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# Some Vietnamese Americans breaking from tradition

## Vietnamese Americans are traditionally Republican, but some say there's a move toward the left and a generational divide at play in this election

By [Suzannah Gonzales](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Former South Vietnamese army Maj. William Quan says he has always been a Republican, ever since he became a U.S. citizen in 1996. He came to Austin from Vietnam in 1990, a year after he was released from prison.

The Republican Party fights against communism and terrorism, and for freedom and human rights, said the 82-year-old, who was a prisoner of war, just like Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain . Quan notes that the senator supported legislation that helped bring political prisoners to the United States and reunite the children of prisoners who had immigrated.

Along with many other veterans and older members of the local Vietnamese American community, Quan supports McCain.

McCain made sacrifices "for freedom for Vietnam," Quan said.

Because of its association with the anti-communist position, the Republican Party has traditionally received the loyalty of Vietnamese Americans, a stance that distinguishes them from other Asian Americans, according to national researchers. But their loyalty to Republicans has started to dwindle this election cycle, researchers and local community members say, especially among younger Vietnamese Americans.

"I can definitely see it," Paul Nguyen , a 21-year-old senior at the University of Texas, said of the generational divide. "A lot of my friends' parents have Republican views, and a lot of my friends are Obama-crazy."

Nguyen said last week that he's undecided, but leaning toward Obama. He said his parents, who live in San Antonio, are strongly Republican.

Nhi Lieu , an assistant professor of American studies at the University of Texas, pointed to McCain's visit to Orange County, Calif., home of Little Saigon , several years ago, when he publicly used the term "gook," to refer to his North Vietnamese enemies. Though older Vietnamese were more forgiving, younger Vietnamese perceived it as a racial epithet, she said.

"There's definitely a generational divide," Lieu said.

But Vietnamese Americans are starting to associate the Republican Party less with anti-communism, Lieu said. The community is diverse, but there's a move toward the left among both young and old and also a large contingent registered as independent, she said. Economic, social welfare and immigration issues are among those of interest, she said.

"I argue that the war on terror and other things brewing is distracting the community from anti-communist causes," Lieu said.

The trend of Asian Americans leaning toward the Democratic Party began in 1992 , according to Ramey Ko , founder of Asian Americans for Obama and co-founder of Capital Area Asian American Democrats .

Texas has the second-largest Vietnamese American population, after California, and the Houston area has the third-largest Vietnamese American population, after Orange County and San Jose, Lieu said.

Of those who had made up their minds on Tuesday's race, two-thirds of Vietnamese Americans surveyed supported McCain, according to the 2008 National Asian American Survey , conducted from Aug. 18 to Sept. 26 . Vietnamese Americans identify with the GOP over the Democratic Party by almost a two-to-one ratio, the survey showed.

Solidarity over the Vietnam War was not enough to make some switch loyalties during the 2004 election, when Vietnam veteran John Kerry faced President Bush , said Vinh Tran of the Austin-based Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation .

Vietnamese Americans are different from many immigrant communities, said Shandon Phan , founder of Asian Americans for McCain, co-chair of Vietnamese Americans for McCain-Palin and a delegate at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Many are first-generation immigrants with strong ties to their homeland who came to the United States because they lost their country and freedom and because Americans opened their arms, he said.


Because of McCain's record on the battlefield and in Congress, Phan said, "They identify strongly with him."

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