

Proud Boys



Photo credit: Getty

- Ideology: Primarily [alt lite](#): Misogynistic, Islamophobic, transphobic and anti-immigration. Some members espouse white supremacist and anti-Semitic ideologies and/or engage with white supremacist groups.
- Membership: Unknown, likely several hundred.
- Notable characteristics: Members frequently wear black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts.
- Global footprint: Proud Boys have chapters in most states and several international chapters in Britain, Norway and Australia.
- Membership: Controlled by local chapter leadership and subject to initiation rituals.

- Tactics: Public rallies and protests. Members have been known to engage in violent tactics; several members have been convicted of violent crimes.

Video Backgrounder

Background

The Proud Boys represent an unconventional strain of American right-wing extremism. While the group can be described as [violent](#), [nationalistic](#), [Islamophobic](#), [transphobic](#) and [misogynistic](#), its members represent a range of ethnic backgrounds, and its leaders vehemently protest any allegations of racism. Their founder, Gavin McInnes, went so far as to file a [defamation lawsuit](#) against the Southern Poverty Law Center when the SPLC designated the Proud Boys a hate group.

In McInnes' own words, the Proud Boys are a "pro-western fraternity," essentially a drinking club dedicated to male bonding, socializing and the celebration all things related to western culture. In reality, the Proud Boys bear many of the hallmarks of a [gang](#), and its members have taken part in multiple acts of brutal [violence and intimidation](#). While the Proud Boys insist that they only act in self-defense, several incidents –including one in which two members of the group were [convicted](#) of attempted gang assault, attempted assault and riot– belie their self-professed peaceful nature. Indeed, many members have criminal records for violent behavior and the organization [actively pursues violence](#) against their perceived enemies.

During the last three years, the Proud Boys have established themselves as a dominant force within [the alt lite](#). Easily recognizable, thanks to their black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts and red Make America Great Again baseball caps, members are regulars at far-right demonstrations and Trump rallies. After several years of forging alliances with members of the Republican political establishment, the Proud Boys have carved out a niche for themselves as both a right-wing fight

club and a [volunteer security force for the GOP](#). Despite their associations with mainstream politicians, Proud Boys' actions and statements repeatedly land them in the company of white supremacists and right-wing extremists. Jason Kessler, the primary organizer of the deadly 2017 [Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville](#), is a former Proud Boy. Several members attended the violent August 12, 2017 demonstration that ended in the death of counter-protestor Heather Heyer.

During an [October 2018 brawl outside the Metropolitan Republican Club in Manhattan](#), for which two Proud Boys members were convicted and sentenced to substantial prison terms, and seven others pled guilty, the Proud Boys were joined by the 211 Bootboys, an ultra-nationalist and violent skinhead gang based in New York City. In October 2019, members of the Denver chapter of the Proud Boys marched with members of [Patriot Front](#) and former members of the now-defunct neo-Nazi group [Traditionalist Worker Party](#). These relationships show the Proud Boys to be less a pro-western drinking club and more an extreme, right-wing gang. Ideologically, members subscribe to a scattershot array of libertarian and nationalist tropes, referring to themselves as anti-communist and anti-political correctness, but in favor of free speech and free markets.

History

The Proud Boys was formed in 2016 by VICE Media co-founder, Gavin McInnes. [In an op-ed](#) in the far-right outlet Taki's Magazine—notorious for its regular contributors, which included white supremacist Jared Taylor—McInnes announced the foundation of the group, describing its members as “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologise [sic] for creating the modern world,” and who “long for the days when ‘girls were girls and men were men.’” According to McInnes, the Proud Boys, whose name is taken from a song in the musical *Aladdin*, are a response and opposition to “politically correct culture.”

McInnes, whose *VICE* magazine built its reputation on publishing juvenile and often offensive material, had been trying to establish himself for years as a

professional provocateur, making wildly racist statements and claiming it was all ironic, or tongue-in-cheek. In 2002, he [said](#), “We seem really racist and homophobic because we hang around with fags and niggers so much. It just becomes part of our vernacular.”

At the same time, McInnes was becoming increasingly overt in his xenophobia and racism, [telling the New York Times](#) in 2003 that, “I love being white and I think it's something to be very proud of. I don't want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.”

According to [McInnes' plan](#), the roughly 1,000 Proud Boys would be organized into chapters nationwide. Membership would be divided into ranks from one to four.

To attain level one, an initiate must publicly state: “I am a proud Western chauvinist, I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.”

To reach level two, the initiate must endure a beating by his comrades while reciting the names of five breakfast cereals. This is ostensibly to demonstrate “adrenaline control;” [leaked online videos](#) show the ritual to be far less violent than what McInnes described. Initiates are told to limit masturbation to once per month. The idea behind this ban -- that porn is making men weak and keeping them from forming real relationships with women -- is common throughout the right-wing extremist movement. In his [op-ed](#), McInnes wrote: “Though sexual intercourse is encouraged, Proud Boys have an endgame and it is to settle down and have kids. They have absolutely no respect for feminists but venerate the housewife so much, they are actually becoming quite popular with women.”

To achieve the third level, an initiate must get a Proud Boys tattoo. Common variations are “Proud Boy,” “POYB” (acronym for Proud of Your Boy”) and “Uhuru,” a Swahili word for “freedom” that the Proud Boys have appropriated as their battle cry.

Finally, the fourth level, which McInnes did not describe in the foundational document, is an honorary degree awarded for “a material sacrifice or service by a brother.” McInnes [said in an interview](#) that the fourth degree is awarded for “a major fight for the cause. You get beat up, kick the crap out of an antifa,” but he [later](#) backpedaled, saying it “obviously doesn’t mean you go to someone’s house or even pick a fight with one at a rally. Fourth degree is a consolation prize for being thrust into a shitty situation and surviving.”

In October 2018, as law enforcement sought members of the Proud Boys for their role in the fight [outside the Metropolitan Republican Club](#), Proud Boys leadership released a “clarified” set of bylaws that seemed to contradict their prior, violent rhetoric. The new language reads: “Any requirement that a brother commit a violent or illegal act as a condition precedent to receiving a fourth degree is, by this bylaw, abolished.”

In early 2019, before [Proud Boys John Kinsman and Maxwell Hare were convicted](#) for their role in the 2018 fight, McInnes announced that he would no longer be formally involved with the Proud Boys. Leadership was [assumed briefly](#) by disgraced Texas attorney, Jason van Dyke, before he was replaced by Enrique Tarrío, a Cuban-American from Miami. Tarrío, the current chairman, is also running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2020.

2020 was a significant year for the Proud Boys. They solidified their status as the most visible, and most active right-wing extremist group in the country. As the nation grappled with the pandemic, members of the Proud boys became a [regular sight](#) at anti-lockdown protests, using the demonstrations not only to raise their profile, but as recruitment opportunities. The group is not unique in this sense – [Boogaloo bois](#) and [militia members](#) were also frequent participants at these rallies. Another key factor in the Proud Boys 2020 activity was [their embrace of the #Saveourchildren campaign](#), alongside [QAnon](#) adherents. The new links with QAnon allowed Proud Boys access to untapped segments of the pro-Trump extremist movement.

Events held in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, allowed the Proud Boys to brand themselves as “law and order” counterpoint to Black Lives Matter protesters, although the Proud Boys themselves generally precipitated the most egregious acts of [violence and intimidation](#) against protesters. This dynamic produced some of the most brutal clashes between Proud Boys and their adversaries, particularly in Portland, Oregon which saw over 100 days of continuous unrest. There were violent and armed [clashes on August 22](#), and a [MAGA convoy on August 29](#) led to the death of Aaron “Jay” Danielson, [a member of right-wing group Patriot Prayer, a frequent ally of the Proud Boys](#). On September 26, close to 500 Proud Boys [gathered in a Park in Portland](#), demanding justice for Danielson. Apart from a few incidents, that event was largely peaceful.

Proud Boys’ profile was given an additional boost when President Trump, in his [September 29 debate](#) against Joe Biden, instructed the Proud Boys to “[stand back, and stand by](#).” Emboldened by the attention from the President, the Proud Boys rallied for Trump twice in Washington, D.C. following his election loss. The first rally took place on [November 14](#), and the second on [December 12](#), which ended with four members of the [Proud Boys suffering stab wounds](#) from a brawl. During that same rally, Proud Boys members allegedly set fire to a BLM banner they stole from Asbury United Methodist Church, a historically Black church. Proud Boys leader, Enrique Tarrío, took responsibility for the incident and was later charged with destruction of property. He was arrested, carrying two extended gun magazines, on the eve of the January 6, 2021 rally that led to the storming of the U.S. Capitol. As a condition of his release, [a judge barred Tarrío from attending the January 6 protest](#).

Violence

Violence has been a key component of the Proud Boys since the group’s creation.

On August 22, 2020, members of the Proud Boys fought with counter-protestors in Portland, Oregon. This clash between right-wing and left-wing activists was one

of many in Portland and other American cities throughout the summer, and Proud Boys had been a fixture at most of them.

Ahead of the August 22 brawl, one prominent member of the group, Tusitala “Tiny” Toese, who is barred from taking part in any protest in Portland as a condition of his probation following his sentencing for assault, explained that the Proud Boys were in the streets because they were [“pissed off and didn’t want to see this country burn.”](#) This is part of a trend of far right vigilantism where Proud Boys self-deputize in order to “assist” law enforcement. Armed with bear mace, clubs, paintball guns and in the case of one Proud Boys member, [an actual gun](#), the Proud Boys engaged in multiple acts of violence against counter-protestors and members of the media. One journalist suffered a broken finger when Proud Boys member [Travis Taylor allegedly attacked him with a club](#).

Patriot Prayer, frequent Proud Boys collaborators, organized another protest that turned violent, on August 15, 2020. The event was attended by Proud Boys, including Alan Swinney, who would later brandish a revolver at the August 22 protest, and who came to the August 15 event [armed with a paintball gun](#), which he used on counter-protestors. [One person was injured after being hit with a paintball pellet](#), although it is unknown if Swinney was the shooter. At least two gunshots were reported during the protest; the shooter remaining unknown. One day earlier, Proud Boys clashed with counter-protestors in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

No members of the Proud Boys were arrested in the aftermath of these protests although a Multnomah County judge issued a new warrant for Tusitala Toese following his appearance at the August 22 protest.

McInnes has repeatedly advocated brutal tactics when dealing with the Proud Boys’ sworn enemies -- anti-fascist counter protestors, [otherwise known as antifa](#) -- and leaked chats from [social messaging app Telegram](#) reveal a clear pattern of inciting violence. In a June 2016 episode of the “Gavin McInnes Show”, McInnes

warned his enemies, “We will kill you. That’s the Proud Boys in a nutshell. We will kill you.”

And yet, the group’s leaders have repeatedly attempted to distance themselves from violence, both threatened and actual. In the aftermath of the 2018 brawl in Manhattan, McInnes stated in an [interview with NewsmaxTV](#) that he does not “control these guys” and described himself as “the founder, not the leader.” Similarly, Tarrío has repeatedly insisted that the Proud Boys [organization is nonviolent](#).

Again, real world events belie the claims made by various Proud Boys leaders. Not only have there been several instances where [Proud Boys](#) have [engaged in unprovoked violence](#), their social media conversations also demonstrate how inciting violence and [responding to small slights with brutal force](#) is key to the Proud Boys’ strategy. In fact, while the [Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights \(FOAK\)](#) was formed to serve as a “tactical *defense* arm” (italics ours) of the Proud Boys, its leader, Kyle Chapman AKA Based Stickman, is a violent felon who has repeatedly encouraged violence against anti-fascist activists, and [whose persona stems from his history of threatening counter-protestors with a heavy iron stick](#). Similarly, Proud Boys and their allies purposefully organize and act in a manner that will all but guarantee violence. In advance of the August 2019 “End Domestic Terrorism” rally in Portland, Oregon, organizer and outspoken Proud Boys ally, Joe Biggs, posted videos of himself holding a spiked baseball bat with the words “Make America Great Again” emblazoned on it, telling the camera that “We’re going to put this to good use.” He also posed wearing t-shirts reading, “I’m Just Here for the Violence” and “Death to Antifa.”

[Screen shots](#) of conversations on Telegram reveal how members of the Proud Boys consider any provocation to be a direct assault that legitimizes any use of force as acceptable retaliation. In advance of an April 2019 rally in Rhode Island, a poster wrote, [“If any contact is made with you, that’s assault. If they take your hat, spray you with silly string, spit, push... It’s assault. We need to have all our guys there](#)

before we retaliate though if we can. The cops aren't going to let us fight long. We need to inflict as much damage as possible in the time we have." In the same chat room, a Proud Boy member using the name "Jason Cardona" posed with a hatchet, writing, "Group, meet Kindness." Later he posed with a large knife and wrote, "If they want to meet wisdom all they have to do is ask." Poster "Col. Kish" wrote, "It's a prior service Marines [sic] to get out and continue beating the fuck out of communists, semper Fi ooh ra."

At the rally in Rhode Island, among others, there have been instances of Proud Boys engaging in unprovoked attacks, as well as groups of Proud Boys [attacking single counter-protestors](#).

In January 2020, Proud Boy member, Tusitala "Tiny" Toese, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge for an attack on a man in Portland. Fellow Proud Boy Donovan Flippo had earlier [pleaded guilty](#) to fourth-degree assault for the same incident.

In August, 2019, former Patriot Prayer member and current Proud Boy member, Russell Schultz, along with five others, was [indicted for rioting](#) following a fight outside the Cider Riot bar in Portland.

On January 6, 2019, self-proclaimed Proud Boy Buckey Wolfe allegedly murdered his brother with a samurai-style sword, claiming that ["God told me he was a lizard."](#) The Proud Boys released a statement saying that Wolfe had never been approved as a member, but according to the [Daily Beast](#), Buckey's Facebook profile included pictures of him with other members of the group. At the time of the murder, Buckey [reportedly](#) subscribed to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Prosecutors say that Buckey demonstrated signs of mental illness.

Links to the political mainstream

On February 21, 2018, a new video appeared on the Proud Boys' YouTube channel, showing Roger Stone, convicted felon and longtime advisor to President Trump,

[staring into the camera and reciting the Proud Boys initiation](#): “Hi. I’m Roger Stone. I’m a western chauvinist, and I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.” Stone has had a long relationship with the Proud Boys, posing in countless pictures with various members, [appearing in videos](#), [receiving support](#) from the group during his 2019 trial and even [using them as private security](#) at events. But Stone is not the only link between the Proud Boys and the political establishment.

After Gavin McInnes’ speech at the Metropolitan Republican Club in 2018, conservative commentator [Ann Coulter tweeted](#), “Get a Proud Boys wristband to defend the men who defend you.” Several Metropolitan Republican Club members defended the decision to host the Proud Boys leader, and Alan Bialeck, a Club board member, [told BuzzFeed News](#) that he believes McInnes was merely expressing his right to free speech.

In October 2019, Donald Trump, Jr. posed for a photo with Proud Boy member Luke Rohlring. It is unclear whether Trump Jr. was aware of Rohlring’s political views, but the photo is part of a long-term Proud Boys strategy: posting alongside high-level Republicans in hopes of gaining legitimacy.

Both U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (Texas) and then-Florida Gov. Rick Scott have been photographed alongside Proud Boys, as have U.S. [Reps Mario Diaz-Balart \(FL-25\)](#) and [Devin Nunes \(CA-22\)](#).

Sen. Cruz took his support a step farther, backing a non-binding resolution that would have defined anti-fascist activists as domestic terrorists after Enrique Tarrio launched a petition in favor of the bill. Even President Trump took notice and [tweeted that](#) “Major consideration is being given to naming ANTIFA an “ORGANIZATION OF TERROR.”

The Proud Boys have also been embraced by a number of Fox News hosts; McInnes has appeared on Sean Hannity’s Fox News program more than 24 times, and Tucker Carlson has appeared on McInnes’ show.

Racism:

While the Proud Boys often publicly denounce white supremacy, their activity has attracted white supremacists who share the group's opposition to progressive politics and proclivity for violence. The Proud Boys participated in the 2017 protests at the University of California-Berkeley, alongside a variety of white supremacist groups, including [Rise Above Movement \(R.A.M\)](#), [Identity Evropa](#) (now the American Identity Movement, or AIM) and the [Traditionalist Worker Party \(TWP\)](#). Similarly, members of Identity Evropa/AIM and TWP have joined Proud Boys and fellow right-wing group [Patriot Prayer](#) events in Portland. One man, wearing a patch for the Proud Boys-associated Fraternal Order of Alt Knights (FOAK), attended the October 2017 neo-Nazi "White Lives Matter" rally in Shelbyville, Tennessee. During the rally, he taunted the counter-protesters by destroying an antifa flag. Members of the Proud Boys also attended the violent August 2017 "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. They later circulated an image of themselves in a celebratory pose with a flag they "captured" from antifa. In October 2018, Proud Boys posed with members of the 211 Bootboys, an ultranationalist skinhead group, after McInnes' speech at the Metropolitan Republican Club in New York City.

McInnes also has a long history with racism not confined to his [repeated use of the N-word](#). He once called African-American actress Jada Pinkett Smith "[that monkey actress](#)," and on an episode of the Gavin McInnes Show on Compound Media [he said that](#) "We're the new n***ers. MAGA is the new black." McInnes declared on March 8, 2017, "If you like Trump, you are a black man in 1945 trying to have water at a liberal fountain."

Misogyny:

The Proud Boys claim that they "venerate the housewife," but McInnes has said that women are "lazy" and "less ambitious" than men, and that the pay gap between women and men is due to the fact a woman "would rather go to [her]

daughter's piano recital" than work. He has said that women are "magical" and that "birth is a magical thing," and that the U.S. should have "enforced monogamy" because women are "colostomy bags for various strangers' semen" when they have sex outside of marriage. He has described feminism as "a cancer" that "makes women ugly." Joe Biggs, a frequent Proud Boys rally-planning partner, close friend of Enrique Tarrío and former InfoWars contributor, has a long history of explicit misogyny and support for rape.

Islamophobia:

Within the Proud Boys creed "The West is the Best" lies an implicit anti-Eastern bias common among right-wing extremists and white supremacists. McInnes has called the idea of a Muslim American president "insane" and compared it to electing "a German president in 1942 in America." In a talk show on Fox News, he said there was a "huge problem with inbreeding within the Muslim community," and alleged that "they [Muslims] hate all non-Muslims." There are also close ties between the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrío in particular, and virulent anti-Islam activist, Laura Loomer.

Anti-Semitism:

Although McInnes has decried racism and anti-Semitism, his past statements tell a different story. He has posted videos of himself giving the Nazi salute and repeatedly saying "Heil Hitler." He was accused of anti-Semitism in March 2017 when he posted a video on Rebel Media called "Ten Things I Hate about Jews," which was later retitled "Ten Things I Hate About Israel."

McInnes has made a number of contradictory statements about Zionism. Prior to his spring 2017 trip to Israel, McInnes appeared in a Rebel Media video in which he asked people to crowdfund his trip to Israel so he could see what the country was like for himself; however, in that same video, he referenced both "The Culture of Critique," by white supremacist Kevin MacDonald, and David Duke's book "Jewish Supremacism." It was during this trip that McInnes appears to have had

somewhat of an anti-Semitic awakening. On his show on March 8, 2017, McInnes muses that Jews were somehow responsible for World War II because [“the Treaty of Versailles, wasn’t that disproportionately influenced by Jewish intellectuals?”](#) He also defended Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis, saying, “Like at one point, the tour guide goes, ‘You know, and there are people who think that this didn’t happen.’ And I felt myself defending the super-far-right Nazis, just because I was sick of so much brainwashing. And I felt like going, ‘Well, they never said it didn’t happen. What they’re saying is that it was much less than six million and that they starved to death and they weren’t gassed.” Then he finishes his train of thought with some thoughts about Jews’ “obsession” with the Holocaust. “God, they’re so obsessed with the Holocaust. I don’t know if it’s healthy to dwell.”

At another point McInnes said: [“Jews: If you don’t want to get people mad, don’t be annoying.”](#)

Transphobia:

In 2014, McInnes wrote a controversial article for the blog “Thought Catalog” titled, “Transphobia is Perfectly Natural,” which included the passage, “Haven’t you seen all the totally functional, happily married, normal trannies walking around? They aren’t all dead, you know...They’re non-heteronormative. In fact, the only thing more normal than castrating yourself and taking tons of hormones to grow tits is chopping them off.”