

How the Proud Boys Grippped the Miami-Dade Republican Party

It was once Jeb Bush's base of power. But an influx of far-right activists and the radicalization of other members brought turmoil.

By Patricia Mazzei and Alan Feuer

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Follow live updates on the House committee hearing on the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

MIAMI — At the iconic Fontainebleau hotel in Miami Beach, just after Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida rallied donors and activists to their feet during a well-attended April fund-raiser for the Republican Party of Miami-Dade County, a scuffle broke out by the valet parking station. Several men in suits and a woman in a cocktail dress tussled over who should and should not have been allowed at the \$250-a-plate dinner.

Someone alerted the police. The next day, a woman who had been escorted out of the dinner renewed a request for a restraining order against one of the men involved in the dispute, writing in her court petition that he was part of a “Far Right Wing Extremist Cult.” She was referring to the Proud Boys, the far-right nationalist group that was at the forefront of the riot at the U.S. Capitol last year.

The man was one of at least a half-dozen current and former Proud Boys who have secured seats on the Miami-Dade Republican Executive Committee, seeking to influence local politics from the inside. Their ranks include adherents who face criminal charges for participating in the Capitol attack: Gilbert Fonticoba has been charged with obstructing Congress. Gabriel

Garcia, a former Army captain who says he has left the group, has been charged with interfering with law enforcement officers during the civil disorder on Jan. 6, 2021.

The concerted effort by the Proud Boys to join the leadership of the party — and, in some cases, run for local office — has destabilized and dramatically reshaped the Miami-Dade Republican Party that former Gov. Jeb Bush and others built into a powerhouse nearly four decades ago, transforming it from an archetype of the strait-laced establishment to an organization roiled by internal conflict as it wrestles with forces pulling it to the hard right. The conflict comes at a pivotal moment for Republicans nationally, as primary voters weigh whether to wrench the party from its extremist elements — or more fully embrace them.

“Yes, we have fringe elements,” said René García, the chairman of the approximately 125-member Republican committee in Miami-Dade County, who is also a county commissioner and former state senator. “Yes, we have different points of view in our party. That’s how we are. And my job as Republican chairman is to protect everyone’s First Amendment right, however wrong they may be.”

The Proud Boys spent nearly half a decade engaged in often violent protests across the country over issues such as the removal of Confederate statues and the unsubstantiated spread of Shariah law. After the Capitol attack, however, as Proud Boys were being investigated by law enforcement and charged with federal crimes, they lowered their profile. The group dissolved its national leadership and encouraged chapters to get involved in local issues, with the goal of amassing support in advance of this year’s midterm elections.

“The plan of attack if you want to make change is to get involved at the local level,” Jeremy Bertino, a prominent member of the North Carolina Proud Boys, told The New York Times last year in the midst of the shift.

What they intend to do with their power is unclear. Still, following a trend pushed by far-right figures like Stephen K. Bannon, Proud Boys started showing up at school board meetings to protest coronavirus mask mandates and the teaching of antiracist curriculum.

In California's Central Valley, members of the group have intimidated protesters who did not want a church to buy an L.G.B.T.Q.-friendly theater in Fresno. A Proud Boy declared his candidacy for the Oregon Legislature. A former Proud Boy in Kansas lost a race for a Topeka City Council seat.

The Proud Boys' encroachments into the Miami-Dade Republican Party are, by far, the group's largest political success. The Fontainebleau incident was the latest to cause unrest within the party as a small but growing number of Proud Boys have deepened existing divisions and injected an unusual degree of aggression into routine dealings.



A poster of Donald J. Trump is reflected in portraits of other Republican presidents that line the headquarters of the Republican Party of Miami-Dade County. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Such a rightward shift mirrors the evolution of state and national Republicans but is remarkable for Miami-Dade, Florida's most populous county, which Democratic presidential candidates have won since 1992. Republicans vastly improved their showing in 2020, a swing that has soured Democrats' prospects.

Chris Barcenas, a Republican committeeman and Proud Boy, said he started thinking about running for a committeeman seat about a year ago.

"Instead of sitting on the sidelines complaining about RINOs or whatever," he said, referring to "Republicans in name only," "I realized that in order to make changes, I had to be involved and be part of the process."

Mr. Barcenas, 34, voluntarily testified a few months ago to the House select committee investigating the events of Jan. 6 about his understanding of the Proud Boys' role in the Capitol attack. He protested at the Capitol that day but did not go into the building and has not been charged with any crimes.

Gabriel Garcia, 37, who has pleaded not guilty to the charges from the Capitol attack, said the party was once the province of country-club Republicans.

"I know a lot of people on the committee way before me were supporting people like Jeb," said Mr. Garcia, who lost a State House bid in 2020. "But when Trump won, pretty much everyone started falling in line."

Asked for an assessment of the party's evolving identity, Mr. Bush demurred. "I am out of party politics and can't comment on what is going on now," he said.

Miami-Dade Republicans paved the way for the party to establish long-term power in Florida by persuading large numbers of Cuban Americans — who had historically registered as Democrats — to switch their affiliation, energized by the hard-line anti-Communist politics of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Many ran for office, nurturing a generation of Cuban American Republican politicians. Like the county itself, the party — and now its right-wing flank — is dominated by Hispanics.

For now, longtime party stalwarts remain in control amid an internal power struggle, but the influx of Proud Boys and the radicalization of other members have created considerable upheaval.

A committeewoman named Barbara Balmaseda recently resigned from a leadership role after photos posted online showed her both in the crowd outside the Capitol on Jan. 6 and then inside the building. The F.B.I. came to her house after the attack and asked for an interview, but she declined, according to her lawyer. Ms. Balmaseda, who has not been charged with any wrongdoing, has not commented publicly on the photos.

In a statement, Ms. Balmaseda said she resigned to focus on schoolwork and because the executive committee was “a waste of time since there is always infighting and drama.”

The party’s executive director, Brandon Diaz, who is Ms. Balmaseda’s boyfriend, also resigned, citing a private sector job. He said he had no role in recruiting or accepting committee members. “I don’t know who is or who isn’t a Proud Boy,” he said, adding that he is not one.

Both Ms. Balmaseda and Mr. Diaz remain on the board of the Miami Young Republicans, a club within the party.

Last month, a faction led by the Young Republicans tried to oust some veteran party leaders, including Liliana Ros, who has been with the party for more than 40 years.

“The meetings are a bunch of fights, people screaming,” said Ms. Ros, 79. “The nice people — the decent people, the people that are real Republicans — are leaving.”

The South Florida chapters of the Proud Boys gained prominence after Enrique Tarrío, who later became the group’s national chairman, took over in late 2018. Mr. Tarrío now sits in jail in Virginia, charged with conspiracy in the Capitol attack.

The Proud Boys' dive into South Florida politics began before Jan. 6. Several members were elected party committeemen in 2020, and others ran unsuccessfully for legislative and municipal office.

One of them, Pedro Barrios, said in an interview outside a polling place in the heavily Cuban American city of Hialeah on Election Day that the Proud Boys represented "anti-socialism."

Mr. Barrios is now a party committeeman.

Nelson Diaz, the chairman from 2012 to 2020, recalled keeping far-right activists out of a party Christmas celebration in 2018 "because of their status and reputation for being aggressive."

"I never knew who was a member of that group and who wasn't," he said.

In October 2018, Mr. Diaz and a couple of Proud Boys were involved in a belligerent protest at a Democratic campaign event featuring Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the U.S. House. Mr. Diaz banged on a door — for which he later apologized — as a rowdy mob and the Proud Boys yelled outside. Mr. Diaz and the Proud Boys said they did not know each other or coordinate their actions.

After that ugly scene, Mr. Diaz said he made party members who had not previously signed a Republican loyalty oath give up their seats.



At least a half-dozen current and former Proud Boys have secured seats on the Miami-Dade Republican Executive Committee. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

But the party ranks continued to draw right-wing members. An ex-committeeman, Christopher Monzon, acknowledged that he once was a member of the white supremacist League of the South. In 2017, he was accused of using a Confederate flag to attack people who were protesting Confederate street names in Hollywood, Fla. He pleaded no contest to aggravated assault and served probation.

Mr. Monzon, now 26 and the vice president of the Miami Springs Republican Club, said he had been on a “path to de-radicalization” and disavowed the racist ideology he previously espoused. Still, when he ran unsuccessfully for the Hialeah City Council last year, he maintained some ties online to some of his League of the South friends.

He said the Proud Boys in the party assumed he would support them because of his past views.

“I’ve always been known as the radical one, so they were like, ‘Yeah, man, we’re going to get more of our people in here,’” he said.

Online sleuths, including a group called Miami Against Fascism, have identified party members who are or appear to be Proud Boys or otherwise affiliated with the far right and chronicled their social media activity, revealing connections to national figures and internal quarrels — including the Fontainebleau altercation on April 22.

It began when a woman who had a restraining order against Mr. Barcenas showed up at the dinner. Also present was the woman’s ex-boyfriend, Nowell Salgueiro, another committeeman, who had a restraining order against her.

Security escorted the woman and her husband out. But a friend of the woman’s and the friend’s husband remained.

Later that evening, the friend’s husband scrapped with Mr. Barcenas and Mr. Salgueiro. The friend said in court filings and in an interview that when she went outside to pay the valet she was also confronted by Mr. Salgueiro, whom she identified as a Proud Boy. He declined to comment.

In the days after, more accusations and petitions flew in court. On April 27, a West Miami Police officer served Mr. Salgueiro with restraining orders. He found him at the monthly meeting of the Miami-Dade Republican Party.

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