

Anti-communists in Name Only? Investigating Dynamic Political Ideology Among Generations of Vietnamese and Korean Americans

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Abstract

Our study presents a puzzle from the 2024 general elections in Orange County (CA 45th district). While Orange County has historically been conservative (McGirr 2015), our study addresses how a former “red” district represented by Korean American, Michelle Steel, flipped to a “blue” district represented by a Vietnamese American, Derek Tran. We argue that Tran’s success was contingent on multiple factors including a co-ethnic voter bloc (Vietnamese Americans) and a change in ideological priorities. Despite Vietnamese Americans and Korean Americans both having legacies of conservative “anti-communism” in their group political ideologies (Dang 2005; Chung 2007), our study investigates how these ideologies among Korean and Vietnamese Americans have transformed in California and the United States. Using ethnographic walk-throughs and interviews with Korean and Vietnamese diasporas in Orange County, San Jose, and Los Angeles we present data that suggests traditional anti-communism has changed generationally, therefore, explaining new political priorities such as justice, human rights, and racial inclusion. While our studies do not refute a panethnic Asian American hypothesis (Wong and Ramakrishnan 2023), our findings complicate “Asian American” politics, and suggest disaggregation as a method to more understand nuances of Asian American ideology as it pertains to how anti-communism has transformed across generations.

Introduction

The Californian 45th Congressional District encompasses areas of Orange County (OC) that have historically been settled by Vietnamese refugees and the Korean diaspora (Collet and Furuya 2010). The communities who made cities such as Westminster, Garden Grove, and Fountain Valley (Orange County Little Saigon) their homes—along with other immigrant ‘enclave’ cities such as Buena Park and Fullerton (Orange County Koreatown)—became the main areas incorporated into the 45th district after redistricting in 2020. In the 2024 Congressional race, this district became one of the most expensive races in the country for both major political parties (Huang 2024). Asian American eligible voters were especially crucial to the race, making up nearly 40% of the census tracts represented in the district. Both candidates Derek Tran (D) and Michelle Steel (R) also represented their respective ‘ethnic’ enclaves of “Little Saigon”¹ and Orange County “Koreatown.” Steel, the incumbent, was favored in polls to overtake Tran, but a surprising amount of fundraising and Tran’s connection as an army veteran increased his campaign’s popularity. Even weeks after the election, ballot counting continued in the district until Tran was narrowly declared the winner (by 653 votes). During their campaign, both candidates engaged in what is colloquially known as “red baiting,” a practice where communist ties are associated with individual politicians to render them less favorable to their voting bases.

In CA’s 45th District, such a strategy was especially illustrative of pandering to the two major populations with anti-communist ideologies who are co-ethnics (which we define as sharing a national origin) with Tran and Steel—Vietnamese Americans and Korean Americans. Tran, who is Vietnamese

American, claims to represent the wider interests of a “Vietnamese American” community. According to him, this community remembers their historical legacy in Saigon, “the Republic of Vietnam,” and remains in staunch opposition to the current “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” (SRV). For Steel, who is Korean American, she claims to represent both the Korean and Vietnamese communities because of her strong stance against communism. According to her, the Korean American community, including herself, survived the Korean War against “North Korean” communist aggression (Nguyen 2024). While both historical narratives are selectively remembered by Tran and Steel, they are reflective of the wider ideological patterns in Orange County (Yam 2024). The win by Tran over Steel confounds the preconception that Orange County’s Vietnamese American community is more “conservative” because of their placement in a traditional Republican heartland. However, Tran’s race may support a theory that Vietnamese co-ethnics helped a Vietnamese candidate win. In this study, we ask a broader question about this puzzle of a more “liberal” electoral result in an otherwise Republican and conservative enclave: *How has political ideology shifted across generations of Asian Americans? Does this shift away from Cold War ideology among youth explain recent election results or does “co-ethnic loyalty” provide the best explanation for coalitional politics?*

We begin addressing these questions by presenting some context for the case selection of the respective populations before explaining the methodology, data, and preliminary findings from our study. 1992 was a pivotal year to the settlement of Orange County by the Korean American community (Chung 2007). The unrest² in Los Angeles (LA) that year, led to an emigration of Korean storeowners and workers to neighboring northern Orange County (Garden Grove, Buena Park, and Fullerton) from historic Koreatown in Los Angeles. The tensions that emerged in 1992 between Black, Latine, and Asian American communities, made Korean Americans who survived *sa-il-gu* (April 29 - the date of the first night of the LA unrest) more prone to racially frame themselves against identifying with a broader coalition of “people of color” in the US racial binary (Kim 1999; Yancey 2003). Koreatown in LA has increasingly become Latine in recent years (Chung 2002). Due to the media’s framing of the 1992 unrest, ongoing anti-Blackness, and effects of racial triangulation (Kim 1999 and 2023), there are relative solidarities that exist between Latine and Korean Americans in LA’s Koreatown, which neighbors Black neighborhoods in South Central Los Angeles. This solidarity is, however, less apparent in the OC case which may stem from the higher white populations of OC and the ethnic homogeneity of Korean American institutions, such as Korean churches, which we expand upon later in this introduction.

Korean Americans immigrated in multiple iterations to the US, including shortly after the Korean War (1950-53) and during South Korea’s dictatorship years (1953-1987). These periods were marked by the dominance of bipolar Cold War ideology and Korean Americans experienced a level of “gratitude” to the US for presenting them with better living conditions and limited political freedoms. As a result, first-generation Korean Americans sided more with American capitalist ideology as a basis of their political opinion. This gratitude was expressed despite the US being a major backer of Korea’s dictatorship and human rights violations (Chung 2007). Furthermore, anti-communism as it is conceptualized in South Korea is complicated by the continued intervention of the US in South Korean politics. During the military dictatorship years of Park Chung-hee, for instance, the US continually provided logistical and financial support to the dictatorship in exchange for the enactment of more stringent ‘counter insurgency’ efforts in Korea. These efforts primarily targeted workers’ movements, intellectuals, and activists for reunification who promoted more social democratic policies and more peaceful relations with North Korea (Lee 2007).

Since Korea's democratization in 1987, a younger and more recent generation of migrants from Korea remembers how anti-communism was a US-led strategy of influence in South Korea, especially during its military dictatorship years. Therefore, they do not hold the same anti-communist sentiment that earlier Korean American migrants hold towards North Korea. In fact, later migrants from Korea continue to view the United States' role in South Korea with skepticism, especially considering the prominent continual presence of the largest US military base, Camp Humphreys, neighboring Anjeong-ri and Pyeongtaek (Martin 2023). Geopolitics has transformed the former "gratitude"-centric positionality of South Korean migrants, especially as South Korea continues to develop economically (Kwan Kim 1991). We theorize that based on emerging challenges to the dominance of US-facilitated anti-communist rhetoric in Korea (Lee 2015), that recent migration has coincided with a diminishing ideological significance of anti-communism in the US.

"Immigrant ideology" (Cheng and Espiritu 1989) drives a similar ideology among Vietnamese Americans who share a sense of "gratitude" in the first generation of refugees. Vietnamese Americans faced the conundrum of straddling between "rescue" offered by the US during the 1970s and Fall of Saigon in 1975 and the reality of imperialist American intervention in Southeast Asia for decades leading up to the Vietnam War (Le Espiritu 2006). Despite the complex history of American foreign intervention in Vietnam, the events of the Vietnam War are "selectively" remembered by members of the first generation who settled in "Little Saigon" OC (Dang 2013). Many of the early Vietnamese refugees were either related to or members of the Republic of Vietnam's military and its affiliated agencies. Rather than viewing the American government as a cause of their dispersal, members of this generation were more likely to view the US in alignment with their politics rather than the current government of Vietnam who they viewed as adversarial (Nguyen 2017; Nguyen 2023). As Republicans were in presidential power during this period of American history (e.g., Nixon, Ford), there was an early association between Vietnamese refugees and Republican presidents. Many Vietnamese American refugees were also later admitted during the Reagan administration, and as a result, neoliberal conservatism in the United States has been ingrained with Vietnamese refugees' early experiences of settlement.

Settlement patterns also compounded ideological effects from immigrants' religious affiliations. Despite Christianity having a limited following in Korea and Vietnam (33 percent and 7 percent), Christianity and Catholicism have much wider adherence among Korean Americans and Vietnamese Americans respectively (70 percent and 30 percent) (Hurh and Kim 1990, Perreira 2024). Since the 1990s, Christianity has increasingly been associated with conservatism in the US and the Republican party (Todd et al 2020). As a result, ideology among Korean and Vietnamese Americans has been influenced by religious conservatism. While theories of religious disaffiliation may suggest that younger Korean and Vietnamese Americans will be more likely to grow less religious and reject evangelical conservatism (Dillon 2015; Hout and Fischer 2002), the increased participation of young Korean Americans in Christian institutions confounds this expectation.

According to Kim (2006), younger Korean Americans who are college-educated are increasingly confounding the expectations of younger Asian Americans being less religious by becoming members of progressive Evangelical Christian, Korean campus organizations. The trend of Korean American fellowships growing across the US is in part due to the desire to preserve a Korean American heritage amidst the dominance of white culture (Min 1992). Kim also argues that Evangelical churches in the US tend to be among the most segregationist of religious institutions. Through the formation of Korean American fellowships, Korean Americans are able to form their own communal organizations that also function as exclusive insider networks in addition to serving as religious institutions. Intimate friendships

and bonds with and between Korean Americans facilitated through the church provided a wider sense of community to “ethnic enclaves” of Korean Americans in places such as Orange County.

The presence of early churches in areas with Korean ministers, students, and adoptees facilitated later immigration to Koreatown in LA in the 1980s-onward and to OC in the post-1992 period. The existence of the early Korean first-generation churches facilitated community services beyond religious sermons. For example, Christian Korean churches were responsible for supporting newly immigrated Koreans with car purchases, childcare support, and navigating social services and welfare (Kim 2006) and enabled suburban enclaves to form beyond LA’s historical Koreatown.

A unique element to Evangelical church membership among younger generations of Korean Americans, is that the overwhelming majority (80%) identify with a church that is different from that of their parents (Kim 2006). The churches which younger Korean Americans select into are often considered more “progressive” despite still being dominantly Korean American and promoting Korean American intermarriage (Min et al. 2014). Since the churches are mostly made up of other younger college-aged Korean Americans, they tend to also conform to values prioritized by second-generation immigrants, such as democratizing the church hierarchy that is common in first-generation Korean churches (Cha 2002). Patterns typically associated with Christian “conservatism” among Asian Americans are thereby subject to generational effects in the Korean American community.

Similarly, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the “re-settlement” of refugees was facilitated by Catholic and Protestant churches, who housed Vietnamese refugees on the account of them attending church services. From this initial group of Vietnamese refugees, subsequent settlement followed the existing community of Vietnamese Christians who later established “ethnic churches” (Bankston and Zhou 1996). While the Vietnamese American community has a more significant Buddhist population (37 percent), early Vietnamese Catholic and Protestant churches in communities like OC and San Jose, created bases for wider Vietnamese Christian communities.

Therefore, religious institutions along with their associations with conservatism coincide with wider ideology and anti-communism affiliated with the immigrant Korean and Vietnamese communities. While both the Democratic and Republican candidates centered their campaigns on “red baiting” to win over more conservative older generations, the Democratic candidate, Tran, also emphasized promises that were more progressive and oriented with liberal political ideology. Tran’s campaign, for instance, supported women’s healthcare access, universal healthcare, and higher wages and housing access. Therefore, campaigns by ‘co-ethnic’ politicians reflect a degree of obfuscation between traditional conservatism and more recent progressive politics. The culture of anti-communism present in these “ethnic enclaves” explains the appeal of direct stances against communist sentiments across the political spectrum. The US political party identification of “Republicans” and “Democrats” are therefore a limited heuristic that do not capture nuanced stances of candidates like Steel and Tran, who also felt pressure to represent wider communal sentiments associated with South Korea and the former Republic of Vietnam.

The incongruence of progressive ideological stances and representing a more anti-communist community posed numerous challenges early on in Tran’s congressional career. Tran’s vote for the anti-immigrant Laken Riley Act, which mandated detention for non-citizens who are charged with crimes, was met with public outcry among Vietnamese community organizations in Orange County, such as VietRISE. VietRISE is a nonprofit organization in Little Saigon that has advocated for immigrant and housing justice, civic engagement, and government accountability. The organization distributed a petition to hold Tran accountable for his vote and apologize for supporting ICE in its increased deportations and activity in Orange and LA county since 2025 (VietRISE 2025).

One in seven Asian Americans are currently undocumented in the US. While Indian and Chinese Americans make the majority of the Asian undocumented immigrant population in the US (AAPI Data 2025), as a percentage of their total population, the 129,000 undocumented Korean, and 95,000 Vietnamese Americans respectively (Deng 2025; Esterline and Batalova 2022) make up significant percentages of the Korean and Vietnamese American diasporas. Despite the large number of undocumented community members in these respective communities, a consistent presence of conservative representatives from their “enclaves” in Orange County potentially indicates another lack of translation between political representation and perceived community needs.

Class-based political theory would predict liberal voting among low-income workers, yet the economic and political behavior of Korean and Vietnamese Americans in Orange County reveals a more complex alignment shaped by enclave economics and ideological history. While Korean Americans and Vietnamese Americans have median incomes lower than other Asian American subgroups such as Filipino and Indian Americans (AAPI Data 2017), those who settled in Orange County represent an anomaly: they live suburban communities typically associated with higher incomes and skilled labor. While this is true for Korean Americans who occupy skilled labor positions in OC, most Vietnamese Americans remain in community-centric small businesses such as restaurants and the nail salon industry (Huynh et al. 2024). The vast majority of Californian restaurant and nail salon workers are considered low wage workers (making less than \$17 an hour in California).

Current voter theories predict that lower incomes correspond with voting for more liberal candidates in support for income redistribution (Hersh and Nall 2016). However, US racial politics also illustrate how such effects are moderated and reinforced by the presence of “minority/ethnic enclaves” in the US South and urban areas (Houle et al. 2019). The strong presence of anti-communist ideology in areas like Little Saigon in Orange County may therefore, mediate the otherwise more liberal-oriented expectation that Vietnamese Americans will turn out in favor of redistributive political candidates.

Anti-communist ideology is also a defining feature of local representation in Orange County. Despite the nonpartisan structure of city councils, all city council members of Westminster who identify as Vietnamese American have voted in favor of resolutions denouncing the Socialist Republic Vietnam by supporting Black April commemorations in Little Saigon. These events involve flying the former Republic of Vietnam flag at half-mast to commemorate the Fall of Saigon and to protest the consolidation of “communist” rule under the Socialist Republic Vietnam. This symbolic and ideological stance has mirrored Republican alignment at higher levels of government. State representation from Westminster and other parts of Orange County’s “Little Saigon” has consistently remained Republican since the 1940s and, as of 2024, is held by Tri Ta, a Republican, Vietnamese American in the California State Assembly.

The legacy of anti-communism, however, has manifested in diverse political strategies for refugee Little Saigon communities in other parts of California. In San Jose, which is the second largest community of Vietnamese people outside of Vietnam and the city with the largest population of Vietnamese Americans (Im 2025), representation has typically stemmed from the Democratic Party rather than Republicans. The city of San Jose is broadly represented by the Democratic Party at the local, state, and federal levels, reflecting a pattern that is commonly associated with urban areas and more liberal bases. Therefore, associating being anti-communist and Vietnamese American with conservatism as it is understood in American politics, is a misnomer that overlooks the diverse forms of placemaking and political party identification within the community. This incongruity confounds understandings of Vietnamese conservatism, which differs from conservatism among other Asian American communities.

These intra-state differences underscore how geography and local demographics shape Vietnamese American political behavior, a dynamic that becomes even more complex when considering Vietnamese populations outside California. The major centers of Vietnamese American settlement outside of California in Houston, Boston, and Philadelphia—have lacked consistent political representation at a local level that is found in California. The perception of Asian Americans as a “perpetual foreigner” may factor into this pattern of reduced representation in non-Californian electoral politics (Junn and Masuoka 2008; Masuoka and Junn 2013), which can limit electoral influence in places with smaller or less politically mobilized Asian communities. California, having the highest Asian and immigrant population in the country, offers political advantages for Asian American candidates that are less accessible elsewhere. These inter-state differences demonstrate representative constraints not only for Vietnamese Americans specifically, but for Asian Americans more broadly. California’s contestation of diverse Asian American groups convolutes Asian American linked fate (Haynes 2012; Chan 2023) or a singular, panethnic Asian American politics.

Political memory—particularly the memory of South Vietnam’s fall and the experience of displacement—has reinforced anti-communism as a dominant ideological framework through which many Vietnamese Americans understand and engage in local politics. However, this memory-based identity does not fully explain how Vietnamese Americans align with U.S. mainstream political parties. Currently, 37 percent of Vietnamese American voters identify as Democrats, while 33 percent identify as Republicans. Although this Republican share is higher than that of other populous Asian American groups—such as Korean and Japanese Americans (25%), Indian Americans (21%), and Chinese Americans (16%)—recent growth in Democratic affiliation within the Vietnamese community may reflect a generational shift. As younger Vietnamese Americans come of voting age, their political priorities appear less driven by Cold War-era anti-communism and more by contemporary social and economic issues.

While we note that this shift is not an exhaustive representation of the numerous, complicated divisions within the Vietnamese or Korean American communities, we argue that these generational changes have contributed to a more fluid and diverse ideological landscape among Vietnamese and Korean American communities. We hypothesize the following, based on the theoretical discussion presented in this section:

H₁: Korean and Vietnamese Americans of the first generation (those who immigrated or arrived as refugees between the 1960s-1980s) will be most ideologically influenced by communism and anti-communism. This group will also be more likely to align with a particular ideology due to religious affiliation.

H₂: Korean and Vietnamese Americans who are 1.5 or second generation (born or raised in the United States), or who migrated in the 1990s, will be more influenced by contemporary political platforms and individual candidates than by Cold War-era ideologies. Religious affiliation may still play a role, but it will be less central to their political identification.

H₃: Co-ethnic/co-national origin support (Collet 2005; Sadhwani 2020; Leung 2022) and ideological preferences are mutually constitutive processes, wherein community members may support a co-ethnic/co-national candidate not simply because of shared identity, but because that candidate’s platform reflects evolving ideological values within the group. In other words, the declining salience of anti-communism may coincide with younger co-ethnics also running as liberal candidates.

We describe our approach to uncovering findings related to these hypotheses in our subsequent section about the study’s methodology.

Methodology

The study's methodology addresses the nuance of communal underpinnings and political priorities of Vietnamese and Korean Americans beyond anti-communist orientations. We implement an interpretivist qualitative study to understand how members of the Vietnamese and Korean American communities view their own political ideologies amidst a wider backdrop of anti-communism. To carry out qualitative, in-depth interviews, the researchers reached out to various community organizations in addition to the campaigns for each respective candidate. Among the second generation, we selected self-identified "progressive" organizations and first-generation organizations that were more likely to share moderate and conservative-leaning views on anti-communism. Interviews were unstructured and occurred in-person or online for the interviewees who were not locally based in California. Social media and the public presences of organizations were consulted for their selection as organizations. Vocal stances on communal political issues corresponded to being selected because this study examines political ideology mainly among civically engaged Vietnamese and Korean American community members. We acknowledge a potential gap of not consulting less civically engaged community members, who were more difficult to contact as participants.

The methodology of our study also follows an iterative research design. Iterative research is based on reforming the central research question and honing our variable of interest through preliminary interviews. Afterwards, we plan on conducting more detailed interviews to collect data about our variable of interest. The approach of our study follows a relational interview approach (Fujii 2017). By following a relational approach, we hope to make sense of how our participants' view their political ideologies and worldviews on their own terms. This principle of participant centricity is in line with the school of Critical Refugee Studies, and other participant-centric research (Le Espiritu et al. 2022). With these goals in mind, we hope to ultimately conduct a study about "meaning making" which refers to a sociological interpretivist method (Alexander et al. 2004) wherein political participants are recorded about how they make sense of the beliefs and ideologies around them. The researchers are able to conceptualize variables of interest by grounding them in how community members are making sense of these ideas. We collaborated with grassroots organizations such as VietRISE and connected with stakeholders about interviewing members of their organization. In addition to connecting with organizers in Orange County, the authors also connected with members of the Vietnamese American community in San Jose to provide a lens of geographic comparison that illustrates the variation in political belief and ideology across place within the same Asian American national origin group (Vietnamese Americans). We also include a similar geographic comparison for Korean Americans by interviewing Korean American organizations in Los Angeles, which has a distinct history and political affiliation than OC, despite being a neighboring county.

Including data from San Jose and Los Angeles allowed the authors to preliminary test our theories and decide which questions and hypotheses to prioritize when conducting fieldwork in the Orange County context. Geographic comparison also offers a form of leverage in assessing which patterns seem to affect the same group (Korean or Vietnamese Americans) more broadly in California. Although there are significant Vietnamese and Korean American diasporas in other US states (New York, Texas, and Massachusetts), due to funding limitations and time restrictions, the authors were unable to conduct fieldwork outside of California. Therefore, while we make general statements about the diaspora communities in our conclusion, we concede that some states with specific placemaking patterns may differentiate in how their Vietnamese and Korean American communities view political ideologies. Studying California also potentially confounds our observations since California has the highest

population of Korean, Vietnamese, and Asian Americans out of all states. We test our priors about specific group politics in a state where panethnic “Asian American” identity is more prominent than it is in other states (Lien 1997).

While acknowledging California’s unique political landscape for Asian Americans, we believe our findings are highly relevant to making conclusions about the political priorities and ideologies of Vietnamese and Korean Americans. Our studies are based in the largest diaspora “enclaves” of these communities outside of Korea and Vietnam today (Koreatown, LA and Little Saigon, OC). We also believe that our findings are primarily focused on younger generations of Vietnamese and Korean Americans who have been less studied in existing studies of Asian American political ideology and transnational politics (Lien and Collet 2009; Collet and Furuya 2010). We expect to include interviews with older members of the community, especially those who are members of religious organizations. We expect the members of these organizations to have diverging political opinions from the primary group we analyze (second and third-generation Vietnamese and Korean Americans). Considering the perceptions of community members across generations allows for us to gauge how political ideology and anti-communism has transformed over time and to make more generalizable conclusions about the effect of generations on the relevance of historical memory and anti-communist beliefs said memory espouses.

Ethnographic observations for this study were conducted in January-March 2025 in Orange County. Ethnographic observations in San Jose were conducted in June 2025. Community meetings with Orange County grassroots organizers took place in April-May 2025 and preliminary interviews took place in June-July 2025. Observation notes were taken that detailed places, political symbols, and historical memory. The conclusions we make in this version of the article are solely based on the initial fieldwork we have conducted. The majority of fieldwork will be collected after this version of the paper is reviewed. Therefore, we remain open to feedback on our methodological approach and how we might better approach our variables of interest in an updated version of our research design.

Ethical considerations for this study were made. As political opinion can be a controversial subject especially among members who identify as more “conservative” when speaking with university researchers, we ensured that our research questions were framed as “open ended” questions. We did not ask about direct political affiliations with any political party. Approval for human subjects research was attained from an Institutional Review Board at the university prior to the study (UP-25-00143). Only participants’ first names are included to protect their identities. Voluntary verbal consent for participation and including first names in interviews was obtained. All interview participants were at least 18 years old.

Preliminary Findings

Kim is an organizer with a local Vietnamese American organization in San Jose that conducts “roundtable” discussions about political issues with the Vietnamese community. She is involved in political organizing and intends to study humanitarian organizations. I spoke with Kim about her upbringing in San Jose’s large Vietnamese American enclave. San Jose, especially East San Jose, is considered the “Little Saigon” of the Bay Area. Kim grew up in this community her whole life and considers herself a second-generation Vietnamese American with a unique circumstance since both of her parents were part of the 1.5 generation, which describes a group of refugees who were displaced from their home country at a very young age (typically between infancy and high school). Her parents fled Vietnam when they were 8 years old (father) and 12 years old (mother). Therefore, they did not grow up with formative memories of the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955-1975, and instead were faced with

unique traumas that endured from the displaced generation and were compounded by challenges that awaited new refugees when they arrived in the US (Le Espiritu 2006).

Kim reflected on her parent's stories and described how their experiences with "refugitude" (Um 2015) provided a unique perspective growing up that she associated her Vietnamese identity with.

"I've grown up with these stories because my parents have so much pride in where they came from and how much they've grown from being a generation of 'boat people' who didn't know the language or culture, but were still able to maintain their culture, even though as refugees, they were forced to assimilate to American culture. They were able to preserve their Vietnamese pride through their stories and passing on these stories to us."

There are three elements of particular significance in Kim's recollection about her family. The first is Kim's notion of "pride." While pride can be understood as a multitude of political associations, in this context, Kim feels a sense of pride not in a nationalistic sense about Vietnam's government today or the ROV of the past, but rather a sense of pride in her family's refugee legacy. This lends to the second observation of Kim's parents being part of the generation of "boat people." Boat people is a term that is attributed to the generation of Vietnamese diaspora who fled Vietnam on an array of different boats that were often subject to environmental and human disasters before they arrived in their intended destinations (Vietnamese Boat People Podcast). An estimated 200,000-600,000 Vietnamese Americans passed away on this journey due to attacks by pirates, navies, and drowning (Archive of Boat People 2004).

The designation of Vietnamese American refugees as boat people particularizes their experience within the "Asian American" panethnic community. While other Asian American groups also underwent difficult immigration journeys, the forced dispersal of the Vietnam War, along with its aftermath of the boat migrations reflect the complexities of identity and memory that are being associated with by second-generation Vietnamese Americans such as Kim. The third observation is Kim's emphasis on "passing on stories to us." The ability to pass on postmemory of an event (Hirsch 2001 & 2008), from parent to child is considered an act of memory politics, but also is not always commonplace, especially among refugee families, many of whom were placed in economic circumstances that are not congruent with their racial categorization as "Asian Americans" (Yamashita 2022). Therefore, Kim's circumstance is also unique in that her parents were open about their difficult pasts. Rather than viewing these stories as a source of shame about the difficulties that her parents experienced, Kim and others in her generation have viewed this past as one of resilience amidst forced departure and transit to the United States. Kim is proud of her past as a Vietnamese American and although her identity is unique, it is not one that is nationalist about the former ROV as Kim expanded upon later.

"I think the memory from the war was the reason for generational change. My grandparents grew up during the Vietnam War, but my parents were born after so they experienced the repercussions of war, but not the war crimes, the bombings, and the violence...My parents always raised me to look at the nuance behind the war, even though they were taught to hate the Northern side...My parents definitely have a lot of disagreements with my grandparents, so the older generation of Vietnamese people. Those disagreements mainly come from politics. My parents are pretty liberal, my grandparents are Trump supporters, and they are very anti-communist. That is the only reason they are fervent about supporting Trump because of his policies on Communism and China."

Kim's discussion of her parent's political differences with her grandparents reflects many of the variables of interest that are relevant to our study of political ideology and Asian American perceptions of anti-communism. First off, Kim describes the relevance of "memory" and how for her parent's generation (despite them being born in Vietnam), their formative memories are inhibited by their young age, and they do not remember the war that her grandparents remember very vividly. Kim elaborated in another

part of her interview that her grandparents also had associated a specific form of trauma with the war because of their family's divided loyalty to the Southern and Northern armies. This accusation of serving as a "sympathizer" (Nguyen 2015 & 2016) also makes the memory of the war in Vietnam "impossible to forget but difficult to remember" (Nguyen 2016). The divided loyalties of the Vietnam War are still strongly factoring into a form of "selective amnesia" (Yoneyama 2016) wherein the legacy of Northern Vietnamese aggression and violence are selectively remembered by Kim's grandparents, but are engaged with in a more critical, constructive manner among her parents who focus on "nuance behind the war."

The different engagements of political memory also have ideological consequences as seen in the affiliations of Kim's parents versus her grandparents. Her parents remain "pretty liberal" relative to her grandparents, due to their specific associations with memories of the war. She adds that her grandparents are "only" supportive of Trump because of his "policies on Communism and China." In particularizing the type of conservatism of her grandparents as a form of "radicalized nostalgia" (Nguyen 2021), Kim also intervenes in discourse about conservative Asian Americans. As Janelle Wong notes, "the difference in Trump support between born-again Asian Americans and born-again Whites is...dramatic (37 percent versus 75 percent)" (Wong 2018). According to Wong, even the perceived most "conservative" type of religious Asian Americans (born-again Evangelicals) did not have a strong preference toward voting for Donald Trump in 2016.

In a similar vein, the consistent base for many Vietnamese Americans of the older generation who vote Republican, is unlikely to emerge solely from religious or traditional conservatism (33% of Vietnamese Americans identified with the Republican party in the 2024 Asian American Voter Survey—AAPI Data). Rather, the Vietnam war context is critical to understanding how memory continues to influence and intervene in the political identification among older Vietnamese American voters. China's ongoing role of intervention in the South China Sea, along with the historical tensions between Vietnam and China, may further have transnational influence on the perspectives of the first generation of Vietnamese American refugees (Storey 2008). Kim's unique position as a very young member of her generation also presents an interesting contrast between her parent's generation and her grandparent's generation. The conflicts between her parents and herself illustrate a shift in the potential political priorities across three generations of Vietnamese Americans.

"My grandpa doesn't like the idea of me getting into politics. I went to the No Kings protest and he made jokes about how I shouldn't be there, which I feel is pretty ironic since a lot of the anti-war movements that were happening because of Vietnam in the 60s and 70s are happening right now regarding Israel and Palestine...My mom has become more open with me going to these protests...my dad and I have gotten into a lot of arguments about social movements, because he holds some conservative views that we disagree about on Israel and Palestine and the Black Lives Matter movement."

In addition to her parents' conflicts with her grandparents' generation, Kim reflected on instances of conflict across the generations with her grandparents. Kim's discussion of how her own activism brought up feelings of discomfort among her family members is a more detailed illustration of the continued political discourse that the Vietnamese American community is engaged with. The "irony" that Kim points to reflects the close solidarities that have been made between Palestine and Vietnam as cases of historical occupation and their related struggles of decolonization. The emergence of widespread protests in the United States following October 7, 2023, have also become a popular reminder of the protest culture during the 1960s-1970s, where college campuses mobilized anti-Vietnam War protests and conducted draft card burning ceremonies in protest of the US military (Sedlmaier 2022). The distinct

reactions to these protests, however, are shaped by factors that go beyond historical memory. Kim's father's background as a veteran affects how he views his daughter's continued protest attendance and her support of a liberation movement that goes against American foreign policy. Furthermore, Kim's father's hesitation to support her open participation and support for the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, is reflective of Asian Americans' negotiations with identity within multiracial coalitions (Chen and Chan 2025) and self-positioning in a world of anti-Blackness that they have become embedded in (Kim 2024).

A distinct pattern in Kim's interview that is unique to her case, is the association of her family as members of the 1.5 generation who remain distinct from the first generation. Rather than her parents' holding conservative ideology based in anti-communism, it is Kim's grandparents who hold such opinions based on a selective historical memory. In contrast to Kim's case, Sandra, another Vietnamese American and second-generation San Jose resident, presents lived experiences with her parents and grandparents. Unlike Kim, Sandra's parents, and grandparents both lean more conservatively in their party affiliations.

"On my grandparent's side (on my Vietnamese side), they know I am more liberal, and it would become a topic at dinner sometimes. In the Biden/Trump race, Biden would slip up sometimes and my grandparents would say, 'Look Sandra, there's the idiot you're trying to support.'"

Sandra's experience with her grandparents reflects the outsider status she is given for not following their political affiliations with the Republican party. The chastizing behaviors of her grandparents are akin to many of the reactions of Trump supporters during the 2020 and 2024 races where Biden's personal qualities and age were the subject of news cycles and political undermining by the Republican party's affiliates. Trumpism as it is understood in Sandra's family also extends beyond her Vietnamese heritage. Sandra is a member of the Vietnamese American community but also holds mixed heritage as a Vietnamese-Cambodian American. Sandra's unique position as someone with mixed Vietnamese and Cambodian heritage is influenced by mutually constitutive patterns of anti-communist legacies in her home countries that traveled to the United States with her refugee parents.

While the Vietnam War is remembered in its name as only having been in Vietnam from an American perspective, the reality of the civil war was that Cambodia and Laos were at the center of many US military interventions. The bombing of Cambodia and Laos into the two most bombed countries in the world, was a consequence of American direct involvement and its efforts to make Cambodia and Laos proxies to 'defend' against Communism's spreading to other parts of Southeast Asia (Kiernan 1997; Lin 2022). The continuity of anti-communist rhetoric in the Cambodian case, therefore, does not ascribe to the same civil war logic that was found in Kim's case, but is a selective memory about the Khmer Rouge. During what is remembered as "Pol Pot Time" among Cambodian Americans, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge were the genocidal communist party of Cambodia. The memory of communists being the perpetrators of violence may affect the memories of Cambodian diaspora members such as Sandra's father, who she describes as a fervent Trump supporter.

"My father is a huge Trumpie. The first time that Trump got shot with the bullet grazing his ear, we had a TV mounted on our wall. My father went up to the TV and started stroking the TV, saying 'Don't worry Trump, God will protect you' even though we're Buddhist and don't believe in God."

Sandra's understanding of her dad's politics is captured by her humor in describing the irony of God's will to "protect" Trump despite a core belief of Buddhism being self-salvation and reincarnation—which is distinct from a sole "God" common in monotheistic religions like Christianity. The ability for Sandra's father to still adopt an "Evangelical" outlook that Trump is chosen as a savior defended by "God" is reflective of wider conservative media influence on potential voters. Since the turn of the

century, Evangelical lobbying has become more closely ingrained with identifying as Republican (Wong 2018). Despite Trump's initial rejection of religion and his former identification as a Democrat, his campaigns in 2016, 2020, and 2024 all made strong assertions that he had a devout belief in Christianity. Although Evangelical leadership remained skeptical about Trump's piety, they nevertheless supported his races contesting with Democratic candidates and funded his presidential campaigns (Gorski 2018).

The ability for Sandra's father to deprioritize his Buddhist Cambodian heritage in exchange for a 'Trumpist' ideology (Morris 2019), also reflects the potential for recent discourses to become the center of political identification for her father rather than the dominance of anti-communist memory. Ideologies such as counter-narratives to LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights, and women's rights have also presented new rationale and priorities from the conservative far-right which also influence first-generation Asian Americans beyond their initial prioritization of anti-communist values. According to Phillips and Lee (2020), Asian American men are more likely to be voters than Asian American women, which does not parallel national patterns of voter registration (Masuoka et al. 2018; Junn and Masuoka 2020). This pattern of gendered politics may also partially factor in the increased support among Asian American men for Donald Trump in the 2024 election (Ramakrishnan—AAPI Data 2025).

Sandra continued to expand on her Cambodian family's conservatism in her interview:

"They're very homophobic, they would go on tangents about how they would disown their children...my youngest aunt and uncle are the only two liberals and they would stand up for the community only to be immediately barraged by the rest of the family."

Sandra refers to her family's homophobia. Homophobia is a product of socialization in the home country and in the United States. Immigrant first generations who are prone to adopting social values from both countries are, therefore, subject to interacting with multiple forms of dominant homophobia. Despite recent progress in legal avenues of recognition for same-sex marriage (Obergefell v. Hodges 2015, Thailand 2025, Greece 2024), homophobic discourse remains internationally dominant (Human Rights Campaign 2025). For Sandra's father and members of the first generation like him, discussion of homosexuality compounds the ongoing cultural 'backlash' discussions of cultural "deviance" which have increased in prominence along with white, Christian nationalism during Trump's re-election campaigns (Eidelhoch 2025). It is likely for voters of the Republican party to engage with online rhetoric, social media, and media discussions that promote homophobia and socially otherize homosexuality in the US.

Resistance to communist parties in the home countries may be symptomatic of the survival of refugees and their rejection of home country politics associated with communist ideology (Bishin 2012). However, as more recent migrants arrive after the first generation of immigrants and refugees who left Vietnam and Cambodia (such as Kim's and Sandra's grandparents), subsequent generations remain more prone to identifying with recent political priorities rather than historical anti-communist rhetoric. New political priorities have emerged such as immigrant rights for those on the left of the political spectrum (such as Kim's parents)—or— cultural backlash against more liberally-minded "progressive values" (Inglehart and Norris 2016) for those who remain on the right (such as Sandra's father).

Preliminary Conclusions

We presented a puzzle of why Asian Americans seem to be shifting towards liberal political candidates in historically conservative districts that once relied on anti-communism as being a primary rationale for selecting into the Republican party. Through a preliminary investigation of two distinct ethnic groups in California—Korean Americans and Vietnamese Americans—we present theories about our hypotheses related to Asian American political ideology and participation today.

In terms of our first hypothesis, we believe that there is considerable reason to continue testing this hypothesis. There appears to be a salience of anti-communist rhetoric that was employed by both the Democrat and Republican candidates in close races in Asian American-majority districts such as CA-45. Furthermore, through conducting preliminary interviews with second-generation Vietnamese Americans in a “blue” city of San Jose, we examined how older generations of Vietnamese Americans are still voting for Republican candidates such as Donald Trump, despite Democrat candidates locally representing the city of San Jose and its Vietnamese American neighborhoods. Therefore, our generational hypothesis seems to be grounded in some of the preliminary data we have collected. We hope to further investigate political opinion among diverse generations of Korean and Vietnamese Americans to assess their preferences for candidates and differences in their anti-communist views.

The theory for our second hypothesis which predicts that younger second-generation Americans will be more likely to base their political decisions off platforms rather than anti-communist ideology also seems to have empirical foundations. We are unclear about the theory grounding the second assumption of our hypothesis which suggests that religious associations will influence political ideology less among younger generations. While that may be true among Vietnamese Americans, the consistent high participation of second-generation Korean Americans in churches may suggest that religious associations remain highly influential in political decision-making and cannot be readily separated from the platforms of political candidates. We hope to conduct interviews with second-generation Korean American Christian organizations to ascertain their views on ideology in comparison to their parents.

Our final hypothesis suggests that co-ethnic bloc voting is not necessarily operating in isolation from generation effects. Younger Asian Americans are voting in conjunction with the dominant pattern for Asian Americans to vote for more liberal candidates (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2023). However, as we examined a unique case where there was more than one Asian American candidate running against each other, Asian American “linked fate” becomes more convoluted, and the expectation for panethnic support is subject to being complicated by the idea of co-ethnic turnout. In a time where anti-communist violence in Asia is increasingly removed from the generations who are able to vote, future elections may be able to tell what Asian American communities with legacies of anti-communism will prioritize in their politics.

While existing studies have told us what to expect of Asian American voters, the depth of understanding distinct ideological preferences of *specific* Asian American communities remains underexplored. Through our study of immigrant and refugee political identity, we hope to contribute to the ongoing debates in Political Science and Asian American Studies about the durability of refugee ideologies, racial political behavior, and the limitations of the panethnic Asian American hypothesis.

Notes

1. Hereafter, we only refer to “Little Saigon” as shorthand for the Little Saigon community in Orange County. However, this decision acknowledges the many other Little Saigons that exist in cities such as San Jose, San Diego, Houston, Vancouver, among others.
2. The 1992 unrest is commonly referred to as the LA riots, but we refer to these events as “unrest” in the rest of our article.

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