

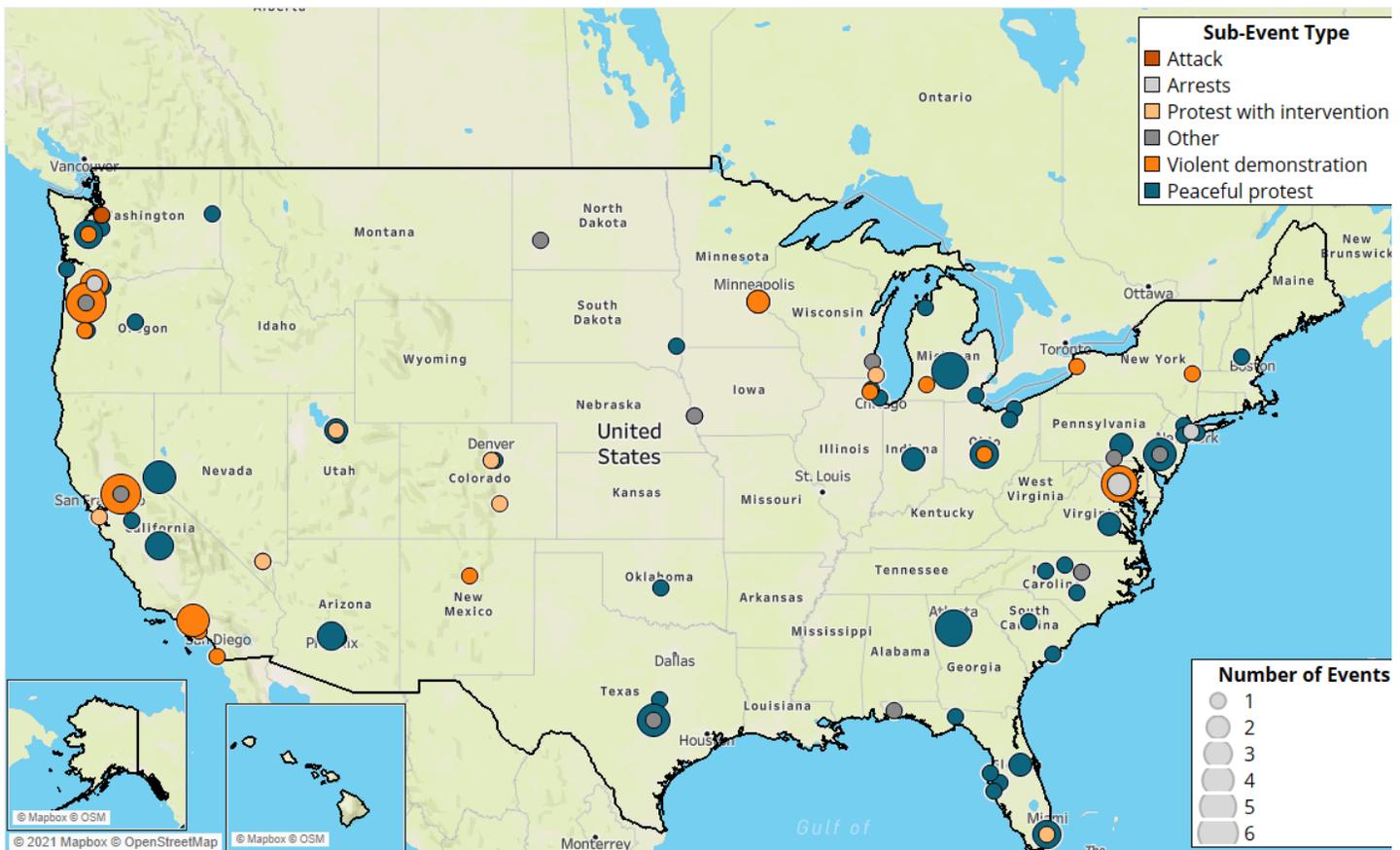


Actor Profile: Proud Boys

Aaron Wolfson and Hampton Stall

The Proud Boys are one of the most active right-wing groups in the ACLED dataset, with events reported across 28 states and Washington, DC since the start of 2020. They are involved in a range of different activities, including: direct engagement in demonstrations, both peaceful and violent; non-violent or indirect engagement, such as voter intimidation or ‘providing security’ at protests for local businesses; and civilian targeting (see map below).

Events Associated with the Proud Boys
(1 January 2020 - 16 April 2021)



The Proud Boys are an ultra-nationalist organization active in the US and Canada. The group is explicitly far-right and anti-left, claiming their core identity as “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world” ([Taki Magazine, 15 September 2016](#)). Members of the organization assert that they are defend-

ing “the West” from vaguely defined forces that purportedly seek to erode it, often using violence to achieve their goals.

The group does not describe itself as a militia. Instead, members refer to the Proud Boys as a “men’s drinking club” ([Los Angeles Times, 30 September 2020](#)). This has not stopped the Proud Boys from coordinating with militias in street actions (*for more on coordination between militias and street groups see [this ACLED report about election violence and this report about ‘Stop the Steal’ mobilization](#)*). The Canadian government formally designated the Proud Boys as a “terrorist entity” in early 2021 due to their proclivity for violence ([New York Time, 3 March 2021](#)), though a similar designation has not been assigned to the group in the US.

VICE News co-founder Gavin McInnes established the Proud Boys in 2016 as part of the “Alt-Right” wave among US-based right-wing actors, encouraged by Donald Trump’s Republican nomination for president that year ([Southern Poverty Law Center, updated February 2021](#)). McInnes later claimed to have left the group following the apparent leak of an inaccurate report by the Clark County, Washington Sheriff’s office ([The Guardian, 19 November 2018](#)). The report erroneously asserted that the FBI labeled the Proud Boys as an “extremist group” with ties to “white nationalism” ([Political Research Associates, 28 February 2019](#)). The reality is less clear, as McInnes has continued to show support for the group through his radio show ([The Guardian, 22 November 2018](#)).

Currently, Enrique Tarrio is the national chairman for the Proud Boys, making him the *de facto* leader of the group. The Proud Boys have, however, experienced significant fragmentation following the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, especially in light of revelations about Tarrio’s past as a federal informant ([Washington Post, 25 February 2021](#)).

While the group describes itself as a fraternal organization, members frequently engage in planned — and at times lethal — violence targeting their political adversaries in public ([Huffington Post, 22 May 2019](#)). These attacks most frequently target leftist activists, but the Proud Boys have also led attacks on journalists that they deem “Antifa press” ([All Gas No Brakes, 3 October 2020](#)). The group has also attacked general media during some of their events, calling them “fake news” ([VICE News, 8 February 2021](#)). Thirty-seven demonstration events involving the Proud Boys between January 2020 and April 2021 have turned violent, accounting for nearly a quarter of all demonstrations associated with the group. They have been involved in violent demonstrations in at least nine states — California, Oregon, New York, Minnesota, Michigan, Washington, Ohio, Illinois, and New Mexico — and the District of Columbia, with a dozen violent events reported in California alone.

The Proud Boys use jokes, memes, and online trolling as rhetorical devices to obscure the group’s *raison d’être* and inclination for violence. For instance, McInnes responded to allegations that the Proud Boys espoused violence by claiming, “we don’t start fights, but we finish them” ([New York Times, 16 October 2018](#)). This assertion serves as a linchpin in Proud Boys recruitment online, both excusing the group’s violence and masculinizing the organization ([International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 26 May 2020](#)).

Proud Boys online activity takes various forms, largely through provocation of leftists and dissemination of widespread conspiracy theories. Provocation mostly comes in the form of online baiting via cultural hijacking and insertion of hyper-masculine and anti-feminist discourses into conversations to prompt reactions ([International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 26 May 2020](#)). For example, Proud Boys have hijacked the word “uhuru” — a common salutation in the Black liberation movement and the Swahili word for freedom — online and via chants ([Southern Poverty Law Center, 20 April 2021](#)). Such cultural hijacking, while appearing mundane and harmless, permits the Proud Boys to use the rhetoric of their perceived enemies in a manner specifically designed to disrespect the group from which the symbol, phrase, or idea is taken. A further example of this trend is the tendency of Gavin McInnes to sign statements as “The Prophet (peace be upon me)” in reference to the Islamic use of the phrase “Peace be upon him” whenever referring to the Prophet Muhammad ([Official Proud](#)

[Boys, 21 August 2017 \[archived\]](#)). This form of cultural hijacking is simple, requiring little ingenuity, yet highly effective as a trolling tactic and a counter to ‘political correctness.’

Jokes, memes, and online trolling by the group also function as recruitment and propaganda devices. Analysis of online activity by accounts affiliated with members of the Proud Boys indicates that the group frequently uses social media to reach out to possible recruits. Proud Boys social media accounts have recently advocated against the effectiveness of restrictions to stop the spread of the coronavirus, the coronavirus vaccine, and a myriad of conspiracy theories related to Bill Gates ([Middlebury Institute, 1 May 2020](#)). The dissemination of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic contributes to group recruitment and has increased the appeal of the Proud Boys to conservative politicians, such as Representative Matt Gaetz ([New York Times, 29 January 2021](#)). It has also broadened the appeal of the organization to the general public, as demonstrations against pandemic-related restrictions — largely organized online — served as a key precursor to the ‘Stop the Steal’ movement, in which the Proud Boys were prominent actors (*for more, see this [ACLEDD report on unrest during the pandemic and this report on ‘Stop the Steal’ mobilization](#)*).

Membership within the group is tiered, but poorly defined. As such, estimates of membership vary considerably from several hundred to the group’s claim of 22,000 ([Anti-Defamation League; Insider, 12 November 2020](#)). Members can also be disavowed, but disavowal does not appear to result in exclusion from Proud Boys events or activities ([Think Progress, 24 August 2017](#)). The degrees of membership range from: (1) outing oneself publicly as a Proud Boy; (2) an initiation ritual in which members beat the initiate until he can name five cereal brands; (3) getting a tattoo with a Proud Boys logo; and (4) fighting members of Antifa to “serve the cause” ([Daily Dot, 27 January 2021](#)).

While the Proud Boys usually do not carry rifles like militia groups, some chapters have begun to carry firearms and to wear plate carriers to the ‘2nd Amendment’ rallies they attend alongside named militia organizations ([Detroit News, 17 September 2020](#)). Several Proud Boys leaders have felonies that predate their involvement in the organization and limit their legal ability to openly carry or own firearms, including Enrique Tarrio ([Salon, 15 December 2020](#)).

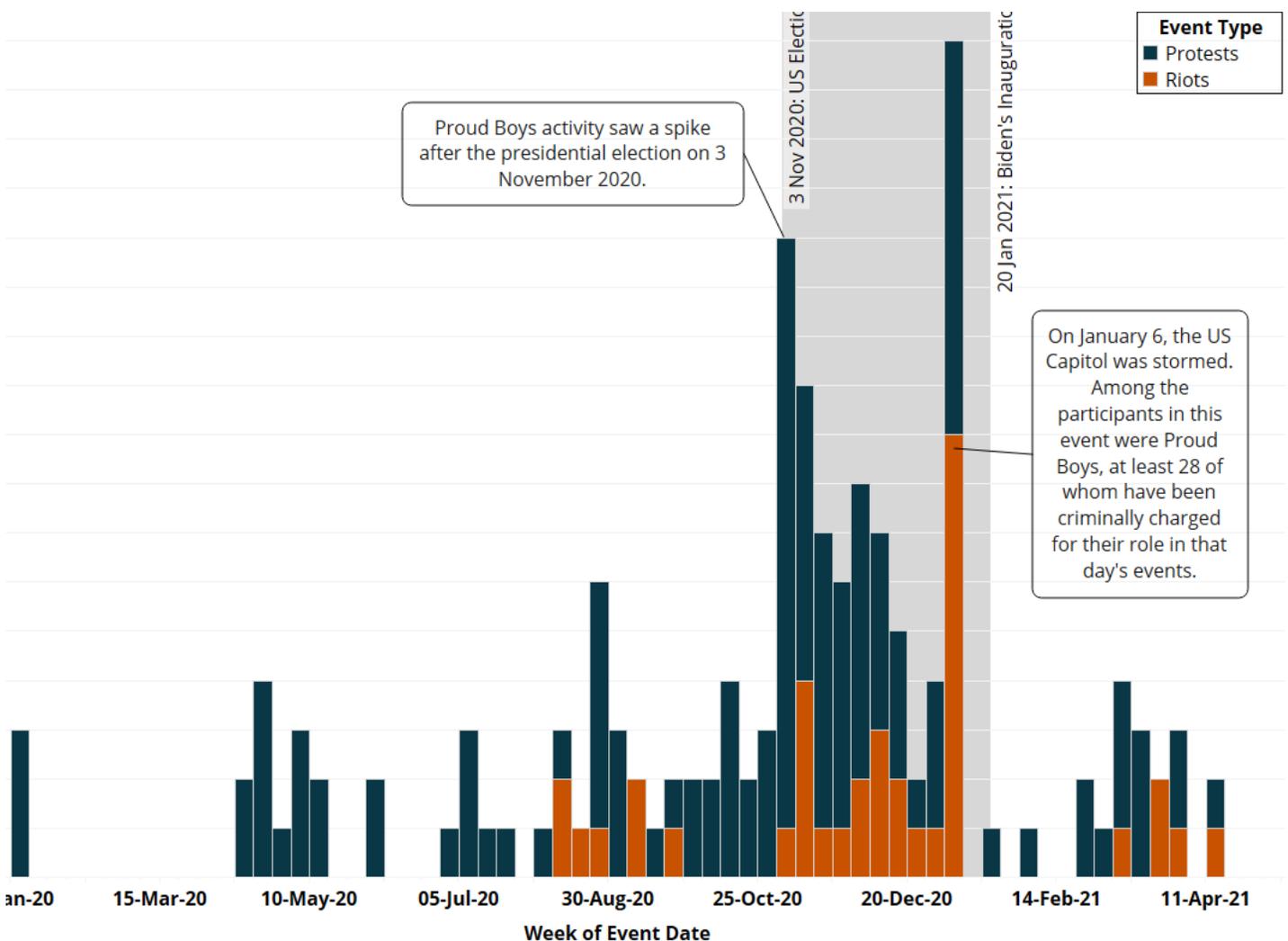
Proud Boys members have a documented history of accruing felony charges over assaults in which the group engages. For example, two Proud Boys were charged with felony assault for their involvement in a 2018 attack on a Proud Boys critic ([Daily Beast, 12 March 2019](#)). Another who brandished a revolver at a riot was arrested in late 2020 on 12 assault and weapons charges ([KIRO7, 30 September 2020](#); [Oregonian, 20 October 2020](#)). Two others who were involved in a fight in New York City were convicted on felony charges in 2019 ([Wall Street Journal, 19 August 2019](#)). And *de facto* leader Enrique Tarrio was charged with new felony charges on 4 January 2021 for keeping high-capacity magazines in his car, violating Washington, DC law ([Independent, 5 January 2021](#)). Other members have accrued further felony charges for their involvement representing the Proud Boys at the 6 January storming of the Capitol ([NPR, 2 March 2021](#); [Kansas City Star, 11 February 2021](#)).

Over the past year, Proud Boys activity has fluctuated largely in reaction to left-wing protests — such as those in the second and third quarters of 2020 — and has shifted to an emphasis on state capitals following the 2020 presidential election. Three events were recorded in the first quarter of 2020 — protests around support for Donald Trump, support for the Second Amendment, and opposition to abortion — with only one of those seeing counter-protesters.

In the second and third quarters of 2020, Proud Boys activity became more confrontational with left-wing protesters: 22 of 40 demonstration events — or more than half — included counter-demonstrators. Of these events, 18 included counter-demonstrators who called for changes consistent with left-wing goals — such as support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, defunding police, support for LGBT communities, support for the Abolish ICE movement, and opposition to anti-Asian attacks. The increased participation by Proud

Boys members in events with counter-demonstrations is not surprising, as confrontation is a foundational principle for the group. The percentage of events with counter-demonstrators in which Proud Boys members participated is over 10 times the rate at which other actors engage with counter-demonstrators. This points to heightened levels of confrontation, regardless of whether Proud Boys participated as demonstrators, counter-demonstrators, or agitators. Following the 2020 presidential election, this rate increased from half of all demonstrations involving the group to nearly two-thirds — 63 of 97 demonstrations.

Proud Boys activity has been strongly correlated with the fortunes of former President Trump. Ninety-seven of the 152 demonstration events in which Proud Boys participated last year — or nearly two-thirds — were explicitly in support of then-President Trump. Over 90% of these pro-Trump demonstrations occurred after the former president called for the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by” at the first presidential debate on 29 September 2020 ([AP News, 30 September 2020](#)). As such, Proud Boys participation in demonstrations increased significantly leading up to and immediately following the 2020 presidential election, with 79 events — or over 60% of all Proud Boys events over the course of the year — occurring during the fourth quarter of 2020. Specifically, Proud Boys activity saw a massive spike when Trump officially lost the election to Joe Biden — a dynamic that once more invigorated the group’s involvement in violent demonstrations. Twenty-five of 37 violent demonstration events — or over two-thirds — in which the Proud Boys participated since the start of last year took place between the election on 3 November 2020 and President Biden’s inauguration on 20 January 2021 (see gray band in graph below).



A major component of Proud Boys activity between the election and the inauguration was ‘Stop the Steal’ mobilization. These demonstrations took advantage of inertia from previous right-wing demonstrations over the course of 2020, with coalitions expanding to include groups like the Proud Boys (*for more, see [this ACLED report](#) on ‘Stop the Steal’ mobilization*). At many of these demonstrations — including in North Carolina, New York, California, and Washington, DC — Proud Boys were involved in street-fighting ([Daily Kos, 3 December 2020](#)). The group’s *de facto* leader joined other influential actors, including explicitly fascist movements, at some ‘Stop the Steal’ events, including in Atlanta, Georgia, which is a key target of election fraud conspiracies ([Daily Mail, 18 November 2020](#)).

Between the election and inauguration, over 70% of all demonstration events in which Proud Boys participated were located in state capitals and Washington, DC — nearly double the rate of such events prior to the election. This likely depicts a shift in the identity of the group’s perceived enemies. Once focused primarily on alleged Marxists and leftists, increased Proud Boys activity in capital cities, often in front of capitol buildings, indicates that the group has begun to identify aspects of the government, especially those deemed disloyal to Trump, as hostile. On 7 November 2020, Tarrío declared the “stand by” order from Trump rescinded but did not disclose the intended targets of the “roll out” ([Forbes, 7 November 2020](#)). By December, however, Proud Boys were associated with anti-government events calling for civil war and to “revolt, reorder, separate and restart America” ([Carson Now, 12 December 2020](#)). By the eve of the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, prominent Proud Boys had identified police as their enemies, calling DC officers “treasonous pig bastards” and “compromised” — a stark difference from their historically staunch pro-police stance ([Vice News, 5 January 2021](#)).

Several factors may hinder or fuel Proud Boys activity in the near future:

First is law enforcement attention on the Proud Boys in the wake of the Capitol storming. Proud Boys members account for about 8% (28) of all participants federally charged by 12 April 2021 for their involvement in the events of 6 January ([Combating Terrorism Center, 12 April 2021](#)). Nine of these Proud Boys were charged with conspiracy, meaning Proud Boys arrestees account for over 40% of the overall conspiracy charges ([The New York Times, 21 February 2021](#)). These charges may depress Proud Boys activity in the short term. Given their light engagement on the ground in the last few months, the effects of the charges may already be partially apparent.

Second is the revelation that numerous Proud Boys members and leaders have been informants for the FBI. After the backlash over the Capitol storming, it was revealed that Enrique Tarrío had been a federal informant — a development that has shaken his position as the group’s *de facto* leader ([Reuters, 27 January 2021](#)) — as had another Proud Boys member from Florida well known for his violence ([Politico, 30 March 2021](#)). This news too may depress their activity. Gavin McInnes made remarks that these developments may mean the end of the group on his podcast ([Get Off My Lawn, 28 January 2021](#); [Get Off My Lawn, 4 February 2021](#)). As the Proud Boys fracture — whether or not the fractures are totalizing or complete — splinter groups and new factions appear to be trending further to the right than before ([Washington Post, 25 February 2021](#)). For example the ‘Nazi wing’ of the group’s New Hampshire Proud Boys Telegram channel, “Proud Boys Uncensored,” has rebranded as “The Western Chauvinist,” with the claim to “focus more on ultra nationalism” ([Right Wing Watch, 1 March 2021](#)).

Third is the Biden presidency, which could serve as either a driver or limiter of Proud Boys activity. The group was formed alongside a pro-Trump thrust and maintained membership throughout his presidency. Many American far-right movements in the near past have seen resurgences when a Democrat holds the presidency ([NPR, 8 March 2012](#)). However, the Proud Boys’ previous focus on supporting President Trump against his opponents was a meaningful driver for the group, in 2017 especially ([Washington Post, 14 September 2017](#)).

This dynamic itself is highly represented by their spike in activity after Trump’s “stand by” comments, as well as their spike in activity coming to the defense of Trump amid his unfounded allegations of election fraud in November. Trump no longer holding the authority of the White House therefore removes a key north star for the group. In some cases, a post-Trump Proud Boys means several chapters are actively distancing themselves from the former president now that he is out of power ([New York Times, 20 January 2021](#)). Still, given the relatively short period of existence for the group, it is unclear how this trend will impact Proud Boys activity in the future.

The Proud Boys returned to street activism in March 2021 in Oregon and Washington states after a prolonged period of general inactivity following the storming of the Capitol. Renewed street activity and an uncertain future make the Proud Boys — one of the most violent actors in ACLED’s US dataset — an important group to monitor in the coming months.