

Why are Vietnamese the most Republican-leaning Asian Americans?

More Vietnamese Americans favor the GOP compared to other Asian Americans, according to recent polling. But the younger generation could change that.



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For decades, political convention has held that the United States's growing Asian American population tends to vote for Democrats.

But there has always been an exception: Vietnamese Americans, whose rightward tilt was shaped by the strife some experienced during and after the Vietnam War.

According to data from the [Asian American Voter Survey](#) in 2022 and 2020, Vietnamese Americans were the only ethnic Asian group in which a plurality — 39 percent in 2022 — identified as or leaned more Republican than Democratic. A majority in every other ethnic Asian group surveyed — Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Japanese and Korean Americans — identified as or leaned Democratic.

A larger [Pew Research Center survey](#) released in May showed a slight majority — 51 percent — of Vietnamese registered voters identified as or leaned Republican, while 42 percent identified as or leaned Democratic. Majorities of Chinese, Indian, Filipino and Korean American voters identified as or leaned Democratic, according to the poll.

Democrats could make inroads in the Vietnamese community by appealing to its younger members, activists say. While 68 percent of Vietnamese American voters age 50 and older identified as or leaned Republican, 58 percent of younger voters identified as or leaned Democratic, according to Pew data provided to The Washington Post.

Many in the older generation share a unique immigration history that experts say has had a powerful impact on their political leanings. After the United States pulled out of Vietnam in 1973, hundreds of thousands of migrants who felt threatened by the Communist regime fled to America. That history differentiates the experiences of Vietnamese Americans from those of many other Asian American communities, they say.

“It’s just our experience of socialism, and our experience of Communism still remains in our psyche, so that we would prefer smaller government,” said former Republican Rep. Anh Joseph Cao, 56, the first Vietnamese American elected to Congress.

Born and raised in a large Vietnamese American enclave in Houston, An Luu remembers attending hometown demonstrations in high school with his father to protest China’s claim to the Paracel Islands, a disputed territory in the South China Sea also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan.

Lu, 23, said his family’s strong opposition to communism drew them and other Vietnamese Americans to the Republican Party, which he said pushed anti-communist rhetoric around China.

Vietnamese Americans make up 10 percent of the United States’ Asian American population, the country’s fastest-growing racial group and increasingly important voting bloc. Vietnamese are the fourth-largest Asian-origin community in the country, following Chinese, Indian and Filipino Americans. The community had a population of about 2.3 million in 2021, according to census data.

In recent years, the Republican Party has been making more efforts to win over Asian American voters by appealing to concerns around crime, education, affirmative action and socialism, which some Vietnamese Americans say they believe is a steppingstone to communism. One conservative group included a graphic video of attacks on Asian Americans in a campaign ad last fall, The Post reported in November. The ad blamed the Biden administration for rising anti-Asian violence, accusing Democrats of not being tough on crime.

And it appears to be working: Asian American voters have shifted more Republican in recent elections, including in 2020 and 2022, according to national network exit polls.

“The Republican National Committee has made a multimillion-dollar commitment to bolster our ground game in Asian Pacific American communities in key states across the country,” said Republican National Committee spokesman Nainoa Johsens.

The Democratic National Committee told The Post that it has been reaching out to Asian American voters for several years.

Democrats “will continue to work to engage and mobilize AAPI voters, including Vietnamese Americans,” said Tracy Falon King, the group’s director of outreach communications. “As we move into the presidential election cycle, we plan to double down on our commitment and continue to share how Democrats have delivered unprecedented results for the AAPI community.”

The political preferences of Vietnamese Americans are similar to those of Cuban Americans, many of whom fled Communist rule, said Karthick Ramakrishnan, founder and co-director of AAPI Data, one of the groups that sponsors the biannual Asian American Voter Survey. “You have a combination of anti-communism and local power-building that accounts for why [Vietnamese Americans] were so heavily Republican in the refugee generation.”

In a closely watched Orange County congressional race last fall, Rep. Michelle Steel (R) and her Democratic opponent, Jay Chen, both campaigned heavily for the Vietnamese vote. Neither is of Vietnamese descent. Steel, who is Korean American, called Chen a Communist sympathizer, which Chen, who is Taiwanese American, denied, reiterating his position against the Chinese Communist Party. Steel was reelected.

California has the largest number of Vietnamese Americans in the country. In Orange County, the community is a key political constituency that represents a growing share of local leaders. All but one member of the Westminster city council are Republicans of Vietnamese descent, including the mayor, Chi Charlie Nguyen. The vice chairman of the Orange County board of supervisors and two state legislators from the county are Republicans of Vietnamese descent.

Former president Donald Trump has also reaped support. Almost half of Vietnamese Americans in 2022 had a “very favorable” or “somewhat favorable” impression of Trump (47 percent) compared to 29 percent of Asian Americans overall according to the Asian American Voter Survey.

Trump’s popularity among that group was in part due to the former president’s strong stance against the Chinese government, despite floating plans to deport Vietnamese refugees, said Long Bui, an associate professor of global and international studies at the University of California at Irvine.

Yet, as more young Vietnamese Americans vote, the community’s political leanings could shift.

Luu said that in 2016 he shared his family’s conservatism and would have supported Trump if he were old enough to vote. But he now considers himself politically progressive after starting college and “meeting a lot of different people,” including LGBTQ individuals and non-U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants who have spent most of their lives in the United States.

“I’m a huge fan of creating more social safety nets,” he said, adding that he identifies as a socialist, although the term would “inspire fear” among Vietnamese immigrants in his community who “don’t understand what it means.”

Tracy La, 28, was raised by Vietnam War refugees who worked in nail salons and restaurants and saw firsthand the impact of policies on working-class Vietnamese, she said. As a political organizer, she said she would often hear Vietnamese voters complain about the need for change.

“I would hear a lot of like, ‘Hey, I keep voting for the Nguyens and the Tas, and my life is not getting any easier,’” said La, a Southern California native who leads VietRise, an Orange County-based progressive social advocacy group. Those voters, she said, may be more likely to gravitate to Democratic candidates in the future.

That is the hope of political upstarts who are running on traditional Democratic platforms, including focusing on expanding access to health care.

In 2022, Hoan Huynh, a Democrat, became the first Vietnamese American elected to state office in Illinois, earning a seat in the state House. Huynh said he distributed campaign materials in Vietnamese and focused on economic issues affecting working-class voters, including grants for small businesses.

Huynh, 33, came to the United States with his family as refugees in 1993 and said his campaign attracted older first-generation Vietnamese voters who supported Trump in 2016 and 2020 but voted Democratic for the first time in 2022. Huynh said he hopes that next cycle, he will draw in even more Vietnamese American community members, especially young voters.