

Young Vietnamese-Americans turn away from GOP

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:10/25/2008 04:43:25 PM PDT

For years after Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975, the tiny contingent of Vietnamese émigrés in the United States who chose to join the Democratic Party stayed quiet.

"Many in the Vietnamese community felt Democrats were just too soft on communism and too weak on defense," recalls Minh Steven Dovan, a San Jose attorney who says he rarely told fellow members of the émigré community that he was a registered Democrat. Other émigrés say that some Republican Vietnamese went as far as dubbing the Democrats in their midst "communist sympathizers."

But more than three decades after communist tanks rolled into Saigon, young Vietnamese-Americans are abandoning the Republican Party in droves, according to a Mercury News computer analysis of nearly 30,000 new Santa Clara County voters. By plugging Vietnamese surnames into a database, the analysis shows that Vietnamese-Americans age 30 and under are registering Democratic over Republican by nearly 4 to 1.

"That is really amazing," said Dovan, 57, "particularly when you think of the generational turnaround."

Other Vietnamese émigrés say the trend has crystallized in recent years — especially since Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, who is exceedingly popular with youth, began running for president nearly two years ago.

"It's easy to understand," said Loc Vu, a former colonel in the South Vietnamese army who now heads San Jose's Immigrant Resettlement and Cultural Center. "The young Vietnamese who were born in this country are the same as the other American kids. They all go to school together. They're open-minded and they're part of the new generation of young voters. They have different ideas than the older Vietnamese."

Like most in his generation, the 75-year-old Vu, currently not registered with any party, plans to vote for Republican John McCain.

Because McCain survived years of torture in a North Vietnamese POW camp, many older Vietnamese consider him a hero. Many émigrés even see irony in the fact that South Vietnamese military leaders were sent to forced-labor camps for "re-education" only two years after McCain was released from the infamous prison dubbed the Hanoi Hilton.

"Many South Vietnamese were going into the communist jails," Vu said, "as McCain was getting out of one."

Still, "I understand why the young people like Obama," Vu said. "And that's OK."

Hung Duc Lai of San Jose, a former South Vietnamese army captain and longtime general secretary of the Coalition of Nationalist Vietnamese Organizations of Northern California, also understands. He and his wife, Mai, are staunch Republicans, and their two twentysomething daughters are ardent Democrats.

"It's a free country," Lai, 61, said with a laugh.

Overall, Vietnamese émigrés are still strongly Republican — a fact reflected in a groundbreaking national poll of Asian-Americans released this month by the University of California-Berkeley and three other major universities.

The poll found that all Asian-American groups with the exception of Vietnamese-Americans supported Obama over McCain. Fifty-one percent of Vietnamese-Americans said they were for McCain; 24 percent were for Obama, with the rest undecided.

But a deeper analysis of the poll show the generational split. Forty-five percent of Vietnamese-American likely voters age 40 and over told pollsters they were Republicans, and 20 percent said they were Democrats, according to researcher Karthick Ramakrishnan of the University of California-Riverside. But 49 percent of Vietnamese-American likely voters under age 40 identified themselves as Democrats; 16 percent said they were Republicans.

The Vietnamese love affair with the Republican Party was highly similar to the love Cubans showed the party after communist dictator Fidel Castro forced them to flee to U.S. shores.

When Vietnamese started becoming citizens in the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan was president. Reagan, a longtime cold warrior, was viewed by Vietnamese émigrés as the perfect commander in chief. So the overwhelming majority of them signed on with the GOP.

"We saw Reagan as very strong — a cowboy with a lot of charm," Lai said.

"Reagan captured Vietnamese hearts and minds in the U.S.," said Andrew Lam, author of "Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora." And "that impression stayed with the Vietnamese here a long time."

The impression often frustrated Dovan, the San Jose attorney, who often points out to his Republican Vietnamese friends that two Democratic presidents — Kennedy and Johnson — sent U.S. troops to aid South Vietnam and that two Republican presidents — Nixon and Ford — decided to extricate the U.S. from Vietnam. Ford, Dovan points out, even cut off funds to South Vietnam as the communists were about to take over.

"But it doesn't seem to matter, just as it doesn't seem to matter that John McCain was in favor of normalizing relations with Vietnam in the mid-'90s," a position that anti-communist Vietnamese fiercely opposed, Dovan said.

Most older Vietnamese émigrés also forgave McCain when during his 2000 presidential bid he called his North Vietnamese captors "gooks" — a disparaging term for Asians often used by U.S. troops during the war.

Democrat Party officials first made inroads into the Vietnamese Republican stronghold in 1992, when Bill Clinton ran for president. Clinton even met with Vietnamese-American leaders in Orange County's Little Saigon. And by the end of the decade, 33 percent of new Vietnamese-American voters in Santa Clara County were registering as Democrats and 28 percent as Republicans, a 1999 computer analysis showed.

Since then, as Vietnamese immigration has slowed and the number of American-born Vietnamese has jumped, Democratic causes such as social and economic justice have taken root in the community.

Quynh Lai, Hung Duc Lai's 27-year-old daughter, a marine biology student at San Jose State University, said it was an easy call to go with the Democrats when she registered to vote at age 18.

Originally, she was most concerned with the abortion issue. "I knew that I believed that I should have control over my own body," she said. "I couldn't believe that it was even an issue."

Now, nine years later, her biggest concerns are protecting the environment and gay rights — and she still feels that Democratic positions better match her views.

"I have a lot of gay friends," she said. "People need to be treated equally."

She and her sister, 23-year-old Uyen, both attended Vietnamese school on Sundays in San Jose for several years and have a solid understanding of Vietnam's history. They understand how their mother and father lost their country. They understand why they support the Republicans and John McCain.

The sisters say they love and respect their parents but just don't like the GOP.

"Republicans are conservative and want things to stay the same," said Uyen Lai, who recently graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in psychology from San Jose State. "I want to see change."

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