



Vietnamese Voices from Orange County, CA: Narratives of Community, Government, and Change

DURING THE LATE-1970S AND 1980S, Vietnamese emigres established a dense “spatial community” of homes and businesses across Garden Grove, Westminster, and Santa Ana, California, remaking the face of central Orange County.¹ Today, this thriving Vietnamese community is in some ways remaking itself. Many members—young and old—talk of the community as being in transition, with its destination(s) not yet set, but being formed daily through the millions of small choices and actions of its people.

Who and what the community is becoming may well defy expectations. Indeed, the research reported in this brief suggests that who its members already are challenges a number of conventional wisdoms and assumptions about Vietnamese Americans. Among other things, we show that those in Orange County both deeply value and are invested in the cohesion of a distinct Vietnamese community, and also wish its members had opportunities for more meaningful relationships across lines of ethno-racial difference.

1 Linda Trinh Võ, “Constructing a Vietnamese American Community: Economic and Political Transformation in Little Saigon, Orange County,” *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 3 (2008): 85-109.

Our research also reveals that most Vietnamese Americans in Orange County envision an active role for the government in securing public wellbeing, improving people’s material conditions, and addressing inequality. In this sense, we find underlying values that suggest that the Vietnamese community has the potential to be a force pushing for economic, health, and racial justice to a greater extent than has so far been realized. The brief concludes with a summary of implications for the growing civic and community-organizing efforts that are already having an impact in Orange County’s Vietnamese community.

Background and Research Methods

Nowhere else outside of Vietnam is there as large a concentration of Vietnamese people as in central Orange County. Although those who arrived from Vietnam in 1975 “as state-sponsored refugees, may be the most studied arrival cohort in US immigration history,” scholar Yến Lê Espiritu points out that research on them long sidelined the voices of Vietnamese people themselves. It was concerned instead with the population as “a problem to be solved.”² The past decade and a half has seen a new body of research emerge—mostly by Vietnamese-American academics—that makes a radical break with this earlier work, exploring with care and depth the life histories, identities, and subjectivity of Vietnamese Americans. Still, this group remains largely understudied in terms of its members’ views and opinions on government, civic life, racial and economic inequality, and much more—leaving media and political operatives to base their representations of Vietnamese Americans on broad generalizations, even stereotypes.

The research analyzed in this brief was co-designed and carried out by the Othering and Belonging Institute and VietRISE, a community-based organization in Garden Grove, CA, to deepen our understanding of the Vietnamese community in Orange County. It does so by listening to voices that are often left out, speaking to issues about which they are rarely asked. As part of the Blueprint for Belonging project,³ our research brought a particular interest in understanding how Vietnamese Americans are thinking about: relations within and among communities across lines of difference; the role of government in society, and trust in it and other institutions; and choices about whether and how to be active, individually or collectively, in civic and political life.

Our principal means for investigating these issues were focus groups. Focus groups are a powerful method for examining ideas and narratives circulating within a constituency or community cross-section, and for going beyond *what* people think to understanding *why* and *how* they think as they do. Unlike opinion surveys, focus groups are organized around open-ended prompts that give participants space to take the conversation where their own stories and connections lead them. Indeed, where they “go” is a valuable piece of the data.⁴ Focus groups are composed intentionally of people with shared characteristics that allow for participants, through cross-talk, to collectively form a picture of current ways of thinking, and terms of debate, among “people like us.” If these interactions sometimes over-represent “socially desirable” or “normative discourses,”⁵ this too can offer valuable insight. First, it reveals “centers of gravity” in what is socially valued

2 Yến Lê Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-433. Quotes are from pp. 410 and 413.

3 For more information on Blueprint for Belonging, anchored at the Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, see <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/b4b>.

4 Phil Macnaghten and Greg Myers, “Focus Groups,” in Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman, eds., *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage Publications, 2004.

5 Janet Smithson, “Using and analysing focus groups: Limitations and possibilities,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3, no. 2 (2000): 103-119.

or validated within the constituency in question. And second, it often stimulates conversation about the fact of certain views *being dominant*, leading to reflection on how those views could be complicated, contested, or refined.⁶

Between late-February and early-April 2021, Blueprint for Belonging and VietRISE collaboratively planned and conducted four focus groups with Vietnamese residents of central Orange County.⁷ Participants were recruited from among Vietnamese-language dominant⁸ individuals ages 40-70 who do not have strong partisan identities (hereafter “non-partisans”).⁹ Each of our four focus groups included 4-6 participants, who met via Zoom for facilitated conversations that lasted 100-120 minutes each. Groups were facilitated by a young Vietnamese community member.

The choice to focus on Vietnamese-speaking non-partisans responds to issues of underrepresentation as well as learning goals defined by VietRISE. First, despite their numbers, the voices of this constituency are frequently left out of characterizations of the Vietnamese community’s views and priorities. Media portrayals of partisan polarization, for example, often ignore that more than a third of Vietnamese-American voters in Orange County are registered as having “no party preference.” Next, VietRISE is part of a movement of 1.5 and second-generation community leaders

who are working concertedly to organize and build bridges between younger and older Orange County Vietnamese residents. Whereas some recent reporting speaks of a “generational divide” in the Vietnamese community, these efforts prioritize creating spaces for young leaders to listen to and understand the perspectives of elder community members. The research reported in this brief was designed by community organizers and researchers to be a continuation and deepening of that work. In turn, we believe that the trust and good will that young organizers have earned through their community-based work were critical foundations for gaining the open and candid participation of elder residents in the focus groups.

This brief discusses several prominent patterns and recurring themes in what focus-group participants said about their community, its relationship with others, government’s role, and civic engagement.¹⁰ We analyze these findings for how they reveal notions of self, “us” and “them,” agency, and values that are circulating in the constituency we studied. For some topics, the brief links focus-group findings to even broader data on Orange County Vietnamese residents’ views, through reference to Blueprint for Belonging’s 2020 county-wide survey. This survey of more than 1,500 Orange County residents utilized sampling techniques to ensure statistically reliable subsamples of people of

6 Sue Wilkinson, “Focus Groups in Feminist Research: Power, Interaction, and the Co-construction of Meaning,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 21, no. 1 (1998): 111-125; Lia Litosseliti, *Using Focus Groups in Research*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003; and Macnaghten and Myers, “Focus groups.”

7 This included the Blueprint for Belonging and VietRISE teams collaboratively setting the study’s scope, drafting and refining the focus group facilitator guide, and deciding upon the criteria for participation.

8 Individuals who reported that they speak Vietnamese more than 50 percent of the time were eligible to participate.

9 In almost all cases, this means individuals who are not registered as Republicans or Democrats. In the small number of cases in which participants are registered with a party, all expressed weak partisan or ideological affiliation. Participants were recruited initially from a registered-voter list, and secondarily through referrals.

10 Comments that were not recurrent, but instead outliers or “one offs,” are either not reported, or properly contextualized as such.



different ethno-racial identities.¹¹ Among those who completed the survey were 429 Asian Americans, of which nearly half identified as Vietnamese. Where relevant, we bring data points on Vietnamese survey respondents' opinions into the analysis of the focus-group data.¹² We conclude with a synthesis of what all of these data tell us about how to translate Orange County Vietnamese residents' views and aspirations into civic and political action toward greater equity and belonging in California.

What Is the “Vietnamese Community”?

Elder Vietnamese residents of Orange County are in the midst of deep reflection about generational transition, the future of their community, and how it will balance continuity and change. This was a robust lesson that emerged from the opening prompt of focus groups, which asked participants to define or explain what the term *Vietnamese community* means to them. Such an open-ended prompt can lead in a number of directions. Often for members of immigrant-origin communities, it brings forward talk of shared culture,

11 Prospective participants were drawn from a pool that included citizens and non-citizens, and were contacted by email, postal mail, and telephone. They could complete the survey online, by landline, or by cellular phone, in English, Spanish, or Vietnamese. All respondents were asked with which race or ethnicity they identify, and were allowed to check one or more of six response options, followed by “other.” Those who identified themselves as Asian American were then asked to say what they consider their “primary ethnicity or family ancestry.”

12 The Blueprint for Belonging 2020 regional survey of Orange County collected data on respondents' views on a range of topics including intergroup dynamics, the appropriate role of government, economic and other policy issues, and the COVID-19 crisis. A data supplement with additional results can be accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/b4boc2020>.

language, celebrations, and struggles with loss and discrimination. Though most of these were mentioned, Vietnamese-American study participants overwhelmingly presented ideas on their community that were organized around stories of “where we’ve come from” and “where we’re headed.”

In general, those stories were structured as progress narratives. They tell of a community originating in the 1975 exodus from Vietnam that—gradually but consistently—has grown in size, economic success, acceptance, and even political clout. This way of narrating “who we are” often ends with elder Vietnamese Americans affirming their pride, happiness, and optimism about their community. Their stories also make evident that they strongly identify with the idea of a “Vietnamese community” as a salient, coherent collective.

This identification corresponds to a strong emotional investment in the community’s future—in what it will become. Among the constituency that was the focus of this study, there was widespread recognition that that future would largely not be in their hands. Many spoke of being on the cusp of a generational transition in leadership of the Vietnamese community—a transition expressed as inevitable and, several emphasized, welcome. Study participants’ acute awareness of generational change in their community, and their general embrace of it, was unique among Blueprint for Belonging’s research experiences.

Still, the strong and deep identification that elder Vietnamese residents feel with their community means that “the next generation”—today’s young people—and the choices they make are weighty points of interest and debate. Our focus-group participants spoke at length about what they wished for this next generation—especially what it should carry forward and what it should “leave behind”—as it shapes the Vietnamese community’s future. Not surprisingly, these discussions focused largely on how the community’s refugee history, and the struggles and sacrifices of members who fled political violence specifically, would be remembered and honored.

There was general consensus that the community’s roots in 1975, and all that its members had over-

come, should remain a source of pride, and should not be forgotten. But study participants wrestled with what “remembering” should entail. One question raised across the groups was where the older generation’s understanding of their history as an anti-communist struggle specifically fit within the community’s identity going forward. Many noted that a declining share of their growing community has this history, and worried that its centrality to Vietnamese-American identity lends itself to prejudice and exclusion—specifically against more recent arrivals and Vietnamese people living in Vietnam. In one of the stronger critiques of what she called “old-fashioned mindsets,” one 55 year-old woman from Westminster said, “Helping Vietnamese in Vietnam or helping Vietnamese overseas are the same thing... We need newer, younger faces to represent the Vietnamese community. Really! All the hatred, all the grudges—[they] are of the past.”

Others wondered if the expectation that younger Vietnamese Americans take on the history of their elders might inadvertently push them away. Two men in their 50s from Garden Grove and Santa Ana agreed that they don’t know how young people are thinking about the Vietnamese community and their place in it. “We don’t really know how the young think now... Do they think that they could get along with the Vietnamese community, or [do they think], ‘Oh, the Vietnamese community is so annoying (phiền quá)?’” Together with a 70 year-old Garden Grove resident, they proceeded to speculate about whether Vietnamese Americans born in the U.S. might distance themselves from the community. The men agreed that what is most important is to keep them “close,” and that harmony among generations is more important than having young people know everything about their families’ stories, if those stories “burden” them and their ties to the community.

That harmony, in the end, was about ensuring that the Vietnamese community endures as a meaningful collective in which members find support and strength, and one that is respected by others. In a quote that reflects conversations across all our focus groups, a 42 year-old Garden Grove resident said, “Hopefully... our future generations will learn and retain the good

aspects of Vietnamese culture, and improve upon the not-so-good aspects so that when other communities look at us Vietnamese, their trust will increase.”

Distinctions and Divisions in the Community

Focus-group participants were later asked to discuss any divisions within the Vietnamese community, and whether there are socially significant distinctions or “subgroups” based on identity or outlook (tư tưởng). The most prominent finding from these discussions was the constituency’s reticence about the question. Overall, study participants were not eager to answer, and a few challenged the premise. For example, a 66 year-old woman from Westminster responded, “Vietnamese people do not have a main group or a subgroup. Everyone’s the same. So I don’t understand who thought [that]... Who came up with that concept?”

“Asking this question, I think, is a bit sensitive, because before, some people who came [around] 1975 often looked down on those who have just come. In general, Vietnamese often don’t get along at work, sometimes regional differences and/or differences in manners make me feel like we lack harmony.... This question is too sensitive, Minh!”

VIETNAMESE MAN, 70
Westminster

These and other responses further showed the high value this constituency places on community unity. Being united was a frequently mentioned ideal, even if often expressed aspirationally, or in the form of regret that Vietnamese people are not *more* unified, especially when voting. But participants agreed that

it is through unity that the Vietnamese community achieves respect, influence, and strength. To talk of intra-community dividing lines or discord, then, was uncomfortable, and conflicted with participants’ ideas of who their community is, or what they want it to be.¹³

Meanwhile, there was one distinction that was ubiquitous among Vietnamese study participants: that between people whose families left Vietnam in or around 1975, and those who arrived in the U.S. more recently. Often these groups were distinguished as refugees (or “refugees escaping communism”) versus economic migrants and/or international students, respectively. However, the significance of that dividing line is undergoing scrutiny, and in flux. Although at one time the former group was widely considered more “legitimate” or “deserving” of entry into the United States, this type of value judgment was only rarely (twice) expressed in our focus groups. More common was for participants to bring it up in order to name it as a problem. In other words, the long-dominant idea that there is a moral distinction between 1970s Vietnamese refugees and later arrival cohorts is one of those that even members of the older generation of Vietnamese Americans is actively debating, with some suggesting that it is no longer relevant and best left behind.

Finally, our groups of non-partisan Vietnamese Americans see partisanship as a major dividing line in their community. In their view, partisanship has gone beyond being an expression of differing viewpoints to being a deeper social fissure. They find this off putting and a reason to avoid overtly political activity, as we explore later in this brief.

Vietnamese Americans and Others

When focus-group conversations turned from intra- to intergroup dynamics, our participants made clear that they have limited contact with people outside

13 Some participants were particularly quick to challenge the implication that there might be higher- or lower-status groups within the Vietnamese-American community, or that Vietnamese Americans treated any of their own members unfairly or discriminatorily.

of the Vietnamese community. In their neighborhoods, at many offices and service agencies, and elsewhere in their daily lives, participants interact almost exclusively with other Vietnamese people. This made it challenging for them to speak to questions about how they see their community's relationship or commonalities with, for example, other immigrant-origin communities.

“Honestly, it’s because the Vietnamese community is too dense (đông quá)! When I go out, I see Vietnamese people every day. So we don’t have a lot of chances interacting with other communities. Only in the workplace, but what you see in workplace doesn’t show you a whole lot.”

VIETNAMESE MAN, 52
Garden Grove

Some expressed the perception however that partisanship also poses a barrier to these groups coming together across national-origin lines to address shared problems. Many study participants said either that Vietnamese Americans are predominantly Republicans, or that they are stereotyped as such by communities of other national backgrounds. They then expressed their own stereotypes, saying that Mexicans, Cambodians, and Filipinos, for example, all support the Democratic Party, and that these differences generate tensions. Here again, partisanship looms large in the minds of non-partisan Vietnamese speakers as playing a wide-ranging divisive role.

Still, non-partisan Vietnamese speakers would like for their community to experience more intergroup interaction, and are optimistic that the results would be positive. Besides partisanship, they view mistrust as arising from simple lack of familiarity—people’s discomfort with the unknown. They expect that direct, meaningful interactions in which members of different communities could learn about one

another’s true character would benefit all involved. Unfortunately, no focus-group participant recalled experiences of such an encounter—whether organic or planned—as a model on which to draw.

Recognizing Racism, without Structures

Though their interactions with non-Vietnamese people are limited, this constituency of Vietnamese Americans is very aware of the presence of racism and discrimination in U.S. society, including against Vietnamese people. Study participants mentioned negative stereotypes, experiences of being treated unfairly, and of course, the 2020-2021 surge in anti-Asian racism and violence. But it was notable that these Vietnamese speakers readily pointed out that U.S. racism has landed more harshly on people of other ethno-racial identities. In both of the two women’s groups, participants agreed that Black Americans have faced worse discrimination and injustice than Asian Americans. In connecting long-standing and numerous attacks on Black lives to more recent ones on Asian lives, there were hints of an opening for building solidarity between Vietnamese speakers and Black Americans.

“[B]ut comparing the Vietnamese community with the Black community, the Vietnamese community doesn’t suffer the same levels of troubles.”

VIETNAMESE WOMAN, 40
Garden Grove

At the same time, the ways in which our Vietnamese study participants discussed racism—and the type of problem they take it to be—lacked a structural or systemic understanding. Their focus was on discrimination as an individualized phenomenon, and one rooted principally in ignorance, unfamiliarity, and fear. Talk of how racism serves particular interests, or can be wielded strategically, was entirely absent.

This abridged view of the problem clearly limited how participants are thinking about “solutions” to

racism in the U.S. Those that were suggested centered entirely on education and intergroup contact, including where participants said that government should play a role. According to a 52 year-old woman from Westminster,

Racism has increased more and more and the government has not done enough to contain it... [So,] When asked what the government hasn't been able to do, it's [this:] opening classes to educate people about race so that people could learn and understand other races better and that we have to respect one another.

In general, exposure to new information and interaction across lines of difference was discussed as the basic antidote to racism.¹⁴

Under-recognition of the role of structural forces in racial inequity also showed up broadly in our 2020 survey findings. The Blueprint for Belonging survey asked two series of questions designed to gauge whether survey respondents understand unequal economic outcomes for Black Americans and immigrants (respectively) as due more to individual versus historical and structural factors.¹⁵ Across most of these questions, Vietnamese Orange County residents were the ethno-racial group least likely to acknowledge the role of historical and structural barriers. For example, whereas 61 percent of Orange

County residents overall said that they agreed that, “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult” for Black Americans to advance, only 49 percent of Vietnamese respondents agreed. Meanwhile, 60 percent of Vietnamese respondents agreed with the idea that, “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough,” and that if Black Americans “would only try harder, they could be as well off as whites,” compared to only 38 percent of all Orange County residents overall.

Far more Vietnamese survey respondents acknowledged the role discrimination plays in limiting opportunity for immigrants than for Black Americans. Interestingly, however, just as many Vietnamese respondents agreed that for immigrants, as for Black Americans, it’s a matter of some people not “trying hard enough,” and that inequality would disappear “if immigrants today would only try harder.” A number of Vietnamese-American scholars have explored historical and social antecedents to this type of belief, from a variety of different angles.¹⁶ But whatever the *source* of narratives asserting that opportunity is equally available to everyone in the U.S. based on hard work, our research shows that they are *current* and *prominent* in Orange County’s Vietnamese community. As such, any effort to build stronger cross-group solidarity or coalitions, or to increase support for racial-justice reforms, will need to contend with them.

14 This understanding drew on one of the aforementioned Vietnamese community progress narratives: that their experience has been one of progressive acceptance through increased familiarity.

15 This refers to the “racial resentment” battery, together with a slightly modified version of the same to measure anti-immigrant (rather than anti-Black) resentment. The racial resentment battery is a standardized set of survey questions that has been used to assess subtler contemporary forms of anti-Black racial animus for nearly forty years. For a very succinct discussion of it, and some alternative approaches to measuring racial prejudice in opinion surveys, see Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 19-24.

16 Some examples include Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Duke University Press, 2012; Tuan Hoang, “From reeducation camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 43-95; and Y. Thien Nguyen, “When State Propaganda Becomes Social Knowledge: Legacies of the Southern Republic,” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2021.

The Role of Government

For years, the Blueprint for Belonging project has investigated Californians' views on the appropriate role of government, including basic questions of what "government" means to them, and what associations attach to the term itself. When we brought these questions to our focus groups with Vietnamese Americans in Orange County, the responses stood out, first, for much of what was *not* said. In particular, many of the prevalent associations that drive cynicism about government in other underrepresented California communities did not come up with Vietnamese study participants.

Notably, this constituency's talk of "government" is not dominated by ideas about partisan national politics. Elsewhere Californians often equate government immediately with politicians, and with the "dirty politics" of partisan disputes and self-interested dealings.¹⁷ Vietnamese Americans in Orange County, in contrast, were more likely to recall experiences with government agencies and service providers, including programs for refugees, language services, and the U.S. Postal Service. Not all of these experiences were positive, and we discuss the implications of some of them later in this brief. But it is significant for how this constituency might think about taking civic action that its ideas about government rely more upon experiences with administrative entities than images of rancorous politicians.¹⁸

Perhaps because they think of the local level first, Vietnamese participants also readily brought up social-service provision in connection to the idea of government. Though again, experiences of accessing services were mixed, we heard none of the

common narrative that California over-taxes and over-spends. Taxation in fact was mentioned only rarely, and fleetingly.

Care, Compassion, and Improving People's Lives

Overwhelmingly, what focus-group participants emphasized was the belief that government's role, and that of elected officials specifically, is to improve the lives of constituents. They said that government should actively make people's lives more comfortable, and create better chances for economic success and upward mobility for their community. Government should also deliver supportive services for those who are struggling, and ensure that people's basic needs are met. In expressing all of this, Vietnamese residents commonly referred to care and compassion as qualities desirable in elected representatives, and indeed in government overall.

These views are notable for how they diverge from those that Republican partisans often ascribe to Vietnamese Americans in Orange County.¹⁹ Too often the Vietnamese community is stereotyped as monolithically aligned with a conservative ideology of rugged individualism, tax cuts, and opposition to social spending. Study participants' talk of care, compassion, and service as the right motivators of policy action stands in stark contrast to this depiction. And this preference among Vietnamese Americans for a government that is active in improving people's material conditions is in no way unique to our focus-group participants.

In fact, this vision of government's role is reflected clearly and consistently in results from our 2020

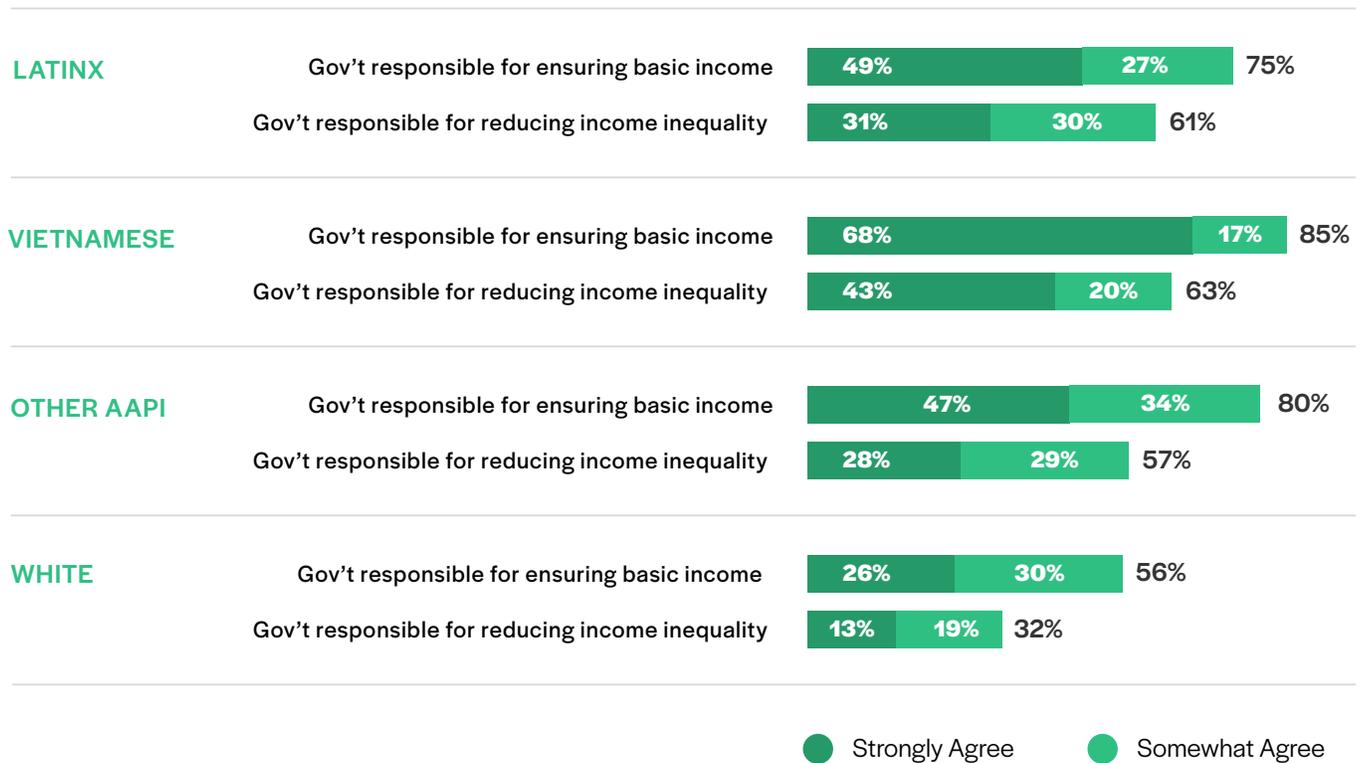
17 See, for example, Joshua Clark and Olivia Araiza, "Margins in Movement: Toward Belonging in the Inland Empire of Southern California," Othering and Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, October 2021, Part V.

18 Consistent with this tendency, where non-partisan Vietnamese Americans *did* bring up elected officials, their focus was close to home—referencing county supervisors and mayors rather than Federal officeholders.

19 For a recent example, see quotes in Brooke Staggs, Roxana Kopetman, and Ian Wheeler, "Why did Vietnamese voters in Orange County swing toward Trump in 2020?," *OC Register*, March 7, 2021.

FIGURE 1

Views on the government’s role in the economy, Orange County, by race/ethnicity



Orange County survey. These results included the responses of 200 Vietnamese Americans to a series of questions about government action in the economic realm. A pair of these asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that the government should be responsible for (1) ensuring that everyone has a basic income, and (2) reducing income differentials between high and low earners.²⁰ On both of these, larger shares of Vietnamese Americans agreed that the government should be responsible for the inter-

ventions in question than did any other ethno-racial group in Orange County (see Figure 1). A near-consensus of 85 percent of Vietnamese respondents said that the government should ensure a basic income when the economy is not providing one, with 68 percent “strongly” agreeing; and nearly two thirds said that government should be responsible for reducing income inequalities.

Survey respondents were also asked whether “the government should provide fewer services, even in

20 These items read in full: “I’m going to read you a series of statements. Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each: (a) It is the responsibility of government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes; (b) When the economy stops providing for working people, government should be responsible for ensuring that everyone has a basic income.”

FIGURE 2

More government services (7) or less services (1), Orange County, by race/ethnicity



areas such as healthcare and education, in order to reduce spending,” or “provide many more services, even if it means an increase in spending.” Here respondents could answer on a scale of 1 to 7, from far fewer services to many more services. The results for different Orange County ethno-racial groups are displayed in Figure 2. Here again, we see that Vietnamese Americans are least likely to favor reductions in services, and offer strong overall support for more government service provision.²¹

What might explain this pattern, which appears so contrary to common depictions of Vietnamese Americans’ outlooks and partisanship? For one, many Vietnamese community members have personal experiences accessing government services. In reflecting upon these, focus-group participants tended to consider U.S. social programs to be generous, but also needed and effective—not excessive or inefficient.²² Next, and likely related, these participants rejected the common anti-tax trope that government services are widely abused. In fact, the idea that it is common for people to exploit the system was raised in our focus groups only once, and *in order to be refuted*. A 42 year-old Garden Grove resident said he believed that in fact most people who apply for government programs truly need them, and those who exploit them are only “a small percentage” and “just bad apples.” Thus, one of the main narratives undercutting support for the social safety net simply does not seem to resonate with non-partisan Vietnamese Americans.

21 Vietnamese residents were also the group most supportive of policy proposals to build housing with supportive services for people experiencing homelessness. See “Poll: OC residents want more housing support for homeless,” Press Release, Othering and Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, Oct. 7, 2020, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/poll-oc-residents-want-more-housing-support-homeless>.

22 As Mimi Thi Nguyen discusses in *The Gift of Freedom*, the performance of gratitude is one of those “debts” imposed upon Vietnamese refugees who received support services that were perhaps unusually generous (see Vŏ, “Constructing a Vietnamese American Community”). But while our study participants arguably performed the imposed gratitude narrative, what is interesting here is that they extrapolate from it a broad support for generous government services *in general*. They do not, that is, “take the bait” of casting themselves, as refugees, as more or uniquely “deserving” of such services. Thus we see that even as people internalize a dominant narrative or experience it as “real,” they can also reinterpret and repurpose it toward a different endpoint than that which may have originally motivated it.

Participating Civically and Making Change

While the goal of an active, caring, and compassionate government is an ambitious one, focus-group participants' thinking about how to reach it was narrower. Notably, most spoke of this goal as something for which they “hoped” or wished, but not as a demand. More broadly, these non-partisan Vietnamese community members almost never spoke of making change in the language of contestation, struggle, or protest. This is an important window into how they currently frame their political agency, as well as how they understand problems with government that they would like to see changed.

As with the issue of racism, when participants spoke of such problems or issues with government, they focused overwhelmingly on individuals rather than systems or structures. A few recounted personal stories of facing challenges or frustrations when accessing government services. In each case, the ensuing group discussions centered on perceived bad actions or characteristics of agency employees or officials, and not on policies or procedures. Where laws and policies came up, participants across the focus groups emphasized the need to follow and abide by them, even if you don't agree with them. Some asserted directly that laws cannot be fought or (re) made “just the way we want.” It could be that some of this frequent avowal of rule- and law-abidingness is participants saying what is socially desirable in the group setting. But even if so, that makes it no less relevant to understanding what is currently resonant and acceptable within this constituency when it comes to frames and types of civic action for change.

Rather than contemplating systems or policy change, focus-group participants expressed a model of good government that depends on fair and caring officials hearing and solving constituents' problems. Where that did not happen, it was usually

the officials who were blamed. Notably, Vietnamese community members' expectations from this type of relationship are especially high when it comes to officials who are also Vietnamese. Several expressed that Vietnamese officials—from the mayor to the DMV office—should be particularly responsive to Vietnamese residents, and committed to meeting their needs. Where this higher standard is not met, it can lead Vietnamese constituents to interpret that Vietnamese officials are actually discriminating against Vietnamese people.

“These government leaders need to help the people. Especially if they are Vietnamese, they have to help Vietnamese first. The support system is very weak! Even now, many people don't know what vaccination is, don't know how to register, don't know what to do. There are people who don't know that raising cats or dogs without a license is illegal. They don't know a lot of things. So they need assistance from the government.”

VIETNAMESE WOMAN, 55
Westminster

The one avenue to which these constituents pointed for themselves and their community to make political change is elections. Numerous study participants affirmed that voting is important, and that all citizens should vote. Beyond the focus-group setting, our 2020 survey also finds that Vietnamese residents overall are less likely than their Orange County neighbors to agree with the statement, “Most elections don't really matter that much. Things stay the same for people like me no matter who is voted into office.”²³ Some characterized voting as a “duty”—in some cases

23 Just 15 percent of Vietnamese respondents said they agree with the statement, compared to 23 percent countywide. And in our survey of neighboring Riverside and San Bernardino counties, 30 percent of the 1,500+ respondents agreed with this statement.

to the country, but in others to one's community. Still, the vision of political agency expressed here was limited, involving a cycle in which one votes, hopes that the electoral winner does what is right, and then votes again—without other actions in between.

Finally, in all discussion of political participation, non-partisan Vietnamese residents tended ultimately to emphasize their detachment from “politics.” Even when saying that they always vote, participants downplayed their political opinions, and said that they avoid conversations about political topics in their personal lives. Talk of politics, many believe, leads to fighting, arguments, or offending others who hold opposing views. They tend to assume that most people's views are set, and that it is better not to confront others on their positions or to try to convince them to think otherwise. It is more important, they feel, to protect relationships and, in one woman's words, “maintain an environment that is calm.” These commentaries clearly communicated the toxicity that these non-partisan study participants associate with today's political discourse.

Summary of Implications

Vietnamese Americans in Orange County possess a rich diversity of experiences, ideas, and identities that cannot be painted in broad brush strokes. As such, with this brief, we do not purport to capture the profile of the Vietnamese community as a singular or homogeneous whole. In particular, young people under the age of 40 and community members with strong partisan attachments are not examined here, and their outlooks are likely to differ in numerous ways. Complementary research on these groups—and subgroups thereof—would be a valuable addition to the present work.

This brief has focused more narrowly in order to reach greater depth. It examined a specific constituency of Vietnamese residents of Orange County represented in our focus groups, namely Vietnamese speakers ages 40-70 with weak or no partisan affiliation. With respect to this constituency, we can offer a set of salient lessons from our research with practical implications for civic and community organizations committed to advancing racial and economic justice,

democratic participation, and belonging. These implications are based on data collected across the focus groups, and further substantiated by survey findings on the Vietnamese community more broadly.

- **For the Vietnamese community.** The idea of the “Vietnamese community” resonates widely, and is a strong source of identity and purpose for this constituency. Actions or activities are likely to garner greater engagement when explained as being on behalf of this community, as a responsibility to the community, and in the interest of its future.
- **Unity as an anchoring principle.** Though this group recognizes that there are socially significant lines of difference within the community, they value and aspire toward a united and egalitarian Vietnamese community in which individuals look out for the interests of the collective. Talk or actions perceived as supporting division or disharmony are viewed as counterproductive and harmful.
- **Language for organizing civic action matters.** Due to their mistrust of “politics” and aversion to political conflict, this group seems unlikely to join campaigns articulated in the language of struggle or certainly “fighting.” Further, efforts that read as politically partisan—as opposed, for example, to being driven by values or the best interest of the community—will likely be off-putting.
- **Agreement on active role for government in economy.** The existing common sense for this constituency aligns with goals of using government to reduce economic inequality and ensure that everyone's basic economic, housing, and healthcare needs are met. The language in which this is most readily expressed is that of care and compassion, and narratives to support government's realization of these qualities would do well to stress the need to *institutionalize* them (beyond particular officeholders).
- **Expanding notions of civic participation.** This constituency widely affirms voting as an essential activity, but ideas about engagement mostly end there. The line of thinking that says, in the words of a 57 year-old woman from Santa Ana, “When there are a lot of us voting, only then can our com-

munity grow stronger,” seems ripe to be extended to other civic activities as well.

- **Interest in meaningful cross-group interaction.** This constituency has little direct dialogue with other immigrant-origin community members or “ethnic minorities” (in participants’ words). Some expressed interest in opportunities for interaction, but due to a number of barriers, these would need to be planned and orchestrated by community-based groups.
- **Coalition building must overcome suspicions of partisanship.** Campaign organizing across immigrant-origin communities is complicated by perceptions of partisanship. If these could be overcome, and campaigns anchored clearly in values or issues that do not read as partisan, the results could be powerful. Already 65 percent of Vietnamese Americans in Orange County say that whites enjoy “too much influence” in California politics—a strong baseline for building coalitions for more equitable representation.²⁴
- **Partial recognition of U.S. racism.** Although the language and analysis of racism as structural or systemic are uncommon with this constituency, members recognize the presence of racial violence and injustice. The current moment could be a time for increasing inter-group solidarity around experiences with hate. But bringing this constituency into campaigns for deeper racial-justice reforms will require a well-planned educational process that meets individuals where they are, understanding that they have likely had limited exposure to deeper analyses of racism.
- **Strong foundations for intergenerational Vietnamese American bridging toward social justice and belonging.** The constituency studied here is ready for a generational transition in community leadership, and to extend their trust and faith to younger Vietnamese com-

munity members. Although older Vietnamese Americans’ experiences and analysis of society likely differ in many ways from those of younger community members, several of the points above reveal considerable complementarity and potential for alignment. There is an exceptional opportunity in older members’ good faith and commitment to unity for young leaders to meet them where they are, and articulate visions that bridge their distinct identities and entry points for action and change-making.

24 Respondents were asked about several different groups whether they have “too much,” “too little,” or “just about the right amount for influence” in California politics. The 65 percent of Vietnamese respondents who said “too much” with respect to whites is slightly higher even than the shares of Latinxs (63 percent) and non-Vietnamese Asian Americans (62 percent) who said the same.

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