

## Trump's debate comments give an online boost to a group social media companies have long struggled against

Proud Boys, others see support in Trump's response to a question about white supremacy

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Far-right groups celebrated on social media after President Trump responded to a debate question about white supremacists by saying that the extremist Proud Boys, a male-only group known for its penchant for street violence, should “stand back and stand by.”

Starting Tuesday night and continuing Wednesday, Trump's comments were enshrined in memes, including one depicting Trump in one of the Proud Boys' signature polo shirts. Another meme showed Trump's quote alongside an image of bearded men carrying American flags and appearing to prepare for a fight. A third incorporated “STAND BACK AND STAND BY” into the group's logo.

These and other laudatory images spread with particular speed on the conservative social media site Parler and also channels on the encrypted chat app Telegram, according to researchers.

One prominent Proud Boys supporter on Parler said Trump appeared to give permission for attacks on protesters, adding that “this makes me so happy.” Others saw a retail opportunity, pushing \$30 T-shirts and \$40 hoodies bearing the group's logo and the words, “PROUD BOYS STANDING BY.”

On the fringe social media site 4chan, an anonymous supporter wrote, “STAND BACK AND STAND BY ... SOMEONE HAS TO STOP THESE FAR LEFT RIOTERS,” according to SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks far-right groups.

Mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have cracked down on the Proud Boys for violations against hate speech and other policies. Twitter and Facebook both acted in 2018. YouTube has quickened the pace of enforcement action against violent right-wing extremist groups since updating its hate speech policy last year.

But the Proud Boys, like other extremist groups, have found new homes online, especially on Telegram, and new visibility, thanks to Tuesday night's debate. One researcher said memberships to three Proud Boys channels on Telegram grew nearly 10 percent after the debate.

“He legitimized them in a way that nobody in the community expected. It's unbelievable. The celebration is incredible,” said Rita Katz, executive director of SITE Intelligence Group. “In my 20 years of tracking terrorism and extremism, I never thought I'd see anything like this from a U.S. president.”

SITE found that Telegram channels devoted to neo-Nazis and white supremacists portrayed Trump's comments as

signals of support. The Proud Boys dispute characterizations of them as white supremacists, but their actions often are touted by white supremacists and others on far-right political fringes.

Twitter also experienced a huge spike in references to Proud Boys, registering more than a million since Trump's statement and about 75,000 an hour on Wednesday morning, according to Clemson social media researcher Darren Linvill. The group more commonly averages a couple thousand references on Twitter per day.

"They've been given a gift," he said.

Trump's comments came in response to a question from the moderator, Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, about whether he would be willing to publicly denounce white supremacists. The president initially suggested he would, but when Democratic nominee Joe Biden asked specifically about the Proud Boys, Trump responded, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what, somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left."

The Trump campaign tweeted afterward: "President Trump has repeatedly condemned white supremacists. What a ridiculous question from Chris Wallace." And on Wednesday, Trump told reporters that he didn't know who the Proud Boys were.

"I mean, you'll have to give me a definition, because I really don't know who they are. I can only say they have to stand down. Let law enforcement do their work," Trump said.

Trump and his cabinet have routinely sought in recent months to portray political violence as predominantly a problem of far-left groups, including the loosely organized antifa. But independent researchers on political extremism and terrorism have consistently concluded that white supremacists and the far-right generally have been more dangerous in recent decades.

The prospect of Election Day violence has increasingly concerned those who monitor such groups. The Michigan chapter of the Proud Boys, one of those that made memes featuring Trump's quote Tuesday night, had recently urged people on Telegram to become "poll challengers" on Election Day.

Trump sounded similar themes in the debate, urging his supporters to monitor polling places for supposed acts of fraud. Later, the Trump campaign ran advertising encouraging people to become poll workers.

"The Proud Boys were quick to react to the president's remarks. They heard them as a call to action and rapidly created 'standing by' memes designed to help mobilization in the group," said Joseph Carter, program manager at Graphika, a network analysis firm.

The Coalition for a Safer Web, a nonprofit group that advocates for technologies and policies to remove extremist content from social media, called Telegram a particularly problematic platform used widely by white supremacists, neo-Nazis and other far-right groups. The group said it was tracking 13 Proud Boys Telegram channels, including one advertising an event in Ohio on Saturday, saying, "Proud Boys will be standing back and standing by in New Albany, OH."

The coalition's president, former U.S. ambassador to Morocco Marc Ginsberg, called Telegram in Capitol Hill testimony last week "a global sanctuary from which extremist groups can actually plot and direct attacks in real time."

On Wednesday, there was no immediate reply to a request for comment to Telegram, which is based in Dubai.

SITE's Katz, of SITE Intelligence Group, said enforcement actions by mainstream platforms have disrupted the recruitment activities of the Proud Boys, who used to conduct outreach efforts on Facebook. Trump's comments helped them on other platforms.

"As one Proud Boys user on Telegram wrote, 'Nobody here has Facebook we all got band [sic] a long time ago.' To that point, after Trump's 'stand back and stand by' comment, their celebration was happening far more on less-moderated platforms like Telegram and Parler," Katz said.

The hashtag #WhiteSupremacy trended on Twitter on Tuesday night in the United States, among accounts on both the left and the right. That included the Trump campaign and right-wing influencers such as Candace Owens, as well as left-leaning actress Kerry Washington, tweeting in response to Trump's comments, according to disinformation researchers at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public.

"Talking points about white supremacy developed among influencers on both sides of the Twitter spectrum," said Kate Starbird, associate professor in the department of human-centered design and engineering at the University of Washington.

The Proud Boys were founded in 2016 by Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, who has since distanced himself from the group. They say they are a "fraternal group spreading an 'anti-political correctness' and 'anti-white guilt' agenda," according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. The group is suing the Southern Poverty Law Center over the characterization.

The group has been involved in a large neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville in 2017, in the reopen protests demonstrating against coronavirus lockdowns earlier this year and recent protests in Portland, Ore. Facebook has banned the group as a hate group.

"Acknowledgment from the top sets the pretense for increased white vigilantism," said Joan Donovan, director of the Technology and Social Change Research Project at Harvard's Shorenstein Center. "This is a group that has organized street brawls using social media, has targeted people in their homes, and now believes their crusade against protesters is legitimate."