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Visual Framing of a Far-Right Group. A Quantitative Image Type Analysis and the
Visual Framing of the Proud Boys from 2017-2022.

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Note: Initials in parenthesis name the author of the respective chapter.

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Abstract (Deutsch) (K.G.)

Diese Arbeit untersucht die visuelle Darstellung der Proud Boys, einer rechtsextremen Gruppierung, in US-amerikanischen Medien von 2017 bis 2022. Die Bilder der Gruppe nahmen vor der Präsidentschaftswahl 2020 und dem Angriff auf das US-Kapitol am 6. Januar 2021 stark zu. Da die Proud Boys keine zentrale Plattform zur Verbreitung ihrer Botschaften hatten, nutzten sie gezielt mediale Aufmerksamkeit bei öffentlichen Veranstaltungen, um ihre Narrative zu verbreiten. Die Medien konzentrierten sich dabei auf die Zusammensetzung der Gruppe, ihre organisatorische Struktur, ihre Interaktionen mit Außenstehenden und ihre ideologische Positionierung.

Um diese Berichterstattung zu analysieren, wählte das Forschungsteam einen zweifachen Ansatz.

Zunächst wurde eine Quantitative Image Type Analysis (QITA) durchgeführt, um Muster in der Bildverwendung durch Medien zu identifizieren. Anschließend wurde eine Visual Frame Analysis durchgeführt, um die übergeordneten Narrative zu interpretieren, die durch diese Bilder konstruiert wurden.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen ein konsistentes visuelles Narrativ, das die Proud Boys als militante, männlich dominierte und überwiegend weiße Gruppe darstellt. Die Analyse zeigt auch, dass die Medienberichterstattung Personalisierung und symbolische Bilder stärker betonte als direkte Darstellungen von Gewalt oder Polizeieinsätzen. Die Bilder konzentrierten sich oft auf die einzelnen Mitglieder der Proud Boys und stellten sie in einer menschlichen Weise dar, als ob die abgebildeten Personen Nachbarn oder Mitglieder der eigenen Gemeinschaft der Betrachter sein könnten, was die soziale Distanz verringerte und möglicherweise Empathie hervorruft. Dies deutet auf eine introspektivere Medienberichterstattung hin, die die Bewegung nicht einfach nur marginalisieren und lächerlich machen wollte, sondern sie als eine breitere Reflexion der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft darstellte.

Abstract (English) (D.J.L.)

This thesis examines the visual framing of the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, across U.S. media from 2017 to 2022. Images of the group surged in the lead-up to the 2020 election and the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol in 2021. Without a centralized platform to disseminate their own messaging, the Proud Boys relied on media attention during public events to amplify their narrative. In turn, media coverage focused on the group's composition, organizational structure, interactions with outsiders, and ideological positioning.

To analyze this coverage, the research team employed a two-pronged approach. First, a Quantitative Image Type Analysis (QITA) was conducted to identify patterns in the types of images used by news outlets. Second, a Visual Frame Analysis was applied to interpret the broader narratives constructed through these images.

The findings reveal a consistent visual narrative portraying the Proud Boys as a militant, male-dominated, and predominantly Caucasian group. The analysis also shows that media coverage emphasized personalization and symbolic imagery over direct depictions of violence or law enforcement. The images often centered on the individual members of the Proud Boys, portraying them in a humanizing way, as if the depicted individuals could be neighbors or members of the viewer's own community, reducing social distance and even potentially inducing empathy. This suggests a more introspective media portrayal, instead of simply looking to marginalize and ridicule the movement, the media framed the Proud Boys as a broader reflection of U.S. society.

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1 Introduction (*D.J.L. & K.G.*)

“Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.”

President Trump (Lewis & Kriner, 2022)

The year is 2020. The election for the next President of the United States of America is in full swing. Sitting President Trump is debating the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr., live in a televised debate. The above quote is President Trump’s response to the debate moderator’s question: “Are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacist groups and militia groups (...)”? (Associated Press, 2020). Biden went on to win the presidency.

President Trump’s response to the moderator’s question came as a shock to many but as a surprise to few. Right-wing extremist groups had been in the public spotlight throughout President Trump’s presidential term from 2017 to 2021 (BBC News, 2017; (Hesson et al., 2020; (Pagones, 2020). Their visibility in media was prominent and their consequence for democracy in the United States an often-discussed facet (see, e.g., Hoffman, 2020). Mentioning the group Proud Boys by name in a presidential debate, however, threw this particular group even more into the public eye. President Trump knew that being associated with a violent right-wing extremist group could potentially have a negative effect on his image, so, throughout the debate, he repeatedly attempted to pivot the discussion towards left-wing extremist groups, seeking to link the ongoing violent protests across the country to these groups while deflecting scrutiny from right-wing groups. This tactic was nestled in a larger strategy of deflection and discreditation. However, the media’s attention wasn’t shaken loose. Therefore, President Trump and his election team sought to discredit media and journalism by accusing them of bias in their framing of groups such as the Proud Boys and the conservative movement more generally (Bond, 2020; CBS Evening News, 2019; Morin, 2019). To combat the media’s framing, they sow distrust and uncertainty in the legitimacy of media and journalism itself. This tactic was meant to pull the rug out from under his political opponents’ arguments by going after the very foundations upon which their arguments rested (Lischka, 2021, Kreis, 2017).

The broader consequences of the deflection and discreditation strategy used by President Trump and his election team are out of scope for this paper. However, since their focus on the framing by media is part of this larger strategy, this thesis will focus

on that part particularly. Media framing is still a too large of a scope, so this thesis will be looking at the media's framing of the group mentioned in the debate, the Proud Boys. To even further narrow the scope, we will be looking at the visual framing the group, meaning that narrative or textual framing is not included. The focus lies solely on the depiction of the Proud Boys in media and the ways journalists frame them using photographs.

The research question is as follows:

“Which recurring image types are used by the media for visual framing of the Proud Boys from 2017 to 2022?”

This research question can be dissected into two main and three minor components. One main component is of an interpretive nature, namely the visual framing of the Proud Boys. Anything interpretive can be construed as subjective and context dependent. Therefore, a strong methodological foundation is needed, upon which the interpretation rests. The Quantitative Image Type Analysis is the second main component, and it allows us to identify and group images of a certain type. As the name let's one assume, the methodology allows for quantification the results. This in turn assists in discovering recurring image types, which can later be aggregated and grouped, and then, if a pattern is discovered and can effectively be argued, the framing of a narrative can be discussed.

The three minor components, the specific group, the closed timeframe, and the focus on media, allowed the authors to narrow the scope and keep the project in the Political Science discipline. The Proud Boys were chosen for their strong publicity in the U.S. (see Wilson, 2018; Kennedy, 2019; Cooke, 2020; Roston, 2021; Johnson, 2022; Westneat, 2023), their clearly defined and publicly discussed goals (see Wendling, 2020; Mapping Militant Organizations, 2023; Proud Boys, n.d.), their right-wing ideology, which reflects a broader right-wing conservative movement within the U.S. (see Pew Research Center, 2014/2021; Jensen, Yates, & Kane, 2022), their organizational manner (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2023), which allows them to actively participate in demonstrations in a structured form, and the national (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023) and international political attention they receive, being designated a terrorist entity in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2022) and New Zealand

(New Zealand Police, 2022). The timeframe 2017 to 2022 because the Proud Boy's movement spread and grew rapidly in the U.S. during Trump's first presidential term, cumulating in their participation in the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, with the goal to actively overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election. Many of the group's members were later arrested and convicted for their active participation in the attack on the Capitol, including their former leader Enrique Tarrio (see Whitehurst, 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2023; Lowell, 2023).

And the focus on the media was picked due to its potential influence on public opinion, which is seen as critical by politically involved persons and is also of academic interest. The research question therefore touches on political communication, media framing and far-right movements, and as will become clear later, how they are intertwined. This topic can be seen as inter-disciplinary, however, this paper is strongly rooted in Political Science. Examining how the media visually frames political actors such as the Proud Boys is of particular relevance to Political Science, as it offers insight into the processes by which public opinion can be influenced, political legitimacy is founded, and narratives are visually showcased in democratic contexts.

This thesis has two authors. When working with Visual Framing and the Quantitative Image Type Analysis, it is best practice to work as a team. It can be argued that a team is more objective than a single person in the analysis and interpretation of the material, especially when coding images, due to the different perspectives presented by the team members. The authors chose to work as a two-person team, since the basis for this thesis was a research paper authored by them on the same topic in 2021, however with a shorter timeframe of six months and excluding the interpretive framing component. Building on this paper, the authors set out to continue their work together and expand the scope, under close guidance and affirmation of their thesis supervisor. It quickly became clear that working as a team not only strengthened the objectivity of the observations but also increased the efficiency of the way of working, due to one author being more versed in the technical aspects of data gathering, while the other in structuring and organizing.

This thesis paper is structured in four parts. Beginning with a literature review in *Part 1, Chapter 2.1*, we first look at protest movements and right-wing protest movements in democracies. What interests us particularly is the depiction of these movements by media and journalism, and we therefore continue with a review of the literature in this area, specifically looking at the protest paradigm.

In the subsequent section within the first part, *Chapter 2.2*, we take a closer look at the literature on framing in journalism. In theory, journalism in a democracy takes on the role of non-biased informant and can be viewed as the connector between the public and the publicly elected. In practice, however, reporting on events requires the journalist to frame and contextualize information. This can happen in a multitude of ways, among them the including or the withholding of information. Following the logic of contextualizing information, we continue by analyzing the literature on generic and issue-specific frames in journalism. Since our interest lies on the visual depiction of the Proud Boys and therefore their visual framing in media, we rounded off the literature review by taking a specific look at visual framing in journalism.

Wrapping up *Part 1*, *Chapter 2.3* is dedicated to the Proud Boys, helping to contextualize the documented events in this thesis. A brief history of the group is given, including the developments from 2022 onwards, even though the scope for the data gathered was limited to President Trump's first term. Nevertheless, the authors deemed it important to look beyond Trump's first term, since much has happened after his reelection in 2024. Perhaps the most prominent event being the presidential pardoning by Trump of those arrested for participating in the attack on the Capitol in 2021. The authors see potential for future research, building on the data from this thesis. *Chapter 2.3.3* focuses on the relevance the visual framing of right-wing group such as the Proud for Political Science, since the methods used in this thesis and the topic more generally is often of interdisciplinary interest.

Part 2 delves into the methods used in the thesis, namely the Quantitative Image Type Analysis, which allowed the authors to categorize a large data set, and the Visual Framing Analysis, which assisted in interpreting the findings. The research process is discussed on a high level, offering an explanation and description of the logic pursued. A special focus is put on the transparency and replicability of the findings.

In *Part 3*, the data is presented in a descriptive manner, taking different perspectives into account. A clear objective of this thesis is to offer a productive addition to the social sciences, especially Political Science, by expanding the inventory of generic and specific image types and frames relevant to protest movements. To ensure this, homogenous definitions are offered by the authors for each image type identified in the data. These definitions, combined with their prevalence in the data and the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods, are interpreted by the authors and presented in the final section of *Part 3*.

This thesis concludes in *Part 4*, reviewing again the importance of this research for the social sciences, Political Science, and for interdisciplinary purposes. With journalism continuing its march into digitalization, it is paramount to have a harmonized, standardized, and consolidated foundation of image types for future research. Such a foundation will play a critical role in the comparability and the discoverability of potential patterns and shifts in visual framing of protest movements.

2 Part 1: Literature Review

2.1 Protest Movements, the Alternative-Right, Media's Role, and the Protest Paradigm

2.1.1 Why we Protest (D.J.L.)

“Social protest movements are the coming together of ordinary people (noninstitutional actors) commonly disaffected with some aspects of the social structure. Coming together, these similarly alienated people use collective action to give voice to their grievances and seek redress in the political arena through legislative action or a change in institutional actions or responsiveness.”

Warde, 2021, p. 3

Social protest movements have been critical to shaping democracy in the United States (Cox, 2018). A few examples are the abolitionist movement ending slavery in the U.S. in the 1860s, the civil rights movement in the 1960s prompting the Civil Rights Act, the LGBTQ+ movement leading to policies prohibiting discrimination in the workplace (Warde, 2021), or also the Christian Coalition of America and their advocacy of a pro-family agenda and local control of education, which became aligned with the policies of the conservative wing of the Republican Party (Combs, 2024). Their influence on society as a whole is therefore quite clear. So what sets off social protest movements?

When looking at why people go to the streets in democracies, the literature sees the reasons multifold. Grasso and Giugni (2016) reference McAdam et al. (1996), who argue that the mainstay of the social movement analysis' mobilization models “emphasize the importance of resources, political opportunities, the construction of political problems, ideological identification for the development of political solidarity, and the organizational structures necessary for political action and mobilization” (p. 34). For groups to pursue political action, they must first realize themselves as social agents able to bring about social change through mobilization, generally through membership in a political group or organization (McAdam, 1982). It is argued that

absence of the belief that grievances and relative deprivation can be redressed through political action, in combination with economic hardship or other forms of disadvantages suffered by the individuals, more likely leads individuals to exit from political engagement, rather than mobilizing them to action. In other words, before people are willing to take to the streets, they must believe they can truly bring about change through their actions. If the people are bogged down by individualized and/or economic hardship, they will be less likely to mobilize collectively. Grasso and Giugni (2016) build on this economic view by referencing the post-materialism theory, which suggests that relative economic security has led to the development of individual's priorities lying in self-actualization, aesthetic, moral, and socially liberal concerns over materialist ones (Inglehart & Wezel, 2005). This development spurs people to pursue anti-state, "elite challenging" political action. So, if people enjoy relative economic security, it is not materialist concerns which spur protest participation, but rather self-expression and universal moral causes, or identity politics.

The literature on what sets off social protest movements is therefore split between research on the importance of resources and research on the importance of social grievances. Grasso and Giugni (2016) looked at economic hardship's role in protest participation. Economic hardship, they argue, "could lead individuals to focus attention on economic inequalities and the human costs these exert on fellow citizens" (p. 36) and "tough economic times can also be seen to provide the basis for political solidarity and identification with kindred social others undergoing similar experiences and struggling against common enemies, leading people to mobilize through collective action" (Grasso & Giugni, 2016, p. 35). When looking at the interrelation of relative deprivation, macroeconomic context, and political opportunity structures, they found that an individual's grievances, when understood in subjective and relative terms, do have an impact on mobilization. However, this effect is greater when characterized by higher unemployment or higher levels of social spending by the government. They show that higher unemployment in society "can play a role in politicizing private lived experience, resulting in outward political action" (Grasso & Giugni, 2016, p.675). In context of higher social spending in times of crisis, the deprived, so those who feel like their conditions have deteriorated, are more likely to protest because higher social spending is often perceived as an increase in political opportunities. This finding supports the results of previous literature "suggesting that welfare state provisions and citizenship rights represent critical resources for groups organizing for collective action"

(Grasso & Giugni, 2016, p.676). In contrast, in societies with lower levels of social spending, the deprived see their situation in individualized terms and are therefore less likely to pursue collective, political action. Recent research (e.g., Suzuki, 2022) on fiscal austerity measures and their effect on social movements show that left-dominant government implementing fiscal austerity measures have a stronger effect on igniting protest movements than fiscal austerity measures implemented by right- and centrist-dominant governments. Suzuki (2022) looked at the data from 37 developing countries between 1973 and 2015, to find that his hypothesis was supported by the findings. Austerity policies introduced by left leaning governments are being seen as a form of betrayal. These partisan effects are observed for anti-government demonstrations and strikes, emphasizing the pro-democratic characteristics of austerity-driven protests. Looking at the importance of social grievances as a spur to action, the literature often differentiates between “old” and “new” movements, with the “old” movements defined as those struggling for socio-economic issues, and the “new” movements revolving around more moral causes, such as the environment, women’s rights, etc. and based on identity (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1971/1981 in Grasso & Giugni, 2016, p. 39-40). Identity politics in protest movements can be based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify, such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, class, climate activity, and so on. “What is crucial about the “identity” of identity politics appears to be the experience of the subject, especially their experience within social structures that generate injustice, and the possibility of a shared and more self-determined alternative” (Identity Politics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), 2024). Looking at what people can identify with, one quickly sees that a large spectrum is covered. “An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. [...] Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly 2002, p. 64). This can be dangerous, since it can be “defined by its opposition to a dominant identity, which typically represents itself as neutral” (Identity Politics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), 2024) and therefore can only survive, some argue, through differentiation from others. Therefore, some argue, the issue with identity politics is that it often clings to rigid categories that oppose each other and focuses too much on past grievances. This has led to a discussion about whether identity politics can be based on a future-oriented unity, instead of excluding others out of resentment (Identity Politics (Stanford Encyclopedia

of Philosophy), 2024). However, it is very clear that identity politics focusing on the development and affirmation of identity in political work (Kauffman, 2001) can help mobilize racial and sexuality minority groups (Bernstein, 2005; Brettschneider et al., 2017; Miller, 2021; Walters, 2018), meaning, in turn, it can also be used to mobilize groups with other identities.

As one can see, focusing solely on macroeconomic reasons for protests is too narrow in scope. Looking at social grievances and seeking to find the answer there, is also too narrow in scope. As Gamson & Meyer (1996) show in their work and Grasso & Giugni (2016) in theirs, individuals mobilize during times of crisis due to them feeling a sense of deterioration in their living standards and due to how the wider environment, in which they find themselves, frame their opportunities. When researching a protest movement, one must therefore consider the contextual catalysts for the movement. This paper looks at a far-right and alt-right protest movement in the United States of America with a particular focus on the Proud Boys group. One will see that their movement falls under what the literature considers a “new” movement. Socio-economic issues play a role, but so do cultural identity and moral issues. They are intrinsically linked and potentially reinforce each other.

2.1.2 Protest Movements in Democracies (K.G.)

As we saw with Warde’s definition of a social protest movement (Warde, 2020) in the above chapter, defining what constitutes a social protest movement is often vague and hampered by “their range, diversity, and scope regarding structure, goals, values, ideology, viability, and levels of institutionalization” (Warde, 2020, p.3). Furthermore, it is highlighted that structural inequalities and identity-based marginalization are a crucial motivation behind collective action, which has often been a catalyst for policy change as social protest movements have brought attention to multiple issues over the decades (Warde, 2020).

In 2011, a cycle of protests spread across the globe, capturing the public imagination. Millions of people came together and publicly expressed their grievances with the “global economic crisis and the accentuation of political and economic inequalities” and “against austerity and socio-economic inequality, against the deleterious consequences of market forces, as well as the ongoing struggle for enhanced democracy” (Davies et al., 2016, p. 2). These protests brought about some change in leadership, brought about the rise of some new political actors and groups, have forced

some dictators to flee, and brought about some social reforms. People came together to “expand their rights, safe-guard and improve their living conditions, oppose oppression, challenge existing categories and boundaries, and assert their identities and values” (Davies et al., 2016, p. 2). Protests, however, are not always focused on increasing the general well-being of the people. Oftentimes, protests seek to expand the rights of a minority group, safe-guard and improve the living conditions of those already enjoying superior privileges, often support oppression against others, and challenge the rule of law and test boundaries of social order, to secure and assert their view on their identity and values. With the rise of nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies, Touraine’s (1981) view rings as true as ever, stipulating that history is formed by two ever-battling forces: “one that seeks to break down the existing order by cultural innovation and social mobilization and another that seeks to stabilize these struggles into organization, order, and power” (Davies et al. 2016, p. 3). Touraine (1981) was also the first one to introduce the idea of the “social subject”, meaning that groups of people tend to define themselves through struggle and that they are seeking for social change, according to Touraine (1981) social movements are not just a vehicle for material demands or grievances but they also function as political actors and are seeking to reshape the frameworks and try to influence the direction of social governance and policy.

The success, failure, or repercussions of a protest movement is dependent on a multitude of factors. The motivation for the start and continuation of one such movement plays a pivotal role. Protest movements, or social movements in a broader sense, can and do threaten authorities in all forms of governments. They can, and have often, forced a change in authority across the globe and throughout history. These movements can either heighten group solidarity or be divisive, dependent on motivators for the protest movement. If the movements are targeted at an outside enemy, such as an invading force, social movements or protests can increase solidarity amongst the domestic population. However, if the movement takes the form of a domestic resistance, it is “provoked by causes that are class specific or otherwise ideologically sensitive and therefore divisive” (Sariola, 1982, p. 181). When analyzing protest movements, the motivators for the movement are of critical importance, because they will contextualize the potential for divisiveness or harmony. It is possibly easy to sympathize with those, such as Sharp (1980), who argues the merits of a democracy that allows dissenters to organize and acquire increasingly sophisticated

techniques of dissent. However, class-specific movements “from below” source their power not through formal organization or moderation but mass militancy. Violence, either from those protesting or from institutionalized authority, attracts popular attention and quickly surfaces into the open (Sariola, 1982), forcing the public to interpret and formulate an opinion on the movement, inevitably sowing divisiveness in a society.

These protest movements not only threaten authorities in governments but also play a critical role in policy creation. Consider the U.S. for a moment. Warde (2021) lists a multitude of examples of social protest movements influencing and shaping American democracy. Among his examples are abolitionist movement and its contribution to the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, the women’s rights movement cumulating in the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote, the civil rights movement of the 1960s prompting the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the LGBTQ+ rights movement leading to policies being put in place “prohibiting discrimination in the workplace and broader society” (Warde, 2021, p.1). Warde (2021) also lists movements sprouting from a conservative vein, which influence U.S. policy. For example, the Christian Coalition of America has successfully “become a force in the political mainstream by mounting significant challenges to same-sex marriage, pro-choice abortion rights, and public education” (Warde, 2021, p.2). Also, the Alternative-Right movement and the Tea Party shine a spotlight on conservative social issues they deem in need of attention.

It is the right of people to pursue such movements, since they are vital for a democratic political system. The problems begin when these movements seek to limit or stifle the rights of others and pursue tyranny or minority rule. Gamson (1990) sees democracies confronted with two main problems: the threat of tyranny or the domination by a minority, and its ability to respond to unmet or dynamic needs among its citizen (Warde, 2021, p.5). Therefore, one the central points of Gamson (1990) analysis is the concept of political opportunity structures, this refers to the general openness of the political structures to social movements and resource mobilization. In detail this means that human, material and informational resources, as well as organizational capacity are crucial for any kind of sustainable collective action over time. He also refers to the process of framing, which plays a significant part in our research and which according to Gamson (1990) it is a tool which movements use in order to construct a narrative and communicate their goals in way which attracts potential supporters and the broad public in general.

Warde (2021) argues that even with these challenges, which inevitably, at least in part, shadow protest movement, it is nonetheless vital for America's liberal democracy. These movements allow the public to collectively voice grievances that remain unanswered by institutional actors and to function as a form of holding public authorities accountable for their actions (p. 5). Additionally, Warde borrows from Earl (2004), to further emphasize the importance of these social movements in the U.S., who wrote that no matter the goal of the protest movement, they can alter the broader cultural environment, affecting values, beliefs, and cultural practices.

All this illustrates the importance of social protest movements for societies around the globe.

2.1.3 Populism and Far-/Alt-Right Movements (D.J.L.)

"The general understanding seems to be that we know who they are even if we don't know exactly what they are."

(Mudde, 2017, p.1)

Populism, so goes the existing academic debate, is a vehicle "for expressing popular grievances of those identified as the 'people' against the loosely defined 'elites'" (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018, p. 8). Populism is a language of protest against what is considered an established political order. The left spectrum of populism sees itself as an antidote to liberal democracy, calling for more participation and involvement of the people in decision-making and more redistribution (Mouffe 2005; 2016), while the right spectrum of populism looks to limit pluralism. Right-wing populism's politics are based on the demarcated boundary between the "people" and the "elites", an "us" versus "them", injected with an additional cultural element of the foreign "others" as a threat to the "people". Traditionally civil resistance has focused on populist leaders and other members of the political elite but the demand side of populism, so the actual supporters of populist movements have often been neglected which leads to further polarization and it also supports the populist leaders claims that established elites are out of touch with "real people" (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018).

Within Europe and the United States there are three factors which can help to understand the rise of the far right in recent years. First, the social and economic consequences following the latest financial crisis in 2007 with its subprime crisis in the

United States and the austerity measures enforced by the European Union. Second, the escalation of military conflicts, humanitarian crises, and migration movements have nurtured anti-immigrant speeches as well as nationalist's positions. And third, the growing insecurity because of Islamic and radical terrorism, which had its beginning with the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11 (Toscano, 2020).

The literature defines the different movements and organizations within the same party family but there are overlapping terminologies (e.g., extreme right, radical right, extreme radical right, populist rights). Lo (1982) defines right-wing movements as movements which want to maintain the status quo, structures of order, and advocate for the increase of economic or political inequalities. She also notes that you can divide right-wing movements into extremist, conservative, and radical right movements. The extremists are seen as a minority in right-wing movements, defined by characteristics of intolerance, monism, moralism, and a preoccupation with conspiracies. Hofstadter (1964) sees conservative movements, as having the goal to minimize reforms and sustain long-standing institutions, and the so-called "pseudo-conservatives" or radical right, which seek drastic changes in the status quo to endorse right-wing ideas. In his book *Alt-America*, Neiwert (2017) writes that right-wing populism in America has created the narrative "producerism". This narrative stipulates that the hard-working American people are being threatened on the one side by a suppressive elite from above and a lazy lower class of "others", which relies on welfare programs, from below. Interestingly, Lipset & Raab (1971) identified the notion of status preservation, which argues that "declining groups seek to maintain their eroding status by strengthening or creating identifications with groups prestigious in the past" (Lo, 1982, p. 109). This "Quondam Complex" is a characteristic of persons who feel they have lost their group attachments and identities and in turn give their support to right-wing leaders who spout bigotry and seek to demarcate themselves from "others" they see above and below them in social status. When a group sees themselves as declining, they have a desire to preserve status, which leads them to identify with the past. It becomes clear that this identity with the past comes with cultural baggage, namely religion and bigotry. This, clothed as a form of anti-modernist culture, seeks to turn back the clock on the consequences of economic growth and bureaucratic rationality, threatening, according to Lipset (1982), democratic states in their legitimacy, effectiveness, and stability. As mentioned in this paper's chapter *Protest Movements in Democracies*, protest movements can and do influence political stability within nations. Especially when one

group seeks to enforce institutional privilege for themselves, while marginalizing others.

Even though history's cultural baggage weighs heavily on right-wing groups seeking to turn back the clock of time, it also has an economic core. The Pew Research Center (2015) highlighted that the middle class's portion of US aggregate income has decreased from 62% to 43% in the last decades and that economic mobility for millennials has become more difficult. Rightwing populists have drawn growing support not from the poorest, but rather from the dwindling middle-class population. Meaning, those affected by declining status, are seen as the primary "focus group" of rightwing populist.

Culture, as an explainer for rightwing movements, goes hand-in-hand with the economic explainer. Cultural globalization, in the sense of younger generations tending to travel more overseas and live in urban areas, has led to a rapid change in values concerning national identity, group loyalty, family values, and traditional gender roles (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). International exposure generally adds to tolerance towards cultural and gender diversity, and the acceptance of migrants (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). Individuals joining rightwing movements therefore often look to uphold their "life world", which is characterized by national identity, family values, etc., all closely linked to religion and prejudice of the past. Their response to changes in these values is to find simplicity in a complex world, by forging moral frames based on popular resentment. Müller (2016) sees their rhetoric as characterized by three components: "people" is authenticated and unified in a cultural sense, the "people" are neglected by their elites and exploited by the "others" or outsiders, and that the "people" are homogenous and therefore reinforce social divides. One of the strategies to respond to populism is that this rhetoric of the "people" against the "others" should not be mimicked but instead democratic institutions and norms should be reinforced, which include the rule of law, protection of minority rights and the independency of the judiciary and the media.

It becomes clear that economic and cultural grievances are at the core of rightwing populist movements. Crises, such as the 2015 refugee crisis or the 2008 financial crisis in the US and EU, are often used as rallying cries for rightwing populist leaders and parties, meant to showcase the dwindling status of certain groups in society and them being supplanted by others. These types of crises have historically allowed rightwing populists to intertwine economic grievances and cultural anxiety to help them receive popular support. Thinking of the cultural demarcation between "us", the majority inside,

and “them”, the minority outsider, as mentioned earlier, helps one understand how the notion of a homogenous people is forged. These lines of separation based on cultural factors are often based on race, religion, or atavism and the culturally unified people are said to be “the forgotten or silent” majority who are having their voices heard again through populists and the complementing movements. They see society’s faults stemming from minorities exploiting native populations, degrading their culture, and decreasing the security of the local populations (Van Kessel, 2015).

2.1.4 The Media's Role in Depicting Protest Movements (K.G.)

“Media are vehicles of information – they make representations of and insights into reality available, as articulated in text, image, and sound.”

(Jensen, 2021, p. 1-2)

Protest movements rely heavily on being seen by the greater population. This can be achieved through multiple ways, a common one being the protest participants spreading information on the movement through interpersonal communication, digitally on the internet, through physical documentation, i.e. pamphlets, and so on. Social media has played a significant role in mobilizing protest movements in our contemporary era (Lee, 2018). Beyond this, many protest movements look to get the word out through media attention and, if possible, through positive media coverage (Levin et al., 1998). With the media playing such a critical role, questions on objectivity and therefore on how a protest movement is depicted are not far behind.

The role of media and its effects on people has attracted much public and scholarly interest and is subsequently one of the largest and most differentiated areas of communication research. This effects research was broken up into four phases by McQuail (2010), starting in the early 1900s with an “all-powerful media”, which viewed mass media as able to shape opinion and behavior through propaganda. It was soon discovered, in McQuail’s second phase, that this propaganda view was struggling under scientific investigation, which found that, in most instances, a link between media stimulus and audience response could not be established. With the advent of television in the 1960s, a new stab at the power of media was undertaken in a third phase, dubbed “powerful media rediscovered”. From the 1980s onwards, qualitative reception studies shook up the field by seeking to account for new forms of communication, i.e. mobile, ubiquitous, and persuasive media. Jensen (2021) points out the double hermeneutics of effects research, which, when observing McQuail’s four phases, clearly shows the connection between effects research and social and historical developments (Jensen, 2021).

Effects research is undergoing a pivot towards “effects processes”, which means that effects “could and should be studied as processes rather than products or events” (Jensen, 2021, p. 158). These processes are complicated, fluid, and interactive. Studying these effects processes is multifold, spanning the quantitative and qualitative realms.

On a quantitative side, one can look at them through a diffusion lens, meaning the material availability and discursive accessibility of media. Or one can take a consumption approach, often commercially driven, to study the concrete interaction between a medium and a user. One can also look at gratification sought, so the expectation of what will be provided, or gratification obtained, so the resulting gratification. Memory is also a popular area to look at – media users' ability to reproduce items of information. Agenda setting, so the media's ability to tell people what to think about, is a major player. It has its background in political communication and looks at "issues", rather than information in a more general sense. Another interesting lens to look through is framing, which, in contrast to agenda setting, "influences how audiences think about issues" (Scheufele, 2000, p. 19).

To pick a few on the qualitative side, one can look at decoding, so how an audience interprets a television series, radio newscasts, etc., or the use of media in other contexts of social action, so how media is used as resource, which may reorient or enhance a user's local interaction (Jensen, 2021).

Through whichever lens one chooses to look at the media's effect on people, media serve as avenues for communication - they facilitate the exchange of information, connecting communicators and enabling interaction among them. Further, media can lead to action. Communication is an act that carries impact both as it occurs and when it concludes. Mass media frames protest movements and their actions, shaping public opinion by presenting news through identifiable lenses (Boykoff, 2006). However, factors shaping news production are difficult for protestors to control and subsequently the framing of the movement is out of their sway. Even though media attention is essential in helping a movement interconnect with the broad public (Leopold & Bell, 2017), often, the social issues underlying the protest movement are sidelined and a focus on the individual events organized and the characteristics of participants is instead pushed, undercutting the agenda of the protest movement. Consequently, the portrayal of the protest movement is often characterized by a predominantly negative framing, which tends to reduce its complexity through oversimplification and the reinforcement of stereotypical representation (Boykoff, 2006).

Protest movements balancing the media's need for a good story while at the same time articulating issue positions is often a double bind. A protest movement's dependence on public visibility requires, to a degree, attention from the news media. When this

attention is not given, protest participants often feel like their voices aren't heard and therefore turn to what makes a good news story, according to established news conventions, namely drama. This often leads to events which might be used to delegitimize the movement - a double bind referred to as the "protest paradigm."

2.1.5 The Protest Paradigm (D.J.L.)

Protestors face a difficult challenge. A fundamental element of protest is contestation, inherently challenging established discourses within the realm of political activism (Volk, 2021). How this protest contestation is broadcast to the larger public is critical. Protestors know that news coverage is important to achieving the protest's goals by getting their message out. Yet, they often need to engage in dramatic action to get the needed news coverage. If they take dramatic action, they risk these becoming the focus of the news coverage and thus distracting from their core message. In turn, the protestors lose control over the narrative. A new narrative is quickly created, one centered on confrontations instead of offering a comprehensive account of the protestor's claims and grievances (Detenber et al., 2007). This type of reporting is characterized by what Detenber et al. (2007) terms "marginalization devices." These devices encompass the media's focus on incidents of violence, vandalism, and traffic disruptions by protesters (commonly labeled as "general lawlessness"), an emphasis on conflicts between police and demonstrators ("police confrontation"), portrayals of protestors as immature or foolish ("idiots at large"), and the presentation of protests as mere spectacles or performances ("carnival"). To add to this, once the narrative has shifted out of the control of the protestors, news coverage often includes the promotion of unsubstantiated claims regarding public perception and a reliance on official sources rather than the protesters themselves for information and commentary (Detenber et al., 2007).

The protest paradigm is a framework which is used by scholars to understand how news media frame protest movements to weaken their legitimacy and/or obscure the movements concerns and issues. It first came around in the 1980s, when Chan and Lee (1984) argued that journalists covered protest movements through ideological worldviews and that protest frames were closely linked to a newspaper outlet's political ideology. Their study was focused on a protest movement in Hong Kong which led them to identify a number of media frames in covering protest. One being that there was an emphasis on violence, focusing on clashes between protesters and police,

property damage or disturbance of the public order. Another frame that they found was that the voice of authorities and official sources was prioritized over protestors, as well as that protestors were often marginalized by being described as radicals. But they also found that the reasoning behind the actual protests was being downplayed by the media and not enough context was given regarding the motivation behind the protest. By delineating these frames, Chan and Lee (1984) argue that this pattern of reporting serves to maintain the status quo by undercutting the sympathy for the protestors by the public, framing the protest as threatening and reinforcing the dominant social and political narrative. However, this framework was rapidly adapted and applied to analyze protest movements within the United States.

Empirical research on media coverage of protest movements has consistently highlighted a pattern of unfavorable treatment of protests by journalists, which often leads to the marginalization and delegitimization of activist movements that pose a threat to the prevailing status quo (Robertson et al., 2018). Weaver and Scacco (2013) further explain that this paradigm has primarily been employed to demonstrate how left-leaning protests tend to be unfavorably portrayed in traditional media outlets which are perceived to support the existing establishment.

Looking at the effects this type of framing has, McLeod and Detenber (1999) found that viewers of television news stories about protests challenging status quo exhibited lower support for the protests than news stories about protests upholding or affirming the status quo. To further support this, a meta-analysis study on protest paradigm research by Teresa (2022) identified through aggregation of the effects of mass media framing of protest movement a moderate weighted mean size ($r = 0.352$). The study further showed that “the effects of protest media framing is higher in the favor of status quo support than protestors/protester’s support” (Teresa, 2022).

Weaver and Scacco’s (2013) findings were tested indirectly by Robertson et. al. (2019) in their work looking at differences in protest coverage on the global stage. They found that there are differences between protests and channels reporting on them and confirmed the protest paradigms continued relevance, especially when looking at the coverage of protests by news media closely affiliated to a particular state. An example of this would be Russia Today’s (RT) reporting of protests in Ukraine in 2014, or China Central Television’s (CCTV) coverage of the Hong Kong protests in 2014. However, not all marginalization strategies were used, making it clear that the protest paradigm may certainly be relevant, but far from a universal truth. Another issue with the

framework appears in coding. The assumption is that a single protest against a state or status quo is problematic due to strategic narratives being driven by the individual news channels. In Ukraine, pro-EU protesters were attacking the police, who were simply trying to uphold the peace, while in the U.S. the police were the ones responsible for the confrontation. Roberston et al. (2019) found that the strategic narrative was in many instances more relevant than the protest paradigm, since it explained the finding that “reporting was more supportive of protests when the mobilizations were in alignment with the strategic narratives of the state in which the channel is moored” (p. 71).

When looking at the protest paradigm, analyses of text is a critical part. However, as Roberston et al. (2019) pointed out in their study, many of the marginalization devices or strategies attributed to the framework were not found. This, they argue, could not be corroborated completely, due to their research not including visual analysis. These discrepancies in research are what this paper seeks to rectify by looking at images used in news coverage. The reasoning for this is to take a purely visual approach to the protest paradigm and looking at how news coverage framed a movement and the accompanying protests through images. Journalistic practices in news media, especially in the U.S., valorize “objectivity.” How this objectivity is practiced is the topic of the next chapters.

2.2 The Social Contract Between Democracy and Journalism

2.2.1 Democracy and Journalism: A Delicate Dance (K.G.)

“Journalism is another name for democracy, or better, you cannot have journalism without democracy.”

(Carey, 1996)

In the West, the connection between journalism and democracy has been reaffirmed repeatedly. Already during the period of the Enlightenment, thinkers of that time “associated newspapers with reason, rationality, progress, and ultimately, democracy” (Ryfe, 2020; see also Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1996). This linkage is no more irrelevant in today’s world, even if some argue that this melding of democracy and journalism has a “shelf life” in the digital age (Zelizer, 2013). With the advent of digital journalism, one can observe a steady decline in the use of the word “democracy” in articles, bumping it from a proud fourth place of the most common keywords in 2000, to a humble ninth place in 2013 (Steensen & Ahva, 2015). One can critically ponder the relevance and significance of the use of the word “democracy” in the literature to argue the relationship of journalism and democracy. Nevertheless, the relationship between people’s right to be heard and the means for them to be heard is critical for a functioning democracy. For people’s grievances to be heard, these must affect a great many people, or the communication of grievances must be effective, and journalism is a clear way of achieving this. However, if journalism is unsupportive of democratic ideals, it can also function as a showstopper.

As Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001) argue, when journalism first professionalized, a part of journalist’s self-understanding was based on their incorporation of democratic commitments. And these democratic commitments flowed into their work, influencing how they framed stories. It is clear then that when discussing journalism’s purpose in Western society, their role in democracy will inevitably come up. So much has the connection between journalism and democracy been a topic of discussion in the West, that one of the oldest functioning democracies in the world, the United States of America, dedicated its 1st Amendment of its constitution partially to the freedom of the press, laying the foundation for any future discussions on the topic by clearly

prohibiting laws that infringe upon the freedom of the press (Cornell Law School, 2023). The 1st Amendment also addresses freedom of speech, right to peaceful assembly, freedom of religion, and the right of the people to “petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (constitution.congress.gov, n.d.). The intertwining of journalism with these rights is apparent, since journalism informs the public of events happening – events such as protests or assemblies, where such grievances are brought to light. However, the way these events are reported and the manner in which the public is informed have been points of contention. Reporting on an event does not automatically guarantee a neutral or objective depiction. Events must be understood within their specific context, as they have histories and are often complex and nuanced. Depicting an event in a purely descriptive, objective manner may distort the event and mislead the recipient, who, in this scenario, is expected to form an opinion for himself/herself. In a society with many factors influencing the course of events, the thought that the responsibility lies with the recipient to gather all relevant and nuanced information and to interpret it in a way for the recipient then to form an informed opinion on the subject matter, is a thought experiment best left to the realm of theory. It is useful only in the sense of setting clear theoretical boundaries when discussing the relevance of journalism and individuals in participating in a democracy. Here, it certainly helped identify one of journalism’s core issues - an issue created by journalism itself: objective framing.

When considering journalism’s relevance to democracy, what do concepts such as “reason, rationality, progress, and ultimately, democracy,” as referenced by Habermas (1989) and Thompson (1996), truly encompass? Do these ideals align with media theory’s traditional question: “who’s doing what to whom and to what effect?” Is this sufficient for journalism? The integration of reason, rationality, and progress with democracy suggests a close relationship between journalism and society, positioning journalism as a mirror of societal culture. But can journalism truly fulfill this role? Is its purpose to uphold democracy, or is it merely a byproduct of democratic systems? Polan (1990) argues, media theory’s psychology is Pavlovian, due to its “endless references to ‘needs and gratifications’” (p. 262), in the sense that there is an “[...] almost complete absence in media theory of any notion of the unconscious: in media theory, human subjects are pure vessels into which are poured all the clichés of communication practice [...]” (p.262). It therefore begs the question of whether the media, or journalism, can live up to the role of acting as society’s reflection. Polan

(1990) goes on to argue that media becomes “a pure and corrupting epiphenomenon imposed on a pristine realm of rational openness in which citizens communicated transparently.”

What if you go around journalism for society’s reflection? In other words, have a space where lays can come together and reflect on societal happenings. In Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), he stipulates that the public sphere arose in the 18th century in reaction to the artificialities of the old aristocracy but then lost out to the new artificialities of a mediatized world. The public sphere emerged as a space where the bourgeois could engage in open discussion and debate, independent and free from government or aristocratic influence. However, as Polan (1990) points out, Habermas admitted that the eighteenth-century reasoning for public debate was an economic one and “only certain people are part of the public sphere [...], and the things they evaluate have a bearing on their capitalist efforts” (Polan, 1990, p. 263). Theoretical perfection therefore was quickly relieved by reality. Reality being, that the bourgeois public sphere was steered by the interests of capitalist exchange and therefore not independent. The corruption of this sought-after rational openness is indispensable.

Culture and self-interest will inevitably be included in any reflection and therefore “taint” it. Journalism is no exception. Therefore, one can hardly speak of journalism as a flawless reflection of society. This does not mean that journalism is a failure in its functioning as the informant for civil society and the glue which holds democracy together. Instead, one should seek to understand the factors which influence journalism and the processing of these influences by journalists when they frame an event for the public. It is critical to observe and discuss such factors. Only through diligent effort on this front can one combat a purist expectation of objectivity in journalism, a theory often pushed by those seeking to discredit an institution vital for the interaction between civil society and the democracy it makes up. Journalism has a special place in how a society sees itself, by framing events so they are understood in a certain way. How, why, and to what effect framing happens, is the subject of the following chapter.

2.2.2 Journalistic Ideals Manifested in Practice (D.J.L.)

Reflecting on the relationship between journalism and democracy and what journalism ought to be, especially when looking at and seeking to understand journalistic

decisions, requires linking the reporting styles with the normative dimensions of journalism (Eide, 2017). When looking at frame-building and journalists' decisions in the selection process, their decisions may be influenced by a variety of factors, such as their role ideals or the production process. Their ideals have an epistemological flair to them, often coined as "objectivity", "facts," "verification", and "truth." Terms like these, laying the foundation for the journalists' "ideal" dimension in their professional role as someone who deals with knowledge claims, often are in a state of tension when looking at what journalists practice (Örnebring, 2017). For example, there is much debate around the very word "objectivity" and its role in journalism and if it is truly achievable in practice (e.g., Gauthier, 1993; Ryan, 2001; Lichtenberg, 1991; Godler & Reich 2013). The discussion quickly turns to practicing objectivism on the one side and interpretationism on the other, with quantitative studies finding significant cross-national agreement on the importance of aspects making up objectivity, such as neutrality, impartiality, factuality, reliability of information, but less agreement about subjectivity or interpretational work in journalism (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Important to note is a study by Godler and Reich (2013) found that objectivism and interpretationism are not always seen as mutually exclusive. It can be argued that journalists need to take objective information and mold it into transmittable knowledge claims for public consumption, requiring a level of educational skill borrowing from and linking the normative and descriptive aspects of their epistemological flair. Also, the terms "verification" and "facts" or "fact finding" face similar practical issues, so much so, that Shapiro et al. (2013) found that verification as a normative ideal showed a strong variation from how it was enacted in practice and was truly an "... ongoing process that starts before, mingles with, and continues after each specific act of reporting" (Shapiro et al., 2013, p. 669).

The normative social contract between journalism and democracy plays a pivotal role in the frame building done by journalists. However, when considering the decision-making processes in journalism, much literature has suffered from "print bias" (Deuze, 2008, p. 199), focusing on newspaper journalism, instead of considering other media ecosystems, such as multimedia, images, audiovisual dynamics, and so forth. Mellado & Vos (2017) see news content as an institutionally and collectively performed phenomenon and worked with six distinct journalistic role performance models over five distinct news platforms, to look at actual journalism practice, arguing that journalists and freelance reporters today publish work in multimedia platforms and via

social media (Briggs, 2012). Continuing this line of thought, journalism is observed evolving a new journalistic role, a role which focuses “less on what journalists gather through their own investigation” and more on “the goal of filtering [...] information in a way that makes it more understandable and actionable for users” (Lewis & Usher, 2013, p. 613). Mellado and Vos (2017) found that journalism may be practiced differently across media platforms, and analyzing news stories is a multifaceted process. In their research they build on an earlier developed framework by Mellado, which identified six different journalistic roles, them being the interventionist, the watchdog, the loyal facilitator, service, infotainment and civic journalism. These different roles can be seen through three different domains, first the presence or absence of a journalistic voice, second the relationship between journalists and those in powers and third the journalists approach towards their audiences. They argue that analyzing news articles from online journalism requires one to look at images and sounds, since journalists have “an array of communicative tools at their disposal” and “much of the platform differences can be boiled down to a simple matter of using textual versus visual or aural elements” (Mellado & Vos, 2017, p. 116). Journalistic ideals are therefore also found in visuals, not just text, a factor to be kept in mind when thinking about framing in journalism.

2.2.3 Framing in Journalism (K.G.)

“Taken together, we can thus characterize framing as the purposefully selective representation of an issue, object, or situation, which serves to guide interpreters to construct specific frames that coherently organize the foregrounded information and render it meaningful.”

(Baden, 2020, p. 232)

Much research has been done on framing. Goffman (1974), for example, sees frames as a structure which helps recipients to organize and interpret experiences and by creating these frames, it helps people to give context to a current situation. Furthermore, there is a difference between natural frameworks, physical happenings without human involvement, and social frameworks, the interpretation of an event with human agency and intention. Goffman also notes that when participants use different

frames while interacting that can cause misunderstandings and conflicts, which reflect a deeper and social cultural friction.

Meanwhile Gamson and Modigliani (1987) found that a frame requires “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (p. 143) but also that media framing is an essential tool to understand the public opinion on affirmative actions. These affirmative action and the understanding of the public have changed over time and is now heavily influenced by how the media is presenting the issue to its recipients. Entman (1993) sees frames as “the ability of communicators to deliberately structure information such as to guide interpreters toward a specific, intended interpretation” (Baden, 2020, p. 231).

In journalism, packaging something, constructing anything, warping it to fit into a designated space, taking a particular perspective to reality, choosing what “aspects of perceived reality” (Entman, 1993, p. 52) to highlight as the true meaning of events and the “connection among them” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143) is an aspect of normality. They are confronted daily with the frames of multiple sources and must filter and morph these to become fit for news presentation. Journalists are thus in center stage of the framing process in news production, nestled between source frames entering and news frames exiting newsrooms (Baden, 2020). How a frame influences is not a one-way street. Framing influences a wide range of audiences and especially in news media they influence and shape not only the recipient’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, but also those of the sources and journalists. It is interesting to note that they distinguish between equivalency frames and emphasis frames. The first one describing that information can be presented in different ways which then can lead to different responses. The second one portrays that in this frame certain aspects of an issue are getting more attention than others (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

As mentioned in the chapter above, when journalism seeks to communicate a situation, event, issue, or idea to a larger public, it is quite impossible to include all aspects and nuances, especially in an objective fashion. Any reporting done on a topic therefore inevitably highlights some aspects and nuances and omits or sidelines others. The goal is to simplify a complicated issue and rephrase it and contextualize it for the purpose of emphasizing a particular interpretation. Recipients thus interpret stories depending on the frames constructed and presented to them (Baden, 2020). Therefore, by “emphasizing some elements of a topic above others, a frame provides a way to understand an event or issue” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 53).

Even though framing research has been dominated by fields such as Journalism Studies or Communication Studies, Political Science has taken a strong interest as well. Framing looks at the presentation of issues – the *how* something is presented. Here, a clear distinction should be made between framing and agenda-setting. The latter looks at the salience of issues, which affects *what* topics people think about and therefore find important (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). De Vreese (2005, p. 54) sees a frame as “an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic” and argues that frames “are parts of political arguments, journalistic norms, and social movements’ discourse.” Therefore, a clear interest in Political Science lies on whether a particular frame is commonly observed in journalistic practice.

Political communication scholars are tasked with improving and enhancing the understanding of complex communicative dynamics that influence political outcomes, both as means and as ends, meaning that communication technology are evolving at an incredible fast rate and research methods need to adapt accordingly. (Holbert & Bucy, 2011). News media is a source of communication which shapes the considerations that people use to understand and evaluate political events and conditions more than any other (Iyengar & Kinder, 1989). Therefore, studying communicative dynamics and their influence on political outcomes is linked to how the news media “frame their coverage of politics and how the public uses this information” (Chong & Druckman, 2010, p.238). They define a media frame as “an interpretation or evaluation of an issue, event, or person that emphasizes certain features or consequences” (Chong & Druckman, 2010, p. 238). Such frames offer recipients a way to receive information, potentially modeling how they interpret, categorize, and rate the depicted situation (Müller & Geise, 2015). Frames therefore set interpretation patterns and meanings (Entman et al., 2009), which help the recipient to logically classify and efficiently process new information, whilst at the same time having the capability to structure and influence the said information (Scheufele, 2001).

When studying frames, it is pivotal to distinguish between frame-building and frame-setting. These two distinctions are important for compartmentalizing the processes of forming frames and the effect framing can have on the recipient. One can understand under frame-building the internal and external factors which influence how a journalist or news organization structure the qualities of a news frame (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Frame-setting deals with the interaction between the receivers and the media frames, considering the receivers “prior knowledge and predispositions” (De Vreese,

2005). However, knowing how media frames truly affect the recipients is difficult. It would be too easy to assume that there is a mere transfer of the media frames into the imagination of the viewer. Scheufele (2001) therefore also sees the effects of frames as the results of an interaction between the frames and the viewer's already-present cognitive concepts.

2.2.4 Generic and Issue-Specific News Frames (D.J.L.)

Some news frames are relevant only to specific topics or events and can be labelled as issue-specific frames, while others go beyond such thematic limitations and can be labelled as generic frames (De Vreese, 2005). Both sets of frame types have their strengths and weaknesses. Issue-specific frames are strong when analyzing a particular topic in detail and can show, for example, the chronological development of a particular issue in the news. For example, Jasperson et al. (1998) looked at the public's perception of the U.S. national budget deficit by drawing on a content analysis of major U.S. newspapers and found four frames: "talk", "fight", "impasse", and "crisis," which reflected the chronology of the development of the talks. For their study they combined on the one hand the theory of agenda-setting, which focuses on the amount of media coverage, and on the other hand framing, which focuses on the details of issue coverage, so they could provide a better explanation for the shifts in the opinion of the public. They argue that the framing of an issue and the frequency of coverage add to the ability to predict issue importance in the mind of the public and showed in their study, that even though the presence of all four frames increased in media over time, only the "fight" frame had a significant impact on public opinion. However, this specificity and great detail in issue-specific framing makes generalizations, comparability, and their use as a base for hypothesis and theory building difficult.

Generic frames, on the other hand, offer a way to compare across issues, frames, and topics, as De Vreese et al. (2001) showed in their study focused on the framing of news in four European countries surrounding the introduction of the common European Union's currency, the Euro. As a comparison, their study showed that journalists in all countries were likely to emphasize conflict when framing general economic and political news. However, when covering the introduction of the Euro, the economic consequences were emphasized. This finding reaffirms previous U.S. research by, for example, Gamsen (1992), McManus (1994), and Neuman et al. (1992), which suggested that news about politics and the economy are often framed in terms of

conflict or the economic consequences of events, issues, and policies. The conflict frame can also be found in other areas, for example Nisbet et al. (2003) looked at the media coverage of stem cell research. They found the most dominant frames were the generic ones: conflict and ethics/morality. On a minor side, two issue-specific frames were also discovered, which dealt with the policy and scientific background.

Though these definitions on framing stem from text-based research, they can and should be used for looking at the framing of images as well. The concept and idea stays the same, especially if the image is rooted in a news story. Often, a news story will have a sole image embedded in it, oftentimes at the very top of the article, thus being among the first things the recipient sees. Frame-setting and frame-building is for images as relevant as it is for text. How images come to be, why a journalist chose to use that particular image, how the photographer came to take the image at an event, how and why the event was chosen, and much more, are all relevant points to understand and are critical to discussing the framing. The effect the image has on the recipient, or the salience of a particular aspect of a topic, depicted in images dealing with said topic or event, all further help understand the narrative pursued by the creators.

2.2.5 Visual Framing (K.G.)

Viewed historically, images have been an anthropological constant (Müller & Geise, 2015), as well as their interpretation. Understanding and interpreting them is rooted in social and cultural practices, and, more generally, the previous experiences made by the image beholder (Mitchell, 1986). Their importance and influence have fascinated people regardless of the discipline their research was classified under. Outside of academia, people understand the power of images. Take, for example, the popular phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

However, if one wants to analyze and interpret images, a definition is an important first step in the process. This process of defining what an image exactly is, is a difficult one. The talk of an iconic or pictorial turn began only quite late in the 1990s with William J.T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm. Boehm, an art historian, was looking to establish a counterweight to linguistics, a veteran discipline with established interpretation methodologies and definitions. With the General Visual Studies, Boehm brought the iconic turn into the public spotlight and sparked the discussion around finding a definition for what an image actually is. As the word “general” in General Visual Studies

allows one to assume, it takes an interdisciplinary approach to finding a definition. As most of these discussions go, soon disagreeing voices appeared with arguing against the logic of an interdisciplinary definition. Bachmann-Medick (2010) goes as far as arguing that a unified, interdisciplinary definition should not and cannot be the goal, especially when one thinks of the vast diversity of images, be they paintings, photographs, videos, digital images, art images, dreams, and so on. Essentially, Visual Studies, with its roots in art history and its inclusion of other disciplines, has a hard time finding a unified definition of what an image is. However, this never stymied the general interest in interpreting images, which has a long and rich history. With the advent of the internet and the flood of digital images, also in the news media landscape (Bachmann-Medick, 2010) put the effects images have on people into a whole new light.

However, with this risk in mind, this Thesis will lean on Mitchell's (1986) work, where he differentiated between material and immaterial images (see Image 1).

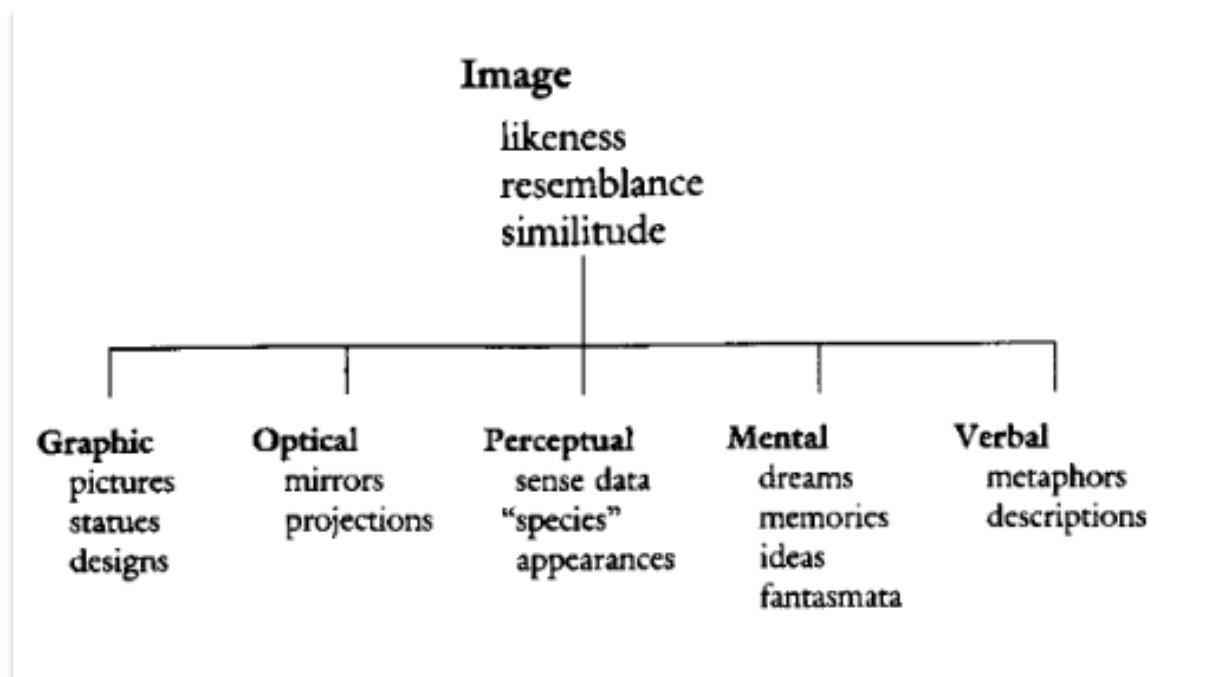


Image 1: The "Family Tree," illustrating how images have differentiated themselves based on boundaries across various institutional discourses (Mitchell, 1986, p. 10).

The categorization of images into material and immaterial helps us close in on a common understanding of what we are talking about in this Thesis. "Perceptual," "Mental," and "Verbal" all fall away, since they are conceptual and mental images, and

therefore immaterial. “Graphic” and “Optical” are direct representations or imitations of something, making them material images. For us, “pictures” in the category “Graphic” is most relevant, since we will be looking at pictures in news articles. With this categorization in mind, the definition by Geise (2011) seems fitting:

“An image is an intentional, at most two-dimensional, media-bound visualization or visual visualization or visual representation of meaningful content that does not have to be fixed beforehand, with reference to situational, temporal, spatial, individual and social contexts.”

(Geise, 2011, p. 63; [translated by Leeb & Großmann])

Müller & Geise (2015) believe visual framing can constitute four frame dimensions, which are not rigid or obligatory, but instead highlight visually “aspects of perceived reality” (Entmann, 1993, p. 52) while neglecting others, which indirectly suggests certain attributes, relations, how to rate or classify something, or what conclusion to draw and therefore implies certain interpretation patterns. In the case of media frames, Cappella & Jamieson (1997, p. 57) state: “Framing the news is a question of slant, structure, emphasis, selection, word choice, and context.” Furthermore, they differentiate between strategic frames and issue frames. The first one focuses on political actors and on their tactics while the second one is concerned with policy content. According to them strategic frames are more likely to active cynicism among the public and the exposure to strategically framed news can lead an increase in political cynicism which can become a danger to democratic engagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

How are these frames created has much research potential? Can one see a pattern in images produced by the media? Panofsky (1997) does not see content of images to be put together randomly, but rather the depiction of specific topics is culturally influenced. The lack of randomness has been shown in multiple visual communication studies (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011; see also Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Wilke, 2004). In media frames, the first step in the framing process are the cognitive frames of the communicators, that is, the journalists. Their knowledge and biases, as well as their work structures and routines, heavily influence how they frame a certain issue. In a study on the visual framing of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the war

in Afghanistan, Fahmy (2005) showed that the mindsets and perceptions of journalists has a clear influence on the image selections and the visual framing of the subjects. Visual framing has become an important and even more interesting area of political science because of how it influences political behavior and the political discourse, especially with political communication becoming more and more visual driven (Entman, 1993). Grabe & Bucy (2009) write in their work *Image Bite Politics* about how visual elements on TV can influence the public's perception during an election campaign. These image bites are being described as short, silent video clips of politicians which are being used during the news coverage on TV. The used visuals, in particular silent ones, can communicate powerful, emotional and symbolic messages which lead to the recipients judging a person's character and credibility from the viewed image bites.

Ultimately visual framing is interesting in the context of political science because it shows how images can influence political understand and shape ideologies, as well as simplify complex topics in the context of certain societal moments. Therefore it is of interest to observe how the Proud Boys are being visually framed by the media over the span of Trump's presidency and beyond.

2.3 The Proud Boys

2.3.1 A Brief History (K.G.)

"We tried their way. We tried apologies, capitulation, and shame. Now it's time for them to try something. GET OFF MY LAWN."

(McInnes, 2017)

The above quote is the official description found for Gavin McInnes' podcast, founder of the Proud Boys. The "get off my lawn" references the iconic scene in the 2008 U.S. movie "Gran Torino" where Walt Kowalski, played by Clint Eastwood, repeatedly growls "get off my lawn" (Eastwood, 2008) to a group of teenagers of Asian descent, and can be interpreted as having a racist connotation. Walt Kowalski is portrayed as a gruff, old-fashioned Korean War veteran with deep-seated prejudices. In this scene, his aggressive confrontation with the Hmong gang members is laced with racial tension, reflecting his character's initial xenophobia and distrust of his immigrant neighbors. As of June 7, 2024, the "Get Off My Lawn Podcast w/ Gavin McInnes" has released over 360 episodes, mainly focused on political and social issues (McInnes, 2017). Gavin McInnes is a Canadian author, provocateur, and podcaster, known for his far-right commentary, as co-founder of VICE Media, founder of the Proud Boys and their chairman for the first two years of the group's existence (Schwartz, 2018). The content of the podcast's episodes coincides with the issues the Proud Boys say they deal with. The Proud Boys as a group were propelled into the public spotlight when they were directly mentioned in the 2020 Presidential debate on live-TV, when President Trump instructed them to "stand back and stand by" (Associated Press, 2020; Hesson & Cooke, 2020; Dickson, 2020). However, they have been around for longer than that but really began to capture public attention during the 2016 U.S. presidential election year.

"Misogynistic, Islamophobic, transphobic, and anti-immigration" is how the Anti-Defamation League describes the Proud Boys (Anti-defamation League, 2018), while Kitts (2021) adds anti-Semitism and anti-feminism to the list of attributes describing the group. The name of the group comes from the song "Proud of Your Boy" by the Broadway production of *Aladdin* (Dickson, 2020). The Proud Boys themselves see

themselves simply as a fraternal group, which is spreading “anti-political correctness” and “anti-white guilt” (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.) and, in a video by VICE (2019), are described by ex-Proud Boys leader and chairman, Henry “Enrique” Tarrio, as “a drinking club with a political agenda” and “Western Chauvinists.” The group members themselves interpret their “Western chauvinism” as extreme patriotism and firmly denying any connections to the “alt-right” movement. The group sees Western society, and especially Western men, as having built the modern-day civilized world. Still, according to Tarrio and the Proud Boys, even though the civilized world was built by the West, society is unable to let them, the men, be proud of Western culture. The Proud Boys lay a special focus on men and the challenges they face in modern society, strictly prohibiting women from joining the group (Zadrozny & Siemaszko, 2018). They are hostile to multiculturalism, especially against Jews, Muslims, and feminism. While some of their members tout neo-Nazi and skinhead symbols, some also see themselves as so-called “white knights” defending conservative Catholic social teachings, while others in the group rage against women’s liberation (Kitts, 2021). The group it as their duty to promote a form of extreme patriotism for defending Western society from “forces” they view as degenerate and threatening to Western values (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). They do not shy away from engaging in acts of violence against these “degenerate forces,” which are predominately left-wing protestors and protest movements (Kriner & Lewis, 2021). The Proud Boys’ violence and views are linked to the emergence of the alt-right movement and the so-called “men’s rights” narratives leading into the 2016 election cycle (Kriner & Lewis, 2021).

“The Proud Boys can be understood as a quirky hate group eager to promote a storybook picture of Western society that few of us have seen in our lifetimes”
(Kitts, 2021, p. 14).

The group uses the First and Second Amendment to the United States Constitution to push their narratives of this storybook picture of Western society, testing legal limits. For example, the internet and social media have played a crucial role in the Proud Boys evolution and recruitment scheme. The group leveraged the digital environment to generate iconography and narratives, often in an ambiguous manner, masking their extreme views behind a veil of irony and storytelling (Dreisbach, 2021), allowing them to circumvent criticism of the group by reframing themselves as victims of bias in a

corrupt media and of leftist movements, which seek to put a stop to their patriotism (Kutner, 2020 & 2021). Their iconography manifests and lives on in the offline world through their apparel, flags, colors, equipment, and more, even after the group was banned from many mainstream social media sites (Matthews, 2018). For example, apparel with provocative, with often ambiguous or politically charged rightwing slogans on them, were sold on an online store run by Fund the West LLC, a business registered in Miami by Henry Tarrio (Glaser, 2019). Touting the First Amendment, Tarrio states that nowadays anything can easily be deemed as hate speech, so the clothing is a way to support the First Amendment, while social media platforms censor particulate ideologies, especially his own (VICE, 2019). Nonetheless, their narratives and violent activities soon began to catch up with them. An example of this is when a group of Proud Boys members were arrested after a brawl in Manhattan after attending a public speech by McInnes, who has been using his usual violent rhetoric. Threatened with legal consequences, McInnes, who up until this point has been the group's chairman, quits the Proud Boys (Brean, 2018). Tarrio succeeds him and during his leadership, the group grew and took on a larger role within the extreme far-right at a national level and began to explicitly support the presidency of Trump (Carless, 2020).

As the succession of McInnes shows, the Proud Boys are an organized group with a leadership. However, the leadership assumes a loose command and control position for organizing and overseeing demonstrations and mobilization action and allows its members to also be part of other groups, often times violent terrorist groups. One sees that the Proud Boys are not unique in their ideology and the line between them and other groups in the right-wing extremist scene are rather fluid. Still, the group has a hierarchical initiate system and rituals to promote a group identity and adherence to its rules (Kriner & Lewis, 2021).

Tarrio was often shown participating in demonstrations with the Proud Boys and other rightwing extremist groups. He quickly took on a central, public role. His central role in the Proud Boys culminated in him taking a leading role in conspiring before, during, and after the storm on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021. For his actions during the breach of the U.S. capitol, Tarrio was found guilty of multiple felonies, including seditious conspiracy and subsequently sentenced to 22 years in prison and 36 months of supervised release (Department of Justice, 2022). Looking at what happened to the leaders of the Proud Boys, the logic behind their organizational structure becomes clear. Leaders often find themselves in the limelight of the public's and law

enforcement's scrutiny. A loose command and control structure and the Proud Boys' members ability to be part of multiple different groups allow a more fluid, dynamic and less rigid response to outer pressure. It becomes more difficult therefore to eliminate the group through a single targeted strike, say by removing a specific leader. And targeting all of the group's members is feat rarely feasible, unless a large portion of them is caught in committing a crime.

2.3.2 The Proud Boys after January 6, 2021 (D.J.L.)

“A lot of people want to see Jan. 6 as the end of something. I think we have to consider the possibility that this was the beginning of something.”

(Miller-Idriss, 2024)

Three years after thousands tried to actively stop the peaceful transfer of power by storming the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, more than 1,000 have been convicted, with around 350 trials still pending and the FBI continuing to actively look for more suspects (CBS News, 2024). Among the convicted are four former Proud Boy leaders, which have been convicted of seditious conspiracy and each sentenced to more than 15 years in prison. Additionally, at least another 70 members have been charged with participating in the violence on January 6th. Some would think that these convictions have led to the end of the Proud Boys, but quit the opposite seems the case. Journalist Aram Roston (2024) interviewed eight members of the group, two law enforcement officials and four experts, who have been tracking the online activity of the group, for a Reuters report. He found that the group is rebuilding and regaining strength during Trump's second presidential campaign. Some members say that they are preparing to become a physical force for Trump again, since Trump has promised to pardon those who have been convicted for their activities on January 6th, should he be elected (Roston, 2024). A Proud Boys member told Reuters that “America is in a period of ‘calm before the storm’” and that the group has learnt from the convictions of January 6th and has been urging its members to stay calm and not risk arrest (Roston, 2024). Similar to the previous presidential election campaign, the Proud Boys began showing up at rallies and events around the United States to show their support for Donald Trump. During the election, three out of four Americans feared violence during the election in November 2024 (Roston, 2024). This coincides with the Proud Boys showing up at political rallies once again and Trump himself saying “if we don't win,

you know, it depends” after being asked, during an interview with Time magazine, if he is expecting violence after the election (Roston, 2024). Another change within the group is how they are organized. They moved away from a top-down leadership system and are instead operating with self-governing chapters in more than 40 states and little central coordination (Roston, 2024). This change to an independent chapter-based structure is common organization structure of gangs (Wippel & Haynie, 2025). These changes have made them less vulnerable for law enforcement. Still, their leadership plays a critical role. Their founder, Gavin McInnes, who has announced his resignation for the group in 2018, still stays an inspirational figure and mediator to the group till this day. Some of the group members even refer to him as “Godfather.” The fact that the group is still active has surprised extremism experts, because usually when the head of an extremist group is removed, the organization itself often falls apart, but this has not happened to the Proud Boys even though many members are in jail (Roston, 2024).

During the Trump administration the group engaged in street brawls with Antifa (antifascists) and other leftist groups, but after the Trump presidency they started to engage in the so-called “American culture war,” where they would clash with participants of abortion rights and vaccine mandates rallies. Violence has and still is a crucial part of the group’s activities, it is even outlined in a handbook put out by the group, describing their rituals. In the manual, which was used as evidence during the trial against former leader Tarrio, it is being described as what one has to do to become a high-ranking Proud Boy. In the manual, multiple ranks are described. One of the ranks, the so-called “fourth degree”, requires violence as a prerequisite:

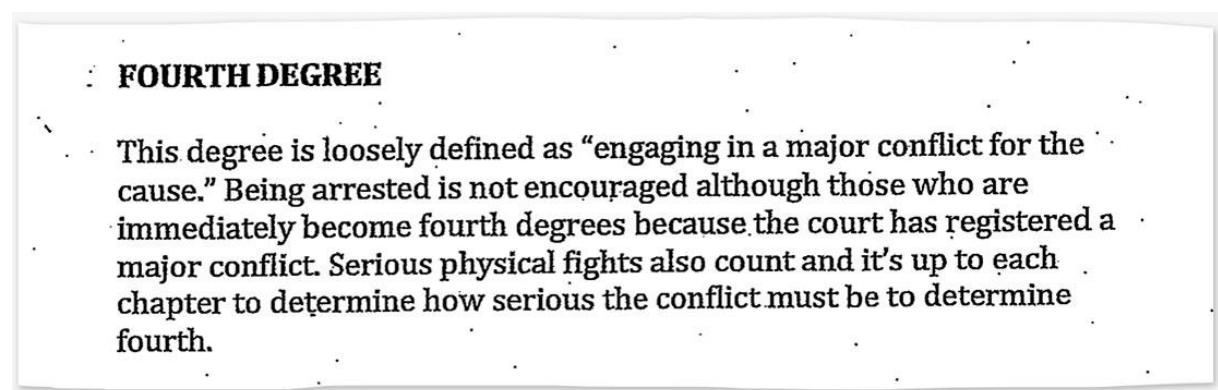


Image 2: The „Fourth Degree“ secondary source cited from Roston (2024).

It is unclear how many members the Proud Boys have in 2024. McInnes, in 2024, claims that they have around 5,000 members at the moment, while officials think that their number varies from 300 to 3,000. Throughout the years members have left the group, just to join other racist and violent groups like Blood Tribe, which is a neo-Nazi group. But according to Julie Farnam, a former U.S. Capitol Police Assistant Director of Intelligence, the Proud Boys are not just active within the United States, they have expanded overseas and there are around 18 international chapters in nine countries. But there has also been conflict within the group as there are different wings, a “Standard/Rouge” and “National/Traditional” wing which even led to a brawl between them in Las Vegas. Still the Proud Boys wanted Donald Trump back in power, not just because he promised to pardon them, but because he appeals against the ongoing cultural shift in America (Roston, 2024).

Just as the Proud Boys hoped, Donald Trump was elected for a second presidential term on the 8th of November 2024 by winning against former Vice-President Kamala Harris and getting over 77 million votes (CNN, 2024). On the 20th of January 2025 Donald Trump was sworn into office for the second time as the 47th president of the United States of America, and as he had promised, he granted clemency to everyone who had been charged in connection to the 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol (Reuters, 2025). The executive order was signed on the 20th of January, only hours after the inauguration, to end “a grave national injustice that has been perpetrated upon the American people over the last four years and begin(s) a process of national reconciliation” (The White House, 2025). In the order Trump commuted the sentences of several people, including five members of the Proud Boys (Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zach Rehl, Dominic Pezzola, and Jeremy Bertino) but also granted a “full, complete and unconditional pardon” to all the other people who had been convicted in relation to the events on January 6, 2021 (The White House, 2025). Through his signature President Trump reversed the largest investigation and prosecution of the U.S. Department of Justice and simultaneously described the riots from that day as a peaceful “day of love.” (Reuters, 2025). Gavin McInnes even said in an interview that he and friends had been celebrating by “pounding bourbons and laughing our heads off.” Experts think that these pardons will encourage the Proud Boys and other extremist groups to more violence. A member of the group told Reuters that they are planning to recruit more people since “now they are going to feel like they are bulletproof” (Reuters, 2025).

2.3.3 The Relevance of the Proud Boys for Political Science (K.G.)

Researching and analyzing the Proud Boys in an academic setting is interesting and of value for multiple reasons, especially in the context of democracy, growing populism, a rise in political violence and radicalization. There has been academic research done on the group, however the majority of literature found at the time this thesis is written comes from news organizations reporting on the group. The group is academically interesting, because they show similarities to rightwing movements around the globe, but in particular, rightwing movements in western democracies. These movements are viewing themselves as counterweights to pluralism and pursuing goals stemming from a general yearning for a romanticized version of atavism. Romanticized because these versions never existed in the way the groups picture them but have been distorted in a nostalgic tinge in order to persuade persons that turning back the clock of progress will solve all of their problems, whatever they may be. These forms of movements are a phenomenon found globally, and though their historical roots may be buried in diverse contingencies, they share at least three features: “a yearning for some kind of lost golden age, a lionization of classical heroes, and a repulsion from the dilution of culture that inevitably accompanies globalization” (see Jaffrelot, 2007 & 1999, Schonthal & Walton, 2016, Jerryson 2016, and Frydenlund 2017, as cited in Kitts, 2021). The Proud Boys live these features in their actions on the ground and couple them with violence, symbolizing the belief that they must be prepared to physically fight in order to achieve their goals. This preparedness for violence is showcased in their attire and often deadly weaponry they bring to protest movements, as will be discussed in later chapters of this paper. Rothbart and Stebbins (2021) looked at the Proud Boys and the rage they emulate, seeing similarities with other hate groups operating in the United States. They argue that the rage and emotional intensity the members of the Proud Boys feel, as evident in their speeches, interviews, and behaviors, go beyond hate and are used as a galvanizing force for recruiting members and maligning enemy groups. The rage is a form of righteousness, meant to convey publicly who they are and how they are committed to a just cause and what they are prepared to do to vanquish their adversaries. This form of righteous rage is used as a central operational force, uniting them in their rage and unifying them politically and organizationally, two factors necessary for political action and mobilization. Their pursuit of political change through mobilization is motivated by the belief that change is truly possible, cemented

by the media's attention and public acknowledgement by the highest form of government. Ultimately their willingness and encouragement of violence should be seen as a threat to democracy.

With approximately 77 identified Hate Groups operating in the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023), the Proud Boys in particular were chosen for this thesis, because of their apparent publicity and their continuous activity online and offline. As mentioned earlier, the Proud Boys have been banned from the major social media platforms (AP, 2022) but have continued to be present online by relying on other platforms such as Telegram, where they run multiple channels, including one with around 28,000 members (Bailard et al, 2024) or Parler and Gab, both micro-blogging platforms, similar to Twitter/X and the a video-sharing platform called BitChute, all of which are heavily promoting free speech (Stocking et al, 2022). These are the places which the Proud Boys, and other far-right groups, use to spread their ideologies and therefore play a part in online radicalization, but it also shows how much attention extremist ideas can gain online. Hand in hand with their claim to promote free speech, the question arises about how far does free speech go and at what point does radical critic become a serious threat to democracy, especially since their online activities spread to offline engagement, which in many cases ends in violence.

Additionally, they were founded the year President Trump was elected as 45th President of the United States and were active during the entirety of his presidential term, with their activity cumulating at the storm on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021, showing that the Proud Boys, and other right-wing groups, do not shy away from interrupting democratic and constitutional processes, when those don't seem to align with their interpretation of the "truth." Therefore, it only seemed fitting to expand our time frame to include January 2021 but also the aftermath of what happened.

Whitney Phillips wrote in her report *The Oxygen of Amplification* (2018) that far-right groups like the Proud Boys have understood how to play the media and use it for their advantage by creating and posting content online, which they know will lead to mainstream media coverage, since these, e.g., memes, provoke and create outrage. And since journalist not just want, but need to attract recipients and ultimately clicks, they themselves are in a difficult decision, because on the one hand they are exposing these groups but on the other hand they are also providing them with a bigger audience. But not just that, the Proud Boys or other groups are often being just labeled as "controversial" and not as the extremist group that they are. So looking further into

this topic by looking specifically at images we seek to add academic content to the growing number of research, which is being done when it comes to extremist groups and in particular the Proud Boys.

By setting our time frame in time period between 2017 and 2022, we were able to narrow down the scope of the thesis in a reasonable way and enabled matching analyzed visual images with events the Proud Boys participated in. Even though the main interest will lie on the repeating, typical motifs of the Proud Boys during this period through abstraction and generalization, and thus be of quantitative nature, the typical characteristics and structures of the media images, thus a qualitative approach, will complement this perspective nicely.

3 Part 2: Methods

3.1 Research Methodology

3.1.1 Quantitative Image Type Analysis (*D.J.L.*)

The Quantitative Image Type Analysis (QITA) focuses on quantitatively analyzing the types of images used, as well as their frequency, and their characteristics and is therefore an effective method for analyzing large data sets of images objectively (Müller & Geise, 2015). QITA combines the logic of the non-standardized iconographic-iconological analysis with the standardized Content Analysis, to go beyond analyzing a single image and instead tracks repeating, typical image contents in a large data set of images, without having to forego on analyzing the meaning of the images. The iconographic-iconological approach by Erwin Panofsky (1994) assists in identifying and verifying image content and subsequently ascertain and analyze the “meaning” of the image (Petersen & Schwender, 2018). Looking at artwork, Panofsky (1994) created a three-level model (objective meaning, intended meaning, and document meaning) to map the meaning of the work. This descriptive part laid the foundation for the interpretative methods of iconology, which comes as the final step in the three-level model. As mentioned, QITA works with the iconographic-iconological process, which not only helps in understanding the underlying visual elements and their significance but also assists in ensuring the replicability in how we selected and analyzed the data. The iconographic analysis examines symbols, motifs, and themes in the image to get an understanding for the basic content and subject matter. It looks at the basic visual elements in each image without interpretation.

First, a “pre-iconographic” level is used to describe the image on a basic level. Here the focus and identification lie with the main, primary subject of the picture, such as persons, objects, or actions (Panofsky 1994, p. 210). For example, in a picture of a protest movement with the Proud Boys present, a basic visual elements would be the people. One would then look at the number of people, their gender, age, attire, and so on. Other visual elements could be objects like flags and signs, the setting (urban, rural, government buildings), counter-protesters, or even gestures and actions found

in the photographs, such as raised fists, salutes, etc. This is a purely descriptive stage and sets the foundation for a deeper analysis. Following this pre-iconographic phase, recurring motifs or themes are identified in the dataset. This is where the analytic depth of QITA begins to really take shape. It builds on the descriptions written out in the pre-iconographic phase and begins to look for patterns within the dataset. One reviews the dataset and looks for repeating visual elements that appear across multiple images. As we will see later, these motifs can be things like recurring scenes of physical altercations, or a certain central figure speaking or gesturing to a crowd. These motifs then become the “image types,” which are then quantified across the dataset, so physical altercations can be clustered into a broader category, such as “Conflict,” or the depiction of central figures as “Personality.” Importantly, these image types are clearly defined and homogenous in their definition to ensure replicability and consistency. These image types are then applied to the full dataset. This step transforms raw visual data into structured and analysis-ready categories. Though the process began with a qualitative aspect, QITA is inherently quantitative and is a standardized process which is particularly suitable for assessing the formal design aspects and modes of representation of images as well as individual image elements (such as actors or locations) and general thematic references (Petersen & Schwender, 2018). The focus therefore lies not on the specific image elements and symbols, such as objects, persons, or situations, but instead in the identification and recording of recurring elements and symbols depicted in particular situations, topics, etc. (Müller & Geise, 2015). It allows one to quantify how often a certain motif or theme appears, to compare visual strategies across time, media outlets, and is critical as a foundation for the iconological interpretation, which gives insights into the framing of the subject matter.

The iconological phase is the third and interpretive part of the iconographic-iconological method in QITA. Here, one looks at the broader cultural, political, or ideological context of the content.

To summarize, the step-by-step process followed for this thesis was based Müller & Geise (2015, p. 215 – 216):

1. First, the visual motifs present within the dataset of collected images were categorized.
2. These classified motifs were then consolidated into distinct image types.

3. The image types were then described in an objective manner based on previous literature and with a special focus on homogeneity of the image types.

These identified and described image types were then:

4. Translated into visual content-analytical categories, documented in a codebook.
5. Then these standardized categories were systematically applied to the data set to check for and ensure consistency and reliability.

Subsequently, the information gathered was then:

6. Quantitatively analyzed while adhering to the principles of the Standardized Content Analysis.
7. Finally, the results underwent an interpretative evaluation, informed by literature and current research.

QITA, through this standardized approach, allows us to draw conclusions on patterns, key ideas, or visual distortions (or biases) by classifying the images into categories (Geise & Lobinger, 2015). Additionally, it is important to note that, when discovering and creating the image types, an open and inductive process was used by borrowing certain aspects of the methodology of Grounded Theory (GT), devised by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. GT uses specific methodological principles and a cyclical data collection and analysis process, to build a theory based on these data and phenomena researched (Grittmann, 2017). GT is inductive and therefore allowed us to be open to new and possibly previously unknown image motifs and thus create image types which may otherwise have been missed, had we worked solely with established theories, image types, and frames. This allows for a deconstructive and critical analysis of the material at hand (Grittmann, 2017). To summarize, our methodology for identifying and naming image types borrowed established frames of image types from the literature, as well as allowed us to have an open mind to new discoveries.

Using these categories, the Image Frame Analysis looks to understand how these photographs construct meaning and public perception. It will be used to analyze how the Proud Boys are portrayed in news coverage.

3.1.2 Image Frame Analysis (K.G.)

The Image Frame Analysis is a method for understanding how visual content is structured to allow for a certain interpretation. An image frame is a way to present visual content that emphasizes certain aspects of a subject while downplaying others, as discussed in *Chapters 2.2.3 through 2.2.4*. The framing is not neutral, it is a reflection of the socio-cultural, ideological, and institutional context in which the photographs are created and then selected.

For this thesis, the Image Frame Analysis helps understand the visual framing of the Proud Boys by media. For instance, it can reveal whether the media chosen for this Thesis frequently used recurring image types, such as “Conflict” or “Personality” to contribute to a particular narrative about the group on the events they participated in. These narratives are not accidental and often can be shaped by editorial routines and professional norms that guide what the authors consider newsworthy or visually compelling, as discussed in *Chapter 2.2.2*. The images of the Proud Boys used by media were actively selected to be published by these organizations and this process is based on intersubjectively agreed upon selection and processing schemes, which, as established routines, relieve the actors (Blöbaum, 2004). The selection process is influenced by specific expectations, interpretations, world views, or ideologies (Grittmann, 2007; Fahmy & Kim, 2008). Image frames are the result of these socio-culturally influenced selection criteria (Petersen & Schwender, 2018).

Identifying image frames allows us to make inferences about the routines and selection processes and perhaps even the ideological positioning of the media outlets in the dataset. The Visual Framing Analysis enables a more in depth understanding of how visual content is used to depict reality and also shapes it. This is done by bundling specific image elements and symbols, such as flags, gestures, people, into broader image themes, which are interpreted as image frames (Petersen & Schwender, 2018). Then, the frames are interpreted through a socio-cultural lens, possibly revealing how media understands and wants to portray the event or the Proud Boys. For example, image types such as “Personality” and “Individualized” can be grouped as a frame emphasizing a narrative the next-door neighbor as a Proud Boys member. “Conflict” or “Confrontation” may align with a narrative of extremism or militancy. Image Frame Analysis therefore not only decodes visual content but can also expose certain power structures and cultural assumptions in visual political communication. More to this later in *Chapter Discussion*.

3.1.3 Research Process (D.J.L)

To automate the collection of a large volume of data needed for our research, a web scraper was used. This allowed us to circumvent manual extraction efforts and thus reduce the manual workload and ensured consistency in retrieving the data. Following the principles of the Extract - Transform – Load (ETL) model, the data was gathered from relevant sources, cleaned, and prepared for analysis.

First, the sources and the time frame were chosen. The selected time frame for our analysis coincides with Trump’s presidential term, which was from 2017 to early 2022. This time frame was chosen to capture particular political events, including the election year and the January 6th storming of the Capitol, events in which the Proud Boys played a prominent role (see *Chapter 4.1.4 Event Distribution*). Using the keyword “Proud Boys,” data was scraped from six sources that represent a mix of mainstream media, regional outlets and websites dedicated to the dissemination of photographs:

- *Getty Images* (<https://www.gettyimages.com/>)
- *The Washington Post* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/>)
- *Reuters Pictures* (<https://pictures.reuters.com/>)
- *Portland Tribune* (<https://www.portlandtribune.com/>)
- *NPR* (<https://www.npr.org/>)
- *Politico* (<https://www.politico.com/>).

The web scraper extracted structured metadata from each source. Depending on if the scraped source was an image repository or a news website, the extracted data elements differed slightly. However, the following core elements were extracted from all sources:

- *web-scraper-order*: A unique identifier.
- *web-scraper-start-url*: A URL link identifying the location of the scraped record within the search engine of the respective source.
- *Link*: The scraped record’s name.
- *Links-href*: A direct URL link to the record.
- *Image-src*: A direct URL link to the image itself.

- *Description*: A description of the image by the source.
- *Photographer*: The name of the person who took the image.
- *Date*: The date attributed to the image.

For news websites, additional textual data was extracted. Even though text analysis was out of scope, this data was extracted for potential future research looking to integrate textual framing with visual framing:

- *Headline*: Article headline.
- *Author*: Article's author(s).
- *Article*: Text content of the article.
- *Image_Source*: Photographer name and/or source of the image.

The raw data was exported as .csv files and then converted into .xlsx files for ease of use. The raw data was then harmonized for comparability purposes between the sources. This harmonization process standardized names, date formats, metadata structures across the sources, therefore ensuring comparability and consistency for the latter-analysis phase. An initial filtering logic was implemented according to a logic laid out in *Part 3: Findings and Discussion*. This removed irrelevant and/or duplicate entries and focused the dataset on images that clearly depicted the Proud Boys.

The cleaned and filtered datasets were uploaded to a shared digital workspace using Microsoft OneDrive, enabling access for collaboration. The contents were analyzed according to QITA and the structured process of Müller & Geise (2015) mentioned earlier, including inductive coding of image types, frequency analysis, and interpretive framing. For transparency and reproducibility, all datasets and images used in this thesis are available upon request. This is meant to ensure that future researchers can build upon this work, replicate the methodology, or extend the analysis (perhaps complementing the findings here with a textual framing analysis).

4 Part 3: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Data (*D.J.L. & K.G.*)

The images chosen for this thesis were shot by photographers taking an outside-in perspective on events involving the Proud Boys. Their photographs frame a visual narrative.

A total of 663 images were used for the analysis, stemming from stock photo agencies such as *Getty Images*, and images from articles on news websites such as *NPR*. Most of the images come from two sources, namely *Getty Images* and *Reuters Images*. *Getty Images* advertises itself as a website which uses images for “visual storytelling worldwide”, which will “help you move [...] your readers and viewers [...]” for “society-changing [...] or headline-driving [...]” (*Getty Images*, 2024). According to the website, *Getty Images* understands the importance of visual storytelling through images and was therefore chosen as a foundational source for this thesis for its diversity and it being sourced by various news organizations. The images uploaded to *Getty Images* come from multiple sources, including the ones depicting the Proud Boys, as later seen in *Table 2*. The new websites scraped for the articles and accompanying images often source their images from *Getty Images*, for example 64% of the images used from *NPR* come from *Getty Images* (*Table 2*). Furthermore, the large quantity of images on *Getty Images* and their sources added much needed material to the research project, while in turn increasing the variety of sources and photographers. Additionally, *Getty Images* has an effective archive of images, searchable and sortable according to multiple variables, such as topic or date, making the gathering of material effective and transparent.

Reuters Pictures was chosen as a source to complement *Getty Images* with another image website, however one with a more direct affiliation with a news organization. It, too, has a strong archive of images searchable and sortable by topic and date, as well as adding a variety of sources and photographers for the images in this thesis. *Reuter Pictures* has a clear connection to the news organization *Reuters*, which was founded in 1851 and is part of the “Big Three” new agencies (Rafeeq & Jiang, 2018). *Reuters Pictures* is quite transparent when it comes to who their photographers are. This is

important, since this allows for future research to build on this thesis, looking for closely at frame production. For example, examining potential framing pursued by the photographers themselves and comparing this to the use of their photographs by other news organizations.

The *Washington Post*, *Politico*, *NPR*, and *Portland Tribune* were chosen at random with merely the prerequisites of being accessible online and having articles and images of the Proud Boys. *NPR* was seen as high potential due to the large number of articles dedicated to the Proud Boys, as shown in *Table 1*. *Portland Tribune* was chosen additionally, due to the prevalence of Proud Boy activity in Oregon state (see *Figure 3* and *Table 3*) and it was considered of interest for the research project to include news organizations with a local focus.

4.1.1 Source Distribution (D.J.L.)

Figure 1 shows the total count of images and articles including images that were scraped per source. The key words “Proud Boys” were used for all websites when scraping the data. Analyzing the source distribution is critical for understanding the representational balance and potential biases in the dataset used.

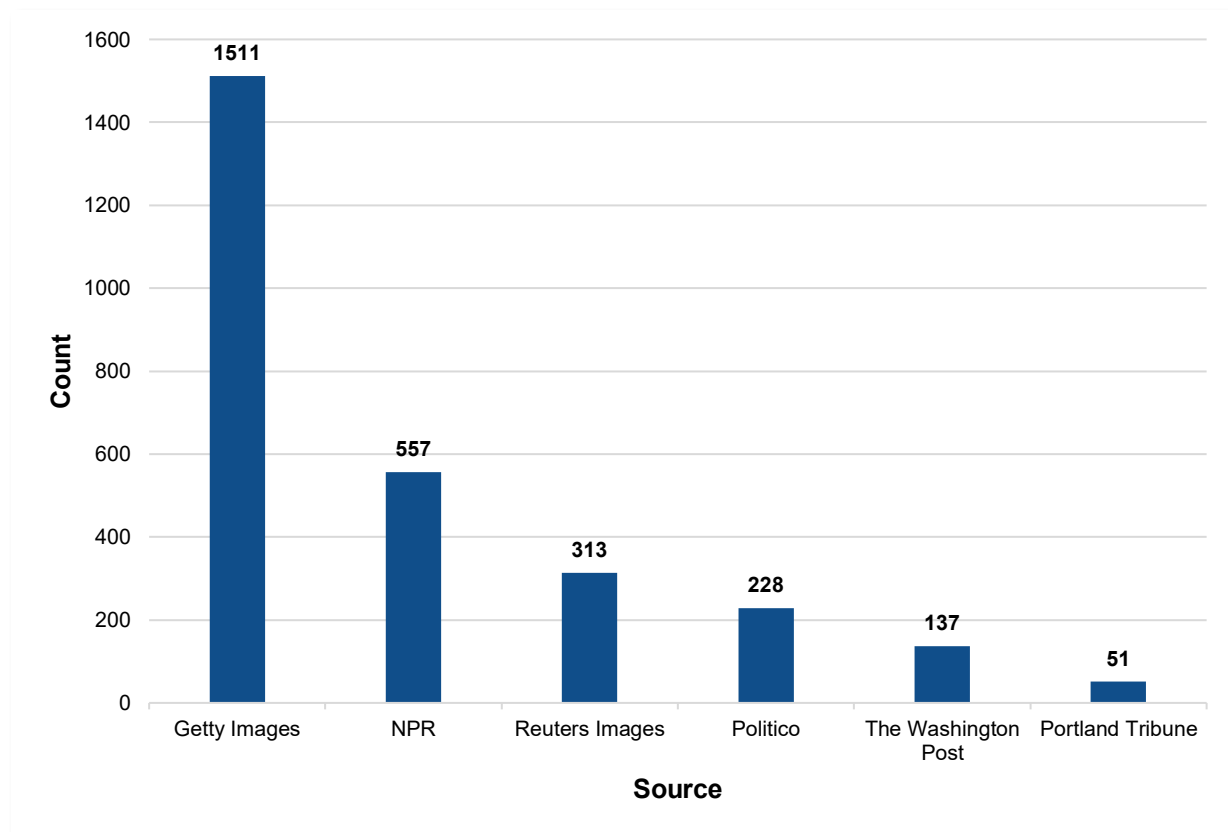


Figure 1: Distribution of Scraped Images Across All Sources (2017 - 2022).

We can therefore account for structural disparities and then seek to avoid over-representing or under-representing certain narratives. Additionally, it allows for a more diverse interpretation of the image frames, as the original of the photographs plays a critical role in shaping how the Proud Boys are portrayed. As shown in Figure 1, the images scraped varies significantly across sources due to differences in website type and content structure. When considering the distribution of the scraped images, one should keep in mind that *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *NPR*, and *Portland Tribune* are news websites which were scraped for articles including images. Since the news articles picked for being scraped needed to include an image, this reduced the total count. *Getty Images* and *Reuters Pictures* are both websites dedicated to images and their dissemination and therefore explains why they have more images than the other sources.

However, not all images and articles with images that were scraped could be used for the analysis.

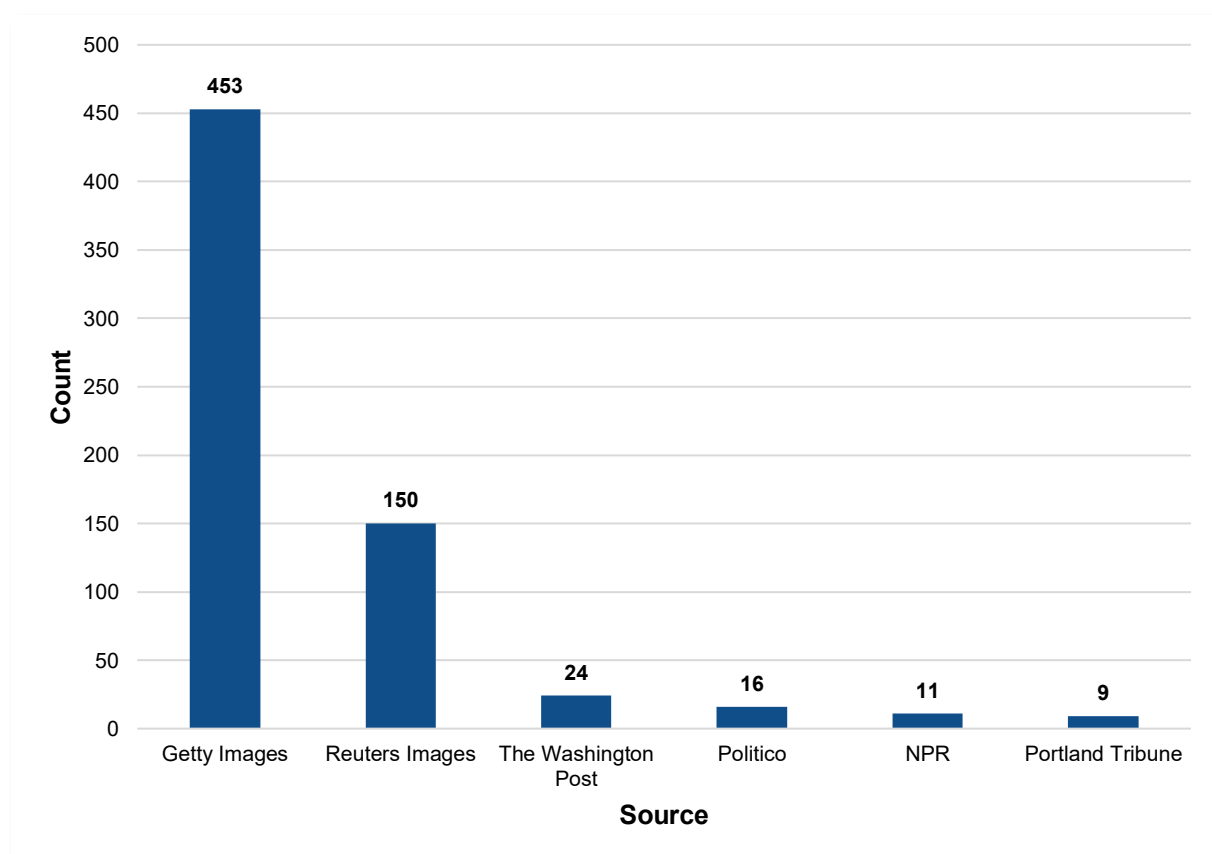


Figure 2: Distribution of Images Included in the Analysis by Source (2017 - 2022).

The most common reason for this was a lack of clearly identifiable members of the Proud Boys. Another factor was duplicates. For example, in *Getty Images*, one would

occasionally stumble across the same image multiple times in a consecutive order. Duplicates and images without clearly identifiable members of the Proud Boys were therefore removed. The distribution of the images used in the analysis is shown in *Figure 2*. What is striking is that of *Reuters Pictures* and *Getty Images*, 48% and 30% of the images scraped showed clearly identifiable Proud Boys, respectively. As a stark comparison, of the articles with images scraped from *NPR*, only 2% depicted clearly identifiable members of the Proud Boys.

The reasons for this are multifaceted. On the one hand, the quality of the search function varies from website to website. Using *NPR* as an example, at the time of the data gathering, if one searched for “Proud Boys” using their search bar, one was confronted with 6,256 article results (*NPR*, 2022). However, of these 6,256 articles, only a fraction included images. Of these articles with images, another magnitude of articles falls away merely because the title does not mention the Proud Boys at all, but the search function nevertheless returns them. E.g., the article titled “The meeting that changed history and 3 other takeaways from the latest Jan. 6 hearing” (Montanaro, 2022) is among the first results returned. There is no mention of the Proud Boys in the title, the image in the article is of a video being played at the “seventh hearing held by the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday” (Montanaro, 2022) and the article itself never mentions the Proud Boys. The only reference to the Proud Boys can be found in the class tags found at the bottom of the article. Another factor is the timeframe used. Even though the timeframe for this project was expanded to include the January 6th capitol riot, most articles scraped fell outside of the designated timeframe. Nevertheless, from *NPR*, *Politico*, *The Washington Post*, and *Portland Tribune*, 993 articles with images were scraped. After removing duplicate images, irrelevant articles, articles without images, or articles with images but no clearly identifiable Proud Boys, 60 unique images of clearly identifiable Proud Boys were filtered out and used. *Table 1* shows that approximately 6% of the images scraped from news websites could be used. In contrast, of the websites dedicated to image dissemination (*Getty Images* and *Reuter Pictures*, $n = 1824$), 603 could be used, or approximately 33%.

Source	Total Scraped	Total w/ PB* visible	Proportion of PB* visible (%)
<i>Getty Images</i> **	1511	453	30%
<i>NPR</i>	577	11	2%
<i>Reuters Images</i> **	313	150	48%
<i>Politico</i>	228	16	7%
<i>The Washington Post</i>	137	24	18%
<i>Portland Tribune</i>	51	9	18%
Total	2817	663	24%

Table 1: Images Scraped vs. Images Clearly Depicting the Proud Boys (2017 - 2022).

*Proud Boys.

**Image sites.

In total, approximately 24% of the images scraped could be used for analysis. Proportionally in percentage, *NPR* had the smallest usable amount, while *Reuters Images* had the largest.

4.1.2 Image Ownership Distribution (K.G.)

Table 2 presents the distribution of images across sources, sorted by the organizations that own the rights to the individual images. *Getty Images* has the highest number of images ($n = 180$, 27%) followed by *Reuters* ($n = 153$, 23%). Together, they account for 50% of all images used across different media outlets. *Getty Images'* content was especially prevalent in *NPR* (64%) and *Politico* (25%), suggesting a strong reliance of these news outlets on visual material from *Getty Images*. In contrast, *Reuters Images* were used almost exclusively used by *Reuters* itself, with a minor presence in *The Washington Post* (12%). This suggests even major news outlets often rely on external agencies for their visual content, rather than sending their own photographs to events, perhaps hinting at budgetary restrictions.

Beyond these two giants, other notable contributors include *AFP* ($n = 97$, 15%), *Anadolu Agency* ($n = 71$, 11%), *Corbis* ($n = 35$, 5.3%). These agencies, while smaller in content, still play a significant role in diversifying the visual narratives available to media outlets. Interestingly, *The Washington Post* ($n = 30$) contributed only 4.5% of the total images, despite being one of the primary news sources scraped. Still, in its own articles, it owned 42% of the images used, and contributed 4.4% of the images scraped from *Getty Images*. The presence of *SOPA Images* ($n = 28$, 4.2%), *Bloomberg News* ($n = 15$, 2.3%), and *NurPhoto* ($n = 13$, 2.0%) further illustrates the fragmented landscape of image sourcing. The remaining sources have less than 3% of the total count. The high count of images from *Getty Images* and *Reuters Pictures* suggests they are commonly used by media outlets for images in their news reporting. The

distribution of images across sources is potentially interesting for further research on the diversity of perspectives and biases in news reporting. For example, *AP* is used in *NPR*, *Politico*, and *The Washington Post*, while the *Portland Tribune* uses local news photographs. Regional and local media played a marginal role in image distribution. *Pamplin Media Group*, for example, provided six images (0.9%), exclusively to *Portland Tribune*. *KOIN 6 News* and *Portland Tribune* themselves contributed only two and one images, respectively. This may suggest that local media outlets rely on larger services for images in their reporting, reducing the presence of local perspectives in national media coverage. *NPR* and *Politico* also showed reliance on outside sources. 36% of *NPR*'s images came from *Associated Press (AP)*, complementing the images it received from *Getty Images*. *Politico* was even more stark. 75% of its images originated from *AP*, reinforcing *AP*'s role in shaping political narratives. *Getty Images* has multiple different sources yet owns approximately 37% of the photographs on the website.

These findings raise concerns about the centralization of visual framing in journalism. When certain agencies dominate the supply of visual content for potentially politically sensitive events such as protest movements or groups such as the Proud Boys, the risk of homogenized narratives can increase. Future research should explore how this centralization could influence public perception and discussions around protest movements. It would certainly be interesting and valuable for Political Science to investigate whether the visual framing differs significantly between images sourced from larger agencies versus those produced by local or independent photographers. One can see that image ownership distribution can reflect on logistical and economic realities in journalism but also certainly shape the boundaries of visually depicting political discourse on events. Understanding who owns the images and who created them is central to any critical analysis of media representation.

	Getty Images	NPR	Politico	Portland Tribune	Reuters Images	The Washington Post	Total Count
Getty Images	168 (37%)	7 (64%)	4 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.2%)	180 (27%)
Reuters	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	150 (100%)	3 (12%)	153 (23%)
AFP	97 (21%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	97 (15%)
Anadolu Agency	71 (16%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	71 (11%)
Corbis	35 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	35 (5.3%)
The Washington Post	20 (4.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (42%)	30 (4.5%)
SOPA Images	28 (6.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	28 (4.2%)
AP	0 (0%)	4 (36%)	12 (75%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (21%)	21 (3.2%)
Bloomberg News	13 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8.3%)	15 (2.3%)
NurPhoto	13 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (2.0%)
Pamplin Media Group	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (67%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (0.9%)
Icon Sportswire	4 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (0.6%)
Saboteur Media & Reuters	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (12%)	3 (0.5%)
KOIN 6 News	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.3%)
Tribune News Service	2 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.3%)
Los Angeles Times	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
New York Daily News	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Portland Tribune	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	453	11	16	9	150	24	663

Table 2: Distribution of Images by Source and Ownership (2017 - 2022).

4.1.3 Geographical Distribution (*D.J.L.*)

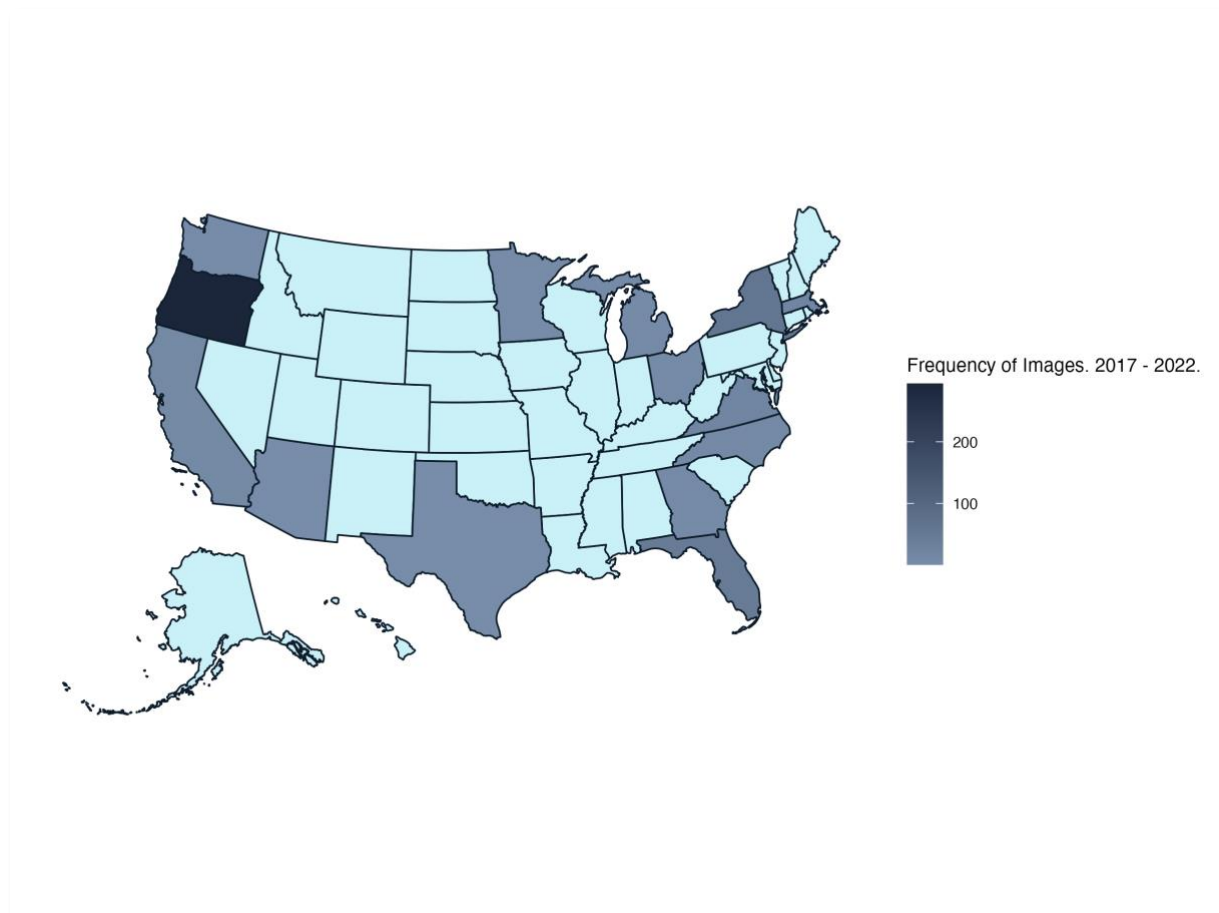


Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of Image Types Across U.S. States (2017 - 2022).

Looking into where the images were taken, *Figure 3* shows the geographic distribution of images depicting the Proud Boys across the United States between 2017 and 2022. A total of 17 U.S. states are represented in the dataset, with shading intensity on the map corresponding to the total number of images taken in each state, with darker shades indicating a higher frequency of images. It quickly becomes clear that there is a coastal concentration of activity, with the majority of images originating from states along the East and West Coasts. In contrast, the states in the central U.S. are seemingly wholly exempt from demonstrations in which the Proud Boys participated in.

Interestingly, the state of Oregon is a clear outlier. Oregon accounts for 294 images (44.34%), making it by far the most represented state in the dataset. The data suggests that both the frequency of events and the presence of media coverage played a significant role in increasing the visibility of Proud Boys activities here. The distribution leans heavily towards Portland and Salem. 99% of the images taken in Oregon

depicting Proud Boys were in Portland and Salem, with Portland making up 81% of the images and Salem 18%. All locations are in the immediate area of Portland, except for Salem, which is 80 km to the south. The activity of the Proud Boys was concentrated on areas of unrest and protests, underscoring the localized nature of the Proud Boys activity in the Pacific Northwest. Oregon, specifically Portland, Oregon, was the site of unrest and protests starting in May 2020 (Levinson, 2020). The protests drew national attention and since their focus was on racial injustice (Flaccus, 2020), these protests were often classified by conservatives in the country as lawless riots taking part in “Democratic wastelands that have been overrun with violence, looting and destruction that is forcing residents to flee for safer locales” (Smith & Flaccus, 2020). Right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys went to these locations of protest and used them as a place to violently clash over what they see as a culture war (Evans, 2021). The images taken in Oregon state were shot in five separate locations, namely Clackamas (n = 2), Gresham (n = 1), Oregon City (n = 1), Portland (n = 237), and Salem (n = 53).

The second most represented location is Washington, D.C., with 166 images (25.04%). This concentration is closely tied to the Proud Boys’ involvement in events surrounding the 2020 presidential election, including rallies, protests, and the lead-up to the January 6th Capitol riot. The images taken in D.C. were taken predominantly on the days leading up to the general election in 2020, and the days following it. Interestingly, there are not many images depicting the Proud Boys on January 6th, 2021, the day of the capitol riot, even though they were reported to have been present on that day and members have testified to have led the coup attempt as well as later being tried and convicted for their participation (Hsu, 2023). A reason for this could simply be the large number of participants and the lack of clearly identifiable clothing, which would help spot members of the Proud Boys. Another reason may be that photographs and witnesses simply were not focused on capturing images solely of the Proud Boys, but rather the moment in general. This absence raises methodological questions about visibility, identification, and media framing in large, chaotic protest events.

New York follows as the third most represented location, with 58 images (9.75%). Rallies and counter-protests happened in New York City, as well as the Proud Boys’ periodic appearances at political events. While not a central hub of activity, the city’s symbolic status as a more liberal location and media significance perhaps contributed to the relatively high image count. Florida, contributing 46 images (6.94%), is

particularly noteworthy given that Miami serves as a base for some of the group's leadership, such as Enrique Tarrio. This could suggest that leadership geography may influence not only organizational strategy (as discussed in *Chapter 2.3 The Proud Boys*) but also media visibility.

Other states, such as Massachusetts and Virginia, each with 18 images, California (10), and Colorado (9) are less represented. The remaining states, such as Texas, Arizona, and Minnesota, contribute only a handful of images each. This uneven distribution highlights the regional concentration of Proud Boys' activity and suggests that their activity is not broadly national but rather strategically concentrated in politically or symbolically charged locations. The geographic distribution also opens up a discussion on the intertwining of protest activity, media presence, and group mobilization. Areas with frequent protests and potentially strong media infrastructure, such as Portland and Washington, D.C., clearly yield more visual content. In turn, the absence of images from central states may not necessarily indicate a complete lack of activity but rather a lack of media attention, either due to lower protest frequency, reduced press presence, or less visual salience.

In sum, the geographic distribution of images offers critical insight into the spatial dynamics of the Proud Boys' activities, the larger overall aspect of media's role in documenting protest movements, and the, perhaps symbolic, geographies that groups like the Proud Boys seek to occupy.

U.S. State	Total Count of Images (n)	Proportion to Total (%)
Oregon	294	44.34%
District of Columbia	166	25.04%
New York	58	9.75%
Florida	46	6.94%
Massachusetts	18	2.75%
Virginia	18	2.75%
California	10	1.51%
Colorado	9	1.36%
North Carolina	8	1.21%
Ohio	6	0.91%
Georgia	5	0.75%
Michigan	5	0.75%
Minnesota	3	0.45%
Pennsylvania	3	0.45%
Washington	3	0.45%
Texas	2	0.30%
Arizona	1	0.15%
Total	663	100%

Table 3: Geographic Distribution of Images Depicting Proud Boys Activity Across U.S. States (2017 - 2022).

4.1.4 Event Distribution (K.G.)

Figure 4 shows the count of images over time from 2017 to 2022, capturing the spikes in media attention and documenting significant far-right events. These spikes correspond to notable rallies, protests, and political mobilizations, reflecting the increased visibility and activity of far-right groups over this period. The data reveals that the frequency and intensity of far-right activities were relatively low during 2017 and early 2018, with notable events such as the "March Against Sharia" in New York and Virginia (10th of June 2017) sparking a small spike. The rally itself was organized by ACT for America, which defines itself as a "the nation's premier nonprofit grassroots movement with over 5 million digital activists ..." (Act for America, n.d.) and took place in multiple cities across the US. The rally was meant to protest against the influence of Islamic law in the United States and lead to multiple acts of violence in cities like Seattle, Oregon, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Harrisburg, in Pennsylvania. Members of the Proud Boys, alongside the Oath Keepers, were present at the rally in Seattle, which was held in front of the Seattle City Hall Plaza (Hatewatch Staff/SPL Center, 2017). At the protest in New York, Pawl Bazile, a member of the Proud Boys, was quoted by the Washington Post saying "you're in the land of Budweiser and bikinis, for God's sake" (Hauslohner & Moyer, 2017), directly reflecting on his views on what he sees as Islam's conservative and restrictive stance on women's dress code and alcohol. The Anti-Muslim protests faced counterdemonstrators in several cities, with the counter-protesters outnumbering the members of ACT for America, the Proud Boys, and Oath Keepers, much of the time.

Activity levels surged in June 2018, evidenced by the "Far-Right Groups Hold Rally" in Portland, Oregon, which attracted much media attention, as seen in the graph's rise. At this rally, also known as the "Freedom and Courage" rally, not just the Proud Boys protested but also another far-right group, called Patriot Prayer, which organized the protest. According to them, they promote courage because it is the "backbone to freedom" (Hatewatch Staff/SPL Center, 2018). Members of both groups once again clashed with counterdemonstrators, who had gathered across the street. Later the police declared the events on that took place on Saturday a riot and revoked the permit for the rally, since the groups began to violently attack each other (Al Jazeera, 2018). During the rally, not just protesters, counter-protestors, and a reporter from a local newspaper were injured. At least two counter-protesters were arrested by the Portland Police (Hatewatch Staff/SPL Center, 2018).

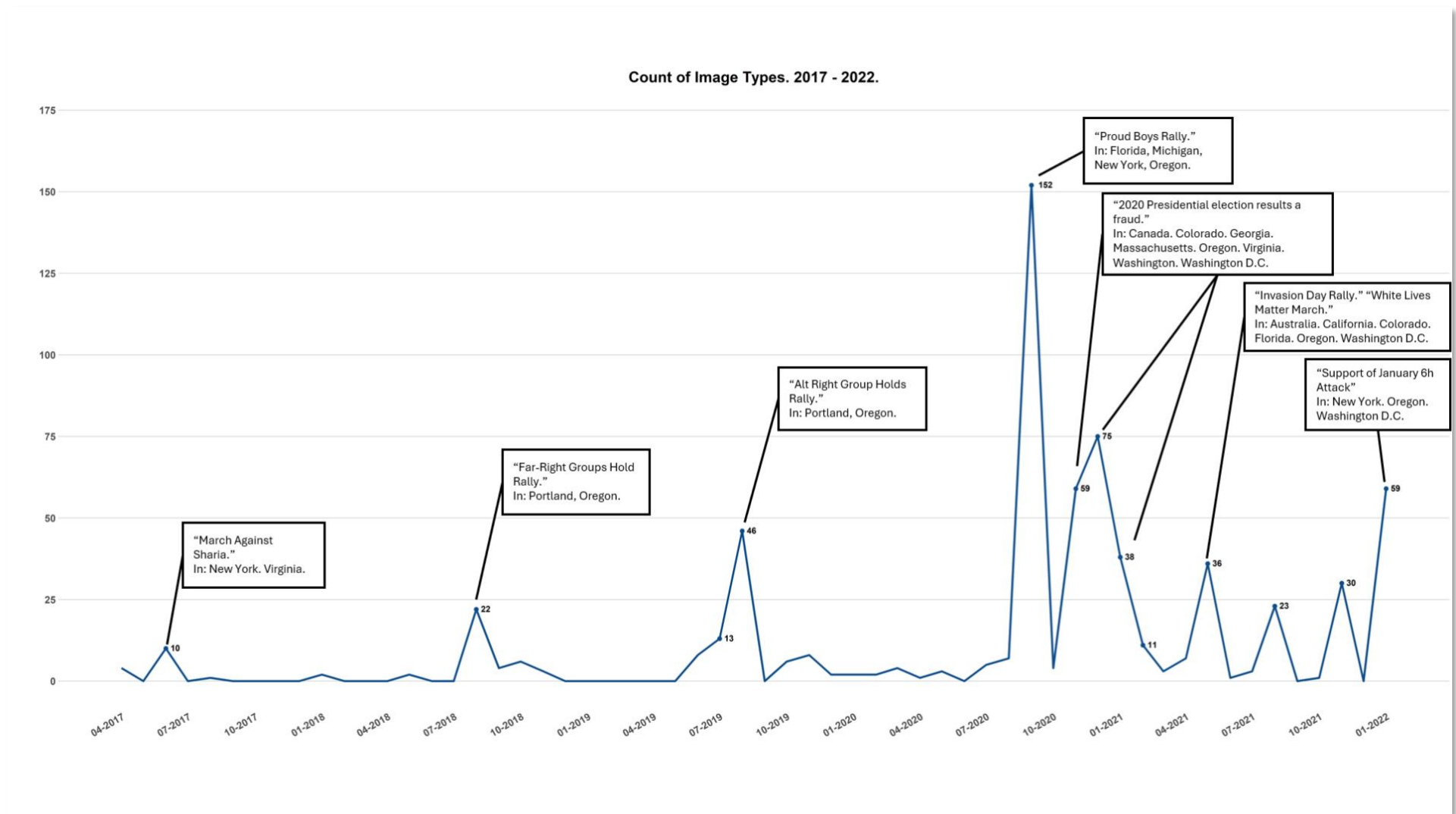


Figure 4: The Count of Image Types Captured Over Time in Quarterly Intervals (2017 - 2022).

A significant spike in activity occurred in August of 2019 with the event the "Alt-Right Group Hold Rally," taking place once again in Portland, Oregon. This rally was, according to *The Guardian*, the biggest far-right demonstration of the Trump era. Proud Boys and other groups, like the Three Percenters and the American Guard, came from across the US to march on the city bridge. In order to prevent a clash between protesters and counter protesters, the local authorities provided a police escort, concrete barriers, and even reopened a previously closed bridge, so they groups could leave the downtown area (Wilson, 2019). Law enforcement arrested approximately 13 people on charges of disorderly conduct, interfering with police or resisting arrest, as well as the unlawful use of weapons. The police seized weapons including metal poles, bear spray, and shields (BBC News, 2019). After the rally Enrique Tarrio said that the Proud Boys are planning to return to Portland every month until the city officials take action against the group Antifa, which the Proud Boys see as leftist extremists (Wilson, 2019). The events in Portland were closely watched by President Trump, who tweeted that he is considering naming Antifa an "Organization of Terror" and that he and hopes that the mayor of the city is doing his job (Voice of America, 2019). This event clearly highlights the interconnectedness of President Trump and the Proud Boys and his attention on the different social groups protesting around the country.

Also, the upward trend suggests a growing capacity of these groups to organize and attract public attention, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. In September of 2020 the Proud Boys organized another rally in Portland, Oregon called "End Domestic Terrorism," which took place in Delta Park. Nearby two other events took place, one of them being held by an anti-fascist group and one by Black Lives Matter supporters. The police reported that at least three people were arrested and nearly 1,500 people had come to two of the three rallies (Sanchez & Rappard, 2020). The state authorities had feared that the turn-out could be much bigger since the Proud Boys themselves had expected at least 10,000 people, therefor state governor, Kate Brown, had even announced a state of emergency over the weekend. The Proud Boys had organized this "free speech" event to not just support Donald Trump and the police but also to restore law and order and condemn anti-fascists (Wilson, 2020), clearly showing their intent to play a political role.

By the end of 2020, the activity reached its first peak with 152 documented instances linked to the "2020 Presidential Election Results as Fraud" narrative. These activities were geographically widespread, spanning Canada, several U.S. states, and

Washington, D.C., signifying a coordinated effort to contest election legitimacy. The timeline shows a critical juncture following the 2020 election. The two key events were the “Million MAGA March” on the 14th of November 2020 in Washington D.C. as well as the “Stop the Steal” rally on the 12th of December 2020. For the “Million MAGA March” in November of 2020 thousands of President Trump supporters came to Washington D.C. to protest against the result of the presidential election earlier that month. The rally started at the Freedom Plaza and later headed towards the Supreme Court. Beside the Proud Boys, also the Oath Keepers participated at the rally and thousands of Trump supporters (BBC News, 2020). President Trump also made an appearance at the march when his motorcade drove down Pennsylvania Avenue and Donald Trump was smiling and waving at his supporters. This Million MAGA March in November was part of the bigger nationwide “Stop the Steal” movement which claimed that Democrats had stolen the 2020 presidential election from the President Trump (Burns, 2020). In the following month, in December 2020, protestors gathered once again to support Donald Trump and the claims of a stolen election, but this time in much smaller numbers. At night the protesters and counter protesters clashed, and the situation escalated. According to the Fire and EMS Department of Washington D.C., four people were stabbed and 33 people were arrested, as well as nine people (two of them police officers) had to be taken to hospitals. These clashes happened in the Downtown area with the police trying to separate both sides, even though also the counter protesters clashed with the police at times. At this rally multiple people addressed the crowd, like former national security adviser Michael Flynn, Mike Lindell (CEO of My Pillow), and right-wing activist Jack Posobiec. Among the participants was also the right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Sloktin, Nuyen, & Doubek, 2020). Protest did not just happen in Washington D.C., but also in Olympia, Washington State, where one person was shot. At this point it had already been six weeks since the Presidential election and the sixth week of Donald Trump claiming that the election had been stolen (Peters, 2020).

The "Proud Boys Rally" in early 2021 marked another sharp increase in activity (75 counts), aligned with narratives of election fraud and direct support for the outgoing administration. This moment reinforced the Proud Boys' identity as defenders of former President Trump's claims of electoral injustice. This is corroborated by Kunzelman (2023), who describes their self-identification as the "tip of the spear" in support of these claims. At the beginning of 2021 around 10 people with Proud Boys attire were

among about 100 other people who had come together in Melbourne for a self-proclaimed “People’s Australia Day Parade” (Vinall, 2021). It was later reported that the Australian Proud Boys were involved in more protests in Australia during a second-wave COVID lockdown with the group posting in anti-lockdown social media groups, as well as looking for people who are trained in combat to help confront law enforcement during these protests (McGowan, 2021). The “Invasion Day” protest was in contrast to Australia Day which is seen as problematic by Indigenous Australians since it celebrates the anniversary of the first British fleet arriving in Sydney in 1788 and is seen as the beginning of the colonization of the continent (Atkinson, 2021). In April 2021 another rally was held in Huntington Beach, California under the name “White Lives Matter” where 10 people were arrested after protesters and counter-protesters clashed, even though the turnout for the event was not massive. Through semi-private chats, members of different far-right groups called for members and supporters to rally all across the U.S. (Zadrozny, 2021).

Another spike occurred in 2022, with "Support of January 6th Attack" and other related events receiving significant coverage. One event was on the 8th of January 2022 in Salem, Oregon and was called the “Never Stop Fighting” rally and was held at the Oregon State Capitol. The goal of the rally was to call for “justice for the J6 political prisoners,” in attendance were more than 20 members of the Proud Boys (Croxtton & Scherle, 2022).

A second rally in January was much bigger and held in Washington D.C. on the 23rd of January. Around 25,000 protestors came to the city chanting anti-vaccine slogans, but they also had signs such as “Trump won.” At the rally Robert F. Kennedy (since 2025 Secretary of Health and Human Services under the second Trump administration) spoke to the attendees, saying that vaccine mandates are worse than the policies of Germany under the Nazi regime. A few members of the Proud Boys were at the rally and had some verbal exchanges with counter-protesters, but no violence or arrests were reported by law enforcement (Skolnik, 2022). These events were not limited to Washington, D.C., but included locations in New York and Oregon, showing the persistence and adaptation of far-right mobilization even after high-profile events like the Capitol attack.

Two clear patterns are seen. One is the proximity of significant political events, such as elections, acts as a catalyst for mobilization for the Proud Boys. The other shows that the Proud Boys capitalized on President Trump’s perceived endorsement. Another

interesting reoccurrence is that Portland, Oregon saw a big number of protest and rallies within our time frame. Oregon is a blue state but only because of six counties, the remaining counties all voted Republican in the election for Governor in 2018 (Politico, 2018). But still it seems to be an example for the deep divisions between urban and rural areas, since the state has a history of protest, mistrust between police and communities of color, as well as groups from different sides of the political spectrum (Diss, 2020). The state was founded and shaped by three Black Exclusion Laws from 19th century, which allowed for the lashing of black women and men, as well as later forbid African Americans to enter or reside in Oregon. Even though the laws were not widely executed, they still had the effect of discouraging Black people from settling in Oregon (Nokes, 2024). In the early years of the 20th century, members of the Ku Klux Klan dominated the legislation of Oregon and these racist historical ties are still present in the state today (Diss, 2020).

4.2 Identified Image Types (D.J.L. & K.G.)

In total, 22 unique image types (*Figure 5*) were discovered. To ensure the homogeneity of each image type, select photographs were described in detail, avoiding, however, over-interpretation. While describing the photographs, the focus was on essential aspects, format, subject, composition, technique, and quality. This allowed for replicability and transparency in the analysis through identifying recurring modes of depiction. Take, for example, *Image 3* and *Image 4*, which were identified as the image types “Personality” and “Individualized,” respectively. These two image types were the most common in the data. How each image type was defined is listed in *Table 3*.

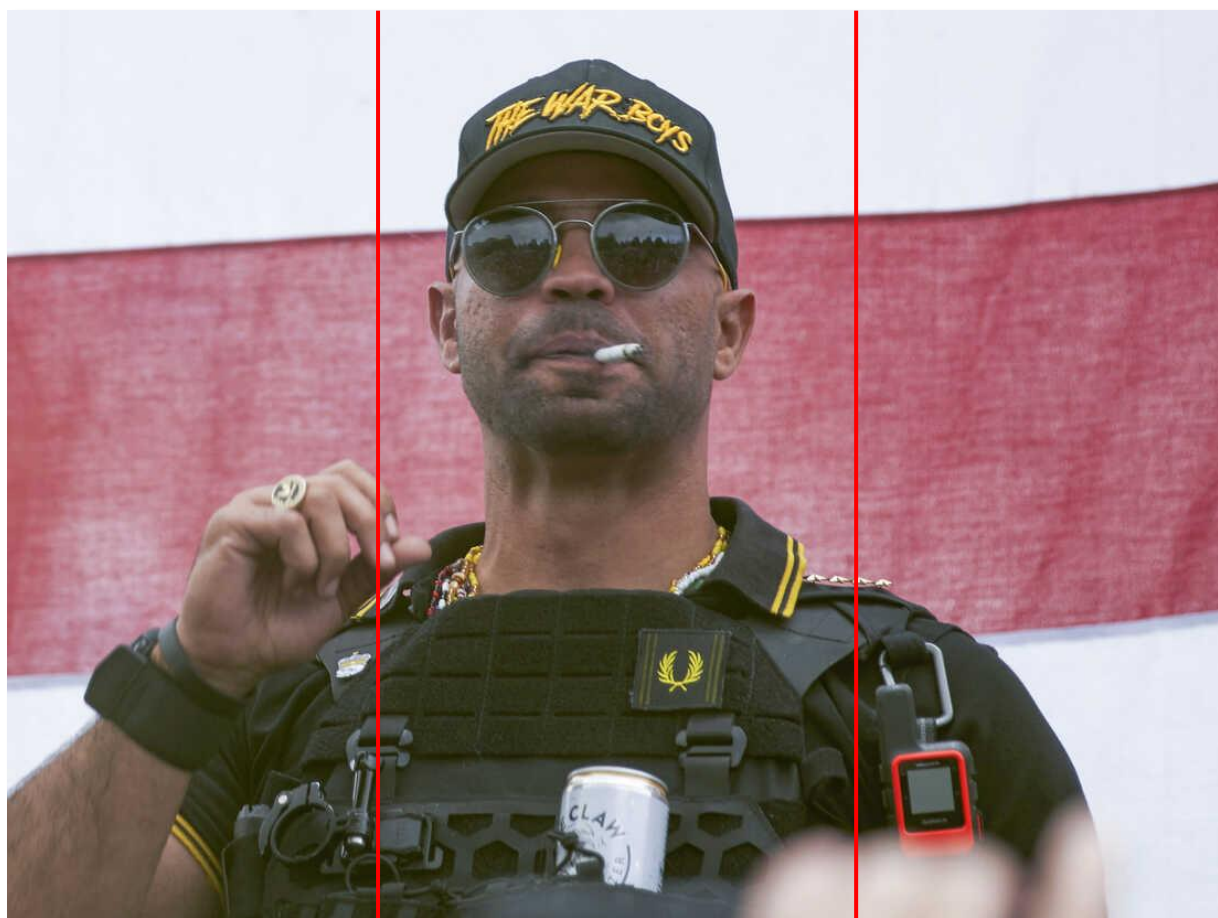


Image 3: Proud Boys chairman Henry "Enrique" Tarrio at a rally in Portland, Oregon, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: *The Washington Post*.

Image 3 shows a man of medium complexion positioned in front of a large U.S. flag, which serves as the background. The U.S. flag in the background, though partially blurred, is identifiable due to its red and white stripes. The man is wearing a black baseball cap with yellow embroidered text that reads "The War Boys." He also has aviator-style sunglasses, which obscure his eyes. A cigarette is hanging loosely from the right side of his mouth, and his expression appears confident and nonchalant. He is wearing a black collared shirt with yellow piping along the edges of the collar and sleeves, similar in style to the shirts associated with the Proud Boys. Over his shirt, the man is equipped with a tactical black chest rig or vest, featuring a hexagonal pattern on the front panel. On the vest, there is a patch with a laurel wreath emblem in gold. Attached to his left shoulder strap is a bright red handheld device, possibly a radio or similar communication tool. There is also a white can with visible text that appears to read "Claw" secured in a slot on the vest, suggesting it may be a can of White Claw hard seltzer. A gold chain is around his neck, with multicolored beads layered beneath it. On his right hand, he has a ring with a decorative emblem, and he is raising his hand slightly as if gesturing or adjusting the cigarette. He also wears a black smartwatch or fitness tracker on his left wrist. The image is tightly framed, focusing on the upper torso and face of the subject. The overall perspective is slightly upward facing, giving the man a larger-than-life or imposing appearance. The photograph seems to have been taken outdoors, possibly at a political rally or protest. The man's attire suggests a political or ideological context. The man appears to embody a defiant or proud demeanor, emphasizing his self-assured personality. He is clearly the main subject of the photograph and a known figure-role in the Proud Boys. This formed the basis for the definition of the image type "Personality."

The man in *Image 3* is "Enrique" Tarrio. The photograph was taken at a rally in Portland, Oregon in 2020. The photograph appeared on multiple news sites and was scraped from an article dated January 2021 from *The Washington Post* (Barrett, 2021), as well an article dated July 2021 from *Politico* (Ward, 2021), and from an article dated August 2021 from *NPR* (The Associated Press, 2021). The photographer is Allison Dinner and the rights to the photograph are owned by the *Associated Press*. The description given by *Politico* for the photograph is as follows: "Proud Boys leader Henry 'Enrique' Tarrio is seen wearing a hat that says The War Boys in September 2020" (Ward, 2021).

Let's look at the second most common image type identified – “Individualized.” Looking at *Image 4*, starting on the left, a person, cropped at the edge of the frame, is visible. This individual is dressed in a pink T-shirt, light jeans, and black tennis shoes. Standing beside them is a young boy or short woman dressed in a light-blue suit. This person is facing the camera and appears to be looking directly at it. They are wearing a tan hat with sunglasses perched on its rim, adding a casual touch to their formal outfit. Beneath the suit jacket, they have a light-blue button-down shirt paired with a darker tie. Around their neck, a "Press" badge hangs prominently, signaling their role. In their left hand, they hold a microphone, suggesting they might be reporting or documenting the event. Directly behind them, a man dressed in a Hawaiian-print collared shirt stands in conversation with another individual. This man, wearing a white baseball cap, is turned slightly away from the camera. His companion is a man sporting a red "Make America Great Again" baseball cap. This man is dressed casually in a gray hoodie left unzipped, revealing a vibrant, multicolored tie-dye T-shirt underneath. He pairs this with dark jeans. All individuals on this side of the image appear to be Caucasian.



Image 4: A Proud Boys flag displayed at the Democratic debate in Westerville, Ohio, Oct. 15, 2019. Source: Getty Images.

In the center of the photo, man is seen holding a black "Proud Boys" flag in one hand and a "Tulsi Gabbard for President" sign in the other dominates the center of the image. He wears a black baseball cap with a red rim, black sunglasses, a brown backpack, and the signature Proud Boys black polo shirt with gold embroidery. His outfit is completed with khaki pants and black tennis shoes. He has a beard, earrings, and a confident smile, making him the focal point of the image.

Behind him, three other men are visible. Two of them, on the left, have their backs to the camera. One of these men is wearing the same Proud Boys polo shirt as the man holding the flag, and the other is only partially visible, dressed in a black T-shirt with a U.S. flag emblem on the sleeve and a red baseball cap. He holds a rolled-up U.S. flag in his hand. The third man, who is facing the camera, has short hair, a long beard, and is wearing black sunglasses. He is dressed in a tan tactical vest over khaki pants. To the right of this group, another man wearing a black baseball cap with unreadable writing is partially visible. Like the others, he is wearing the Proud Boys polo shirt, paired with brown shoes. All men in the center of the image appear to be Caucasian. On the right of the photo, a man stands prominently at the front, holding a blue sign pointed away from the camera, making the text unreadable. He wears a red "Make America Great Again" baseball cap, black sunglasses, the Proud Boys polo shirt, dark jeans, and black sneakers. To his right, a woman is holding a white sign with "Trump 2020" written on it in bold letters. She is dressed in a red baseball cap, a blue denim jacket, blue jeans, and has a flannel shirt tied around her waist. She completes the outfit with blue sneakers.

Next to her stands a man wearing a red backward baseball cap, a dark hoodie, dark jeans, and sneakers. Behind this group, starting from the left, a woman in a red "Make America Great Again" baseball cap is visible. She is wearing a black T-shirt, dark jeans, sneakers, and a light-colored backpack. Beside her is another woman, partially obscured, wearing a white sleeveless top. Further back, a tall man in a white baseball cap and black shirt is visible. In the far-right corner of the image, a man in black sunglasses and a white shirt can be seen. Like the other sections, all individuals on this side of the image appear to be Caucasian.

The photograph is captured from a frontal, ground-level perspective, giving a clear view of the subjects and their actions. The photographer was looking to capture the individuals partaking in the event, giving the viewer an understanding of who the individuals are.

This methodology was used for the image types, leading to the discovery of 22. A concise definition of each is found in *Table 3*, while the subsequent chapters discuss them in more detail.

Image Type	Definition
Personality	The focus is on widely recognized public figure. They are often placed centrally within large gatherings. The crowd's attention is often directed towards the person, emphasizing their leadership role and positioning them as focal points or guides for the group.
Individualized	The focus is on specific individuals within a crowd, often through close-up shots.
Portrait	The focus is on a person posing for the photographer. The person being photographed is aware of their picture being taken.
Subgroup	The focus is on a smaller collection of individuals within the larger group being photographed.
Gesture	The focus is on a movement of a part of the body of an individual or individuals, which expresses an idea or meaning.
Apparel	The focus is on articles of clothing worn by individuals, often targeting clothing which showcases ideological ideals.
Demonstration	The focus is on individuals grouped together to form a crowd. The crowd forms a collective purpose, shown as a homogenous unit. Often, the photograph's angle does not capture the entire crowd in one frame, therefore emphasizing the large size, or the shot is made from above.
Political Statement	The focus is on signs or flags held by individuals, conveying political messages. These images aim to illustrate the individual's stance on the political spectrum and their views on specific social issues.
Conflict	The focus is on behavior of an individual or of individuals involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something.
Confrontation	The focus is on non-violent altercations, however characterized by verbal communication in an aggressive or challenging manner. The individuals are often placed centrally in the photograph and appear emotional. The communication depicted is typically one-sided, with one individual on the receiving end of the communication.
Speech	The focus is on a person in the act of delivering to an audience a formal address or discourse.
Prayer	The focus is on a crowd of people engaging in a collective act of prayer, often involving kneeling and resting hands on each other's shoulders.
Verbal Exchange	The focus is on a verbal conversation between people.
De-escalation	The focus is on implemented techniques during an encounter to stabilize, slow, or reduce the intensity of a potentially violent situation without using physical force, or with a reduction in force.
Group portrait	The focus is on a portrait setting depicting three or more persons.
Barrier	The focus is on a police-formed barricade for crowd management, which can consist of bicycles, fencing, a line of police officers, or other forms. The barricade is often shown separating groups of people from one another.
Spectacle	The focus is on a person or persons engaged in an unusual act or dressed provocatively, clearly intended to attract attention.
Law Enforcement	The focus is on the people or activities of law enforcement.
Destruction	The focus is on the breaking and/or undoing of something.
Help	The focus is on an action of someone being helped.
Occupation	The focus is on the action, state, or period of people physically occupying a particular area.

Table 3: Definitions of identified Image Types.

4.2.1 Personality (n = 110)



Image 5: Enrique Tarrio walks among Proud Boys supporters during a rally, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: The Washington Post.

Personality is defined as an image depicting a figure widely recognized by the public. A well-known figure was identified as someone consistently mentioned by name in either the accompanying article or the image description. One prominent example is "Enrique", who emerged as the dominant personality type across the dataset, with a few exceptions. For instance, Gavin McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys and co-founder of Vice Media (The Associated Press, 2019), is named in 12 image descriptions. Typically, these individuals are shown surrounded by other Proud Boys members or giving speeches. The camera's focus in these images consistently highlights these well-known figures, often positioning them centrally within large gatherings. In most cases, the crowd's attention is directed toward the personality, emphasizing their role as a focal point. Occasionally, the crowd is depicted looking in the same direction as the personality, reinforcing their leadership role by framing them as guides or spokespeople for the group.

These personalities serve as symbols of the Proud Boys, presenting the group as structured and organized under decisive leadership. This visual representation of leadership frames the Proud Boys as a unified group, ideologically centered around

their leader. The leader acts as their spokesperson, a point further underscored in images depicting these figures holding a megaphone while addressing a crowd (e.g., see *Image 2*).

The Proud Boys believed they had an unofficial support by former-president Trump for their activity and therefore were highly active. The leader, or personality, being the dominant image type identified is consistent across all sources analyzed, except for the Portland Tribune, which had a more even distribution among the image types found.

4.2.2 Individualized (n = 80)



Image 6: A man holding a U.S. flag is singled out from the crowd by the photographer, Aug. 17, 2019. Source: Getty Images.

Individualized was defined as photographs that capture specific individuals selected from within a crowd by the photographer, with a particular emphasis on close-up shots. These close-ups often focus on a single person, rendering the surrounding crowd secondary and less significant.

The central objective of this approach is to illuminate the individuals who constitute the larger group, thereby addressing critical questions about the identity and characteristics of members of the Proud Boys. The images seek to explore who these

individuals are, their motivations for joining such a group, and what they represent within the broader context. By focusing on individuals, the photographer attempts to humanize the collective mass of participants, who might otherwise appear to be a homogenous entity moving with a singular purpose. This visual strategy provides a means to identify and understand the personal narratives and diverse backgrounds of those involved in the movement, offering insights beyond the often-publicized figures of leadership. It aims to present a perspective on the participants' reasons for engagement, highlighting the personal dimensions and varied motivations that underpin the broader collective actions of the Proud Boys.

4.2.3 Portrait (n = 45)



Image 7: A member of the Proud Boys has his portrait taken, May 2, 2020. Source: Getty Images

Portrait is defined as a photograph where the primary focus is on an individual intentionally posing for the camera. The subject is fully aware of their photograph being taken, and their posture, expression, or demeanor reflects this awareness (Müller/Geise, 2015, p.30). These images emphasize the personality, identity, or presence of the person being photographed, often highlighting their face, body language, or attire. The demeanor of the subject in Portrait images can vary widely,

ranging from confident and composed to relaxed or playful, depending on the context and intent of the photograph. The subject's gaze, whether directed at the camera or elsewhere, along with their pose, conveys a sense of self-presentation and engagement with the photographer. Portrait images focus on the individuality of the subject, often capturing their character, emotions, or social identity. The environment or background may enhance the narrative of the photograph, but the central emphasis remains on the person being photographed.

Overall, Portrait seeks to showcase the relationship between the subject and the photographer, highlighting themes of self-awareness, identity, and personal expression. The images capture deliberate moments of interaction between the member of the Proud Boy and the camera, emphasizing their intent to be seen and represented.

4.2.4 Subgroup (n = 45)



Image 8: A subgroup of protesters is seen gathered in front of the U.S. Capitol, Jan., 2021. Source: Reuters Images.

Subgroup is defined as a photograph that highlights a smaller collection of individuals within a larger group or gathering. For this thesis, they are individuals clearly identifiable as members of the Proud Boys or a similar group. These images focus on

the interactions, dynamics, or relationships of this smaller subset, distinct from the broader context of the larger group. The individuals in the subgroup are often engaged in shared activities, clothing, or expressions that set them apart within the scene. The demeanor of the individuals in Subgroup varies depending on the context but often reflects a sense of unity, connection, or shared purpose. Their proximity to one another, as well as their gestures, expressions, or activities, emphasizes their collective identity within the larger group. The background or surrounding context may still hint at the larger group, but the primary focus remains on the smaller subset. Overall, Subgroup seeks to emphasize the significance of the Proud Boys within a collective, highlighting their unique role, interactions, or individuality in relation to the larger demonstration or participants at the event.

4.2.5 Gesture (n = 42)



Image 9: A Proud Boys member displays a hand gesture associated with white supremacy, Aug. 17, 2019.
Source: Getty Images.

Gesture is defined as a photograph that emphasizes the movement or positioning of a part of the body by an individual or group, intended to express an idea, emotion, or meaning. These images capture moments where physical gestures, such as hand signals or body postures, serve as the primary mode of communication or convey a

symbolic or emotional message. Gesture images often reflect themes of expression, communication, or symbolism, highlighting the ability of body language to convey complex ideas or emotions. For example, in many of the photographs classified as Gesture, the “okay” hand gesture, in which the thumb and index finger touch while the other fingers of the hand are held outstretched, is used to symbolize white power (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). The focus is on how gestures contribute to the meaning, emotion, or narrative of the photograph, often serving as a visual representation of the subject's intent or state of mind.

4.2.6 Apparel (n = 40)



Image 10: The photograph highlights the equipment and attire of the Proud Boys, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: Getty Images.

Apparel is defined as a focus in the photograph on articles of clothing worn by the Proud Boys, with a specific focus on individual pieces that showcase ideological ideals. Examples include T-shirts with slogans such as "Death to Liberals" or vests featuring Velcro-attached emblems portraying figures like Kyle Rittenhouse, elevating them to cause célèbre status. The distinguishing factor of this image type lies in the details and the context-oriented slogans or depictions highlighting certain politically fueled instances. It captures individuals wearing these distinct articles of clothing or emblems and explicitly excludes flags or signs with symbols or inscriptions.

Yellow prints are notably prevalent among Proud Boys members, serving as a visual confirmation of their allegiance to the group. This practice functions as an informal uniform, distinguishing them from a multitude of other protesters and symbolizing unity and a sense of belonging.

This image type parallels other types that seek to depict members of the Proud Boys as individuals. However, the symbols and clothing featured in these images can also be interpreted as a form of "branding" (e.g., the black and yellow Perry polo shirts), which, Rothbart and Stebbins (2022) argue, constitutes a "key element in facilitating the move from the individual back to the collective" (p. 8). In their discourse on righteous rage, the authors contend that the Proud Boys aim to convey attributes of warrior-like bravery, valor, strength, and devotion through their attire.

The choice of clothing and symbols by the Proud Boys is not simply a fashion statement but a conscious declaration of their identity and values. By donning these specific items, members visually align themselves with the group's principles, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity. Furthermore, these symbols can act as instruments of intimidation or provocation, signaling their presence and ideological positions to others. They manifest an implicit rage, an emotion evident in their speeches, interviews, and behaviors (Rothbart and Stebbins, 2022), underscoring their commitment to their perceived just cause and their readiness to achieve their objectives.

The clothing and symbols adopted by the Proud Boys are pivotal in shaping their collective identity, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a distinct group, and conveying their ideological stance to the broader community.

4.2.7 Demonstration (n = 36)



Image 11: The Proud Boys march in formation toward a pre-determined location, Dec. 13, 2020. Source: Reuters Pictures.

Demonstration is defined as a photograph which captures groups of individuals, including or prominently showing members of the Proud Boys, assembled at a specific location for a collective purpose. This image type is marked by the absence of conflict or violent activity, instead portraying a cohesive unit of individuals engaged in protest by marching along a predetermined route or occupying a designated space. It is important to note that, consistent with other image types identified in our research, the demonstration image type must always include clearly identifiable members of the Proud Boys. However, in many cases, these are seen marching alongside non-Proud Boys participants, showcasing the broad spectrum of supporters who rallied in favor of President Trump or other similar reasons during these events. These photographs thus present the Proud Boys as part of a larger, overarching movement, emphasizing their commonalities with other demonstrators.

A principal aim of such images is to offer an overview of the event and to illustrate the unified nature of the Proud Boys, highlighting the substantial turnout and solidarity in support of a particular cause. The organized and goal-oriented feel of these events aims to convey to viewers the significance and scale of the movement. Demonstrations

are a vital, fundamental part of democracy and a critical aspect of participating in a democratic system. Images of demonstrations seek to depict social movements and their large support. These social movements often question the forms of subordination and status quo (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Laclau & Mouffe (2014) were referring to new social movements of the left and the insistence of these movements for egalitarian principles to be present in all levels of society. The conservative protests and movements, with the Proud Boys marching alongside of them, show that these conservative groups are using strategies mainly used by social movements of the left. Through them depicting themselves as acting supporters of the right to assemble and merely making use of a democratic principle, they are looking for shared ground in the larger population. The media depicts them as coming together as one unit in order to be heard and seen more effectively. They want their view of how the country should be run to be seen and show the large number of people with the same views.

In conclusion, images of demonstrations involving the Proud Boys play an essential role in shaping public perception of their collective identity, reinforcing their participation in the democratic process, and signaling their ideological alignment within a broader societal context. Through visual representation, these images capture both the unity and the magnitude of their movement, as well as their strategic alignment with traditional democratic practices.

4.2.8 Political Statement (n = 36)



Image 12: A Proud Boys member displays a sign bearing a political message, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: Getty Images.

Political Statement is defined as a clear focus on pictures of signs or flags which are being held up by members of the Proud boys. These signs invariably convey political messages, often referencing social events that have received national attention. The image type is meant to give the viewer an idea of where the Proud Boys stand on the political spectrum and what their views are regarding certain social events.

Image 12 shows a man holding a sign that says, “Free Kyle Now”, a reference to Kyle Rittenhouse. The Proud Boys carry signs, like the one depicted in *Image 12*, to show their support for what they believe was a justified act by Rittenhouse in a situation they see was caused by a culture war. Kyle Rittenhouse is a young man who became a subject of controversy after his involvement in the Kenosha, Wisconsin, shooting in August 2020. On August 25, 2020, during protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse fatally shot two people and injured another with a rifle. Rittenhouse traveled to Kenosha from Illinois to join other armed civilians who were patrolling the streets amid protests following the police shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man. They saw themselves as protectors of people’s properties and businesses. However, it had mainly culture reasons, such as racial issues. During his trial in

November 2021, Rittenhouse argued that he acted in self-defense, and the defense team maintained that the individuals he shot were attacking him. After a highly publicized trial, Rittenhouse was acquitted of all charges. The verdict was controversial and sparked debates about gun laws, self-defense, and racial tensions in the United States. The case remains a polarizing topic, with some individuals hailing Rittenhouse as a hero and others condemning him as a dangerous vigilante (Romo & Pruitt-Young, 2021).

4.2.9 Conflict (n = 25)



Image 13: A member of the Proud Boys violently clashes with another individual, Aug. 22, 2020. Source: *The Washington Post*.

Conflict is defined as a photograph showing an individual or group involved in physical violence intended to hurt, damage, or destroy someone or something. These images depict moments of violence or aggression, highlighting the physical actions taken by the subjects. Examples include physical altercations, the destruction of property, or direct confrontations involving bodily force.

The demeanor of the individuals depicted in Conflict is often intense, emotional, or enraged, with actions such as striking, pushing, or throwing objects being central to

the image. Visual cues such as clenched fists, chaotic movements, or expressions of pain and anger further emphasize the aggressive and destructive nature of the event. Conflict images underscore the breakdown of dialogue and the escalation of tension into physical violence and show the Proud Boys as violent or as being around violence. They reflect the raw, often chaotic, and destructive aspects of the protestors during the events. These photographs often convey turmoil, anger, and the immediate consequences of violence, highlighting the intensity of conflict.

Overall, Conflict seeks to highlight moments where disagreement or tension has escalated to the point of physical force. The focus is on the visible and primeval impact of such actions, emphasizing the harm, damage, or destruction caused in these situations.

4.2.10 Confrontation (n = 24)



Image 14: A member of the Proud Boys confronts another individual, Aug. 1, 2018. Source: Getty Images.

Confrontation is defined as a photograph depicting the Proud Boys in a non-violent altercation with other individuals. No physical acts of violence are seen. The image type often shows Proud Boys engaged in verbal arguments or disagreements with others, typically in an aggressive, confrontational, or challenging manner. The

demeanor of the individuals depicted can often be interpreted as being upset and/or emotional, and their confrontational attitudes suggest that the situation could escalate to physical violence. Moreover, the communication depicted is one-sided.

While the interactions shown in Confrontation may not involve physical violence, they can be viewed as precursors to such actions. The Proud Boys are often shown as the ones initiating the confrontation or challenge, while the other individuals involved appear to be on the defensive or attempting to avoid the confrontation altogether.

Overall, Confrontation is meant to further emphasize the Proud Boys' aggressive and confrontational stance at political and social events. It also seeks to highlight the potential for violence and conflict that exists within their interactions with others, even when physical violence is not yet involved. It shows anger and conviction of those photographed.

4.2.11 Speech (n = 22)



Image 15: A member of the Proud Boys holds a speech, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: Getty Images.

Speech is defined as a photograph depicting an individual addressing a crowd, typically showing the speaker standing in front of an audience, frequently with a microphone in hand, at a podium, or on a stage. The image type emphasizes the act

of verbal communication, portraying the speaker as a central figure delivering a message or engaging with the audience. The demeanor of the speaker is usually confident, composed, and expressive, reflecting their intent to inform, persuade, or inspire. The audience in the background or foreground of the image may appear attentive, engaged, or reactive. Often, the photographs capture gestures, facial expressions, or body language. They depict moments of verbal expression that carry weight or importance, showing a more formal aspect and the organizational tone of the movement. In the context of the Proud Boys and their participation in demonstrations across the country, the image type conveys a sense that the group has a streamlined narrative and ideology, with enough content for holding speeches to an attentive crowd.

4.2.12 Prayer (n = 20)



Image 16: Members of the Proud Boys and others are seen kneeling in prayer, Sept. 26, 2020. Source: Getty Images.

Prayer is defined as photographs depicting a crowd of people engaging in a collective act of prayer. However, without the accompanying image description provided by the photographer or editor, it may not be immediately clear to viewers what exactly is taking place in the picture. Nevertheless, in news videos and other sources, as well as article

texts and image descriptions, it becomes evident that individuals depicted in these images are engaged in an act of group prayer. This involves kneeling and resting their hands on each other's shoulders in a collective show of devotion and unity. Such images often highlight the spiritual and religious dimensions of the Proud Boys' beliefs and actions, emphasizing their intertwining of social issue with religion.

The use of group prayer as a tool for political expression and protest is symbolic for their own political goals. Overall, Prayer seeks to emphasize how religion and politics intersect in the U.S., highlighting the diverse range of strategies and tactics employed by the Proud Boys in pursuit of their ideological goals.

4.2.13 Verbal Exchange (n = 15)



Image 17: A person is seen in verbal exchange with another, Apr. 8, 2018. Source: Getty Images.

Verbal Exchange is defined as a photograph depicting participants engaging in direct conversation or debate with one another. The individuals shown are clearly aligned with opposing sides of the demonstration, as indicated by their signs, clothing, gestures, or overall stance towards each other. These images focus on the act of verbal interaction, capturing moments of discussion, disagreement, or argument between individuals with conflicting perspectives.

The demeanor of the participants may range from calm to passionate, highlighting their distinct differences in ideologies or beliefs. The image often shows emotional facial expressions, stark hand gestures, or a body language that showcases the intensity of their interaction. While no physical altercation is depicted, the tension or contrast in their viewpoints is visually evident, underscoring the polarized nature of the exchange. These photographs often capture the raw, unscripted nature of such exchanges. The images visualize the clashing of ideas and beliefs, as well showing the participants either looking to assert or defend their viewpoints. This image type seeks to highlight the role of dialogue between protesting parties.

4.2.14 De-Escalation (n = 13)



Image 18: A police officer is seen breaking up a violent altercation, Dec. 12, 2020. Source: Getty Images.

De-escalation is defined as a photograph depicting efforts to diffuse tension or prevent violence. These images often feature law enforcement officers or other authority figures intervening in violent situations, such as breaking up fights or positioning themselves between opposing groups to keep them apart. The focus is on the measures taken to calm the situation and restore order. Images highlight the role of intervention in preventing violence and reducing conflict. These photographs capture

moments of tension where the potential for escalation is evident, but efforts are being made to maintain peace by the police. The positioning of individuals, officers standing between opposing groups, breaking up physical fights, or calming demonstrators, is central to these images.

4.2.15 Group Portrait (n = 13)



Image 19: Members of the Proud Boys pose in a group portrait, Jan. 8, 2022. Source: Getty Images.

Group Portrait is defined as a photograph that depicts three or more members of the Proud Boys posing together at a demonstration or public event. The focus of the image is on the collective presence of the group, showcasing their unity, solidarity, and shared identity as they participate in the demonstration. The individuals are typically aware of the photograph being taken and often present themselves in a manner that reflects their beliefs, values, or affiliations.

The demeanor of the Proud Boys in Group Portrait images may vary but typically reflects confidence, defiance, determination, and group harmony. The group may be shown standing together, often in similar attire, such as branded clothing or specific colors that align with their identity. The body language, facial expressions, and positioning of the members within the group convey their collective stance and involvement in the demonstration. Group Portrait images in this context often

emphasize the cohesion and unity of the Proud Boys as a political or social group, capturing the sense of belonging and shared purpose among the members. The background or setting of the photograph, such as the demonstration or protest scene, may provide context for their actions, but the primary focus remains on the group's collective identity and stance.

Overall, Group Portrait in this context highlights the Proud Boys as a unified group within a larger demonstration, emphasizing their organized presence, identity, and involvement in the events.

4.2.16 Barrier (n = 12)



Image 20: Physical barriers separate the Proud Boys from others, Jul. 6, 2019. Source: Getty Images.

Barrier is defined as a photograph that highlights a police-formed barricade used for crowd management. These barriers can consist of physical objects such as bicycles, fencing, or other temporary structures, as well as lines of police officers standing to create a physical divide. The primary focus is on the barricade as a tool for separation, often depicted as keeping groups of people apart or maintaining order in a public space.

The demeanor of individuals on either side of the Barrier can vary, with police often shown as composed and authoritative, while the crowd may appear frustrated, confrontational, or resigned. Visual elements such as the arrangement of the barricade, its interaction with the environment, and the tension or calmness of those present all contribute to the narrative of the photograph.

Barrier images emphasize themes of control, separation, and authority. They highlight the role of barricades in managing public gatherings, protests, or demonstrations, as well as their impact on the dynamics between law enforcement and the public. These photographs often illustrate the physical and symbolic divisions that exist in contentious social or political contexts. Overall, Barrier seeks to depict the use of barricades as both a practical and symbolic tool for maintaining order, showing the ways in which physical divides shape interactions and the flow of events in crowded or high-tension situations.

4.2.17 Spectacle (n = 10)



Image 21: A Proud Boy wearing a Santa Claus jacket, Dec. 12, 2020. Source: Reuters Pictures.

Spectacle is defined as a photograph depicting a person or persons committing an unusual act or dressed provocatively, clearly meant to attract attention. The Cambridge Dictionary defines spectacle as “an unusual or unexpected event or situation that

attracts attention, interest, or disapproval” (Spectacle, 2023). Hertog and McLeod (1995, 2001) use spectacle as an image type to describe a focus on the drama, oddity, and spectacle of the protests and protesters, including the number of protesters. For example, in *Image 21*, a man is seen wearing a Santa outfit at one of the protests. This is clearly an oddity meant to attract the attention of the attending people and the present media.

Spectacle can be seen as protestors looking to attract the attention of the surrounding people and the media, which in turn helps the movement gather public attention. It is often used in a way to take the seriousness out of the depicted situation. A militant, organized group is disrupted by the attendance of a group member wearing a Santa outfit, or male members wearing skirts. Hertog and McLeod (1995, 2001) however argue that spectacle can be used to frame a movement as silly and not to be taken seriously and is often used by the media to delegitimize a protest or demonstration.

4.3 Image Type Distribution Among News Sources (K.G.)

Table 4 presents the distribution of image types across the six news sources analyzed in this thesis. Unsurprisingly, *Getty Images* dominates the dataset, contributing 453 images, which makes up approximately 68 % of the total. This reflect *Getty Images'* role as a primary image provider for many media outlets. In contrast, *Reuters Images* contributed 150 images (23%), while traditional news outlets such as *The Washington Post* (24 images), *Politico* (16), *NPR* (11), and the *Portland Tribune* (9) made up a much smaller share of the dataset.

This imbalance in volume has implications for the types of images represented. Its dominance means that its editorial choices, so what it captures, how it frames events, which moments it prioritizes, and so on, most certainly influence the overall visual narrative. For instance, they contributed the highest number of images in nearly every major category, "Personality" (62), "Individualized" (52), "Demonstration" (30), "Conflict" (19), and "Confrontation" (20).

Interestingly, *NPR*, despite its small image count, shows a highly concentrated framing strategy. Of its 11 images, 8 (73%) fall under the Personality motif, indicating a strong emphasis on individual figures rather than group dynamics or ideological symbolism. This could reflect *NPR's* editorial focus on human-centered storytelling, where the individual becomes a lens through which broader political phenomena are understood. *Politico* also shows a distinct pattern, with a relatively high proportion of Individualized (31%) and Political Statement (6.2%) image types. This suggests a framing strategy that emphasizes both personal identity and ideological messaging. Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* presents a more balanced distribution.

Reuters Images, while contributing fewer images than Getty Images, still plays a significant role in shaping the dataset. It is the second-largest contributor in categories such as "Gesture," "Apparel," and "Prayer," and provides a notable share of "Group Portrait" and "Verbal Exchange" image types. This suggests that *Reuters* may offer a slightly more diverse visual framing, capturing both symbolic and interpersonal moments. At the lower end of the distribution, image types such as "Help" (0.3%), "Destruction" (0.9%), and "Law Enforcement" (1.2%) appear across all sources.

Their scarcity may reflect media caution, limited access to such moments, or a broader media tendency to avoid imagery that could be seen as too inflammatory or legally sensitive.

Similarly image types such as “Barrier,” “De-Escalation,” and “Group Portrait” are present in small number, primarily from *Getty Images* and *Reuters Images*, suggesting that while these frames exist, they are not central to the dominant visual narrative. Overall, the distribution of image types across sources reveals both editorial priorities and potentially institutional constraints. Getty Images’ dominance ensures a wide range of visual motifs, but also centralizes the framing power in the hands of a single image provider. Traditional news outlets, by contrast, contribute fewer images but often with a more focused narrative intent.

<i>Image Type</i>	<i>Getty Images</i>	<i>NPR</i>	<i>Politico</i>	<i>Portland Tribune</i>	<i>Reuters Images</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>Total Count</i>
Personality	62 (14%)	8 (73%)	5 (31%)	1 (11%)	26 (17%)	8 (33%)	110 (17%)
Individualized	52 (11%)	-	5 (31%)	-	19 (13%)	4 (17%)	80 (12%)
Other	37 (8.2%)	2 (18%)	-	2 (22%)	14 (9.3%)	2 (8.3%)	57 (8.6%)
Portrait	35 (7.7%)	-	-	1 (11%)	8 (5.3%)	1 (4.2%)	45 (6.8%)
Subgroup	31 (6.8%)	-	3 (19%)	1 (11%)	8 (5.3%)	2 (8.3%)	45 (6.8%)
Gesture	23 (5.1%)	-	-	1 (11%)	17 (11%)	1 (4.2%)	42 (6.3%)
Apparel	23 (5.1%)	-	1 (6.2%)	-	16 (11%)	-	40 (6.0%)
Demonstration	30 (6.6%)	(9.1%)	-	-	1 (0.7%)	4 (17%)	36 (5.4%)
Political Statement	31 (6.8%)	-	1 (6.2%)	-	3 (2.0%)	1 (4.2%)	36 (5.4%)
Conflict	19 (4.2%)	-	-	-	5 (3.3%)	1 (4.2%)	25 (3.8%)
Confrontation	20 (4.4%)	-	-	1 (11%)	3 (2.0%)	-	24 (3.6%)
Speech	15 (3.3%)	-	-	2 (22%)	5 (3.3%)	-	22 (3.3%)
Prayer	15 (3.3%)	-	-	-	5 (3.3%)	-	20 (3.0%)
Verbal Exchange	10 (2.2%)	-	-	-	5 (3.3%)	-	15 (2.3%)
De-escalation	13 (2.9%)	-	-	-	-	-	13 (2.0%)
Group portrait	8 (1.8%)	-	-	-	5 (3.3%)	-	13 (2.0%)
Barrier	10 (2.2%)	-	-	-	2 (1.3%)	-	12 (1.8%)
Spectacle	9 (2.0%)	-	-	-	1 (0.7%)	-	10 (1.5%)
Law Enforcement	5 (1.1%)	-	-	-	3 (2.0%)	-	8 (1.2%)
Destruction	4 (0.9%)	-	-	-	2 (1.3%)	-	6 (0.9%)
Help	1 (0.2%)	-	-	-	1 (0.7%)	-	2 (0.3%)
Occupation	-	-	1 (6.2%)	-	1 (0.7%)	-	2 (0.3%)
Total	453	11	16	9	150	24	663

Table 4: Distribution of image types across all sources. Source: Own research.

4.4 Discussion (*D.J.L. & K.G.*)

Examining the visual framing of the Proud Boys through a political science lens opens up a multifaceted view of how democracy, rightwing extremism, protest movements, and political violence intersect. It is clear that democracies such as the United States are often molded by social protest movements, some progressive, like the movements on women's or minority rights, others reactionary, such as the Alternative Right. It is also clear that social protest movements have different roots. The Proud Boys, while not a political party, have become highly visible as a group within this landscape, driven by identity politics rooted in exclusion and cultural grievance.

Their self-description as a "drinking club with a political agenda" and "Western chauvinists" (VICE, 2019) reflects an ideological view that centers on a perceived loss of status for white, Christian, heterosexual men, in modern society. The group's ideology is built on a rejection of pluralism, feminism, and minority rights, and a belief that the foundational role of men in Western civilization is being erased or vilified. Rather than advocating for material or policy-based reforms, their protests are symbolic acts in a broader culture war. Their signs and slogans rarely call for legislative change. Instead, they assert identity, pride, and resistance to perceived cultural decline. Though not policy focused, they pursue political change to force their views on others, while all the same running the danger most social protest movements created on identity politics face, namely the unsustainability of continuously pursuing a path of "us versus them." This ideological posture is shown in how they protest. Many of their rallies appear designed not to advocate for specific policies, but rather to provoke confrontation, assert visibility, and demonstrate organizational strength. Their presence at events like the January 6th Capitol riot highlights their willingness to challenge democratic institutions on the ground. While they are not formally part of the political system, their actions have political consequences. Their presence forces public discourse to contend with them and, in doing so, contributing to broader societal polarization. The Proud Boys can be understood as a symptom of the broader rise of populism, by positioning themselves as representatives of "the people" in opposition to "the elites" and "others." In this sense, their actions are justified to them as a form of resistance against the established power structures.

The Proud Boys also fit within established definitions of right-wing movements. According to Lo (1982), such movements aim to preserve traditional social hierarchies and can be categorized as conservative, radical, or extremist. The Proud Boys exhibit traits of both the radical and extremist right. They are conspiratorial, moralistic, and intolerant, yet also frame themselves as defenders of the “common man” against corrupt elites (Lo, 1982; Neiwert, 2017). Like many protest movements, they rely heavily on media coverage to amplify their message. However, their exclusion from mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X has limited their ability to control their own narrative. Instead, they depend on coverage from journalists and image agencies, particularly at public events, to shape how they are seen. This forces them to balance the narrative they want the public to see and hear with the narrative pushed by the media, which often is looking for sensational or action-packed stories. Their reliance on external media creates a tension between how the group wants to be perceived and how they are actually portrayed. As Boykoff (2006) notes, media coverage of protest movements often shifts focus from the issues to the individuals involved. Our findings support this: the most common image types in our dataset were “Personality” and “Individualized,” suggesting a strong emphasis on personalizing the group’s members. These close-ups, emotionally charged images humanize the participants and may even evoke empathy, portraying them less as extremists and more as relatable individuals. This framing contrasts with the “faceless mass” often used in coverage of other groups, such as refugees (Marent, 2021), and suggests a more self-reflective approach by media, one that reflects on the movement as a symptom of broader societal tensions.

The dominance of *Getty Images* in our dataset, accounting for 68% of the analyzed photographs, raises questions about the consistency and neutrality of our discussion on the visual framing of the Proud Boys. On one hand, this concentration may skew the dataset. On the other, it reflects the reality that many media outlets rely on the same image sources, reinforcing a shared visual narrative. *Figure 5* illustrates the frequency of image types across sources, showing a clear preference for images that highlight individuals, gestures, and ideological symbols. This suggests that both media outlets and image agencies are interested in exploring who the Proud Boys are and what they represent, rather than simply documenting their actions.

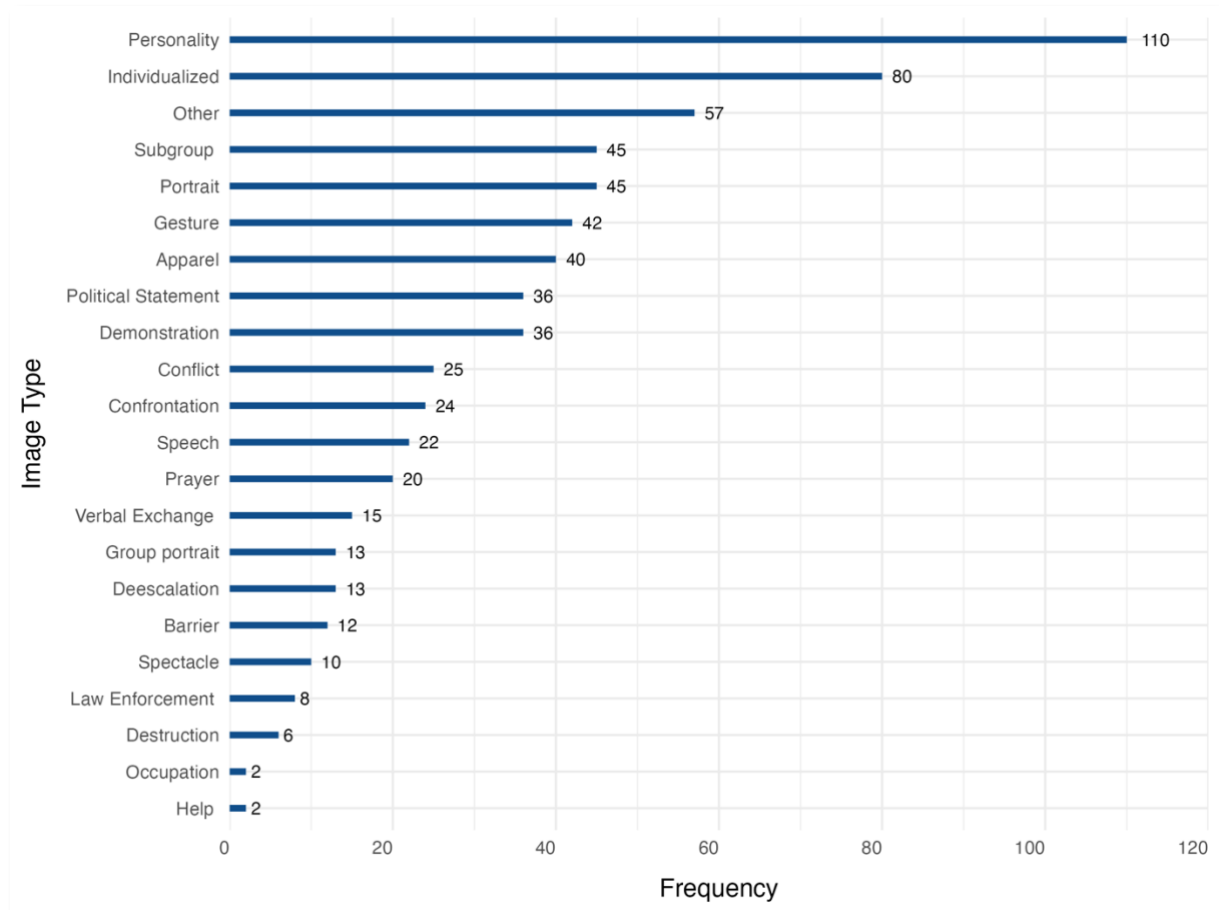


Figure 5: The Frequency Distribution of all Identified Image Types Across Sources (2017 - 2022).

Figure 5 presents the frequency of image types identified through the Quantitative Image Type Analysis (QITA) applied to the dataset. This distribution offers a revealing look into the visual strategies used to portray the Proud Boys across various media sources between 2017 and 2022. The most dominant image type is “Personality” ($n = 110$), followed by “Individualized” ($n = 80$). Clearly, a strong emphasis was put on portraying the Proud Boys through the lens of individual figures, rather than as a faceless mass of people. These image types often highlight emotion and are often taken as close-up shots, reinforcing the framing narrative of personalization of the participants. The image types “Portrait” ($n = 45$) and “Subgroup” ($n = 45$) further support this, indicating that the visual framing pursued often centers on the body language and symbolic actions of individuals in the photographs, as well as their cohesion as a group. The image types “Gesture” ($n = 42$), “Apparel” ($n = 40$), and “Political Statement” ($n = 36$) further reinforce the group’s ideological framing. Apparel such as matching uniforms, tactical gear, or branded clothing can be seen as a visual cue for affiliation and intent. Political statements, showcased through flags, signs, or slogans, reinforce

the ideological framing of the group. These photographs position the Proud Boys not just as participants in the events, but as actors with a clear political agenda and as a cohesive, unified group following clear goals.

Image types defined as “Demonstration” (n = 36), “Conflict” (n = 25), and “Confrontation” (n = 24) are meant to show the large size of the group and the Proud Boy’s willingness to show a united front towards the “others,” often in a violent or confrontational manner. These photographs used to dramatize events, highlight tension, and frame the group as either instigators or defenders. These are meant to make the events more interesting to the viewer by showing action, though these are less dominant than one might expect. This suggests that while the group’s confrontational behavior is acknowledged, it is not the primary focus of the media’s coverage.

Less frequent but still notable are image types such as “Speech” (n = 22), “Prayer” (n = 20), and “Verbal Exchange” (n = 15). These introduce a new dimension to the group’s visual framing, showing persons from the Proud Boys speaking to a larger group, thus pushing an agenda and arguing their case, while also showing them in situations where they express their points of view to the “others.” The photographs showing religious expression frame their ideological reasoning as having its roots in Christianity. Their organizational structure is also shown in photographs classified under the image type “Speech” and “Group Portrait” (n = 13). These images hint at internal organization and ideological depth, complicating the often simplistic portrayal of extremist groups.

At the lower end of the distribution are “De-escalation” (n = 13), “Barrier” (n = 12), and “Law Enforcement” (n = 8). These frame the presence of police as necessary to maintain order. Their scarcity may reflect media caution or a preference for more ambiguous, less emotionally charged imagery.

“Spectacle” (n = 10) can be seen as a way for the group to grab the viewer’s attention, falling into the realm of the protest paradigm. However, this image type was rare in the dataset. “Destruction” (n = 6), “Occupation” (n = 2), and “Help” (n = 2) suggest that portrayals of the Proud Boys engaging in overtly destructive or altruistic behavior are uncommon, possibly due to editorial selection or the nature of the events themselves. Geographically, the dataset is heavily skewed toward Oregon, mainly Portland, which accounts for nearly 44% of all images. This reflects the city’s history of protest and its symbolic role in national debates over law and order. However, even in this conflict-prone setting, images of direct clashes were not prioritized. This again points to a media narrative focused more on identity and symbolism than on violence.

The Proud Boys showed an ability to capture media's attention by capitalizing on key moments such as the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the presidential debate, the January 6th Capitol event, and others. This visibility allowed them to spread their narratives on electoral fraud, chauvinism and the broader right-wing ideologies, as well as the general belief of the marginalization and loss of standing in society of Caucasian men, to the wider public audience, even when they lacked their own platform for communication. The low amount of images of violence hints at the group finding it unnecessary to pursue a more violent strategy at these protest events, since the media coverage was holding the group accountable by documenting their actions while at the same time also providing already them with a platform to disseminate their narratives. Or violence happened, but the media and image platforms filtered a large portion of them out, to pursue the narrative of the next-door neighbor. Here a textual framing analysis would certainly have been beneficial, to compare what was written in the articles to that what was depicted in the photograph(s) used.

Taking into account the image types discovered and their distribution within the dataset analyzed, a particular framing can be argued. A heavy focus was on the individuals who make up the Proud Boys and who are participating in the protests. The top three image types were "Personality," "Individualized," and "Portrait," showing that media had a special interest in looking past the collective masses. In chapter 2.2.3 *Framing in Journalism*, we mentioned Entman (1993) seeing frames as "the ability of communicators to deliberately structure information such as to guide interpreters toward a specific, intended interpretation" (Baden, 2020, p. 231). "Personality" serves to present the Proud Boys as structured and organized under decisive leadership and ideologically centered around their leader. The leader acts as their unifying spokesperson. "Individualized" provides a means to identify and understand the personal narratives and backgrounds of those involved with the Proud Boys, going a bit beyond the often-publicized figures of leadership. This image type presents a perspective on the participants' reasons for engagement, highlighting the personal dimensions and varied motivations that underpin the broader collective actions of the group. While "Portrait" emphasizes the personality, identity, or presence of the person being photographed, often highlighting their face, body language, or attire. Here the media framing narrative seems to focus on the personalization and humanization of the Proud Boys. Instead of showing them as a faceless mass, they seek to shine a light on the individuals within the movement, their personal stories, and unique

characteristics. This approach can have several implications. First, it puts a face to the ideology of the group, presenting the Proud Boys not just as an abstract party but as a collection of individuals with distinctive identities and motivations. This humanizing angle can evoke empathy or at least a deeper understanding from the viewer, who might see parallels between the protestors and people within their own communities. Secondly, this narrative can also serve to legitimize the group's presence in the political landscape. By focusing on the individuals and their personal narratives, the media can portray the group as a legitimate political actor with real grievances and a coherent ideology, rather than merely a violent fringe group. This can influence public perception, presenting the Proud Boys as part of a broader societal discourse rather than outliers.

Additionally, image types such as "Subgroup," "Demonstration," "Group Portrait," and "Speech" all add to the framing narrative of them being a unified entity within a larger, nationwide political and ideological movement. "Subgroup" often reflects a sense of unity, connection, or shared purpose, while "Demonstration" portrays a cohesive unit of individuals engaged in protest by marching along a predetermined route or occupying a designated space. The Proud Boys are often seen on the photographs marching alongside non-Proud Boys participants, showcasing the broad spectrum of supporters who rallied in favor of President Trump or other similar reasons during these events. These photographs thus present the Proud Boys as part of a larger, overarching movement, emphasizing their commonalities with other demonstrators.

Adding to this, "Group Portrait" shows the Proud Boys posing together at a demonstration or public event, showcasing their unity, solidarity, and shared identity as they participate in the demonstration and typically depicts them as confident, defiant, and determined. "Speech" conveys a sense that the group has a streamlined narrative and ideology, with enough content for holding speeches to an attentive crowd. It can therefore be argued that the media is framing the Proud Boys as a symptom of a larger ideological and/or political movement within the U.S., rather than a catalyst for it.

"Gesture," "Apparel," "Political Statement," and "Verbal Exchange" frame them along ideological lines, showing their political agenda, their militancy and seeming willingness to use violence to achieve their goals, and their differing views from the "others." For example, in many of the photographs classified as "Gesture,"² the "okay" hand gesture, in which the thumb and index finger touch while the other fingers of the

hand are held outstretched, is used to symbolize white power, while in “Apparel” guns and tactical equipment of the people are highlighted, showing their militant set up. “Free Kyle Now” signs (*Image 12*) can also be seen held up by Proud Boys members, a reference to Kyle Rittenhouse, showing their support for what they believe was a justified act by Rittenhouse in a situation they see was caused by a culture war. While no physical altercation is depicted in “Verbale Exchange,” the tension or contrast in the viewpoints represented by the Proud Boys and the “others” is visually evident, underscoring the polarized nature of the exchange and the seemingly large gap between the viewpoints. These image types therefore frame the group in a political and ideological light.

The rest, so “Conflict,” “Confrontation,” “De-Escalation,” “Barrier,” and “Spectacle” seek to dramatize the events and make them interesting to the viewer, while also framing the group as violent and ready to take action against the “others.” The image type “Confrontation” often shows Proud Boys engaged in verbal arguments or disagreements with others, typically in an aggressive, confrontational, or challenging manner, while “Conflict” shows violent, physical behavior through the destruction of property, or direct confrontations involving bodily force. “Barrier” and “De-Escalation” show police intervention where the positioning of individuals, officers standing between opposing groups, breaking up physical fights, or calming demonstrators, is central to these images, or a barrier such as a fence separating groups of people from each other. “Spectacle” is an image type defined as clearly an oddity meant to attract the attention of the attending people and the present media. This is often a simple way for members of the Proud Boys to attract attention to their movement and therefore gain a platform for their narratives through media attention.

Nevertheless, due to the small number of sensationalizing and dramatizing photographs in the dataset, Detenber et al.’s (2007) framework of “marginalization devices” within the Protest Paradigm shows that these techniques by the media could only partially be replicated in the findings. The heavy focus is certainly not only on violence or spectacle. Instead of focusing on disruptive or controversial aspects, the images often centered on the individual participants making up the group, portraying them in a humanizing way, as if the demonstrators could be neighbors or members of the viewer’s own community, reducing social distance and even potentially inducing empathy. This suggests a more introspective media portrayal, instead of simply looking to marginalize and ridicule the movement, the media looked at them as a form of self-

reflection of U.S. society. While images of violence or the group's overall attitude towards others was not missing entirely, their frequency is notably low in comparison to other image types. Taking this into consideration, the visual framing narrative suggests a complex portrayal where the Proud Boys as a threatening collective force and as relatable individuals within a more mainstream ideological and political movement. The visual framing thus serves to both sensationalize their actions and evoke a deeper understanding of their members, ultimately looking to highlight both the danger and the humanity within the group.

This breakdown shows how visual framing operates not just through individual images, but through the cumulative effect of repeated motifs. These frames shape how audiences understand the Proud Boys, as individuals with grievances, as ideological actors, as an organized unit, or as participants in conflict. In doing so, the media doesn't just report on events, it constructs the visual frame through which political meaning is communicated. This distribution not only informs the construction of image frames but also raises important questions about media bias, editorial routines, and the visual politics of protest coverage. Future research could explore how these image types vary across media outlets or over time, and how they correlate with public perception and political discourse.

Despite its contributions, this thesis is not without limitations. The reliance on *Getty Images* for image material potentially introduced a level of bias. Nonetheless, we also saw that photographs on *Getty Images* were used across a variety of different news sites. Also, the uneven distribution of usable images across sources reflects clear differences in their objectives, with a visual dissemination website like *Getty Images* focuses on stock photography, prioritizing photographic storytelling, while text-based outlets such as *NPR* contribute fewer visuals and in turn put more emphasis on textualized reporting.

The keyword-based data collection process also presented challenges. Variations in search algorithms, tagging practices, and data availability across sources can result in gaps or inconsistencies in the dataset. These issues should be addressed in future research projects with refined methodologies, including manual extraction or a collaboration with media organizations to ensure more comprehensive and reliable data collection through APIs. Additionally, the subjective nature of image classification, despite efforts to standardize coding, remains a methodological challenge. Integrating

automated classification tools alongside manual analysis would certainly improve assist in future studies, even in a two-person team.

Ultimately, the Proud Boys offer a compelling case study in how far-right groups use media visibility to shape public discourse. Their connection to political figures like President Trump further complicates their role, blurring the line between fringe activism and mainstream politics. As visual framing continues to influence public perception, it is crucial to examine how these narratives are constructed, and what they reveal about the state of media in a democracy today.

The methodological contributions of this study, particularly its use of Quantitative Image Type Analysis (QITA) and Image Frame Analysis, provide a foundation for further research into the role of visual media in political communication. However, the limitations identified here must be addressed in future research. Future research should therefore also explore how these images are received by audiences. Do they reinforce support, provoke backlash, or simply normalize their presence? Given the Proud Boys' alignment with Trump and the pardons granted to some of their members, it's worth asking how visual framing might influence voting behavior or public opinion. Understanding the impact of these images on recipients, not just their content, will be key to understanding the full political significance of visual media in the years ahead.

5 Conclusion (D.J.L.)

As Neus (2023) argues in her book *24 Hours in Charlottesville: An Oral History of the Stand Against White Supremacy*, academia must listen to those on the ground and integrate their lived experiences into analyses of right-wing protest movements. This principle underscores the need to critically examine how groups, like the Proud Boys, are visually framed in media, as these narratives directly shape public understanding and political discourse. The ability of media to both reflect and construct political realities places a unique responsibility on journalists to balance accuracy, neutrality, and context, particularly when covering movements with polarizing reputations.

This thesis set out to explore the visual framing of the Proud Boys in media coverage from 2017 to 2022, a period marked by political tension in the United States. The introduction highlighted the group's rapid rise to prominence during the Trump presidency, culminating in their participation in the January 6 Capitol riot. This period also saw former President Trump leveraging media narratives to direct public opinion while simultaneously discrediting journalistic institutions, deepening the polarization of public discourse. This thesis sought to analyze recurring image types used by the media to frame the Proud Boys and the implications of this framing for understanding their mobilization and public perception.

The findings of this study highlight a focus on the individuals within the group, its organization, its interaction with "others," and its political messaging rooted in a more mainstream movement. The framed narrative portrays the group's participants as one's next-door neighbors and the ideology for which they stand one consistent with a large portion of U.S. society.

Reflecting on the methodological challenges discovered during this research, reliance on platforms like *Getty Images* introduced difficulties in the interpretation, especially when wanting to look at media more closely. However, in turn, it highlights the media's reliance of platforms such as *Getty Images*. This is an important discovery, since there are more levels to the journalistic process of picking images, oftentimes forcing the journalists to work with already filtered and sorted material. Additionally, variations in tagging practices and search algorithms complicated the data collection process, emphasizing the importance of developing more refined methodologies for future

research. The subjective nature of image classification also underscores the value of integrating automated tools and broader datasets to enhance consistency and reliability. To address these limitations, the methodology and definitions of image types employed in this thesis were designed to compensate for the shortcomings of the datasets. By offering a standardized and replicable framework for analyzing visual framing through QITA, this research provides a foundation for future studies to build upon. The codified image types and their descriptions not only enhance the transparency of this research but also serve as a valuable resource for scholars seeking to compare or expand upon its findings. This effort aims to bridge the gaps in existing data and contribute to the broader harmonization of visual framing methodologies.

Returning to the broader context discussed in the introduction, this thesis reaffirms the centrality of journalism in democracies. Journalism's dual role as an informant and framer of events makes it a powerful force in shaping public perception, especially in politically charged such as the presidential election. The visual framing of the Proud Boys illustrates how media narratives can simultaneously delegitimize and amplify far-right movements.

This research contributes to a growing body of work examining the how media representation and political mobilization are intertwined, offering insights into the ways far-right groups navigate and exploit media ecosystems to further their agendas, even when blocked from creating their own platforms for disseminating their narratives. By emphasizing the importance of visual framing in understanding protest movements, this thesis seeks to add to interdisciplinary research that advances an understanding of visual framing of far-right groups in democracies. As the media landscape continues to evolve and become more digital, so too must our analytical frameworks. Scalability should be the next step, building on the strong foundation of standardized definitions such as those in this thesis.

6 References (D.J.L. & K.G.)

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