

# Vietnamese-Americans Are No Longer A Lock For The Republican Party

Graphics by [Ella Koeze](#)

[The Voters](#) is a series of articles exploring the demographic groups of Americans who will choose the next president.



Lan Diep, recently elected to the San Jose City Council, inside the Blue Dragon Taekwondo Academy, owned by his cousin, in Milpitas, California.

Photograph by Anthony Cruz

The future of American politics may look a lot like Lan Diep. As a recent [TED talk](#) pointed out, he's the son of political refugees from Vietnam who over the summer returned from political defeat to win a seat on the San Jose City Council. His margin of victory was just 12 votes.

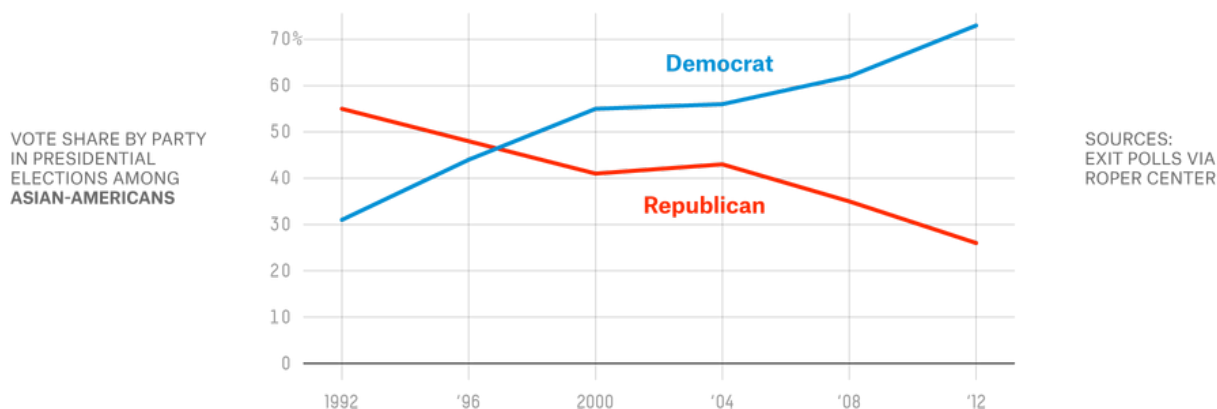
Diep, 32, a legal aid lawyer who was born in Texas and learned English from watching television, isn't as anchored to party loyalty as conventional politicians. Though he is a self-described fiscal conservative and a lifelong Republican, he's voting for Hillary Clinton.

"I think she is something of a flawed candidate, but given the options, she is obviously the only qualified candidate to hold the office of the presidency," Diep said. "I'm just really disappointed by the candidates that the Republican Party put up this time." He considered voting for the Libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson, "but given his lack of understanding of world events ... I'm sticking with Hillary."

Vietnamese-Americans, who number [nearly 2 million](#), with especially large concentrations in California and Texas, are part of the larger narrative of [Asian-Americans who have switched party affiliations](#) and votes from Republican to Democratic. In 1992, Republicans won among Asian-Americans by a 22-point margin in the presidential election, according to exit polls; in 2012, Asian-Americans voted Democratic by 47 points, which was nearly double the margin in 2008.

In 2016, according to the National Asian American Survey (NAAS), there are far more undecided voters, but the [Democratic ticket still leads among Asian-Americans by 43 points](#). As NPR political demographics reporter [Asma Khalid](#) said in a recent [FiveThirtyEight podcast](#) accompanying this series on voters, "Within the span of two decades, you can see that Hillary Clinton will potentially be able to win an overwhelming majority of Asian-Americans, the

very voters who overwhelmingly did not vote for her husband two decades ago.” She calls it the “most rapid realignment” of any racial or ethnic demographic in the country.



But the Vietnamese-American transition in party affiliation and voting has a twist. Like Cuban-Americans, the first Vietnamese-Americans who came to the U.S. in significant numbers were fleeing a communist government. People who arrived in the years after the [Indochina and Migration and Refugee Act of 1975](#), in particular, forged strong ties to the Republican Party. (The act, which set up a settlement assistance program for refugees from Southeast Asia, was signed into law by President Gerald Ford.)

“For a long time, this [Vietnamese-American community] was the most heavily Republican group of Asian voters,” said Taeku Lee, a professor of political science and law at the University of California, Berkeley, and a principal investigator on the NAAS report. “Then, in 2008 and 2012, they began to turn Democratic and a key driver of this shift has been a growing generational gap.” He said the gap was similar to that of Cuban-Americans, with older voters supporting Republicans. But Lee added that even that is changing. “In 2012, about 58 percent of Vietnamese-American registered voters over 50 voted Democratic,” he said.

Cold War politics still influences today’s. Diep points out that President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam and, in the eyes of some

Vietnamese-Americans, “threw a failing communist government a lifeline.” Hillary Clinton is viewed through that lens, and Donald Trump is also viewed as being tough on China, which is in a [militarized dispute with several nations, including Vietnam](#), over rights in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the NAAS survey shows that Vietnamese-Americans are choosing Clinton over Trump 46 to 20 percent. Twenty-nine percent are undecided, by far the highest of any Asian-American group, which may indicate that people who are generally Republican voters are struggling with their options.

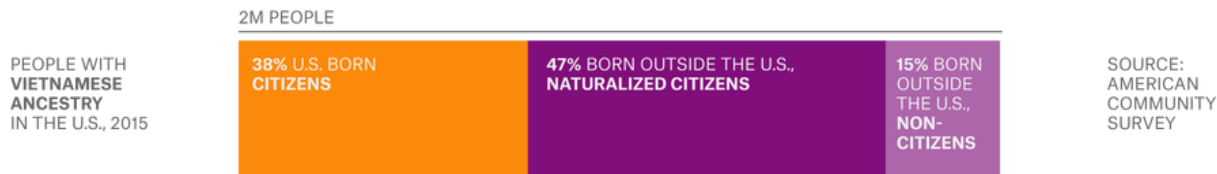
	CLINTON	TRUMP	OTHER	UNDECIDED OR REFUSED
<b>Vietnamese</b>	46%	20%	5%	29%
Chinese	53	12	15	20
All Asian-Americans	59	16	10	16
Japanese	53	22	11	14
Indian	70	7	9	13
Cambodian	51	13	27	10
Filipino	57	27	6	10
Hmong	60	10	23	7
Korean	73	12	7	7

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SOURCES: NATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN SURVEY

[Sixty-two percent of Vietnamese-Americans are immigrants](#), though most are citizens, which is partly a result of a streamlined citizenship process for Vietnamese refugees. Roughly half of Vietnamese-Americans [speak English less than “very well,”](#) according to the Census. As a result, NAAS found that 39 percent of Vietnamese-Americans only consume Vietnamese-language media.

That adds to the influence of news outlets such as [Bao Calitoday](#), a media company whose Vietnamese-language newspaper and website reach an audience from its San Jose headquarters to Ho Chi Minh City. Its publisher, Nam Nguyen, spent four and a half years in prison after the Vietcong took control of Saigon in 1975, ending the Vietnam War. He came to the United States in 1991, where he found work as a translator for a Vietnamese media company before starting his own.



When he became a citizen five years later, he registered as a Democrat, following a friend's advice. But his father-in-law, who had sponsored his and his wife's move to the United States, decried his party choice. Nguyen said his party is immaterial to the choices he makes in the ballot box, but added: "When I go out into the community, I keep it a secret," since party affiliation can be a tense topic.

In the San Jose council race, Nguyen endorsed Diep, a Republican, in his newspaper. But Trump is a different story. "I prefer to go for Hillary," he said, "because there's something more normal, believable and stable if she runs the country more than Trump."

One reason for Nguyen's choice and that of many other Vietnamese- and Asian-Americans may be concern about Trump's rhetoric on immigration. Over the last four years, the NAAS found a [fivefold increase in Asian-Americans who cited race or racism](#) as the country's most important problem, from 2 percent to 10 percent. Lee, of UC Berkeley, sees 2016 as a chance for Democrats to solidify their bonds to Vietnamese-Americans and other Asian-Americans as part of a multiracial coalition forged in the Obama years, but there's no guarantee that will happen. While the demographic changes in the American electorate are "inexorable," Lee said the GOP could switch gears and follow the recommendations of its 2014 ["Growth and Opportunity Project,"](#) which aimed to woo voters of color. Or, he said, the Democratic party could fail to deliver on issues of importance to the community.

In other words, Asian-Americans, while trending heavily Democratic, are not what political scientist Paul Frymer calls a ["captured group"](#) bound to one

party, as black Americans have become. Asian-Americans and black Americans have sometimes been stereotyped as antagonists, the “model minority” versus a problem minority. But Nguyen made a point of expounding at length on the contributions black Americans had made to immigrant life. “Freedom is not free,” he said. “You pay with your blood.” He cited the contributions that black Americans made to fighting for political rights that allowed “a new immigrant like us to come over here to enjoy the fruit” of black political organizing.

Diep too sees politics through the lens of coalition building, something he learned when he was a Nevada staffer for the 2012 Obama campaign, which he praised as “the best political organizing team that American politics has seen to date.” When he takes office in January, barring any unforeseen developments, he will help guide a multiracial city in a region where Vietnamese-Americans are both numerous and powerful. Santa Clara County, the Silicon Valley region including San Jose, where he is now a city councilman, is 35 percent Asian-American and 7 percent Vietnamese-American. Though the first Vietnamese-American council member [was elected 11 years ago](#), [Diep’s](#) win didn’t come easy. Manh Nguyen, the incumbent unseated by Diep, [later sued](#) him, claiming the vote-counting was mishandled.

“My campaign represents a passing of the torch for the Vietnamese community,” Diep said, referring to the rise of younger generations into maturity and of the children of Vietnamese refugees reshaping the community’s power base. “I think that my campaign was a balm to cynicism, at least in San Jose. So many people wrote me off.”