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Last night, during the first presidential debate of the 2020 United States election, President Donald Trump was asked repeatedly to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militias – a request which he dodged. Instead, called on by his opponent Joe Biden and moderator Chris Wallace, Trump [addressed the hate group the 'Proud Boys' specifically, stating:](#)

“Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I’ll tell you what, somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the Left because this is not a Right-wing problem, this is a Left-wing problem.”

Trump’s words have already ricocheted throughout far-right social media spaces. On their official social media pages the Proud Boys have widely shared footage of the debate, claiming they are “standing by for America” and have ironically lauded Donald Trump as their new leader. The group has even produced [T-shirts on their official online shop](#), branded with the words “standing by” – a phrase they now regard as an endorsement by the president of the United States.

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Graphics shared on a number of Proud Boys' Telegram channels following the Presidential debate.

Overview

Founded in 2016 the Proud Boys can be classed as a far-right organisation. The public face of the movement aligns most closely with the 'radical-right' which, unlike the 'extreme-right', accepts the essence of democracy. Indeed, members have [repeatedly aligned themselves with Donald Trump](#) and encouraged others to engage with political processes. They have been [branded a "general hate" group by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#), and as an ["extremist group with ties to white nationalism"](#) by the FBI. They have chapters in most states in the US as well as [several international factions](#) in the United Kingdom, Norway and Australia.



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Members are staunchly opposed to what they deem “political correctness” and “racial guilt”, and call for closed borders, minimal government and maximum protection of free speech and gun rights. The organisation [describes itself](#) as a collection of (exclusively male) “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologise for creating the modern world”, although the Anti-Defamation League has [designated the movement](#) as “a dominant force within the alt-lite”, with ideological influences from the alt-right surrounding misogyny, Islamophobia, transphobia and anti-immigration – an accusation the Proud Boys stringently deny. While the movement has repeatedly attempted to align itself with the political mainstream by [deliberately avoiding the use of overtly racist symbols](#) on social media, Brian Brathovd, co-host of the antisemitic podcast ‘The Daily Shoah’ [has noted](#): if the Proud Boys “were pressed on the issue, I guarantee you that like 90% of them would tell you something along the lines of ‘Hitler was right. Gas the Jews.’”

Their Founder

Founder of the Proud Boys, 50-year-old Gavin McInnes, was [born](#) to Scottish parents in Hertfordshire, England. At a young age, his family migrated to Ontario, Canada, where he was raised. McInnes is known for co-founding the digital media and broadcasting company ‘Vice Media’ in 1994, although he was [bought out of the enterprise](#) in 2008 after he voiced his support for the far right. McInnes, a [former contributor](#) to the far-right social media site ‘Rebel Media’, has openly identified as a “xenophobe” [stating](#) “I don't even



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see it as disputable that any other culture is in the same league as the West... we're simply better...It's not racial, it's cultural."

Violent Tactics

The Proud Boys have long attempted to brand themselves as a non-violent movement, yet one of the group's higher-level initiation rituals involves "kick[ing] the crap out of an (sic.) antifa". Indeed, the organisation has been linked to a number of [arrests](#) and [violent instances](#), mostly related to street fights. A favourite tactic of the Proud Boys has been to attend rallies and street protests, often [showing up](#) as 'opposition' to anti-fascist rallies, and taking part in skirmishes with other protesters.

The 2017 'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which united individuals and groups from across the far-right spectrum under a shared banner of racism and antisemitism, is an important stain on the Proud Boys' historical record. The two-day rally culminated in the [murder of counter-protester Heather Heyer](#) in a vehicle-ramming attack initiated by a self-identified white supremacist, which attracted [international condemnation](#) to the event. The Unite the Right rally was attended by a number of Proud Boys members, and was [co-organised by Jason Kessler](#) who, at the time, was a newly-sworn member of the movement. Following the international backlash to the protests, the Proud Boys [released a statement](#) attempting to distance



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themselves from the rally and reiterating their supposed opposition to the alt-right, separately McInnes also [accused Kessler](#) of misleading him and attempting to deliberately infiltrate the Proud Boys to smear their reputation. However, given the group's strong ties to the protests, these accusations have had little weight.

Civil unrest surrounding coronavirus lockdown restrictions and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd, have potentially emboldened the Proud Boys, and members have attended armed rallies throughout the United States. Notably, the group's president Enrique Tarrio [framed](#) anti-lockdown protests in Florida as where "the battle for the 2020 election starts". The Proud Boys have also attempted to capitalise on weeks of unrest in Portland, Oregon, hosting large rallies in the city and [entering into clashes](#) with Black Lives Matter protestors.

Social Media Presence

In August 2018 [Twitter banned Proud Boys](#) groups from their platform, with Facebook and Instagram [following suit in November that year](#), after the organisation violated their community standards surrounding "organised hate". This step towards deplatforming was a blow to the Proud Boys' attempts to infiltrate the mainstream political consciousness, and for some



The Proud Boys

ICSR Insight by Research Fellow Blyth Crawford

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time the group only remained publicly active their website and on smaller far-right sites like 'Gab' and 'Minds', where they attracted a very small audience of 1,000-2,000 users. The group also maintained a presence on the encrypted messaging app Telegram with an audience of around 5,000 on their main channel.

However, the [Proud Boys' social media presence has been significantly emboldened](#) in 2020 following the endorsement of the alternative social media site 'Parler' by various high-profile Republicans with close ties to Donald Trump. The main account associated with the group currently touts over 50,000 subscribers, an increase of approximately 40,000 since the platform's promotion by Republican party officials. Despite claiming political neutrality, Parler is [used mostly](#) by hard-core pro-Trump Republican supporters, providing the Proud Boys with a significant platform on which to appeal to the relative political mainstream. Since joining the platform in 2019 they have repeatedly shared a range of white-nationalist and misogynistic propaganda, and more recently, conspiracies surrounding the coronavirus.



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Conclusion

The Proud Boys have maintained a prominent presence at the fringes of American politics since 2016. Despite their public façade they are ideologically aligned with the alt-right and have been linked to several violent instances and clashes at protests throughout the United States. The president's remarks last night and his continued refusal to clearly condemn white supremacy are likely to significantly boost the Proud Boy's public profile and embolden members, shifting them closer towards their goal of breaching the political mainstream.