

Los Angeles Times

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From the Los Angeles Times

John McCain enjoys wide support in Vietnamese communities

Roughly 51% of Vietnamese voters, many of whom were tortured in North Vietnamese prisons like McCain, say they identify with the Arizona senator and believe he'll support their causes.

By My-Thuan Tran

October 24, 2008

Nhon Ky Phan sees John McCain as a brother, a man who -- much like him -- suffered through harrowing days as a prisoner during the Vietnam War.

"What happened to me was what happened to him," he said in Vietnamese. "John McCain is my comrade."

In the waning days of the presidential campaign, a team of McCain boosters -- made up largely of former Vietnamese war veterans who are less concerned with Joe the Plumber than with the bonds forged in wartime -- is trying to rally the vote in Orange County's Little Saigon, the largest Vietnamese American community in the country.

The politics in the Westminster enclave lean to the right and Vietnamese Americans have proved to be faithful voters, so it's not altogether odd that the McCain campaign has set up shop in a Bolsa Avenue strip mall across the street from the Asian Garden Mall, a popular gathering spot.

Many Vietnamese Americans are drawn to McCain's support of Vietnamese refugees. As a senator, McCain led efforts to pass legislation in 1996 that would allow the children of Vietnamese political prisoners to reunite with parents who'd already been allowed to immigrate to the U.S. "The Vietnamese cannot forget what McCain has done for our people," Phan said.

McCain came to Little Saigon during the Republican presidential primary for a fundraiser held by Assemblyman Van Tran (R-Garden Grove), whom some consider to be the dean of Vietnamese American politicians. The candidate has not returned, but in August, the campaign opened a satellite office in the Little Saigon Outreach Center -- the first presidential campaign office located in Little Saigon. There, an intern makes calls, hands out yard signs and answers questions from the visitors, most of them Vietnamese, who trickle in.

The area still echoes with memories of the war. In Westminster, there's a statue honoring American and South Vietnamese soldiers. The flag of the fallen country of South Vietnam is on display in shops. And there are regular street protests condemning people or businesses perceived to be communist sympathizers.

Phan, 73, is a former major in the South Vietnamese military who spent eight years in prison after being captured by the North Vietnamese. He's a part-time host on a Vietnamese talk radio show and devotes a big chunk of his air time to preaching the gospel of John McCain. "He is a hero," Phan said.

More than policies and party loyalties, Phan said he is drawn to McCain's personal history. As a Navy fighter pilot, McCain was shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese in 1967 and spent more than five years as a prisoner of war, enduring torture. Phan is reminded of the years when he suffered at the hands of the North Vietnamese, who tied his legs together and gave him barely enough rice to survive.

On his show, Phan talks passionately of McCain's allegiance when he refused an offer by the North Vietnamese to be released from prison early. "This shows that when he is president, he will sacrifice for the country more than others, that he truly has the spirit of patriotism," Phan said in an interview.

Most of McCain's support in Little Saigon occurs outside of the modest campaign office -- in grass-roots efforts run by Vietnamese Americans on radio talk shows and in discussions at local restaurants and coffee shops. Members of the Vietnamese community are organizing a rally for McCain on Saturday in front of Westminster City Hall.

That event comes on the heels of a rally last weekend in Little Saigon that drew about 120 Vietnamese American supporters of Barack Obama. Organizers said that rally aimed to show that support for McCain is not ubiquitous in their community.

Cuong Sinh Cao, 62, a captain during the Vietnam War, said that their efforts "can't make a difference in this election, but we want to send a message to politicians that we are involved and we are active." Cao, who also sounds his support for McCain on a radio show, has rounded up about 30 Vietnamese volunteers to go to Nevada next week for a get-out-the-vote effort.

In a recent national poll, more than half of Vietnamese Americans surveyed said they support McCain, diverging from other Asian American groups that mostly supported Barack Obama. Roughly 51% of Vietnamese Americans nationwide support McCain, compared to 24% who support Obama, according to the study conducted by professors at Rutgers University, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside and USC.

Many older Vietnamese who came to the U.S. as refugees are more concerned with foreign policy than domestic policy, said Jeffrey Brody, a Cal State Fullerton professor who has studied Vietnamese American issues.

"John McCain's record and personal experiences as a prisoner in Vietnam has earned him a lot of credence with those Vietnamese who fled Vietnam or participated in the war," he said, adding that second-generation Vietnamese may not hold the same emotional ties.

Organizers at last Saturday's Obama rally were critical of McCain's support for normalized U.S. relations and trade pacts with the communist Vietnamese government, at a time when human rights abuses still occur there.

"There is misconception in our community that McCain, just because he is a veteran, will support our cause," said Phu Nguyen, 31, a local businessman and community activist. "McCain has a history of being very friendly to the government in Vietnam, which goes against the struggle of the activist movement."

Tran is a Times staff writer.

my-thuan.tran@latimes.com

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