The political significance of fragile masculinity
Sarah H DiMuccio and Eric D Knowles

Recent research in gender psychology finds that males are expected to actively earn and maintain their status as ‘real men’ or risk losing this valued group status. The precariousness of manhood can create anxiety among males who feel that they are failing to meet cultural standards of masculinity—a state we term fragile masculinity. Although research has identified a variety of strategies that men adopt in order to restore their threatened status as ‘real men’, few studies have examined compensatory attitudes and behaviors in the political realm. We review recent evidence suggesting a link between fragile masculinity and aggressive political stances as well as support for the party (Republicans) that tends to endorse such stances. Overall, the evidence, though currently limited, suggests that fragile masculinity is crucial to fully understanding men’s political attitudes and behaviors.

Address
New York University, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, USA
Corresponding author: DiMuccio, Sarah H (sarah.dimuccio@nyu.edu)

Since its inception more than a century ago, the field of political psychology has made great strides in understanding the psychological origins of political attitudes, ideologies, and behavior. Scholars have identified a range of factors—including personality traits, racial attitudes, economic stressors, and intergroup dynamics, to name just a few—that help explain why people support the policies and politicians they do. Here, we draw attention to an as-yet-underexplored determinant of political behavior: fragile masculinity. Our goal is to review existing research into this crucial feature of gender psychology and outline preliminary evidence for its importance in the political realm.

What is fragile masculinity?
A long tradition of research into masculinity examines the prevailing cultural expectations to which men are expected to conform [1,2]. Only recently have scholars begun to document the fraught nature of these expectations—and the psychological and behavioral consequences for men who fear they are falling short of strict masculine standards [3]. A new (but fast-growing) body of psychological research demonstrates that manhood is ‘precarious’—that is, males are expected to actively achieve and defend their high-value status as men. If they fail to convincingly demonstrate their manhood, males risk losing their status as ‘real men’ [4]. In many males, the pressure to earn and prove their manhood triggers anxiety that in turn motivates a variety of compensatory beliefs and behaviors [5]. The study of fragile masculinity thus concerns the anxiety that stems from manhood’s precariousness and the behavioral consequences of this anxiety.

The primary method by which males attempt to earn and maintain their manhood is by behaving in stereotypically masculine ways [6]. Research from the past 50 years has identified several core traits that characterize socially acceptable masculinity in the United States: status-seeking, achievement and success in work and sports, independence, confidence, competitiveness, risk-taking, aggression, and the eschewal of femininity in behavior, speech, and emotion [1,2]. Importantly, fragile masculinity is not merely the fear that one will be punished for failing to conform to gendered prescriptions and proscriptions; indeed, both men and women face pressure to abide by their culture’s prevailing gender norms. Rather, a man’s failure to adhere to masculine expectations is especially threatening because it can lead, not only to ostracism or a loss of esteem in the eyes of peers, but to the revocation of his very membership in the high-status ‘man’ category. Thus, men are expected to behave in masculine ways in order to claim membership in the privileged gender group—and failure to do so successfully results in a loss of status.

While the content of what it means to be a man (specific qualities, behaviors, preferences and traits dictated by the prevailing masculinity) varies with the cultural and historical context, the structure of manhood as a social status that must be earned and maintained appears widespread [3,7–10]. Indeed, anthropological, historical, and psychological research finds that manhood is tenuous and elusive throughout many societies and time periods, although more research is needed to better gauge whether precarious masculinity is a universal phenomenon. It is manhood’s precarious structure—rather than any specific, culturally bound contents—that causes men’s anxiety and motivates attitudes and behaviors meant to alleviate it [3,9]. Recent research confirms that adopting masculine traits and behaviors is a strategy...

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.11.010
2352-1546 © 2019 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
by which fragile men attempt to gain, maintain, and reclaim ‘real’ manhood.

**Consequences of fragile masculinity**

Much of what we know about the consequences of fragile masculinity comes from studies that experimentally reduce men’s confidence in their manhood. Manhood threat is most often induced by insinuating that the participant is high in femininity—the primary trait that prevailing American cultural standards demand that men avoid. Popular approaches have men engage in stereotypically feminine tasks (e.g., hair braiding) [11] or give participants false feedback on a gender knowledge test indicating they possess an inappropriate amount of feminine knowledge [12,13]. Utilizing these threat paradigms, among others, researchers have found that—relative to women or to men whose gender status was not challenged—threatened men display a consistent set of physiological, cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral responses.

Men exposed to masculinity threats have been observed to react with increased anxiety-related thoughts [4], aggressive ideation [4,14], discomfort and anger [13], gender-role-related stress [12], higher cortisol levels [15], and cardiac vagal withdrawal (an index of stress) [16]. Threatened men also displayed higher pain tolerance [12] and greater toughness [17], punched a punching bag harder [14], consumed more alcohol [18], rejected feminine preferences [5], took greater financial risks [19,20], and were more aggressive toward gay men [21]. Many of men’s reactions to threat, while they do not directly pertain to politics and elections, nonetheless hint at the political significance of fragile masculinity. These reactions include increased justification of social inequality [22], less support for gender equality [9], more benevolent sexism [13], more homophobic attitudes [23], and increased enjoyment of sexist and anti-gay humor [24].

Beyond this experimental work, several constructs conceptually related to fragile masculinity have been found to predict aggressive beliefs and behaviors. In particular, the construct of gender role discrepancy stress—some men’s abiding sense of anxiety about not living up to masculine norms—is associated with risky and aggressive behavior [25]. Other research reveals that men’s desire to maintain masculine ideals is associated with gun enthusiasm and aggressive responses to perceived security threats [26]. Moreover, men high in masculine honor beliefs have been shown to rate other men more positively when those men confront threats directly and aggressively [27]. Thus, it may be that men chronically prone to fragile masculinity are predisposed to engage in stereotypically male behaviors that demonstrate (to others and the self) genuine manhood.

In sum, there is much evidence to suggest that threatened or fragile men engage in traditionally masculine gender scripts—disavowing femininity and gayness, striving for dominance and success, showing toughness, taking risks, and being aggressive. The cited research represents only a subset of the many studies that have been conducted in this area. In contrast, the consequences of manhood threats within the political realm are underexplored [23,28**].

**Fragile masculinity’s role in politics**

The political realm may be an especially appealing arena for men to prove and (if necessary) restore their manhood status. In politics, men may choose between parties, politicians, ideologies, and policies that vary in terms of their gendered connotations. In the context of politics, masculine stances and policies are those that convey toughness, aggression, and risk tolerance—qualities that might be relevant in the domains of national security and foreign policy. It may thus be the case that demonstrating one’s masculinity in politics can be accomplished by supporting risky or aggressive positions and the politicians who advocate them.

Scholars and analysts have for decades cited observational and anecdotal evidence that masculine anxiety, and the resulting need to demonstrate masculine prowess, runs deep in American politics—from contributing to the expansion of the Vietnam war [29], to influencing perceptions of male electability [30], to guiding strategists’ notions of “effective” political campaigning [31]. Such analyses offer insight into how masculine anxiety affects many aspects of politics, including decisions made by male politicians to the voting behavior of the male electorate.

A small number of studies provide empirical evidence that masculine concerns do, in fact, drive political opinions and outcomes. For example, sociologist Robb Willer and his colleagues found that, following a manhood threat, men showed greater support for President George W. Bush and the Iraq War [23]. More recently, sociologists Emily Carian and Tagart Cain Sobotka found that a manhood threat caused an increased desire for a masculine president, which in turn predicted support for Donald Trump in 2016 [28**]. Correlational research from our own lab (currently in preparation) finds that men higher in gender role discrepancy stress are also more likely to support more ‘aggressive’ policies, such as torture and the death penalty.

While the relationship between masculinity and politically aggressive outcomes is important in its own right, it can also help us understand another phenomenon on longstanding interest in the political realm—namely, the ‘partisan gender gap’. A great deal of public-opinion research indicates that men and women differ, on average, in terms of
party identification, voting behavior, political ideology, and political attitudes [32–34]. Specifically, research since the 1960s has consistently found that women are more likely than men to identify and vote Democratic, identify as liberal, and support social-welfare policies. Men, in contrast, are more likely than women to identify and vote Republican, identify as conservative, and support use-of-force policies (e.g., military intervention) [35]. While several causes have been explored for this disparity, such as biological factors, demographic variables, and sociocultural influences, fragile masculinity has not yet been examined as a possible contributor to the gap.

One reason to believe that fragile masculinity might compound the partisan gender gap is that the largest and most robust gender differences occur with respect to use-of-force issues [36]. Research shows that men, more than women, tend to support the use of force both domestically (e.g., capital punishment, torture, gun control, police brutality) and internationally (e.g., military force, defense spending, violent foreign policy, and war) [37]. Moreover, evidence suggests that men’s tendency to be more militaristic and politically aggressive than women largely accounts for the overall gender gap in party identification, voting, and ideology [38,39]. Men thus appear specifically attracted to policies that encourage force, military aggression, and violence.

It is likely that gendered stereotypes of political parties and policies—assumptions about whether a party or policy connotes masculinity or femininity—are themselves sufficient to create a partisan gender gap. Even in the absence of fragile masculinity, people will tend to follow prevailing gender norms when deciding which policies or candidates to support. Yet it may still be that the case that fragile masculinity compounds the gap. While future research is needed to address this possibility, experimental and correlational evidence, some of which is outlined above, supports a connection between fragile masculinity and political aggression.

Men’s support for the use of force in the political domain may help explain their greater propensity to vote Republican and identify as conservative, as the GOP has curated its platform around being ‘tough’ [40]. Indeed, people view the Republican party—both explicitly and implicitly—as the more masculine of the two major U.S. political parties [41,42]. A recent study using a nationally representative sample of voters found that men and Republicans were more likely to support the statement ‘American society has become too soft and feminine’, which in turn significantly predicted voting for Donald Trump in 2016 [43]. Other studies had participants role-play political leaders in the midst of international crises, finding that men (compared to women) exhibited greater confidence in their decisions [44,45], aggression toward opposing players [44–46], conservatism and Republicanism [46], and preference for the use of military force in real-world U.S. foreign policy [46]. Finally, evidence from our own lab supports a link between fragile masculinity and a preference for Trump and Republican candidates [47]. Using Google Trends data on search terms found (in a pretest) to be popular among fragile men (e.g., how to get girls, penis enlargement, Viagra), we found that geographical areas highest in these searches showed greater support for Trump in the 2016 general election and for Republican candidates in the 2018 House elections. Although correlational, these data suggest that fragile masculinity may be an important factor in real-world political outcomes.

Taken together, the existing literature suggests that there is indeed a link between fragile masculinity (both manipulated and measured) and support for masculine and aggressive political means and ends, such as engaging in war and heightened aggression in crisis simulations. Moreover, fragile masculinity is an underexplored factor in explaining society-wide political differences between men and women. Further empirical research is needed to explore the scope of the relationship between fragile masculinity and political attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

Acknowledgement
We thank Marie Helweg-Larsen for comments and valuable feedback on an earlier version of this article.

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


Demonstrates a causal link between fragile masculinity and support for Donald Trump, mediated by an increased desire for a masculine president.


Synthesizes and reviews the literature on the partisan gender gap.


Demonstrates how trait stereotypes that are gendered in nature (compassionate vs. tough) shape perceptions of the Democratic and Republican parties and also reflect the values of each party.


Demonstrates that men and Republicans are more concerned about American society becoming too feminine; a belief which in turn predicted voting for Donald Trump on 2016.


