

Younger Vietnamese-Americans line up behind Democrats

Generation gap underscores Trump's problem with fast-growing racial group



Vietnamese women attend a ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon in Washington last year © Getty

by: David J Lynch in Washington

Nursing a combat wound, Cuong Dinh escaped the fall of Saigon in April 1975 with his wife, Tram, their 10-day-old son and four-year-old daughter. Since the day the young army major left the south Vietnamese capital on an American jet, he has had one political home.

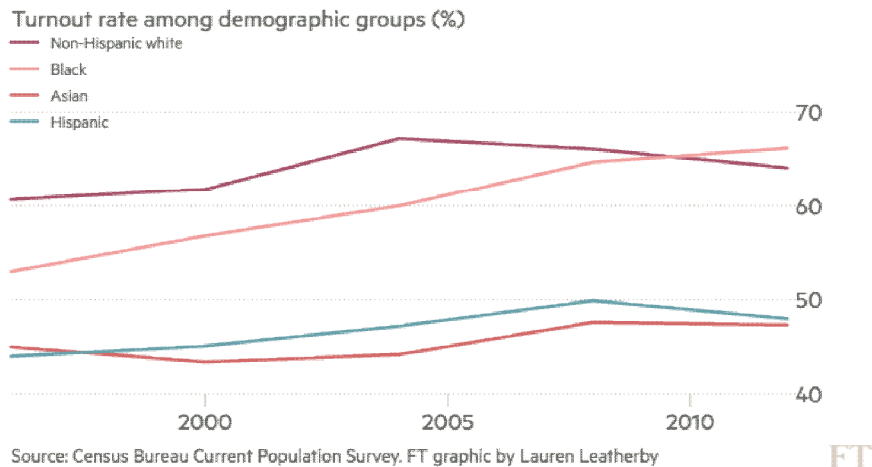
Like thousands of Vietnamese refugees who settled in the US, Mr Dinh's experience of a war in which the Democrats led in halting funds for South Vietnam made him a stalwart Republican. But his political allegiance, founded on the anti-communist sentiment of the cold war, is not shared by his offspring.

Of Mr Dinh's four adult children, three are Democrats. As recently as 2008, when Senator John McCain, who spent six years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, was the GOP standard-bearer, 48 per cent of Vietnamese called themselves Republicans. Now Democrats hold a 45 per cent to 29 per cent lead.

“I'm a Republican, no doubt about that. My children are different,” says Mr Dinh, adding with a chuckle: “When we have family meetings, we always fight. The kids say we need to change.”

The leftward tilt by Vietnamese-Americans underscores the Democratic party's hold on one part of the electoral mosaic. With immigration from countries such as China and India outpacing that from Mexico in recent years, Asian-Americans have become the nation's fastest-growing racial and pivotal voting group in swing states such as Virginia, Nevada and North Carolina.

Asian-American turnout is historically low, but it is growing

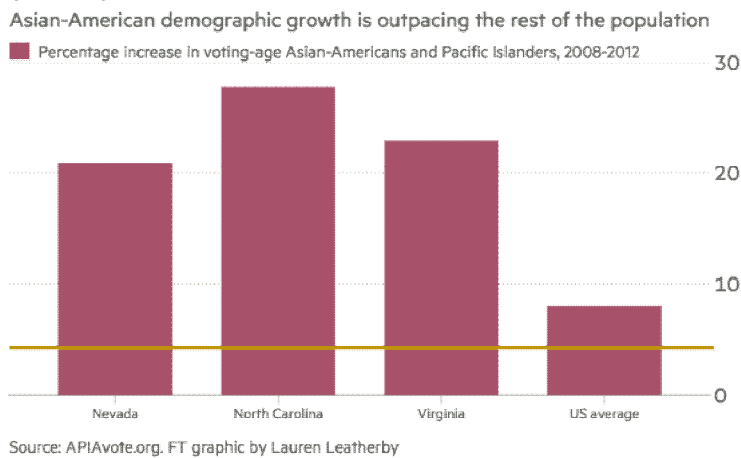


Already, the white share of the electorate has plunged from 88 per cent in 1980 to an anticipated 69 per cent this year. And the Democratic leanings of 21m Asian-Americans pose a stiff challenge for Republicans in the age of Donald Trump.

Mr Dinh's daughter Tini, 35, remembers voting in a classroom mock-election for Republican George HW Bush. In 2000, she cast a real ballot for his son. But today the government worker and mother of three is a Democrat, drawn to the party by its stance on social issues including healthcare, education and equal rights.

"It's the values my parents really instilled in me growing up," she says. "The issues for the community are changing."

In swing states, the Asian-American population is growing fast

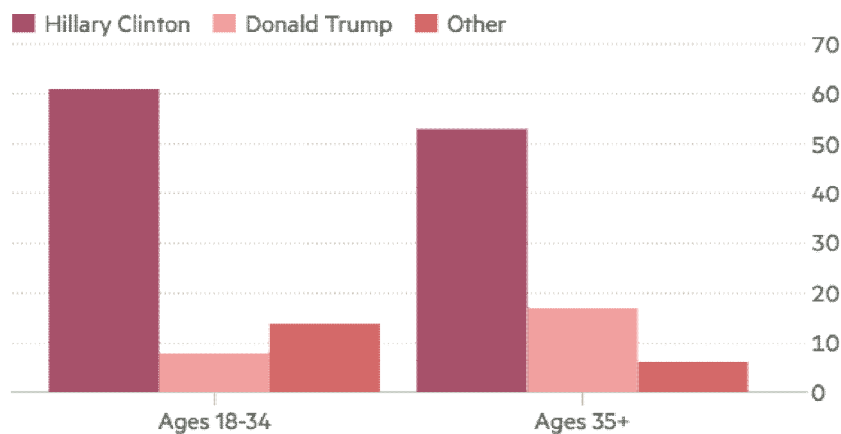


Republicans in recent years have stumbled repeatedly in dealing with non-whites. In Virginia, Senator George Allen's career imploded in 2006 after he was videotaped calling an Indian-American "macaca" or "monkey".

Following the 2012 election, a Republican National Committee "autopsy" concluded the party's position was "precarious" if it did not adapt to minorities' concerns. This year, Mr Trump's denigration of the Indiana-born, Mexican-American judge presiding over the Trump University fraud trial and his call to ban Muslim immigration only made matters worse. "Anti-immigrant statements and harsh rhetoric" make it challenging for Trump or Republicans more broadly to appeal to that community," says Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political-science professor at the University of California, Riverside.

Asian-Americans favour Hillary Clinton, especially if they are young

Presidential vote choice among Asian-American and Pacific Islander registered voters (%)



Source: Fall 2016 National Asian American Survey. FT graphic by Lauren Leatherby

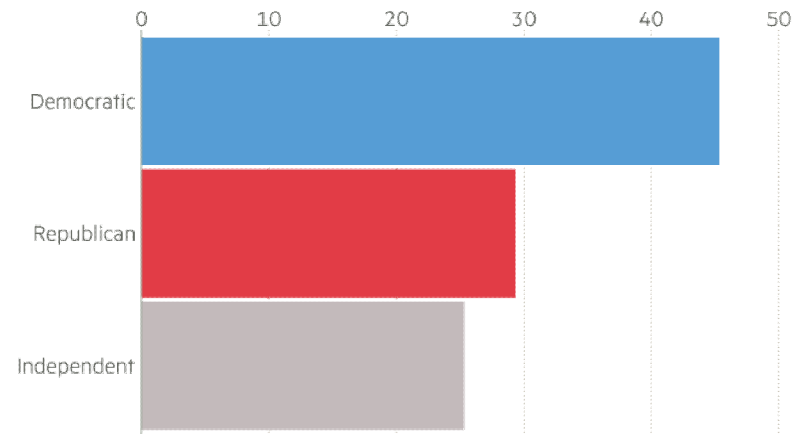
FT

Still, Mr Trump earlier this week released an ad targeted at the largely Democratic Indian-American community. He spoke a few words of Hindi before proclaiming in English: "We love the Hindus!" The AAPI Victory Fund, a political action committee focused on Asian-American turnout, produced a Vietnamese-language ad for Hillary Clinton, which opened with an image of the yellow and red South Vietnamese flag. The only English spoken in the 30-second spot was two words: Hillary Clinton.

For an older generation of Vietnamese, including the estimated 50,000 who live in northern Virginia, memories of the war that brought them to the US remain fresh. Over coffee in a suburban McDonald's in Vienna, Virginia, Mr Dinh, 74, with an American flag pin on the lapel of his navy blue blazer, describes the final days of the southern regime. An army major and district chief, he was responsible for keeping open a highway between the Mekong Delta and Saigon. He was wounded leading 800 men against a North Vietnamese force of about 3,000.

The Vietnamese-American vote

Share of party identification among Vietnamese-American registered voters (%)



Source: Fall 2016 National Asian-American Survey

FT

As South Vietnam's defences collapsed, he secured seats on a C-141 aircraft bound for Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. He spent four years after arriving in the US working as a dishwasher, janitor and painter before learning computer programming. He later learned that North Vietnamese soldiers had visited his in-laws' home seeking to capture him. "I would have been shot," Mr Dinh says. "They knew me very well."

But the anti-communism that underpins his political views holds less salience for the young. His daughter, who reveres her parents as "self-built people", instead frets over Republicans' immigration stance. "The rhetoric coming out of the Republican party doesn't have that sense of inclusiveness," she says. "The current candidate wants to build a wall. It worries me." Next week, Mr Dinh will vote for Mr Trump and his daughter will vote for Mrs Clinton.



Hillary Clinton addresses Asian-American and Pacific Islander supporters in California in January © AP