

**Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence
In the Hmong-American Community**

By

**Steven Doherty, PhD
Assistant Professor
Dickinson State University**

Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 8, 35 Pages

Abstract

This research focuses on the major social, cultural and political factors that have shaped Hmong-American political behavior in the United States and also more specifically on the issue of Hmong-American candidates who have run for electoral office. Electoral turnout and the partisan direction of Hmong-American voters will receive some general examination. Special attention is also given to the unusually rapid emergence of candidates for electoral office from the Hmong-American community in the Upper Midwest, and the specific motivations and strategies of Hmong-American electoral candidates.

Introduction

Ethnicity and race have had a distinct and significant influence on political behavior in the United States. These factors are becoming more important in American politics as American society is currently undergoing a significant wave of new immigration. The 2000 United States Census provided dramatic evidence of a major ethnic and racial transformation of American society. The results of the 2000 Census show a remarkable growth of Asian American ethnic groups (Armas 2001). This burgeoning population will have a substantial impact on the American culture and political system. The number of Asian American voters and the overall size of the Asian-American voting block will increase and could become a more consequential force in American politics. However, little social science research has been focused on the

political behavior of Asian-American ethnic groups (McClain and Stewart 1995: 72). The purpose of this research is to try to give some illumination on this topic by examining the political mobilization of a new and unique Asian ethnic group located in the American Middle West. Hmong-Americans are a newly arrived immigrant group, having emigrated from Indochina in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Hmong have a unique culture and historical experience (Chan 1994: 1). Like most immigrant groups, Hmong-Americans will demonstrate distinctive patterns of political behavior (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Expectations of immigrant and ethnic minority voting behavior would suggest lower levels of electoral turnout and political engagement among Hmong-Americans, with few Hmong-Americans choosing to participate in elections or to run for elective office.

Yet in the 1990s, Hmong-Americans have exhibited an unexpected tendency to run for elected office (Sturdevent 2000; Associated Press 2000). In Central Wisconsin and Minnesota, several Hmong-Americans have chosen to run for local and state office in the last nine years.

This research will attempt to focus on the major social, cultural and political factors that have shaped Hmong-American political behavior in the United States and also to focus more specifically on the issue of Hmong-American candidates for electoral office. Electoral turnout and the partisan direction of Hmong-American voters will receive some general examination. Special attention will be given to the unusually rapid emergence of candidates for electoral office from the Hmong-American community in the Upper Midwest, along with an exploration of the motivations and strategies of Hmong-American electoral candidates.

Background on Hmong-Americans

Hmong-American Culture and Historical Experience

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group originally located in the Southeast Asian countries of China and Laos. Possessing a traditional culture and agricultural life-style, the Hmong have a distinct ethnic identity in Southeastern Asian society (Chan 1994: 53). The Hmong have suffered severe discrimination from the dominant ethnic groups of both societies, often being discouraged from speaking their language and using their alphabet (S. Vang 2001; Chan 1994).

In the mid 1960's, the American government began to recruit the Hmong leadership into assisting US military efforts in Indochina. Hmong in Laos would be recruited into a secret army to try to contain pro-Communist forces in Laos (Hamilton-Meritt 1993: 131). The Hmong in Laos engaged in strong resistance to the Communist Pathet Lao regime and Hmong soldiers assisted the United States military in many efforts. After the end of American military involvement in Southeast Asia, the Hmong would suffer severe retribution from the Communist regimes of Laos and Vietnam.

Vietnamese troops invaded Laos in the mid 1970s, subjecting the Hmong to severe persecution and even genocide (Hamilton-Meritt 1993: 392-393.) The Vietnamese utilized chemical weapons on the Laotian Hmong population; killing many thousands of Hmong (Hamilton-Meritt 1993: 446). The Hmong population of Laos, fearful of further persecution, began to flee the country, often landing in refugee camps in Thailand (Chan 1994: 46). From there many immigrated to the US, where they were granted a special immigrant status as past allies of the United States government (Beck 1994).

Many Hmong refugees were settled in the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota, a major destination for the settlement of Hmong refugees, along with Fresno, California. Wisconsin and Minnesota were often chosen for settlement of Hmong refugees because of their active social service agencies and relatively generous social-welfare systems (Beck 1994).

Wisconsin has several large concentrations of Hmong in the central part of the state - in the medium sized cities of Wausau, Eau Claire, LaCrosse and Menomonie (see Table One). Eastern Wisconsin also has large concentrations of Hmong in Green Bay, Appleton and Sheboygan. In Minnesota, the Hmong population is largely centered in St. Paul, the capital and the second largest city in the state

Having arrived relatively recently in the late 1970s and 1980s, most Hmong-Americans are still dealing with the challenges of adjusting to the American culture and society (Pamperin 2001: Chan 1994: Beck 1994). Although progress is being made in raising the living standards and economic independence of Wisconsin's Hmong population (Moua 2001), most Hmong-Americans still have income levels substantially lower than the state averages in Minnesota and Wisconsin (see Table One). Educational achievement has been a difficult process for the Hmong, with Hmong-Americans completing high school at a rate lower than most non-Hmong-Americans (See Table One). Many Hmong do not speak English as a first language and the transition from the unique and complex Hmong language to proficiency in English has not been an easy process (Beck 1994).

The Hmong culture is quite distinctive from modern American culture. Traditional Hmong culture emphasizes strong family cohesion, parental authority and respect for elders.

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., *Hmong Studies Journal* 8: 1-35.

Hmong society is organized into several clans that provide social and cultural leadership for Hmong-Americans (Chan 1994: 53). The cultural adjustment to American society has been quite difficult with a perceived breakdown of the Hmong family and clan system and a growth in certain social problems in the Hmong-American community, such as juvenile crime (Chan 1994; Beck 1994).

Expectations of Hmong Political Behavior

No known comprehensive studies of Hmong-American electoral behavior have yet been undertaken. With no specific body of literature existing as a reference for this study, comparative literature has been utilized for this purpose. Some of the studies of electoral behavior that would appear relevant to Hmong-Americans could be (1) studies of Asian American electoral behavior in general, as the Hmong are an Asian ethnic group, and (2) studies of the political behavior of ethnic groups with a similar refugee background, such as Cuban-Americans. Some exploration of literature dealing with electoral behavior in general could also be of value in exploring this topic.

Research on Asian-American Electoral Behavior

Due to the recent arrival of many Asian immigrants, the literature on Asian Americans is not as extensive as that which deals with more numerous and longer established groups, such as African-Americans or Hispanics (McClain and Stewart 1995: 73). With Asian Americans the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, it can be expected that their political behavior will receive more attention in the future, however, currently the body of literature is quite limited.

Naturalization, Registration and Turnout

The small body of literature dealing with the political behavior of Asian-Americans finds that Asian American political behavior is influenced by numerous social and cultural factors. Asian Americans are quicker to naturalize than other ethnic groups (Barkan 1983), suggesting a general desire for Asian Americans to enter the mainstream of American society. This finding may have some relevance to political behavior as a desire for citizenship can possibly be motivated by the objective of having a more active role in the political process, something denied those without American citizenship (Pelissero 2000: 753-754).

It could also be suggested that the general social conditions of Asian Americans could result in higher levels of electoral participation. Asian Americans often show levels of education and income higher than most minority groups and sometimes levels of socio-economic status (SES) that exceed even white Americans. The dominant model for electoral participation in the U.S. is the SES model, which suggests that higher educational achievement and higher income levels tend to stimulate higher levels of electoral participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

However, most studies of Asian American electoral participation show levels of electoral participation at lower rates than for the general population. This level of electoral participation tends to remain low, even controlling for SES (Lien 1997; Wong 1986). Pelissero (2000) found Asian American voters in Chicago to have an overall lower level of turnout than non-Asian voters.

Two major causes for this general disengagement from the political process have been

suggested by several studies of Asian American electoral behavior. Feng and Tang's 1997 study finds a strong connection between lingual and cultural barriers and Asian-American electoral participation. Many Asian Americans may not be proficient in English, limiting the information available to them on the electoral process and about the major candidates and issues. This information tends to stimulate voter interest in electoral contests.

Another factor could be the impact of naturalization status and the relatively recent arrival of some Asian Americans in the United States. Asian Americans are a relatively new ethnic group with a substantial number of them arriving in recent years. This immigrant status could hinder political participation in several ways. Many Asian immigrants have not become naturalized American citizens and thus are not eligible to vote. The naturalization process for many immigrants can be quite lengthy, creating a "lag time" for recent immigrants to participate in the American political process. Newly arrived immigrants also tend to lack familiarity with the voting process in the United States, perhaps resulting in fewer of them turning out at the polls. Pelissero (2000) found Asian American registration and turnout to rise with the longer tenure of Asian immigrants in Chicago neighborhoods.

Several studies of minority group electoral participation suggests that minority status in general results in lower levels of voter turnout, even controlling for SES. These studies find that minority status contributes to feelings of psychological distance between minority group members and the American political system (Schwartz 1973). It has also been suggested that the small population concentrations of most minority groups reduce the political efficacy of these groups, giving them little incentive to mobilize electorally.

Partisan Direction among Asian-American Voters

Studies of partisan direction among Asian Americans have suggested little connection between Asian American ethnicity and either of the two major parties. An earlier study of partisan preference found a connection between Chinese-Americans and the Republican Party (Cain, Kieweit and Uhlaner 1991). More recent studies have found a moderate connection between Asian-Americans and a preference for Democratic candidates (Pelissero 2000; McClain and Stewart 1995; Nakanishi 1994). The general assumption is that Asian Americans show a very high level of partisan independence, with a perhaps a slight preference for the Democratic Party (McClain and Stewart 1995; Nakanishi 1994). Pelissero (2000) found a moderately strong link between Asian-American ethnic groups and the Democratic party in Chicago city elections.

A possibly relevant literature on the partisan direction of Hmong-Americans might be the research dealing with Cuban-Americans; a group with serious cultural and demographic differences with Hmong-Americans, but whose experiences as refugees fleeing Communist domination of their homeland has some parallels with the experience of the Hmong. Moreno and Warren (1988) and (1992) note a strong preference for the Republican Party among Cuban-Americans, a preference tied to Cuban-American perception of the Republican Party as being more responsive to their efforts to bring an end to the Communist regime of Fidel Castro in power in Cuba. Moreno states that this preference for Republican candidates has persisted into second generation Cuban-Americans born in the United States (Moreno 1992). While this assumption has never been examined systematically, perhaps similar circumstances exist for

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., Hmong Studies Journal 8: 1-35.

Hmong-Americans and a similar preference for the Republican Party among Hmong-Americans is possible and could be linked to foreign policy considerations.

Hmong-Americans and Expectations of Political Participation.

SES expectations about the effect of income, education and minority status on voting behavior would indicate that Hmong-Americans will show low levels of electoral turnout and a partisan preference for the Democratic Party (Flanigan and Zingale 1998). Hmong-Americans combine the assumed unfamiliarity with the American political process, the language and cultural barriers to voting, along with levels of SES lower than for most Asian-American ethnic groups (Zaniewski and Rosen 1998). Compared to other groups, Hmong-Americans have very recently immigrated to America, beginning to arrive in the 1970s through the mid-1990s with another significant refugee resettlement in the 2004-06 period (Hmong Cultural Center 2007; P. Vang 2001; Chan 1994). The Hmong also face serious lingual and cultural barriers to assimilation in American society, something that is expected to have a negative impact on levels of voter turnout.

Hmong Electoral Behavior in Central Wisconsin.

Survey Methods

A methodologically sophisticated study of Hmong-American electoral behavior would be of extreme difficulty at this point in the Hmong-American experience. As Hmong-Americans are not a tremendously large percentage of the population of the Central Wisconsin and the Twin Cities metropolitan region electoral districts in which they reside, an analysis of voting results of these districts would not provide much useful data regarding Hmong-American turnout

or voting patterns. Hmong-Americans have also arrived in the United States rather recently, limiting the number of elections that could be examined for an impact from Hmong voters. No known major survey of Hmong-American attitudes toward politics and government has been undertaken (Lee 2001; Moua 2001). The approach of this research is to begin the process of exploring Hmong-American electoral behavior by obtaining relevant information on this topic using as many sources as possible. Newspaper articles and other media coverage of the political activities of Hmong-Americans have been reviewed for this purpose.

Perhaps the most significant sources of illuminating information on this topic has been personal interviews with many of the individuals who have expertise dealing with the electoral behavior of the Hmong-American population of Central Wisconsin. A relatively wide range of community leaders, political activists and candidates for electoral office have been contacted for this survey and their observations on Hmong-American electoral behavior have been useful in beginning the exploration of this topic (Yang 2001; Her 2001; Lee 2001; Moua 2001; Xiong 2001; P. Vang 2001; S. Vang 2001; Pamperin 2001). All of the Hmong-Americans who ran elected office in Central Wisconsin in the 1990s have been contacted for this study, with the exception of one. While this method is perhaps general and lacking in sophistication, the observations given on the topic of Hmong-American electoral behavior can give some illumination on this topic, which is of special significance to American politics in general and the politics of the Upper Midwest in specific. It is hoped that as the amount of data on Hmong-American electoral behavior increases, the methodological sophistication of research on this topic will continue to improve as well.

Turnout among Hmong-American Voters

A strong consensus exists across the Hmong-American community leaders and electoral activists about the general disengagement of the Hmong-American voter from the American political process (Yang 2001; Her 2001; Lee 2001; Moua 2001; P. Vang 2001; S. Vang 2001). Most described a rather low level of electoral turnout among the Hmong population of Central Wisconsin. Yang Kay Moua, Hmong Community Liaison Officer for the City of Eau Claire, Hmong-American community leader and a co-chair of Neng Lee's successful run for Eau Claire City Council reported that an informal poll of the Hmong-Americans community taken in 2000 found about 25% of those contacted reported voting in recent elections (Moua 2001).

This lack of electoral mobilization fits the dominant SES models about electoral turnout among minorities, immigrants and low SES voters in general (Flanigan and Zingale 1998; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). However, several unique cultural, social and economic factors have been suggested by observers of Hmong-American voters for the low levels of electoral turnout among Hmong-Americans voters. These include:

(1) Language and Naturalization

One of the major difficulties for Hmong-Americans in dealing with the American government and American society in general is the difficulty many Hmong-Americans have in mastering the English language (Moua 2001). Language barriers keep Hmong-Americans from voting in several ways, by limiting the information available to them about the issues and candidates and creating a feeling of unfamiliarity about electoral procedures. Although ballots

and electoral materials are provided in the Hmong language, some Hmong-Americans are apparently unaware of the availability of these materials (Moua 2001).

The language issue has had an added impact on the Hmong community's level of political participation as the difficulties of mastering English has hindered the naturalization process for many Hmong. The naturalization process requires some level of proficiency in English and this has slowed the naturalization process of many Hmong immigrants (Shah 1999). This phenomenon probably has more impact on the Hmong community more than some other immigrant groups because of the complexities of the Hmong language. The Hmong tongue is quite distinct and unique and transition between Hmong and English is a difficult process (Chan 1994).

The Hmong community lobbied very aggressively for legislation in the United States Congress lessening the language requirement for Hmong veterans of the Indochina War in the naturalization process (Shah 1999). Pao Vang, executive director of Hmong community associations in both Eau Claire and Menomonie, suggests that the effort to lobby for this legislation was seen by many in the Hmong-American community as a way of hastening the entry of many Hmong-Americans to the mainstream of the American political process and American society in general.

(2) The Impact of low Income Levels

Stephen Vang, a Hmong community leader in Central Wisconsin and the Hmong Student Advisor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, notes that for many Hmong-Americans economic survival has been the focus of their efforts in America, with participation in politics and other

activities taking a secondary role. Vang notes that unlike some immigrant groups, the Hmong arrived in a state of extreme poverty and the overall need to survive economically has been the primary focus of the Hmong community in the early phases of settlement. Other observers of the Hmong community concur on Vang's assessment that the general economic hardship facing Hmong-Americans in Wisconsin has been a major force in depressing electoral turnout among Hmong-Americans (Moua 2001; P. Vang 2001).

(3) Perceived Lack of Political Efficacy

Hmong-Americans, due to their small numbers, tend to feel a general lack of efficacy in influencing the American electoral process (P. Vang 2001). Composing a small fraction of the total population of Minnesota and Wisconsin, it is not surprising that many Hmong-Americans feel that their votes will have little impact on the outcome of state and federal elections (S. Vang 2001). Successful Hmong-American candidates for elected office have all been at the municipal or school board levels, where the smaller numbers of Hmong-American voters can have a more serious impact and in at-large elections, where several of the candidates who received votes are advanced to positions in government, rather than just one candidate elevated to office.

Partisan Preference among Hmong voters

Discussion of Hmong-American voting preference with several observers of the Hmong community reveals some unique circumstances. Many leaders of the Hmong Community suggest that Hmong show a marked dichotomy in their partisan preference, supporting Democratic candidates for local and state level offices while preferring Republican candidates for national office (Moua 2001; P. Vang 2001; S. Vang 2001).

The general perception is that this possible high level of support for the Republican party for national elections, especially Presidential elections, lies in a belief among many Hmong-Americans that the Republican Party is more likely to pursue foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia that might result in the weakening of Communist domination of Laos (P. Vang 2001; S. Vang 2001; Peterson 1991). In 1991, Minnesota's then Republican Party chairman Bon Weinholzer, remarked that for the Hmong and other Southeast Asian groups "foreign policy is the main thing, they feel that the Democrats betrayed them" and that "these people are more dyed in wool Republican than I am" (Peterson 1991). Regardless of the accuracy of that statement, for many Hmong-Americans, the situation in Laos is something that is still relevant to them in many ways. Pao Vang notes the large number of Hmong-Americans who have family members in Laos who are still suffering severe discrimination at the hands of the Communist Pathet Lao regime and their Vietnamese allies (S. Vang 2001). Vang states that foreign-policy considerations are something Hmong-Americans consider quite seriously when making their electoral choices, to a higher degree than the general American electorate.

Joe Bee Xiong and Neng Lee, both successful Hmong-American candidates for elected office, and Yang Kay Moua felt that this Republican preference was held by many older Hmong-Americans, but that an overall high level of political independence or a slight preference for the Democratic party would be an more accurate picture of the partisan preference among most Hmong-Americans (Lee 2001; Moua 2001; Xiong 2001). They felt that the Democratic Party has tended to be more responsive to Hmong concerns in general and that Democratic positions on social-welfare and economic policy better reflect Hmong-American views on public policy

(Lee 2001). Ka Ying Yang, former Executive Director of the Southeast Asian Action Resource Center, (SEARAC) and a Hmong-American community leader active in national politics, suggested that this preference for Democratic candidates will decrease as more Hmong-Americans become more familiar with domestic American political issues (Yang 2001).

The Democratic preference for local offices fits quite nicely with established notions about the link between low SES and minority voters and the Democratic Party (Flanigan and Zingale 1998; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). However, the general perception of a relatively high Hmong-American support for the Republican party at the national level runs contrary to SES assumptions of partisan preference. This suggests a possible similarity between Hmong-Americans and other ethnic groups with refugee origins, such as Cuban-Americans, in the preeminence of foreign policy considerations in making decisions about which of the two major parties to support (Moreno and Warren 1992).

Hmong-American Candidates for Electoral Office

Literature on Candidate Emergence

The large number of Hmong-Americans choosing to run for office in the Upper Midwest is something that is considered by many to be an unexpected development (Sturdevent 2000: Associated Press 2000). No significant research on the emergence of candidates from the Hmong community or other immigrant groups has been located for this survey. Parenti (1967) suggests that it generally takes several decades for an immigrant ethnic group to begin the process of becoming active in politics and the rapid rate of entry into local politics for the Hmong community of the Upper Midwest would appear to be quite surprising. Some reference

for this question can be found in several explorations of the topic of candidate emergence in general. Several studies have examined the issue of candidate emergence, examining the factors that influence why and when citizens choose to run for elected office.

Classic studies by Schlesinger (1966) and Prewitt (1970) have done much to shape the dominant assumptions on this issue (Krebs 1995). Both studies minimized the importance of choosing to run for office as a form of political expression or as a desire to contribute to change in their community, and suggest that the motivations of most candidates for public office are generally limited to career ambitions or elite recruitment into candidacy. According to these classic studies, few candidates for elected office, especially at the state and local levels, run for office out of a desire to advance issue positions, represent group interests or engage in the advancement of a particular ideological perspective. Schlesinger, examining political ambition in general, found ambition for public office to be tied heavily to the perception of electoral success, with few challengers opting to challenge the incumbent in districts which enjoy an established incumbent (Schlesinger 1966).

Dealing more specifically with city council positions and other local offices, Prewitt suggested that competition for city-council seats was quite limited and candidate selection was largely a result of elite recruitment processes. Prewitt notes that most challengers for electoral office at the city level are encouraged to run by those already in positions of power (Prewitt 1970). Engstrom and Pezant (1975) found motivations for candidacy for local office to be tied to an individual's desire to build a career in politics and government service and generally not out of a desire to fulfill a civic duty or promote a particular ideological viewpoint.

Bledsoe, (1993) describes a more varied motivation for the decision to run for electoral office. In his 1993 survey of city-council candidates, Bledsoe found some city-council candidates to have mentioned a diverse range of considerations that influenced their decision to run for city council, including a desire to represent group interests and to have the ability to have a role in shaping the policy outcomes of local government (Bledsoe 1993 ch. 3).

The assumptions of Schlesinger and Prewitt make the rapid emergence of Hmong candidates appear to be quite surprising. Possessing a small fraction of the overall population of the districts they reside in and being part of an ethnic community with an assumed low turnout, most Hmong-Americans would find their possibilities of electoral success to be somewhat limited (S. Vang 2001). With little experience in the American political process and a general lack of Hmong role models in elected office in the U.S., it could be assumed that few Hmong-Americans would choose to run for elected office.

Hmong Candidates in the Upper Midwest 1991-2007

The late 1990s have seen a relatively large number of Hmong-Americans running for local office in Central Wisconsin and the Twin Cities Metropolitan region. As many as ten Hmong-Americans have run for elected office in Wisconsin since 1993 (Moua 2001: Xiong 2001: Sturdevant 2000), with five Hmong candidacies in Eau Claire, Wisconsin alone.

Chor “Charlie” Vue was the first Hmong-American to run for elected office in Eau Claire, when he ran for the school board in 1993. Vue was not successful in his quest; however, he did receive fifteen percent of the at-large vote. The late Joe Bee Xiong was the first known Hmong-American elected to public office in Wisconsin when he was elected to an at-large

position on the Eau Claire City Council in 1996 (Associated Press 2000). Xiong was re-elected for another term in 1998, with the second highest vote total of the nine at-large candidates (See Table Two). Xiong chose to retire from the city council in 2000 to spend more time with his family (Xiong 2001).

Joe Bee Xiong's election was seen as a watermark event in the Hmong community according to Ka Ying Yang, of the Southeast Asia Action Resource Center (Associated Press 2000). In 2000, two Hmong-American candidates declared for local elected office. Neng Lee for an at-large city council position and Chong Chang Her chose to run for the Eau Claire school board. Neng Lee was able to keep a Hmong-American presence on the city council after Xiong's retirement. However, Her was unsuccessful in his bid for a position on the school board garnering 14% of the total at-large vote. These candidacies brought serious attention to the growing political activism of the Hmong community of Central Wisconsin (Her 2001; Lee 2001; Xiong 2001; Moua 2001; Associated Press 2000). Subsequently, Saidang Xiong (2002-2004) and Thomas Vue (2006-present) were elected to the Eau Claire City Council (Moua 2007).

In nearby Minnesota, a state with a more sizable and concentrated Hmong-American population, Hmong-American candidates have also emerged at a rapid rate. A Hmong-American was first elected to public office in the United States in 1991 with the election of Choua Lee to the St. Paul school board. Neal Thao followed Choua Lee to the St. Paul school board in 1995 (Sturdevent 2000; Smith 1995). Lormong Lor was elected and served on the Omaha, Nebraska City Council from 1994 through 2001. (Moua 2007). Both Choua Lee and Neal Thao had the endorsement of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL). In the Fall of 2000, 28

year old Cy Thao ran unsuccessfully for the Minnesota State House of Representatives under the banner of the third party Independent Party (Sturdevent 2000).

In 2002, two Hmong-Americans were elected to the Minnesota state legislature, Mee Moua garnered a seat in the Minnesota state senate and Cy Thao won election to the Minnesota state house of representatives. Both candidates ran under the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) banner and utilized campaign organizations that drew upon the Hmong clan system to mobilize Hmong-American voters (Yoshikawa 2006). Moua and Thou have been reelected several times and are influential voices in the Minnesota state legislature. When Neal Thao stepped down, Kazoua Kong-Thao was elected to the Saint Paul School Board in 2003 and was subsequently reelected in November 2007, in the same election, Pakou Hang was defeated by the incumbent officeholder in an attempt to win a seat on the Saint Paul City Council (LaVenture, 2007). Outside of the upper Midwest, Xiong Blong conducted a successful campaign for a Fresno, California City Council seat, mobilizing the support of the substantial Hmong-American population in the Fresno area and receiving strong support from Hispanic and African American voters (Stanley 2006). Noah Lor was elected to the Merced, CA City Council in 2007 (Moua 2007).

In 2006, the late Joe Bee Xiong failed in a bid for a seat in the Wisconsin State Legislature (Lee Pao Xiong 2007).

Reasons for Rapid Emergence of Hmong Candidates

Few other immigrant communities have experienced the rapid growth of electoral candidates that has taken place in the Hmong-American community of the Upper Midwest.

The sizable Southeast Asian community of the Twin Cities Metro area (including the Vietnamese and Laotian communities) has yet to field a candidate for elected office (Moua 2001). The Hispanic community of Wisconsin or Minnesota has also not yielded candidates despite a growing population.

Yong Kay Moua remarked that the Hmong have a cultural affinity for government and politics (Moua 2001). He noted that in pre-Communist Laos, many Hmong served in the Laotian government and also served were in advisory positions to the Laotian monarchy. He recalls that the Hmong were important mediators between the 64 ethnic groups that comprised Laotian society. Perhaps the choice for government service is one that many Hmong find consistent with community values and norms. Moua and other observers of the Hmong community feel that the community exhibits a high level of group consciousness and unity (Yang 2001; Moua 2001; Chan 1994; Beck 1994). The clan system tends to tie the Hmong community closer together than other immigrant groups, with Hmong-Americans living in closer proximity and engaging in more social interaction than other newly arrived ethnic groups. This could give Hmong candidates a perception of stronger support for their electoral efforts from within their own community compared to prospective candidates from other ethnic groups (Moua 2001).

Another possible reason for the rapid rise in the number of Hmong candidates is the relevance of government policy to Hmong-Americans (Her 2001; Beck 1994). From the beginning of their experiences in the U.S., Hmong-American leaders have been quite aware of the relevance of government decisions to their community, beginning with the strong tie between the United States military and the Hmong originating in the Vietnam War, and continuing with

the impact of social service agency decisions

In the Upper Midwest, Hmong-Americans have had a close relationship with government officials and governmental agencies (Her 2001). While many immigrant groups come to the United States for primarily for economic reasons, the Hmong motivations for immigration to the United States have been more strongly linked to American government public policy and foreign policy decisions (Beck 1994). The settlement of Hmong refugees in the Upper Midwest was largely coordinated by governmental agencies and the material well-being of Hmong-Americans has been seriously influenced by social-welfare policy at the state level (P. Vang 2001). These experiences have contributed to a definite familiarity for Hmong-American community leaders with state and federal government elected officials and governmental agencies in the United States, and a realization among many Hmong in the U.S. of the special relevance of government policy to their community.

Ka Ying Yang suggested that the rural and medium-sized cities of Central Wisconsin are conducive to Hmong-American candidacies, as Hmong-Americans are more visible in these communities and more capable of garnering the attention of the non-Hmong community (Yang 2001). In Central Wisconsin, Hmong-Americans are the only significant minority group and face little competition from other minority groups in their efforts to gain some recognition from the larger white community. The Hmong candidates for elected office in central Wisconsin have received substantial local media attention for their campaign efforts (Xiong 2001). Perhaps urban ethnic groups residing in more urbanized settings face a more difficult task of bringing their concerns to a greater level of notoriety as there is more competition from other ethnic groups and

other organized interests for the attention of the community at large.

Motivations of Hmong Candidates

Much of the literature on candidate emergence ties the emergence of candidates for electoral office to elite recruitment (Prewitt 1973), a desire for careers in politics (Engstrom and Pezant 1975) and a perception that an electoral victory is possible (Schlesinger 1966). None of the Hmong candidates examined in this research noted a strong desire for a career in politics, or a position in government (Her 2001; Lee 2001; Xiong 2001; Sturdevent 2000; Walsh 1991). Several also noted that they did not expect electoral success when they chose to run for elected office (Moua 2001; Xiong 2000; Sturdevent 2000). The late Joe Bee Xiong chose to retire from the Eau Claire City Council in 2000 as his long-term career plans did not include continued time in government service (Xiong 2001). Many of these candidates suggested that they chose to run for office not because of a desire for elected office but out of a desire to (1) provide a stimulus for Hmong-Americans to involve themselves in electoral participation (2) create a greater recognition of the Hmong-American community and Hmong issues among the general populace and (3) give some group representation for Hmong-Americans in relation to government policy outcomes that influence Hmong-Americans. Perhaps Bledsoe's portrait of candidates for electoral office often exhibiting a desire for community service and group representation appears to be a more accurate portrayal of the motivations of these Hmong-American candidates.

(1) Mobilization

Many of the Hmong-American candidates who chose to run for elected office in this survey have suggested that their candidacy would contribute to electoral mobilization in the

Hmong-American community by giving Hmong-Americans a recognizable member of the community to mobilize behind and to begin to participate in the American political process. The late Joe Bee Xiong linked his desire to run for city council in Eau Claire to an effort to stimulate political participation among Hmong-Americans and to bring the Hmong-American community closer to the mainstream of city government and politics. He felt that having a Hmong candidate in the City-Council race in April of 1996 would make Hmong-Americans feel more part of the community, and more likely to grasp the impact of city government on their lives (Xiong 2001).

Cy Thao of St. Paul felt that his “long-shot” 2000 third party effort for the Minnesota State House of Representatives was motivated by a desire to increase Hmong-American electoral turnout and begin to lay the framework for increased political efficacy for Hmong-Americans in Minnesota. Thao, quoted in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, remarked “Win or lose, we want to create a Hmong voting bloc. We have got to be sure that we have a voice ten years from now. Right now the Hmong are interested in working as a group. Years from now they will be scattered. We have to establish a tradition of political cohesiveness now and make it a basic part of community life. If I can do that, we will be taken seriously by all parties” (Sturdevent 2000).

Ka Ying Yang noted that the candidacies of Joe Bee Xiong and other Hmong candidates have done much to convince Hmong-Americans of the potential of a stronger voice in American politics and government. She notes that when Joe Bee Xiong announced his candidacy and was successful in his quest for elected office, many Hmong-Americans, both in the Upper Midwest and elsewhere in America, began to take a much stronger interest in politics and understood need to participate in electoral activities. (Yang 2001).

(2) Need to Gain More Recognition of Hmong Community and Hmong-American Issues

Yong Kay Moua noted that his first experience with American government as a Hmong community leader in the U.S. was when, in the early 1980s, he was contacted by the Eau Claire Police Department over several erroneous reports from local residents that Hmong refugees were capturing and using domestic dogs as food. These obviously inaccurate reports convinced Moua and other Hmong community leaders of the need to increase the profile of their community in the general population and to try and inform the general populace about the Hmong culture and historical experience. The process of encouraging electoral candidates for office is part of this process (Moua 2001). Moua reported a general desire of Hmong community and clan leaders to field candidates and encourage political activities and running for office among Hmong-Americans in the 1990s.

The late Joe Bee Xiong saw his campaign for city council as a way of creating momentum for greater understanding of the Hmong community in the city of Eau Claire (Xiong 2001). Xiong in the years before his city council campaign had been actively involved in informing the non-Hmong population of Eau Claire about Hmong culture and the challenges facing Hmong citizens of Wisconsin. Xiong served as a volunteer and unofficial representative of Hmong citizens on many city commissions, and also organized cultural presentations that informed and educated the general populace of Central Wisconsin about the unique culture of Hmong-Americans and their remarkable historical experience (Xiong 2001).

Xiong believed that his effort for city council, whether it had been successful or not, raised the profile of the Hmong community in Eau Claire and brought Hmong issues more into

the mainstream of local politics. He also suggested that having a Hmong-American on the city council brought a greater sense of shared community between the Hmong-American and non-Hmong community of Eau Claire.

(3) Issue Advocacy

Choua Lee felt the need for a Hmong voice in the policy process of the St. Paul school board and became the first Hmong-American elected to public office in American history (Walsh 1991). Her candidacy seemed motivated by, at least in part, a desire to have a Hmong-American impact on the decisions of the school board relevant to Hmong-Americans (Smith 1995).

Hmong-Americans have special concerns about the policy outcomes of the local government and several observers of the Hmong-American community have found a link between the growing number of Hmong candidates for the school board and these decisions (Yang 2001; Lee 2001; P. Vang 2001; S. Vang 2001). The local school board is an area of special-concern for Hmong-Americans. Generally having larger families and higher birth-rates than non-Hmong-Americans, the education of their children is of crucial importance to the Hmong community (Moua 2001; P Vang 2001; S Vang 2001; Smith 1995). Stephen Vang noted a very strong sentiment in the Hmong Community that their overall economic success would be tied to educational achievement (S. Vang 2001). One outcome of school policy in the Upper Midwest that has had considerable resonance for the Hmong community is the support of bi-lingual education programs for Hmong students and the use of translators for Hmong students not proficient in English (Colaizy 2001). The continued survival of these programs has been called into question in several school districts, including the Eau Claire school district (Colaizy 2001) and

Hmong citizens have expressed concern about the future of these programs. Chong Chang Her, candidate for Eau Claire school board in 2000, linked some of his motivation for running for office to his desire to have a Hmong-American voice in school board decisions dealing with bilingual education and other school board decisions relevant to the Hmong-American community of Eau Claire (Her 2001).

Conclusions

While this research is a somewhat general exploration of Hmong-American electoral behavior, a few suggestions about Hmong-American electoral behavior can be advanced. One is the general low level of voter turnout of the Hmong-American community. No observer of the Hmong-American community doubted the general appropriateness of the SES model to Hmong electoral turnout. Perhaps a more unexpected finding of this survey is the possible higher level of Republican partisan support among the Hmong-American voters of the Upper Midwest.

The unusually rapid increase in candidate emergence in the Hmong-American community appears less motivated by a desire by Hmong-Americans to hold positions of power in Central Wisconsin and Minnesota communities, but appears to be linked perhaps to a desire by many Hmong-Americans to raise the level of awareness of the Hmong community among non-Hmong residents of these communities. Few of the candidates for office in this study appeared to have the motivations for elected office associated with many challengers for elected office, such as the desire for a career in political office or recruitment from the established power structures. Many of these electoral efforts also appeared to be part of an overall desire of many Hmong community leaders to mobilize more Hmong-Americans in the electoral process and a

desire for some form of Hmong-American representation in governmental policies relevant to their community, most notably the desire for some input on school board decisions.

The Future

Since their relatively recent arrival in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Hmong community has made significant economic, social and political progress. Yet the future cohesion and political mobilization of the Hmong community in the Upper Midwest and in America in general is still very much in question. The Hmong community, with a generally higher birthrate than the general population will become a more significant voting bloc and this could result in an increased electoral mobilization and efficacy among members of this community. The high level of social and cultural unity exhibited by the Hmong-American community could also result in a strong Hmong-American voting bloc (Yang 2001).

However, a growing mobility and increased assimilation of the Hmong community of the Upper Midwest could also reduce group cohesiveness and cause an erosion of group consciousness in the Hmong-American community. As Hmong-Americans integrate economically and socially into mainstream America, it is a definite possibility that they may lose their cultural distinctiveness and group consciousness, a phenomenon that many feel has already taken place in many Asian ethnic groups (Wong 1986).

The electoral behavior of Hmong-Americans also deserves more examination. As the level of data on this topic increases, a more systematic and sophisticated voting study will be more feasible. More general surveys of Hmong-Americans on their views related to voting and government would be quite interesting, and these surveys will become more possible as more

Hmong-Americans become more proficient in English.

A survey of the Hmong-American electoral candidates suggests a strong belief that the continued emergence of candidates from their community will proceed well into the future.

Several reported that they were aware of several Hmong-American planning future candidacies in Wisconsin (Moua 2001; Xiong 2001).

Perhaps the future of the Hmong-American community will involve the entry of many Hmong into politics and government service. Yong Kay Moua suggested that through the history of their people, the Hmong functioned as important advisors to the Laotian monarchy and served as mediators between Laotian ethnic groups. He suggests that the Hmong might be able to contribute to their new homeland in a similar fashion, by adding their unique talents and cultural perspective to an increasingly diverse American social and political landscape.

References Cited

Books and Journal Articles

- Beck, Roy. 1994. "The ordeal of immigration in Wausau." *Atlantic Monthly* April 1994.
- Bledsoe, Timothy. 1993. *Careers in city politics: The case for urban democracy*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Cain, B.E., D. R. Kieweit, and C.J. Uhlaner. 1991. "The acquisition of partisanship by Latinos and Asian-Americans." *American Journal of Political Science* 35: 29-55.
- Chan, Sucheng. 1994. *Hmong means free: life in Laos and America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Engstrom, R.L., and J.N. Pezant. 1975. "Candidate attraction to politicized office: New Orleans" *Social Science Quarterly* 56: 975-982.
- Feng, K. and B. Tang. 1997. *Southern California Asian Pacific Exit poll report*. Los Angeles: Asian-American Legal Center of South California.
- Ferris, Micheal. 1994. "A study of political participation in the Hmong community" In *A gathering of voices on the Asian American political experience*. Annette White-Parks, et al. eds. Fort Atkinson, WI; Highsmith.
- Flanigan, William H. and Nancy Zingale. 1998. *Political behavior of The American Electorate* Washington: CQ Press.
- Hamilton-Meritt, Jane. 1993. *Tragic Mountains: the Hmong, the Americans and the secret war for Laos*. Bloomington and Indianapolis; Indiana University Press.
- Hmong Cultural Center. 2007. *Hmong 101 Presentation*.
<http://hmongcc.org/BuildingBridgesGeneralPresentation2007Version.pdf>
Retrieved 29 November 2007.
- Krebs, Timothy. 1999. "The political and demographic predictors of candidate emergence in city council elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 35(2): 279-300.
- Lien, P. 1997 *The Political Participation of Asian-Americans* New York: Garland

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., Hmong Studies Journal 8: 1-35.

McClain P.D. and J. Stewart Jr. 1995. *Can we all get along? Racial and ethnic politics in America.* Boulder Co: Westview

Moreno, Dario and Christopher Warren. 1992. "The Cuban community and the 1992 Presidential election." *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Politics* 6(1992-1993): 27-36.

Moreno, Dario and Christopher Warren. 1988. "Cubans in Florida: the conservative enclave." in Rodolfo de la Garza, Ed. *Latinos in the 1988 Election.* Boulder: Westview Press.

Moua, Tou Yer. 1994. Hmong values and political leadership as perceived by U.S. Hmong Ph. D dissertation, United States International University.

Nakanishi, D.T. 1994. "Asian American Politics: An agenda for research." *Amerasia Journal* 12: 1-27.

Parenti, Michael. 1967. "Ethnic politics and the persistence of ethnic voting." *American Political Science Review* 61: 717-726.

Pellisero, John P., Timothy Krebs and Shannon Jenkins. 2000 "Asian-Americans, political Organizations, and participation in Chicago electoral precincts." *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 35(6): 750-769.

Prewitt, K. 1970. *The recruitment of political leaders: A study of citizen leaders.* New York; Bobbs-Merril Corporation.

Schwartz, David. 1973. *Political Alienation and Political Behavior.* Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

Uhlener, C.J., B.E. Cain and D.R. Kieweit. 1989. "Political participation of ethnic minorities in the 1980s" *Political Behavior* 11: 195-231.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven CT; Yale University Press.

Wong, Peter. 1986. "Asian Immigrants: where do they come from, where are they now and where are they going?" *Annals of the Academe of Political and Social Science* 87: 150-168.

Yoshikawa, Taeko. 2006. "From a refugee camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case study of

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., *Hmong Studies Journal* 8: 1-35.

a Hmong woman's challenge. *Hmong Studies Journal* 7(1) 1-23.
<<http://hmongstudies.org/Yoshikawa.pdf>> Retrieved 29 November 2007.

Zaniewski, Kazimierz and Carol J. Rosen. 1998. *Atlas of Ethnic Diversity in Wisconsin*
Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Newspaper Articles

Armas, William 2001. "Asian population in U.S. soars." Associated Press. March 10, 2001.

Associated Press 2000. "Hmong citizens finding a place on Wisconsin ballots." *Duluth News-Tribune*. March 10, 2000.

Colaizy, Tawny. 2001 "Communicating differences." *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram* March 31, 2001.

Doyle, Michael. 2000. "Hmong citizenship bill wins final congressional OK." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* May 24, 2000. 1b

LaVenture, Tom. 2007. "Kazoua Kong-Thao reelected to school board, while Pakou Hang loses council race to Dan Bostrom." *Asian American Press* 12 November 2007.

Moua, Wameng. 2007. "Votes Don't Add Up for Pakou Hang." *Hmong Today*
1 November 2007.

Peterson, David. 1991 "As Minnesota's minorities gain power, they're reassessing political affiliation" *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* December 2, 1991 1b

Shah, Ally. 1999. "St. Paul school board members sending message of change." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. September 10, 1999. 1b.

Smith, Maurice. 1995. "School board standouts, Choua Lee, Mark Conlan make mark with activism". *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* February 20, 1995. 1b

Stanley, Eduardo. 2006. "Latinos Help Elect First Hmong City Council Member in California" *New American Media*, November 28.

Sturdevent, Lori. 2000. "Healthy impatience leads Hmong to politics." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. October 19, 2000 1b.

Walsh, James. 1991. "Hmong wins respect- and seat on school board." *Minneapolis Star-*

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., Hmong Studies Journal 8: 1-35.

Tribune. November 7, 1991 1b.

Personal Interviews

Her, Chong Chang. 2001. Candidate, Eau Claire School Board, personal interview. April 3, 2001.

Lee, Neng. 2001. Eau Claire City Council Representative, personal interview, April 2, 2001

Moua, Yong Kay. 2001. Hmong Community Liaison, City of Eau Claire, personal Interview March 30, 2001

Pamperin, Bruce.2001. Professor of Sociology and specialist on Hmong sociology, University of Wisconsin-Stout, personal interview February 19, 2001.

Vang, Pao. 2001. Executive Director, Hmong Community Association of Menomonie, WI and Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Eau Claire WI, personal interview, March 5, 2001.

Xiong. Lee Pao 2007. Director of the Center for Hmong Studies, Concordia University-St. Paul, Personal interview, January 29, 2007.

Vang, Steven. 2001. Director, Lao Human Rights Project and Hmong Student Advisor, University of Wisconsin-Stout, personal interview, February 22, 2001.

Xiong, Joe Bee. 2001. Eau Claire City Council Member 1996-2000, personal interview, March 28, 2001.

Yang, Ka Ying. 2001. Executive Director of the Southeast Asian Action Resource Council, personal interview, April 10, 2001.

Table 1- Hmong Demographics in Minnesota and Wisconsin (2000 U.S. Census)

Total Population

Minnesota	41,000
St. Paul	26,509
Minneapolis	10,000
Wisconsin	33,791
Milwaukee	8,078
Appleton	4,741
Wausau	4,453
Eau Claire	1,971

Hmong Demographics

Median Age

Minnesota Hmong-Americans	16.4
Wisconsin Hmong Americans	16.0
Minnesota State Average	36.7
Wisconsin State Average	36.0

Per-Capita Income

Minnesota Hmong-Americans	\$7,210
Minnesota State Average	\$23,198

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., Hmong Studies Journal 8: 1-35.

Wisconsin Hmong-Americans	\$6,860
Wisconsin State Average	\$21,271

Percentage in Poverty

Minnesota Hmong-Americans	33
Minnesota State Average	9
Wisconsin Hmong-Americans	26
Wisconsin State Average	11

Workforce Participation

Minnesota Hmong-Americans	62.5%
Minnesota State Average	72.2%
Wisconsin Hmong-Americans	54%
Wisconsin State Average	66%

Percentage High School Graduates

Minnesota Hmong-Americans	43.9
Minnesota State Average	87.9
Wisconsin Hmong-Americans	42.0
Wisconsin State Average	86.7

Table 2- Hmong Candidates for Office, Eau Claire County 1993-2000

1993- Eau Claire School Board

Chor “Charlie” Vue
 Votes Received: 6,295
 Percentage of Total Vote: 14%

Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence in the Hmong-American Community by Steven Doherty, PhD., Hmong Studies Journal 8: 1-35.

Order of Finish: 3rd of Four

1996- Eau Claire City Council

Joe Bee Xiong
Votes Received: 5,876
Percentage of Total Votes: 15%
Order of Finish: 3rd of 8

1998-Eau Claire City Council

Joe Bee Xiong
Votes Received: 4,209
Percentage of Total Votes: 16%
Order of finish; 2nd of 9

2000 Eau Claire City Council

Neng Lee
Votes Received: 5,704
Percentage of Total Votes: 14%
Order of Finish: 4th of 7