

October 21, 2012

## Hmong voters favor Obama, survey shows

### Democrats lead GOP in reaching out to unique Asian-American community

*By Robert Mentzer  
Wausau Daily Herald*

For John Vang, the biggest issue in this year's presidential election is education.

"A lot of Hmong people struggle in this country," said Vang, a 38-year-old insurance agent from Wausau. "We care about education. We come from a country where we don't have education. ... We want our children to have a better life."

Vang is supporting President Barack Obama's re-election because he believes the president has the better education plan, and because he believes that "like Obama says, in order for the country to move forward, be better, the middle-class people need to be (doing) better, too. Not just the rich people."

His political views aren't unusual in the Hmong community. According to a national survey of Asian-Americans conducted late last month, Obama has overwhelming support from Hmong-Americans when compared with his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney.

Here's where Vang is somewhat unusual compared with his Hmong peers: He's a habitual voter. Despite years of voting education efforts by Hmong leaders and organizations like the Wausau Hmong Mutual Association, Hmong participation in voting lags behind the national population. The national survey, called the National Asian American Survey, found only 26 percent of Hmong respondents were likely to vote this year.

That's one reason Vang is encouraging other members of his community to get involved.

"We are citizens of this country, and voting is our responsibility," he said. "If the Hmong people ask questions about both sides, what they're going to do for the country, we help explain who's going to do what."

Mary Yang of Wausau voted for Republican George W. Bush in 2000, but since then has voted for Democrats. ("I felt so horrible," she said about having voted for Bush.) Yang, a health care information technology worker, doesn't have cable television, but she watched Democratic National Committee speeches by Obama, Michelle Obama and former President Bill Clinton on YouTube and said she is very committed to supporting Obama's re-election.

"What can you do in four years?" Yang said. "It's not like (Obama) created a lot of the issues we're facing today, like the economic downturn or (troubles with) housing."

## Survey shows Democratic advantage

This year was the first time the <http://naasurvey.com/resources/Home/NAAS12-sep25-election.pdf> alt="" title="" target="\_blank">National Asian American Survey, conducted by University of California political science professors, has tracked Hmong attitudes. The survey, released Sept. 25 and updated Oct. 8, revealed a Hmong population that heavily favors Democrats but does not vote in high numbers.

Among all Asian-Americans, 43 percent supported Obama and 24 percent supported Romney, while nearly one-third of respondents, 32 percent, called themselves undecided.

Among Hmong likely voters, the preference for Obama was even more pronounced. Only 4 percent were Romney supporters, while 56 percent supported Obama. The remaining 40 percent were undecided.

There are about 260,000 Hmong-Americans, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. The survey found that nearly one-third of them live in presidential battleground states such as Wisconsin.

Sixty-three percent of Hmong-Americans surveyed identified as Democrats or said they leaned toward Democrats. Only 12 percent were Republicans or leaned Republican. No other Asian-American group had a greater partisan discrepancy. (Only Filipinos had more respondents who identified as Republican than Democrat.)

However, no other Asian-American group had a lower likely voting rate than Hmong respondents.

## **GOP outreach rare**

The Hmong community's strong support for Obama might be related to the fact that only the Obama campaign has bothered to ask for Hmong support.

Obama's 2008 campaign and its much-vaunted volunteer army made new inroads in the Hmong community, and this year Obama's Organizing for America has tried to build or maintain that advantage. The campaign hired Thomas Lee, the former longtime director of Marathon County's Diversity Affairs Office, to run its Hmong outreach operations statewide. A recent photograph [http://www.democrats.org/news/blog/wisconsins\\_hmong\\_community\\_supports\\_the\\_president](http://www.democrats.org/news/blog/wisconsins_hmong_community_supports_the_president) alt="" title="" target="\_blank">posted on the Democratic Party's blog shows a gathering of Hmong clan leaders at a "Gotta Vote" bus tour stop outside of Schofield Oriental Market.

The Republican Party and the Romney-Ryan campaign have made no similar efforts to reach out to Hmong voters. Bruce Trueblood, the chairman of the Republican Party of Marathon County, said the GOP's political message is colorblind.

"Our goal is to get all voters, regardless of ethnicity, to realize that Romney is the best choice," Trueblood said.

Given Obama's high favorability ratings in the Hmong community, the group might seem out of reach to Republicans. But Vang noted that on the state and local level, Hmong support for Republicans is not unusual when the politicians reach out to the community. State Sen. Jerry Petrowski, a Stettin Republican and a ginseng farmer, has forged deep ties in the Hmong community during his long tenure in the state Assembly. And Vang said Republican former Gov. Tommy Thompson, now running for U.S. Senate, has met with Hmong leaders in Wausau during his 2012 campaign.

"In Wausau, I can see not all Hmong are voting for Democrats," Vang said. "Some are Republican."

At the Wausau Hmong Mutual Association, Executive Director Peter Yang said the organization provides nonpartisan educational services to the Hmong community, helping people to register to vote, providing information about the campaigns and informing them about getting out to vote on Election Day.

"For the Hmong community, there seem to be more talks about the importance of getting out to vote," Yang said. "We don't encourage people to vote one way or the other. But more people in the community are talking about the campaign. ... More community leaders are encouraging (Hmong people) to get out to vote."

---