drivers of ethnic and racial prejudices are ignorance and stereotyping. Gurin et al. (2002) highlight the importance of informal campus and classroom-based engagement with diverse peers for reducing prejudice and promoting racial and cultural understanding among university students.

Other research consistently finds that higher education has a limited effect on students' ideological position (Mariana & Hewitt, 2008; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2020). Campbell and Horowitz's (2016) US study of sibling pairs supports a “college effects model,” but their findings highlight family background as a confounding factor—while students' attitudes on certain political issues may shift during university, this had little effect on their overall political orientation, formed prior to university. Looking more specifically at university education and support for the far-right, Elchardus and Spruyt's (2010: 189) research in Belgium found higher education in general has “no effect on attitudes that explain right-wing voting,” but they identified significant protective effects for education in the social sciences. Other studies have similarly found disciplinary effects, with those studying social sciences and humanities developing more liberal views (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2009; Surrige, 2016; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2020). We build on these works by contributing new Australian data wherein students/graduates themselves articulate the ways university education has shaped their political orientations.

1.2 | Australian far-right context

While studies of the far-right in Europe and North America have produced a number of useful concepts and methods, it is vital to understand the unique context and distinct developmental phases of the Australian far-right. Compared with scholarly attention on populism in Europe and the Americas, comparatively little work has been done on populism in Australia (Moffitt, 2017). Much of the research focus has been on the politically marginal ER groups, leaving the more influential RWP less studied. In the first phase (1930s to 1940s), extremist groups saw “Bolsheviks” and Jews as their main enemies. In the second phase (1970s–1990s), they targeted Asian immigrants and sexual minorities (Campion, 2019). During the third phase (post-9/11), ER groups (e.g. Lads Society and True Blue Crew) targeted Muslims (Peucker & Smith, 2019). The rise of the One Nation Party in 1996 on the platform of anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous nationalism and its resurgence in 2016 on an anti-Islamic platform gave a political voice to a mixture of ER² and RWP supporters (Campion, 2019; Peucker & Smith, 2019). So far, the most tragic expression of the Australian ER's violent and eliminationist Islamophobia was the 2019 massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, committed by an Australian white supremacist terrorist.

Beyond Islamophobia, research on Australian ER online media suggests supporters are developing an “intersectional” approach to political mobilisation, bringing race, class and gender together to claim to fight for “persecuted” white working-class men (Davis, 2019). The ER has developed a new ideological “master frame,” proclaiming a “culture war” against out-of-touch, politically correct (neoliberal) elites and “cultural Marxists” (Davis, 2019). In line with Kimmel's (2017) findings on the American far-right, researchers point to the centrality of aggrieved entitlement in Australia, notably the sense of loss of Australia as a supposedly exclusive white space (Sharples & Blair, 2021) and the decline of white heterosexual men, as women and minorities advance “at their expense” (Agius et al., 2020: 2).

During this third phase, the right-wing faction of the Australian Liberal Party appropriated and popularised some exclusionary ideas of One Nation, such as framing “boat people” (mostly Muslim and non-white asylum seekers) as “queue-jumpers” and a national security threat. While other nominally conservative parties in the Global North gradually adopted elements of RWP ideology, especially Islamophobia after 9/11, the right-wing faction of the Liberal Party did so quite quickly. A decisive turn in this direction started just before 9/11, in August 2001, when the Liberal-National Coalition government breached international law by refusing to process Afghan refugees aboard the Tampa, with Prime Minister Howard proclaiming: “We will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come” (O'Doherty & Augoustinos, 2008). Two days after the 9/11 attacks, Defence Minister Peter Reith was already warning refugee boats arriving in Australia could “be a pipeline for terrorists to come and use our country as a staging post for terrorist activities” (Sparrow, 2019: 95).

As Hage (2003: 52) claims in his seminal work, geopolitics, history and early national identity projects have produced a sense of Australia as a demographically small island of white people, blessed with natural wealth, but far from the “mother country” and other whites, menacingly close to an “ocean” of (much poorer) non-white peoples, and destined to be forever fearful of being “swamped” by “uncivilised otherness.” In other words, a number of Australians live in perpetual fear that white Australia might suffer the same fate as Aboriginal Australia (Ang, 2003)—overwhelmed and dispossessed by unstoppable waves of overseas invaders³.

Research shows this dark paranoia is not universal among white Australians. Qualitative interviews indicate that while young Australians with strong pride in culturally homogenous (i.e. white) Australia reject cultural diversity and accommodation, others are proud of multiculturalism and want to extend a “fair go” to culturally diverse asylum seekers (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2017). That is, although ethnic nationalists are ideologically predisposed to see

the increased presence of non-whites as the start of a “flood”/ “invasion” of the “uncivilised other,” Australian civic nationalists are likely to welcome diversity, as it reinforces the multicultural character of Australian society they value.

This is a major finding, but it is important to establish why some young Australians develop a civic and others an ethnic version of national identity. Bulbeck (2004) shows young South Australians exposed to university education are much less likely to develop hostile attitudes to economically more vulnerable ethno-racial Others. In line with Laughland-Booÿ et al. (2017), McAllister (2018) finds Australians with ethnic national identity tend to be less supportive of immigration. And echoing Bulbeck's findings, McAllister shows university education and age tend to predict whether Australians develop ethnic or civic versions of national identity. Thus, consistent with the previously discussed international studies, Australian researchers find university education tends to dampen the appeal of RWP ideology. However, we know little about how university education might produce such effects.

In what follows, we will first explain how our method—in-depth qualitative interviews—enables us to understand lived experiences and self-understandings of participants. We will then discuss the main themes that emerged from the interviews—men's thoughts about ethno-racial diversity (immigration, multiculturalism and racism), sense of ethnic competition for work and welfare, effects of intergroup contact, concerns with “PC” culture at the university, and university's effect on the development of a pluralist outlook. We conclude by discussing the study's methodological limitations and implications of the finding that university education seems to reduce support for RWP by promoting a pluralist outlook.

2 | METHODS

The data analysed for this paper were generated in a pilot study of the role of university education in making students/graduates less likely to support far-right politics. Our exploratory, qualitative research design gave us the flexibility to pursue empirically grounded lines of inquiry while allowing interviewees to raise pertinent and unanticipated dimensions of experience (Berg, 2001).

2.1 | Sampling

To explore the potential role of university education, we purposively constructed a sample, including participants with and without university education. Although our primary interest was to see how university education may affect the ideological outlooks of white men with working-class backgrounds, we interviewed a number of men with middle-class backgrounds, as well as those who did not attend university. Inclusion of middle-class participants was important because, as Bhambra (2017: 215) correctly points out, RWP garners significant middle-class support. We focussed on men because, as noted above, they are much more likely to support RWP (e.g. Kitschelt, 1995). Inclusion of a non-university sample enabled us to ask whether other post-school education (e.g. at technical college) shaped men's political orientations.

2.2 | Recruitment and data collection

Recruitment of the university-educated group took place at the authors' institution, a metropolitan research-intensive Australian university. Recruitment was swift and yielded a sample of 10 white men aged 18–29 years from a range of disciplines (see Table 1). In contrast, recruitment of those without university education proved challenging.

TABLE 1 Summary of participants' key characteristics.

Participant name	Age	Class background	Academic discipline/occupation
University-educated			
Adam	29	Lower middle-class	Psychology postgrad
Callum	20	Middle class	Sciences
Eric	20	Middle class	Social Sciences
Jack	19	Working class	Social Sciences
Jed	18	Working class	Criminology/Law
Michael	24	Working class	Sciences postgrad
Robert	24	Middle class	Engineering
Sam	24	Middle class	Engineering
Thomas	19	Working class	Social Sciences
Tony	26	Middle class	Engineering
Non-university			
Ben	27	Lower middle-class	Electrician
Daniel	27	Lower middle-class	Plumber
Geoff	57	Working class	Mining & Transport
Ian	29	Working class	Software programmer
Luke	20	Middle class	Unemployed
Matthew	29	Lower middle-class	Audio-visual
Paul	58	Working class	Truck driver
Sebastian	27	Lower middle-class	Electrician

Based on some of the responses from the university sample on perceptions of political correctness (discussed below), cold-canvassing at relevant workplaces was deemed inappropriate. We circulated posters at technical colleges (e.g. “TAFE”), but this was unsuccessful. Two participants were recruited through the authors' contacts and a further six through various social media platforms (e.g. Reddit and Facebook). This involved extensive posting on relevant forums and messaging scores of suitable participants with little response. The resulting sample comprised eight white men, six aged 20–29 years and two in their late 50s. We chose to extend the age range for this group largely due to recruitment difficulties. We wanted at least some of those without university education to hold right-wing political views—for the sake of diversity and to complement those with university education. As discussed below, two participants with university education and three of those without described themselves as holding centre-right political views. Given the sample includes men still at university (undergraduates and those completing postgraduate qualifications), it is of course possible that their views may change once they have left a university context or in response to key events like entering the labour market as graduates. It is also worth noting that the views of the two older men may reflect age or cohort effects in addition to, or in interaction with, their educational experiences.

We have included a broad marker of class background in Table 1 to indicate the range of participants' socioeconomic backgrounds. When allocating participants to class groups, we considered parents'/participants' level of education/occupation, neighbourhood and public/private education.

Interviews were conducted by both authors, audio-recorded and transcribed, varying in length from 60 to 100 min. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, but several were video calls, and one was completed via a messaging service. In line with previous research

(Jenner & Myers, 2019), the authors found videoconferencing did not hamper the quality of interviews. With the increased use of such technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants seemed comfortable and at ease with the technology and its use allowed them to discuss personal aspects of their sociopolitical views in the privacy of their homes. The interview conducted via a messaging service took longer than the others as the participant was at work and responded in bursts when available. This may have given the respondent longer to deliberate on answers, and the text-based format may have facilitated online disinhibition (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Nonetheless, given the richness and detail of this interview, the authors feel his views and opinions may have been expressed in more flamboyant language, but likely reflect the participant's orientation toward a range of issues and experiences. One interviewee did not want to be recorded, so notes were taken instead. The interviews were semistructured, permitting us to include questions about political developments (e.g. Black Lives Matter protests). The authors developed an interview schedule informed by literature on RWP and the effect of higher education on political views and also sought insights into participants' political biographies. The interview schedule was refined and augmented after initial interviews and in the light of post-interview debriefings between the authors. Themes covered in the interviews included: sociodemographic background; early political thinking and socialisation; information sources on politics; effect of post-school education/workplace on sociopolitical views; encounters with Others in these environments; opinions on political correctness, minority rights and immigration. In line with previous research, we operationalised RWP ideas as opposition to (non-white) immigration, equal rights for minorities and women and “political correctness” (Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005).

2.3 | Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the authors' university. All names used are pseudonyms.

2.4 | Analytical approach

Analysis of the in-depth interviews involved an interpretive iterative process. The authors debriefed after each interview and used these meetings to compare notes, review interview questions and discuss emerging patterns and divergences. An early interviewee piqued our interest in how political difference is interpreted and responded to, and we developed new questions to pursue this line of inquiry. Once transcribed, the data were initially read by both authors to gain familiarity and look for initial similarities and divergences between accounts. Using frameworks of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), we developed preliminary codes during the second reading. These were refined and related to themes in subsequent reads and in the light of discussions between authors.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Immigration, multiculturalism and racism

In general, university students/graduates expressed positive views about immigration and multiculturalism, although one expressed concern about Muslim immigration. Those graduates/students who decided to express attitudes that could be read as racist attempted to couch them in nonracialised terms. Robert (engineering)⁴ suggested, “Let us not bring in people from high-risk countries,” and then explained: “They have values that will never be compatible with ours.”

In line with Australia's official multiculturalism, several students/graduates noted Australia was founded by immigration. They spoke about the successful assimilation/incorporation of Italians and Greeks, implying non-white immigrants should/would follow a similar path. Callum (sciences) confidently stated, "Immigration has been a resounding success here." In part, this perception of successful integration of "white ethnics" was related to participants' own backgrounds (e.g. Irish and Italian). Across the ideological spectrum, students/graduates expressed support for immigration. They generally believed that even if immigrants were culturally different, their children would be culturally Australian. As Sam (engineering) explained, Australian-born children of immigrants "will be extremely similar in terms of their outlook to the kids who are themselves not the kids of the parents from elsewhere."

In contrast, several non-university participants expressed strongly anti-immigrant and racist opinions. Luke (unemployed) held critical views of Australia's immigration policy and thought pro-immigration individuals "do not seem to see the cultural gaps or the fact that there are differences between us; they do not seem to see that, you know, what's obviously sitting right in front of them." He said many refugees "just want to come here [Australia] for housing and benefits." He found it "particularly offensive" when migrant women wore the hijab, as he thought this was "more of a political statement than a religious one. It's a statement of 'I do not want to fit in, I wish to, you know, stick to my old customs.'" He argued, "We're swamped with people from China, India and Muslim and African countries." Luke thought Muslim immigrants are "unwilling to conform" and do "not assimilate into the general population." He also asked why Australia was not taking more Christians from Syria and Iraq as they were "genuinely at most risk." He complained bitterly about being told by another person that "white people are terrible" and "how evil I was because I was English and I'm responsible for colonialism and all that. Apparently, I'm responsible for something that happened centuries ago." He raised the reported persecution of white farmers in South Africa and concluded, "Everything's just become – we must penalize white people for the past."

Along similar lines, Paul (truck driver) said the idea of "white privilege" is all about making people "feel guilty for being white." Geoff (mining/transport),⁵ a self-declared supporter of Donald Trump and One Nation stated:

I fucken' hate that disgusting policy of multiculturalism; there's one culture in this country the culture our fathers built and defended in two world wars; they and their children should have been asked in the 1940s 50s 60s 70s 80s even as late as the 1990s if it was ok to turn OUR country into the UN's SEPTIC TANK... the traitors in government NEVER asked because they knew the answer is NO.

Here, Geoff openly rejects multiculturalism and sees minority cultures as completely inferior, but other non-university participants rejected anti-minority sentiments. For example, Ian (software programmer) approvingly stated, "We're a country of immigrants," and Sebastian (electrician) said he supported Black Lives Matter.

3.2 | Ethnic competition for work or welfare?

Some argue graduates have more pro-immigrant views because their education tends to provide them with labour market advantages over nongraduates (Ivarsfalten & Stubager, 2013). Indeed, in Australia, economic return on education is higher for Australian-born compared with migrants (Foroutan, 2023); hence, graduates may be less likely to view immigrants as credible labour market competitors. The interviews gave mixed support for this account.

While several university students reported significant difficulties in the job market, these mostly related to challenges in finding the right kind of job (permanent/secure/well-paid/full-time). Tony (engineering) felt the “unfair promotion” of less qualified women, and minorities had squeezed him out of his preferred career and forced him to pursue postgraduate study. Adam (psychology) was unable to get a permanent teaching job despite working long unpaid overtime on evenings and weekends; he noted, “My parents taught me, you work hard, you do a good job and you should get stable employment, you can buy a house, have kids, yada, yada, yada. That did not happen.” However, some of those with middle-class backgrounds felt able to rely on family support if things got rough. Referring to his “generous” parents, Callum explained: “If I fuck up, I know I'm going to have somewhere to fall back on.”

Non-university participants reported considerably more severe forms of deprivation, such as long-term unemployment or homelessness. Luke related a personal experience of exclusion from social housing, to the benefit of a migrant from “fucking Sudan,” which he saw as blatantly unfair. He also claimed, “I feel I've been rejected from my job for being white.” Like Tony, who felt diversity hiring practices had disadvantaged him, Luke believed “a lot of companies [...] want to hire minorities or whatever, 'cause they feel it makes them look good. I feel we should hire based on merit, not on the colour of your skin.”

Students/graduates who displayed some RWP attitudes still disagreed that resources should be spent on retraining (white) Australians instead of bringing in (non-white) immigrants to fill labour shortages. Overall, support for welfare chauvinist sentiment—that social protection should be limited to “real” (i.e. white) members of the nation—was weak even in the non-university sample and virtually nonexistent among university students/graduates. In contrast, RWP students/graduates were concerned with affirmative action quotas and hiring, probably because these were deemed more relevant than access to social housing/social security payments.

3.3 | Intergroup contact: “They love this country as much as I do!”

As universities are generally ethnically diverse places, we anticipated intergroup contact would feature in students'/graduates' accounts of their experiences. Numerous students experienced the different forms of diversity that commonly accompany university education as opportunities to learn from the Other (Pike & Kuh, 2006). For example, Jed (criminology/law) developed a friendship with a Muslim student from Bangladesh; he learned about Islam and discovered that despite his “antireligious” views, he and his friend “share a lot of similar views.” Callum and Eric (social sciences) mentioned the role of migrant students in helping them appreciate how “fortunate” they were as Australians. Jack (social sciences) spoke about learning from students with regional backgrounds or those living with a disability, and Sam, Jed and Jack talked about meeting more people at the university willing to discuss politics and encountering a wider range of political perspectives. Jack explained, “Because of the social culture of the university, you just meet so many different people and you just talk with them.” Comments like these highlight the role of universities in promoting intergroup contact and the diversity of sociopolitical views students can be exposed to.⁶

Tony, who expressed some RWP views, seemed influenced by pre-university contacts with non-white students. After he expressed serious concern about the military threat Communist China poses to Australia, the interviewer questioned him about the possibility of Chinese Australians becoming an “enemy within.” Eventually, Tony replied: “I understand what you are asking me. I went to school with a number of Australian-born Chinese and Vietnamese kids. We played together on the same sports teams. And I can tell you: they love this country as much as I do!” Since Tony also voiced a number of “politically incorrect” opinions, it seems fair to conclude this belief was heartfelt. It appears the lived experience of Australian

multiculturalism can make a difference and that the outcomes of intergroup contact may be realised well before young people start university (Wölfer et al., 2018).

Some participants without university education reported significant contact with diverse Others, but this typically served to reinforce prejudiced views. Paul explained that, as a truck driver, he met all kinds of people, including Muslims. While he found them okay interpersonally, he argued Muslims would try to violently dominate if they became a majority: “Individually, every single one of them would be nice, but because of the way they are educated and the way Islam is, they can very quickly be turned into monsters.” He added, “I should not say this, but they should not be here [in Australia.]” Similarly, Geoff complained: “I feel like a foreigner walking down the street these days.” Although he initially bought a house in an area because it was “mostly white,” he said, “Today it looks like a multicultural shit hole.” Unpicking why Paul and Geoff remained deeply racist despite reported intergroup contact is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the conditions in which contact occurs have a large bearing on the outcomes for contact (Barlow et al., 2012). Moreover, recent research points to the multiple drivers of Islamophobia among ethnic majority Australians, such as party identification with the centre-right Liberal and National parties and the prevalence of Muslims in local areas (Gravelle, 2021).

3.4 | Universities and “PC” culture

In recent years, concerns about a “free speech crisis” on Australian university campuses have appeared in public discourse (e.g. Gelber, 2020). Reflecting this discourse and the far-right’s hostility toward political correctness (e.g. Davis, 2019), several participants thought university is an institution which enforces “political correctness.” As we might expect, the most extreme version of this kind of thinking was formulated by Geoff, a One Nation supporter without university education. At the start of the interview, referring to the interviewer, he noted, “Seeing you are from a university, you have to be a Marxist fascist left-wing fuckwit because that’s all the education system turns out these days.” Yet, several students/graduates also viewed universities as “oppressive” institutions.

Robert was critical of universities as institutions with “a strong bias.” Accordingly, he said, “To get the most out of the uni experience you have kind of got to hold a low profile.” Reflecting on his university experience, he added, “It really is suppression.” Tony shared some of Robert’s concerns about “political correctness” and universities as leftist institutions, but he felt his disciplinary background in engineering shielded him from the “worst excesses.” He thought engineering had taught him “pure” and apolitical ways of researching issues, but he felt other disciplines avoided certain topics and chose not to ask certain questions—his example was a supposed correlation between race and IQ.

While a number of non-RWP students expressed concerns about the “excesses” of “political correctness,” their opinions were generally more nuanced. For Eric, the view of universities as bastions of “political correctness” took a relatively mild form, in that he was concerned about “being ostracised or, you know, criticised” if he expressed right-wing or less progressive views. He said at times in class he would “pretend like I agree,” and at other times, he chose not to share his views because “if I had said it I would have gotten dirty looks, snarls, you know.” Jack noted, “There is a bit of a culture of eliteness about opinions which robs people of the ability to learn and reflect [...] There are certain people who forget that people have to learn.” In contrast, Jed thought “political correctness” is necessary to prevent racial slurs and insults to other people’s religious beliefs. Others were also supportive of “political correctness,” indeed Adam was hostile to those who complain about “political correctness,” referring to them as “fucking idiots.”

Our findings suggest possible differences between fields of study. Two engineering graduates (Robert and Tony) expressed a sense of bitterness, which felt sincere, over promotion of

“unqualified” women and minorities at the expense of more qualified white men and in violation of the merit principle. Robert referred to awards for women engineers: “Imagine being given an award not because you did something impressive; imagine being given an award not on the merits of what you achieved but because of your group identity. How difficult must that be for a woman to deal with.” Robert was clearly fearful that he might be penalised for things he said during the interview, asking for the recording to be stopped on several occasions, and Tony was the only participant who requested the interview not be recorded. Both men held wider concerns that their comments in everyday life could be used against them—e.g. reported to employers and threaten their jobs.

3.5 | Monists and pluralists: Appreciation or dismissal of political differences?

As noted earlier, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) identify an “elective affinity” between monism and RWP, but this link is undeveloped. In our study, this link—and its counter in pluralism—was unanticipated but emerged early during fieldwork and was a strong theme across interviews. A monistic orientation is grounded in the view that single right answers are achievable/desirable in social and political life (Berlin, 1969). As such, monists adopt a dismissive attitude to political others. This takes two key forms: others may be stupid, and hence unable to see the truth of a situation, or they may be liars, deceiving people for various malignant reasons. Based on our participants' comments, a pluralist outlook contains three central elements: an understanding that there is a wide range of legitimate political views and beliefs; an openness to learn from others; and an openness to changing one's mind. Notably, our findings suggest pluralism and monism do not neatly overlap with education levels, as one might expect.

Matthew (audio-visual) encapsulated the pluralist view when he said: “I believe that everyone has at least a little bit of the truth [...] And because of that, when I hear people, I try and understand exactly why it is they think what they do, understanding that in some areas they may have a more developed understanding than I do.” Thus, in Matthew's view, there may be something valuable to learn from others. Matthew also believed reasons and circumstances inform the views people hold: we may disagree with them, but there are reasons for their views, and an individual who thinks differently cannot simply be dismissed as stupid or evil. As Jed claimed, “Everyone thinks they are right... In everyone's brain, they are logical, so if someone has disagreeing views to you, they probably have a pretty logical point of view.” For Jed, this meant we should try and “understand” the perspective of others.

In contrast, Robert reflected monism when he referred to Extinction Rebellion activists as “crazy people.” Indeed, Robert thought there was little “function” in talking politics when views differed. Instead of thinking there might be something to learn from others, he thought this amounted to “propagandis[ing]” and could mean “you lose a friend.” Paul (truck driver) delegitimised the views of Black Lives Matter supporters, saying “The fucking idiot media was calling them demonstrators. They were not demonstrators they were bloody terrorists—burning and torching and breaking!” He thought protesters “have to be sponsored by somebody to be like that [because] they have to know they are doing more damage than use [...] Nobody can be that stupid, unless they are being paid.” Environmentalists were similarly misguided; he thought activist Greta Thunberg “needs a psychologist” and should not have addressed the United Nations on the climate emergency. He referred to “the climate change scam” and said efforts to develop renewable energy were absurd: “There has been climate change for 13 billion years. And they are building windmills [laughs]. Spending billions of dollars, using electricity produced by—coal [laughs].”

As suggested, RWP and monism seem to have an elective affinity, and indeed none of our participants who expressed a pluralist approach also expressed support for RWP ideas. The sources of pluralist thinking seem diverse. A number of students/graduates related their thinking about political difference to their university education. A few thought university developed their critical thinking skills. Several thought they had an opportunity to experience diversity in a range of forms and learn from the experience of others. Still, in line with previous research (Mariana & Hewitt, 2008), students/graduates generally argued university did not fundamentally change their political opinions. A notable difference between the non-university and university sample was that while several non-university participants said their opinions were similar to their parents and did not report significant shifts in opinion, students and graduates did not interpret alignment between their parents and their own political views in this way. Differences between students/graduates and their parent's political views were common and accounts tended to emphasise their own thinking/experiences in arriving at their views, even when these were similar to the views of parents.

A number of students argued university education changed *how* they thought in general. Adam believed his studies in history had developed his analytical thinking skills by allowing him “to really see the differences in understanding of a situation, and what's good for one group is not necessarily good for another.” Jack reflected similar sentiments, saying that learning several different theories of international relations “enhanced my ability to sort of take an issue and analyse it from multiple different lenses at once in my head,” something he did not think he “necessarily had the ability to do before.” Adam and Jack clearly expressed a pluralist basis to critical thinking by arguing for the value of using different perspectives to analyse an issue. This resonates with Woessner and Kelly-Woessner's (2020) finding that university education increases appreciation for dissenting viewpoints.

Callum thought his university education in the sciences had developed an “instinct to check the information of everything you write about,” and he now applied this emphasis on the need for claims to be “rigorously sourced” to his engagement with politics. His love of science had fostered an appreciation of high-quality evidence, and he thought his scientific training had provided skills to distinguish “a reputable source from a disreputable source.”⁷

Engineers Tony and Robert expressed a particular form of monism. They understood politics in an instrumentalist way—as problem solving. Robert thought there was little “function” in discussing politics when views differed, and Tony thought science could be used to find objective answers to sociopolitical issues. We view this as a technocratic form of monism, likely reflecting these men's socialisation into the “technoscientific interpretive schema” of engineers (Sainsaulieu et al., 2019). However, this was not a universal position among engineers, with Sam saying he found it interesting to hear and learn to appreciate different arguments. He also thought Aboriginal Australians have “massive disadvantages,” and we should do something “to give them a leg up.” He rejected the idea that white Australians are “ignored” or “forgotten,” to the contrary: “We've got two major parties made up of mostly Caucasian individuals [...] I do not think there's too much worry there.”

Monism, while hard to reconcile with liberal democratic politics, should not be seen as the worst form of ideological intolerance. Monists may display a dismissive attitude toward political others, but ER takes this further by dehumanising political opponents (Mouffe, 2013). As Davis (2019: 129, 134) shows, the Australian ER online media frequently use “strategic incivility” in the form of intentionally insulting labels for opponents, including “social justice warriors,” “snowflakes,” and “Leftards.” Geoff used similarly colourful and dismissive language, mentioning the “looney left” and “left-wing Marxist fascist fuckwits.”

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began by asking how university education might undermine the appeal of RWP. Clearly, findings from this exploratory study are preliminary and should be used to inform the development of future research drawing upon a wider evidence base. That is, our findings can only be seen as empirically informed, plausible explanations, whose generalisability cannot be assumed, but should be systematically tested, ideally with a large-scale survey using nationally representative samples. Nonetheless, the study offers rich insights into the views of white Australian men and some of the ways university education (or its lack) may affect their political views and orientations.

The bulk of our findings align with existing research. While some university students/graduates supported RWP, their views come close to the moderate version of the ideology. Student/graduate RWP supporters were opposed to both affirmative action and welfare chauvinism. For most students/graduates, contact with Others—in terms of ideology, religion, race/ethnicity, disability and rural background—led to greater understanding and acceptance, in line with intergroup contact theory. In contrast, for several in the non-university group, significant contact with Others did not increase tolerance or acceptance. While RWP students/graduates tended to see university as a politically biased institution, concerns about political correctness were widespread across the sample.

The most interesting finding is that university education appears to promote a pluralist outlook, which is hard to reconcile with RWP's monistic ideology and thus tends to make university students less susceptible to the appeal of RWP. Our findings support the claim for an elective affinity between RWP and monism. The experience of a university education (noting the complexities of engineering) seemed to facilitate a pluralist outlook, an orientation incompatible with the monist tendencies of RWP ideology. The elective affinity between a monistic outlook and RWP ideology may stem from RWP's fundamental rejection of liberal tolerance to various forms of diversity—ethnic/racial, sexual, religious and ideological—and deserves further investigation.

The technocratic monism and RWP opinions expressed by some students/graduates suggests university education does not mechanistically lead to a pluralist outlook or rejecting RWP. Some engineering graduates in our sample linked their own lived experiences—a perceived suppressive atmosphere of political correctness at university and hardship in finding good jobs afterwards—to perceived leftist repression at universities and unfair promotion of women and minorities over (ostensibly) more qualified white men. Engineering graduates expressing these sentiments displayed no awareness of any sort of structural white or male privilege (Pease, 2012). In other words, they did not consider the possibility that while they were experiencing a variety of hardships, engineers who happen to be women or racial minorities might be experiencing barriers that were not visible to white men engineers.

More generally, the technocratic monism we identified implies aggregate-level findings and prominent assumptions about university education as providing a blanket “immunising” effect against RWP deserve further interrogation. Future research should systematically explore disciplinary differences in support for key aspects of RWP ideology. The lower appeal of RWP for students/graduates may reflect selection effects for those who attend university (Weber, 2022). Indeed, our findings on the apparent enduring adolescent effects of intergroup contact also point to the need for investigation with younger age groups.

Our findings on the incompatibility of a pluralist outlook with support for RWP suggest a pluralist orientation may matter more than university education in undermining support for RWP. While our study highlights the ways university education can facilitate and develop a pluralist outlook, such orientations were not exclusive to students/graduates. Future research should examine the development of pluralist orientations in young people's

political socialisation. At a time of resurgent far-right politics and heightened political polarisation, the need for democracies to nurture pluralism and mutual understanding is as important as ever.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nathan Manning: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Djordje Stefanovic:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ORCID

Nathan Manning  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0488-0888>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The extent to which an antidemocratic stance is characteristic of far-right parties is subject to ongoing debate (e.g. see Carter, 2018).
- ² A 2017 nationally representative survey found about 1/3 of One Nation supporters would prefer to replace a multiparty democracy with rule by a 'strong leader' (Markus, 2019: 63). A clear majority of party supporters can be classified as RWP, but a significant section supports ER.
- ³ As usual with RWP national projects, the idealised happy golden age of white Anglo Australia as an exclusive and safe national home, never really existed (Hage, 2000: 68, 73, 212–213).
- ⁴ Disciplinary background is listed for those with university education and industry/sector for those without.
- ⁵ Geoff's interview was conducted using a messaging service; excerpts are faithful to his written responses.
- ⁶ Given the significant presence of students from China on campus, it was surprising that our participants rarely discussed contact with these students.
- ⁷ Non-university participants were asked whether they thought their post-school training or workplace experiences shaped their political thinking; regardless of whether they held a pluralist or monist orientation, such questions did not resonate.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Nathan Manning is a political sociologist at The University of Adelaide. His research is focussed on young citizens, political dissatisfaction/disillusionment and the wider role of emotions in politics and citizenship. He is a founding co-editor of the journal *Emotions and Society* (Bristol University Press), and his research has been funded by the British Academy & Leverhulme Trust, and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Djordje Stefanovic is a political sociologist at The University of Adelaide. His work draws upon historical and quantitative methods to study ethnic conflict. His current work focusses on the far-right and the drivers of anti-minority sentiments. His research has featured in various outlets, including *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *International Migration*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Human Rights Quarterly* and *Political Psychology*. His research has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the European Institutes for Advanced Study; Nuffield College, the University of Oxford; and the European Commission.

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