

Los Angeles Times

The GMC Sierra delivers better fuel economy than Toyota.*

LEARN MORE AT GMC.COM | ▶

GMC

WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE.™

SIERRA 1500

*Sierra 1500 EPA est. mpg with available 5.3L engine (2WD) 15 city/20 highway; (4WD) 14 city/19 highway. Toyota Tundra est. mpg with available 5.7L engine (2WD) 14 city/18 highway; (4WD) 13 city/17 highway.



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/orange/la-me-vietdems29feb29,1,1437465.story>
From the Los Angeles Times

Leaning left in Little Saigon

Anticommunism in O.C. is tempered by a focus on domestic issues. Democratic registration increases. Discuss

By My-Thuan Tran and Christian Berthelsen
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

February 29, 2008

Hoa Van Tran, a lawyer and U.S. Army veteran, has jumped into this year's hottest election in Orange County.

The battle for a seat on the Board of Supervisors is shaping up as a high-profile, all-Vietnamese field -- a milestone in the Vietnamese American community's growing political movement. But there's a glaring difference between Tran and his fellow office-seekers: He's a Democrat.

Since they first began arriving in the U.S. after fleeing Vietnam's communist regime in the 1970s, Vietnamese immigrants -- much like the Cuban refugees who settled in Florida -- have developed a political profile that is almost monolithically Republican, identifying with the party's historic anti-Communist stance.

Now, after years in which they were eclipsed by their more dominant Republican counterparts, Vietnamese Democrats are beginning to emerge in Orange County, home to the nation's largest Vietnamese American community with a population of more than 150,000.

Republicans continue to outnumber Democrats nearly 2 to 1 in Little Saigon, and the vast majority of elected Vietnamese politicians are Republicans. Few political experts in either party expect that Tran will defeat his GOP rivals for the supervisor's seat.

But for the first time, registration of new Vietnamese voters as Democrats is outpacing Republicans in Orange County, and the number of newly registered Republicans has declined.

The widening political bandwidth is a sign of change in the Vietnamese American community, where the agenda -- once sharply and nearly exclusively focused on foreign affairs -- now includes domestic issues such as poverty, healthcare and Social Security.

"For so long, there has been a one-party monopoly in the Vietnamese community," said Kim Oanh Nguyen-Lam, who became the first Vietnamese Democrat elected in Orange County in 2004 as a Garden Grove school board member. "We Democrats are coming out of the shadow."

Long Dinh Dang, 67, is an example of the shift. Dang became a Republican after he immigrated to Orange County in 1994 and was worried that Democrats had become too cozy with the Communist regime when former President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo with Vietnam.

But now, a man who twice voted for President Bush says he has had a change of heart. He switched to the Democratic ticket last month to vote in the presidential primary. More than communism, he worries about the slumping economy, Medicare and the Iraq war.

"Democrat, Republican, it doesn't matter," he said. Particularly in local elections, "I judge candidates more on their ability to be closely connected with our Vietnamese community," he said.

Last year, a small group of political staffers and community activists formed the Vietnamese American Democratic Club, which has been strategizing with the Orange County Democratic Party about campaigns and registration drives. The group has launched a show on Little Saigon Radio to spread its message and encourage debate on issues including presidential candidates and health policy.

Two Vietnamese American Democrats, including Nguyen-Lam, have been elected to school boards in Westminster and Garden Grove since 2004. And now the county's Democratic Party is preparing to back Hoa Van Tran in the 1st District supervisor's race, a seat representing the central county area including Santa Ana, Westminster and Garden Grove.

"I saw Democrats always supporting social issues, working people, the poor, the immigrants, the small businesses, all the ones with no voices," Tran said in a recent interview. "I felt that was where I was coming from."

The 1st District includes heavily Latino parts of Orange County and has been the only majority-Democratic part of the county for a dozen years. It's also home to Orange County's best-known politician -- Rep. Loretta Sanchez.

The supervisor's seat was held by a Democrat until 2007, when Janet Nguyen squeaked out a three-vote victory over another Vietnamese Republican. The vote was seen as a political milestone for the Vietnamese community.

Nguyen and her top opponent, Garden Grove schools trustee Trung Nguyen (who is no relation and running again), took nearly half the votes in the 10-candidate field, even though Vietnamese voters constituted just a quarter of the electorate. The result demonstrated the Vietnamese community's high propensity to cast ballots, suddenly registering it as a political force.

To community activists, the emergence of Vietnamese American Democrats shows growth in a community that used to denounce Democratic voters and even aimed death threats at the few who campaigned for Democrats.

"Before, if you put yourself out as a Democrat, people may say you are not hard-line enough against the Communists," said Phu Do Nguyen, Tran's

campaign manager. "But that perception is changing because people are facing real issues of everyday life."

The GOP aggressively -- and successfully -- courted Vietnamese voters early on, far outpacing Democratic efforts.

Jeffrey Brody, a Cal State Fullerton professor who has studied Vietnamese American issues, said Vietnamese voters had become more concerned with domestic issues over the years. That, he said, has driven some to switch parties -- especially as many gave up hope they would ever reclaim their homeland from Communists and as second-generation Vietnamese began to reach voting age.

"Vietnamese refugees were naturally more concerned with foreign policy rather than domestic policy, even though Democratic policies at the time would probably have been more beneficial for them," Brody said.

Tran, 42, of Garden Grove, came to the U.S. in 1980 after escaping Vietnam by boat when he was 15. He joined the military after high school, serving as a mechanic in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. He worked for the Orange County Public Defender while attending law school.

"The perception is that Republicans are anticommunists and Democrats are communist," Tran said in a recent show on Little Saigon Radio. "But that is not entirely true."

Frank Barbaro, the chairman of the county Democratic Party, said the party is planning events to drum up support for Tran's campaign. Democrats hold an overall registration advantage of about 2,000 votes in the district, according to the most recent figures.

The Democrat has a potential opening because there are multiple Republican candidates. Janet Nguyen is facing competition from Republicans Trung Nguyen and Dina Nguyen, a Garden Grove councilwoman.

Still, as a political neophyte, Tran faces considerable odds. He has little name recognition, and some traditional backers of Democratic candidates, such as the Orange County Employees Assn., say they plan to sit this race out.

Republican leaders in the Vietnamese community say they have little to fear. Assemblyman Van Tran (R-Garden Grove) said the Republican Party has deep roots in the Vietnamese community that are not easily trumped. The party has cultivated community activists such as Van Tran who went on to elected office. Van Tran's 2004 campaign ran a massive voter registration drive that brought in thousands of Vietnamese Republicans.

"With the Republicans, there is a level of trust and rapport with the community that has been built for well over two decades," he said.

"There is absolutely no shortcut to winning trust in the community," he said.

But Vietnamese Democrats say they are pleased with the inroads they have begun to make.

"Before, it was easy for people to vote based on ethnic ties," said Khoi Ta, a former Sanchez aide. "You see the last name Nguyen or Tran, and you would vote for that person. Now, the community has a choice."

my-thuan.tran@

latimes.com

christian.berthelsen@ latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:

