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Vietnamese community rally for racial justice at Boston City Hall in June 1992 to protest remarks by City Councilor Albert "Dapper" O'Neil.

Photograph by Peter Kiang

Practitioners' Essay

## The Local/Global Politics of Boston's Viet-Vote

James Dien Bui, Shirley Suet-ling Tang,  
and Peter Nien-chu Kiang

### Rallying for Racial Justice

After strolling past Boston's growing Vietnamese business district during an annual spring parade along Dorchester Avenue in 1992, City Councilor Albert "Dapper" O'Neil, the neighborhood parade's honorary grand marshal, shared his keen, caustic commentary about local demographic change with another city official on the street: "I just passed up there, I thought I was in Saigon, for Chrissakes. . . . It makes you sick, for Chrissakes!"

A bystander captured O'Neil's remarks on home video, and the revealing footage was broadcast on local network television news that night. In outrage over such blatant and official disrespect, two hundred from Dorchester's Vietnamese community along with allies from throughout the city rallied at Boston City Hall one week later to call for racial equality and demand a public apology from O'Neil.

But with fewer than one hundred Vietnamese Americans registered to vote in Boston at that time, and with most Vietnamese residents still struggling in poverty amidst refugee realities, their capacity to exert local political pressure directly through votes or campaign contributions was minimal (Pham 1992). Indeed, O'Neil attended the rally himself and defiantly refused to apologize (Rezendes 1992a). Having held office since 1971, O'Neil consistently received the highest vote-totals in Boston's at-large city council elections throughout the 1980s and continued to do so throughout the next decade until dying in office at age seventy-eight in 1999.

That City Hall rally, though, made history as the first public, mass demonstration by Boston's Vietnamese community focusing on local politics and issues of racial justice (Sege 1992). Well organized political rallies, lobbying efforts, and public ceremonies co-

inciding with April 30th commemorations to mark the fall of Sai Gon or to protest local visits by groups from the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam had taken place regularly at Boston City Hall, the State House, and other sites since the mid-1980s. The Vietnamese refugee/immigrant community's capacity for political organizing was already highly engaged, but such demonstrations were—both then and now—primarily symbolic in appealing to the public's moral conscience externally while sustaining anti-communist ideological discipline internally within the community itself.<sup>1</sup>

### Developing Civic Engagement

In the immediate wake of the 1992 City Hall rally, the director of Boston's largest Vietnamese community agency acknowledged the need for increased civic engagement and admitted in terms of his own political participation, "I only vote [in the past] for president or U.S. senator, and I wasn't too serious with the city councilor or treasurer or small positions. Now I should pay more attention myself to every single one of them" (Sege 1992). More to the point, the president of the Vietnamese Community of Massachusetts, the umbrella coordinating body of thirty-seven Vietnamese organizations across the state, asserted following the rally, "We will work harder to push the people to register to vote. . .if we want the political system in Boston area or everywhere in America to pay attention to our role, we have to get involved with our right to vote" (Sege 1992).

Two years later in 1994, the establishment of a new, neighborhood-based community development corporation, Viet-AID, marked a significant upgrade in the community's organizational capacity. Envisioned initially by 1.5-generation Vietnamese Americans who had helped to organize the 1992 City Hall rally, the founders of Viet-AID sought an organizational model that would not be overly constrained by either the ideological commitments enforced by the older generation in the community or the dominant client/deficit-centered paradigm that characterized social service agencies and refugee mutual assistance associations locally and nationally. Viet-AID's mission opened new conceptual and programmatic possibilities for capacity-building, particularly in relation to affordable housing development and home ownership, self-sufficient economic development, child care and native language education, neighborhood safety, and, by necessity, com-

munication and organizing within the multicultural Dorchester neighborhood across ethnicity, language, and race.

Following the later-1990s period of immigration and welfare “reform,” a further shift in the focus of local civic engagement efforts turned to stress the urgency for Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to gain citizenship in order to be protected against the drastic elimination of rights and benefits for non-U.S. citizens mandated by Congress. A former Asian American Studies student who volunteered as a citizenship instructor recalled at that time how painful the process was, especially for the Vietnamese elders, simply to gain naturalization:

. . .one woman who did not know how to read and write. . .was very ashamed. [She said] “Teacher. . .I’m so stupid. Why do I have to have this despair? I stayed up all night last night and cried because I failed the test again. I’m so embarrassed. Teacher, if I don’t pass the next test, I don’t know what I will do. . . (Kiang 2001)

Further public policy attacks against immigrants have continued locally—most recently through a 2002 statewide ballot initiative financed by California businessman, Ron Unz, that successfully eliminated bilingual education in Massachusetts, just as he had previously accomplished in California. The Unz initiative compelled bilingual education advocates and organizers in Boston’s Vietnamese community to reengage with the need for issues-based voter registration, education, and mobilization. This set the stage for the most recent efforts in 2003 and beyond, known as Viet–Vote.

### The 2003 Viet–Vote Campaign

The Viet–Vote Campaign is led by a coalition established initially in 2002 by Viet–AID, the Vietnamese American Civic Association (VACA), and the Massachusetts Vietnamese-American Women’s League. In 2003, the coalition added four more groups: the Vietnamese-American Public Affairs Committee (VPAC), the Vietnamese Professional Society (Massachusetts chapter), the Intercollegiate Vietnamese Student Association of New England (IVSA) and the Vietnamese-American Voters League of Massachusetts, which had pioneered the use of the phrase “Viet–Vote” in their previous statewide voter registration and education efforts in the 1990s.

The goals of the Viet-Vote Campaign are to:

1. build a permanent coalition of Vietnamese-founded and -operated groups whose mission is to build power in the Vietnamese community through civic engagement;
2. use a three-pronged approach of voter registration, education, and mobilization to increase Vietnamese civic participation, particularly in terms of voting in Boston Wards 13, 15, and 16 with increases by 33 percent in 2003 (local elections), 50 percent in 2004 (national elections), and an additional 20 percent in 2005 (compared with 2003);
3. build the capacity of coalition members to sustain voter participation efforts.

Activities in 2003 included:

- voter education and registration at community events, businesses, churches, and door-to-door;
- producing a civic participation curriculum as well as bilingual voter information materials for newsletters, newspapers, leaflets, and Vietnamese ethnic media (press, radio, television, internet);
- GOTV bilingual phone-calling to roughly 1,500 Vietnamese registered voters before election day;
- providing bilingual support and transportation, particularly for elders, at polling stations on election day;
- creating a database of almost 3,000 Vietnamese registered voters in Boston.

Efforts in the Fall 2003 elections yielded a direct increase of 172 new Vietnamese registered voters. More importantly, on election day in the targeted Wards #13, #15, and #16, Vietnamese voters increased from fourteen, fourteen, and thirty-seven in the 1999 elections to 200, 133, and 279 respectively in 2003—a combined increase of 941 percent.

Based on a survey conducted immediately after the elections, the average age of the Vietnamese voter in these wards was fifty-five. Thus, the “senior” population within the Vietnamese community turned out to be the politically active group of the community. Ironically, Viet-Vote activities were mostly carried out by college students and young professionals, but somehow

they did not mobilize younger voters. As a result, a new goal for the planning and development of Viet-Vote is to connect civic engagement with youth development more explicitly in order to attract younger voters, especially through the registration component of future campaigns.

### Diasporic Local/Global Political Strategies

Beyond simply being another good example of grass-roots, electoral ward/precinct machine-building with working class immigrants, the Viet-Vote Campaign is also—like the community itself—a story of civic engagement with both local and transnational meanings in diasporic context. Viet-Vote’s voter education efforts worked to connect desires for Vietnamese voice, power, and representation with critical local issues ranging from crime and jobs to affordable housing and bilingual education. A complementary strategy focused on gaining recognition of the flag from the former Republic of South Viet Nam as the “official” flag of the Vietnamese community in the City of Boston. The yellow flag with three red stripes embraced by Vietnamese refugees and their families often flies with U.S. flags outside Vietnamese-owned houses and businesses in Dorchester. It has always been present at major community events for the past twenty-five years [see photos 2 and 3]. But in this effort community advocates used it in mobilizing to impact public policy symbolically in the city.

This strategy culminated in August 2003 when—with roughly 100 Vietnamese Americans cheering from the gallery—the Boston City Council voted unanimously to recognize “the Heritage and Freedom Flag as the official symbol of the Boston Vietnamese-American community.” The approved city resolution had been submitted by Councilor Maureen Feeney who represents the Dorchester-Fields Corner area. In response, the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C. quickly issued a formal statement of protest, asserting: “A small minority of Vietnamese-Americans who claim themselves representatives of the Vietnamese-American community living in Boston aim at sowing division, rekindling the past hatred and painful pages of the history between our two nations and among the Vietnamese themselves.” Embassy officials then personally visited City Hall to insist that the only proper flag to fly is that of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam which is recognized by the U.S. government. Disregarding such claims while acknowledg-

ing the growing clout of the local Vietnamese community, one City Councilor explained at a formal meeting with the Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission, "What you feel in Washington, that is in Washington, and we here in Boston support our community here" (Abraham and Slack 2003).

Interestingly, although the 1992 racial justice rally marked the first time that Boston's Vietnamese American community demonstrated at City Hall about a local issue unrelated to Viet Nam politics, the official response from City Councilor Dapper O'Neil at that time was "apologize to who? for what? I didn't say anything to any of them" (Rezendes 1992b). In a show of both his own power and the marginal political influence of the Vietnamese community, O'Neil went on that same year to be voted City Council President. In contrast, a decade later, government officials from Viet Nam came to Boston City Hall to protest, while City Councilors voted unanimously to support what they believed were the wishes of their local Vietnamese constituency.

These two historical moments at Boston City Hall are linked closely—though in non-linear and seemingly contradictory ways—through the complex process of street-level Vietnamese community capacity-building and development. Issues of racial justice and homeland political passions are both implicated in and essential to Vietnamese community civic engagement. Yet, if the next historic rallying moment at Boston City Hall can be imagined as the inauguration of the city's first Vietnamese American elected official, then we suggest that dedicated day-to-day campaigns such as Viet-Vote and the foundational long-term capacity-building commitments of its sponsoring community organizations are concretely and conceptually necessary to continue building on the 941 percent gain in Vietnamese voter participation in Fields Corner that the community so dramatically produced in 2003. With this in mind, adding a "youth leadership development" component to the civic engagement initiative is the top priority and next step for the Viet-Vote campaign specifically.

## Conclusion

Through the title of his oft-quoted autobiography, former Massachusetts Congressman and long-time Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (unrelated to Boston City Councilor "Dapper" O'Neil) observed, "All politics is



local" (1994). For organizers in Boston's Vietnamese community, such sage advice, when put into practice, has needed to account for the local meanings and consequences of intense transnational sensibilities as well as multiracial/multicultural neighborhood realities and racialized quid pro quo relationships with city officials.

The large increase in Vietnamese voter participation through the Fall 2003 Viet-Vote campaign cannot be understood (or replicated) without recognizing either the basic legwork of the campaign itself—particularly by staff and volunteers from the younger generation—or of the diasporic resonance of the flag issue as one important signifier of local political clout and representation—particularly for the older generation who comprised the large core of new Vietnamese voters in the November election. More importantly, the local mission, operation, and impact of Boston's Viet-Vote campaign are tied intimately to much longer term organizing and capacity-building efforts—both past and future—that are manifest in, for example, the bricks and mortar of the Vietnamese American Community Center; the intergenerational, bilingual sharing of stories through cultural/community development projects such as *Our Voices*<sup>2</sup>; the hard-earned street solidarity between Vietnamese and Black youth through interracial organizing by *Tieng Xanh-Voice*<sup>3</sup>; and multiple collaborations with Asian American Studies courses and projects for the past fifteen years. Though not described in detail here, these stories of practitioners in Boston's Vietnamese community also deserve telling (Aguilar-San Juan 2003).

## Notes

1. Much has been recorded and written about the complex, contested nature of refugee/exile politics in various Vietnamese communities throughout the Vietnamese diaspora. See, for example, Vo; Chung; Nguyen.
2. See <<http://www.vietaid.org>>.
3. See <<http://www.txvoice.org>>.

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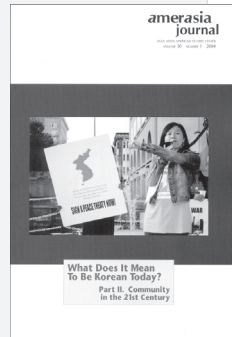
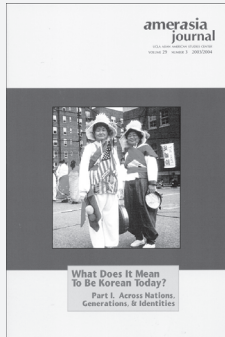
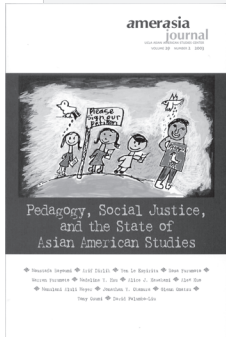
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