

## **Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Over the past several years, Hmong in the United States have gained prominence for their increasing involvement in politics. Most of the attention has understandably focused on Fresno, California and St. Paul, Minnesota, home to the two largest Hmong populations in this country. While the Hmong communities in both cities are similar in size and have made significant political progress as evidenced by the election of Hmong candidates, the Hmong community in St. Paul has made greater inroads in the political realm. In addition to the elections of two Hmong candidates to the Minnesota State Legislature and two to the St. Paul School Board, the Hmong community in St. Paul has been able to engage local and state governments in Minnesota to address issues that affect the Hmong community. Through interviews, census data, and newspaper coverage of political campaigns, I show that Hmong in St. Paul have achieved greater representation in local and state governments and received greater support from government officials than Hmong in Fresno because Minnesota offers a social, economic, and political context that is favorable to fostering Hmong political involvement. Compared to Hmong in Fresno, Hmong in St. Paul have higher levels of socioeconomic resources and are more visible given their large size relative to other minority groups. They live in a region with consistently high levels of political participation and have political candidates who devote resources to mobilizing the Hmong community. Moreover, the Hmong vote has been critical to the success of Hmong candidates in St. Paul, an indication of the increasing political clout of the Hmong community there and a major reason why politicians in Minnesota are more willing to respond to issues that affect the Hmong community. Overall, this study highlights the importance of local and regional context in understanding the political incorporation of immigrants.

### **Introduction**

The Hmong community in the U.S. has received significant media coverage over the past several years for their increasing involvement in local and state politics. Most of the attention has understandably focused on Hmong political involvement in two cities, St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California, home to the two largest urban concentrations of Hmong in the country. While the Hmong communities in both cities are similar in size and have made significant political

progress as evidenced by the election of Hmong candidates, the Hmong community in St. Paul has made greater inroads in the political realm. For instance, in 2002, Mee Moua became the first Hmong state official when she was elected to the Minnesota State Senate. Later in that same year, Cy Thao was also elected to the Minnesota State Legislature, where he is serving as a state representative. The following year, Kazoua Kong-Thao was elected to the St. Paul School Board, becoming the third Hmong in St. Paul to serve in that capacity. In 2009, Vallay Moua Varro, the sister of Mee Moua, joined Kong-Thao on the St. Paul School Board, marking the first time two Hmong individuals have served concurrently on the Board.

Aside from their involvement in electoral politics, Hmong in Minnesota have also successfully engaged Minnesota governments on issues that affect the Hmong community. In 2004, then-St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly led an unprecedented trip with a delegation of mostly Hmong educators and professionals to Thailand to assess the conditions of 15,000 Hmong refugees recently sponsored by the U.S. government to come to America. In 2006, both the Minnesota State Senate and House of Representatives unanimously passed resolutions condemning the desecration of Hmong graves in a Thai refugee camp. Furthermore, politicians from Congressional members and local and state officials have appointed Hmong as staff members. The most recent high profile appointments came in 2006 when the newly-elected St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman appointed two Hmong to the key positions of Education Director and Policy Associate in the mayor's office.

The political breakthrough of Hmong in Fresno also began in 2002 when Tony Vang won a seat on the Fresno School Board and became the first Hmong elected official in Fresno. Then in 2006, the Hmong community celebrated again as Blong Xiong became the first Asian American elected to the Fresno City Council and the first Hmong in California to be elected to any city council. Like their peers in St. Paul, Hmong in Fresno also organized their own

delegation and visited Hmong refugees in Thailand; however, whereas the trip in St. Paul was led by the mayor and thus supported by the local government, the Fresno trip was coordinated by a non-profit organization and funded by local private institutions.

The election of Hmong to local and state offices and the involvement of local and state government on matters that concern the Hmong community in Minnesota point to the increasing political influence and visibility of Hmong in Minnesota, specifically in the city of St. Paul, where over two-thirds of the Hmong Minnesotan population resides. Though Hmong in Fresno have achieved important political success, as seen by the elections of Tony Vang and Blong Xiong, they have yet to attain the level of influence of Hmong in St. Paul. Given these contrasting cases of Hmong political involvement, this study seeks to understand why Hmong in Minnesota have been able to achieve this level of political influence. Why do the local and state governments in Minnesota seem to be more willing to take up issues that directly concern the lives of Hmong? Why is the same level of government response not present in California, specifically Fresno? What factors account for the increasing political influence of Hmong in Minnesota? And do such factors exist in Fresno?

Given that elected officials generally respond to concerns that are shared by groups who form a substantial part of their constituency, and especially their voters, this study will examine factors that affect the electoral participation of Hmong communities in St. Paul and Fresno. Are Hmong residents in one area more likely to participate in politics? If so, what accounts for this difference? Furthermore, how important is the Hmong vote in elections? Given that Hmong are a relatively small ethnic group, how visible are Hmong communities in these two regions? Does one region offer a social, economic, or political context more favorable for Hmong to actively participate in the political process?

## Literature Review

Very little scholarly work has been produced on the subject of Hmong political involvement in this country. The few studies that do exist on the subject tend to focus on communities in the Midwest, specifically in Wisconsin and Minnesota. These studies have documented how the history and culture of Hmong have shaped their adaptation to political life in the United States (Hein 2006; Vang 2006). In his study of Hmong and Cambodian refugees in cities in the Midwest, Hein (2006) argues that the Hmong's sharply drawn ethnic boundaries and their minority status in their homeland give them a stronger sense of group identity than Cambodians, whose ethnic identity was more porous. Because of these features of their identity, Hmong are more likely to engage in collective action because they perceive higher levels of prejudice and discrimination compared to Cambodians who are likely to view hardships as stemming from personal failings.

With respect to attitudes towards politics, several studies show that Hmong generally hold favorable opinions about political participation, with many encouraging their children to be engaged in politics (Wong 2007; Doherty 2007). In her study of civic participation in the Hmong community in St. Paul, Wong (2007) finds the existence of a community-oriented political culture where ethnic solidarity in the pursuit of group equality and dignity is highly valued. Furthermore, she finds that Hmong parents encourage their children to be engaged in politics for the welfare of the Hmong community, and that holding elected office is encouraged as a career path. Similarly, Doherty (2007) argues that Hmong have a cultural affinity for government and politics.

The electoral success of Hmong candidates in the Midwest has been attributed to a number of factors, including the high concentration of Hmong residents, their visibility, and their improving economic conditions. Vang (2006) contends that the support derived from the large

concentration of Hmong in St. Paul played a key role in the successful election of Hmong candidates in St. Paul. Doherty (2007) argues that the medium-size cities of Central Wisconsin are conducive to Hmong candidacies because Hmong are more visible in these communities and more capable of garnering the attention of the non-Hmong community.

Aside from these studies of Hmong political participation, research on political participation in this country has emphasized the importance of four primary variables: socioeconomic resources, group consciousness, political mobilization, and context. The dominant perspective is that of the socioeconomic model of political participation which stresses the importance of resources in determining who is likely to become involved in the political process. According to this perspective, individuals with high levels of socioeconomic resources such as income, time, and high-status occupations are more likely to engage in politics (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). These individuals are more likely to participate because they have the time to participate and money to contribute to political campaigns, and they understand the political process. Moreover, they feel more of an obligation and a greater sense of efficacy (Brady, Verba, Schlozman 1995; Verba and Nie 1972). Another perspective examines how having a strong group identity and an awareness of one's marginalized status within society can propel people to participate at rates that are higher than expected based on their level of resources (Shingles 1981; Verba and Nie 1972). For instance, the candidacy of someone from one's racial or ethnic background may heighten one's identity and the perceived benefits, which, in turn, stimulates one to participate (Leighley 2001).

A third perspective underscores the importance of political mobilization and recruitment networks. According to this perspective, individuals who are encouraged to participate by political candidates, voluntary organizations, or other individuals are more likely to participate than those who do not receive such encouragements (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Conway

2000). Community organizations play an especially important role in the mobilization of immigrants because they provide information that increases immigrants' awareness and knowledge of how to participate (Bedolla 2005; Garcia 2003; Wong 2006). The fourth perspective argues that the resources that are associated with political participation are different based on the location of where people live (Bedolla 2005; Bobo and Gilliam 1992; Jones-Correa 2001). In other words, context is important because where one lives determines what sort of opportunities are available for the accumulation of socioeconomic resources and access to community organizations and political candidates who will devote resources to help individuals get involved in the political process (Bedolla 2005; Wong 2006).

### **Analytical Framework**

In this study, I will compare Hmong political involvement in St. Paul and Fresno based on the factors that previous research has shown to affect the political participation of people in this country. The first factor is that of socioeconomic status, which will include various indicators of socioeconomic status such as income, poverty rate, homeownership rate, and educational attainment. I argue that Hmong in St. Paul are more likely to participate in politics because they have more socioeconomic resources. More resources will lead to greater political participation through greater incentives for participation. The second factor I examine is the racial and ethnic context of each city and state. I argue that because Hmong in Minnesota are among one of the largest minority groups, this helps them in terms of their visibility. Furthermore, due to their large size relative to other minority groups, the Hmong vote in St. Paul will have a greater impact in elections than the Hmong vote in Fresno.

The third factor involves a comparison based on four indicators of the political context of each location. I will compare the history of voting in each state; the number of Hmong non-profit organizations in each city; the voting rules of each state that affect voter eligibility and turnout;

and the history of Hmong electoral political involvement prior to the election of the two candidates (Minnesota State Senator Mee Moua and Fresno City Council Member Blong Xiong) whose campaigns will be discussed. I argue that the political context of St. Paul is more favorable than the one in Fresno for facilitating the political participation of Hmong.

Finally, I will look at the impact that the candidacy of Hmong individuals had on the political participation of the Hmong community. Did more Hmong participate in these elections because of the Hmong candidates? How important was the political participation of the Hmong community to the success of these campaigns? Did these candidates devote resources to mobilize the Hmong community? I argue here that the Hmong vote in St. Paul is more significant to the success of the electoral campaigns and that Hmong candidates there are more likely to direct resources to mobilize Hmong voters.

My overall argument is that context, in terms of the local and state location, plays a critical role in shaping Hmong political participation. Context affects access to resources for upward mobility, the size of the Hmong population relative to other minority groups, and the type of political environment that can either hinder or facilitate the political participation of Hmong. These three factors affect how Hmong candidates run their campaigns and the extent to which the vote of the Hmong community plays any significance in these elections. The significance of the Hmong vote in these campaigns, in turn, will impact the extent to which political candidates reach out to the Hmong community during their campaigns and how they respond to the Hmong community's concerns once they are in office.

### **Research Methodology**

Data for this research was collected through observations, interviews, and examinations of newspaper articles and Census Bureau figures. I visited St. Paul and Fresno to conduct observations to gain a better understanding of the visibility and development of the Hmong

community as well as the economic condition of each city. During my time in each city, I interviewed many individuals knowledgeable about the political involvement and the development of the Hmong community there. The subjects I interviewed consisted of Hmong activists, politicians, non-profit organization personnel, and community leaders.

In addition to interviews and observations, data from the Census Bureau and mainstream newspaper coverage of the campaigns of the Hmong candidates were also consulted. Most of the information about the demographics of Fresno and St. Paul were gathered directly from the Census Bureau's website. However, census data specifically for Hmong were extracted from other studies and reports. Newspaper coverage was consulted to gather information on the electoral campaigns of the Hmong candidates. Information about the campaign of Mee Moua mostly came from newspaper coverage in the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Minneapolis Star Tribune. Meanwhile, the Fresno Bee newspaper was the primary source consulted for information about Blong Xiong's campaign.

### **Hmong in Fresno, California**

According to the 2000 Census, there are over 71,000 Hmong living in California (Pfeifer 2005). The majority of Hmong in California are dispersed throughout the Central Valley from Chico/Yuba City in the north down to Fresno in the south. Fresno leads the Central Valley cities with the largest Hmong population (23,000), followed by Sacramento (16,000), Merced (6,000), and Stockton (5,500). Census figures compiled from Hmong communities in the Central Valley show a community that is facing numerous economic challenges (APALC 2005). Over half of the Hmong population in California have less than a high school diploma and only 7 percent holds a bachelor's degree or higher. Their median household income is about \$25,000, twice as low as the median Californian household income. Lack of educational attainment combined with



low household income has led to a community living in abject poverty; over half of the Hmong population lives below the poverty line and a similar percentage is on public assistance.

As the sixth largest city in the state of California, Fresno has an estimated population of over 480,000. Like most Central Valley cities, except for Sacramento, Fresno has existed primarily to service regional agricultural economies. The importance of agriculture to the region is reflected in the population of those who historically migrated to Fresno and other parts of the Central Valley in the early to mid-1900s. Rural citizens escaping the southern “Dust Bowl” in the 1930s came to the Central Valley to find opportunities to continue farming (Kotlin and Frey 2007). Portuguese immigrants were attracted to the area because of the thriving vineyards, and the Japanese that settled in the area were interested in cultivating fruit and nut trees.

It was the agricultural economy of the Central Valley and the hope of being able to farm that lured many Hmong refugees to migrate to the Central Valley from other parts of the country in the 1980s (Yang 2001; Finck 1986). As a group who relied heavily on subsistence farming in Laos, Hmong living in other parts of the country such as St. Paul, Minnesota and Portland, Oregon saw the Central Valley as an ideal location for them to recreate a piece of their lives as they were in Laos. It is estimated that as many as half of the Hmong who migrated to Fresno in the early 1980s came with the belief that they were going to be involved in farming (Finck 1986). However, after seeing firsthand the requirements for farming such as knowledge of modern farming techniques and marketing experience, less than 20 percent of those who came with farming in mind indicated a continued interest (Finck 1986). Because of their lack of education, especially their limited English proficiency, many Hmong resorted to living on public assistance. The exponential growth in the number of Hmong on welfare in the early 1980s attests to this increasing reliance on government assistance. In July 1980, there were only 168 Hmong individuals on public assistance in Fresno (Finck 1986). Three years later, the number increased

dramatically to over 7,000 Hmong on public assistance, due in large part to the large migration of Hmong from other states who could not find employment in the city.

The lack of employment and the poverty confronting the Hmong community in Fresno continues today, but it is a widespread problem for the greater population in the city as well. Though Fresno is at the heart of the richest farmland in the world, it is also a city that has been plagued by high rates of poverty primarily because of its high unemployment rate and the low levels of educational attainment among its population. Fresno's unemployment rate has wavered above 8 percent, reaching as high as 12 percent in 2000 (2000 Census). In a report published by the Washington-based Brookings Institution (Berube 2006), Fresno ranked at the top of the list of the most populated cities by concentrated poverty. Though Fresno ranked fourth among the 50 largest cities in the United States in its overall poverty rate, with over 26 percent of its population living below the poverty line, it ranked first in concentrated poverty, defined as the degree to which the poor are clustered in high poverty neighborhoods. The report also found that immigrants and native-born individuals in Fresno were more likely to be poor compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country. For instance, the national percentage of native born individuals and immigrants living in poverty in the U.S is 12 and 18 percent, respectively. In Fresno, the poverty rate for native born individuals is over 19 percent and for immigrants, it is an astounding 35 percent.

It is against this economic backdrop that the Hmong community in Fresno has developed since Hmong refugees first began settling there in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Hmong community in Fresno has been able to make some progress over the past 30 years and it is considered to be the most developed Hmong community in California. Fresno is home to the world's largest and most successful Hmong New Year festival, drawing hundreds of thousands of Hmong individuals from throughout the United States. There are two Hmong radio stations in

Fresno, one is Hmong-owned and the other is managed entirely by Hmong staff, broadcasting Hmong news and entertainment throughout the Central Valley. There are also a number of Hmong-owned businesses, including over 10 supermarkets, a few clinics and chiropractic centers, video rental stores, ranches and farms, and insurance and financial services agencies.

Among the more prominent non-profit organizations in Fresno serving a significant proportion of the Hmong community are Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM), Stone Soup Fresno, Lao Family Community of Fresno, and the Fresno Center for New Americans (FCNA). Of these 4 organizations, the only one that actively works to increase the civic and political participation of its members is FCNA. With over 40 staff and an annual budget of over \$2 million, FCNA is the only organization that has specifically devoted resources to a project aimed at developing the capacity of Southeast Asian refugees in Fresno to become civically and politically engaged. Entitled the "Southeast Asian Advocacy Project," the goal of this three-year old program is to create and foster leadership and civic engagement among individuals of Southeast Asian descent in Fresno County. Through this project, FCNA provides leadership trainings for community leaders, assists its members in gaining citizenship, conducts voter registration, and educates its members about city government and its functions. According to Lue Yang, co-founder and executive director of FCNA, the organization works with the local government to relay information about political participation to its members:

We work with the city council and county clerk to learn about where precincts are, how to cast a ballot, how to vote for mayor, city council, and state representative. We work with these agencies to obtain resources to educate the community about the availability of resources (L. Yang 2007).

I will next examine the successful campaign of Blong Xiong for Fresno City Council. Most of the attention will be focused on the strategies employed by Xiong and the extent to which the Hmong community was involved in his campaign. The following questions will also

be addressed. What are the demographics of Xiong's constituency? How did these affect how he campaigned and specifically the messages he tried to convey and the groups to which he reached out?

### **Fresno City Council Member Blong Xiong**

Blong Xiong made history when he was elected in 2006 to represent District 1 on the Fresno City Council, becoming the first Hmong in the state of California and the first Asian American in Fresno to occupy a city council seat. Prior to running successfully for election, he worked briefly in the Office of the Public Defender in Fresno County before accepting a position at the Fresno Center for New Americans (FCNA). At FCNA, he served as deputy director for six years, where he spearheaded many successful projects such as the Hmong Dental Project, the Hmong Voters Education Project, and the Hmong Resettlement Healthy System Navigation Project.

In September 2005, Xiong officially announced his intention to seek the city council seat in Fresno's District 1. District 1 was comprised of mostly middle class residents of predominantly white and Latino backgrounds (Magagnini 2006; Kahle 2008). According to Xiong, of the 32,000 registered voters in the district, only about 250 of them were Hmong (Xiong 2007). As such, from the outset of his campaign, Xiong sought to make it clear that he was more than just a candidate for the Hmong community. "During the press conference which I announced my candidacy, I tried to make it very clear that I was just a candidate – yes a Hmong-American candidate – but I could be any man," Xiong explained in an interview (Kahle 2008). Similarly, Ben Vue, a Xiong supporter, also emphasized the importance of conveying to the voters that Xiong was a candidate for the all people in the district: "Blong's message is not that he is Hmong. He is a candidate first and foremost. Yes, he's Hmong but he represents issues across the spectrum that affects all people" (Vue 2007).

During his campaign, Xiong's experience as an immigrant was often a key part of his message, particularly when it came to garnering support from the Latino community. He compared his experience to that of many immigrants and talked about his life growing up with seven siblings and suffering from economic hardships (Stanley 2006; Leedy 2006). Xiong's chief of staff, Miguel Arias, a Mexican immigrant explained how Xiong's background was important in courting the Latino vote: "The case was made to the voters that Blong is a good candidate not just for the Hmong community but [also] the immigrant community" (Magagnini 2006). Xiong's message resonated with the Latino community, many of whom joined Hmong volunteers from throughout the Central Valley to canvass every home in the district (Magagnini 2006; Stanley 2006). Volunteers for Xiong's campaign also relayed the same message that Xiong emphasized in his speeches to the Latino community. "We told people he was an immigrant, like us, and that he understood our situation. Xiong is a member of an ethnic minority and now is the time to unite and support him," said one of Xiong's Latino supporters who participated in a local Latino voter drive (Stanley 2006).

Though the Hmong vote did not play a significant role in his election to the Fresno City Council, Xiong still needed and received support from the Hmong community in other ways. As Xiong puts it, "The only thing that didn't have a factor was (Hmong) voting. I still needed the Hmong community for financial support and manpower" (Xiong 2007). The Hmong community from Fresno to Sacramento responded to Xiong's call for assistance by volunteering and donating to his campaign (Magagnini 2006; Leedy 2006). Xiong's campaign received thousands of dollars from the Hmong community, mostly in small amounts of \$10 and \$20 (Leedy 2006). Hmong elders who did not speak English provided financial contributions and spread information about Xiong's campaign within clan networks, while younger Hmong contributed by doing precinct walks and making phone calls to potential voters (Vue 2007; Vu 2007). The

Hmong radio stations were also used regularly to encourage the Hmong community to contribute to Xiong's campaign.

In the primary election held in June 2006, Xiong came in second by a difference of only 7 votes behind Scott Miller. Because no candidate received a majority of the vote, a runoff election was held in November between Xiong and Miller. Miller, who was a businessman, was backed by the Greater Fresno Chamber of Commerce, the Valley Taxpayers Coalition and other business groups. Xiong, on the other hand, received support from the Central Valley Progressive Political Action Committee and several unions including the 930-member Fresno City Employees Association (Leedy 2006). Xiong was also endorsed by the Fresno Bee, who cited his experience serving as deputy director of FCNA as useful for dealing with the bureaucracy at City Hall. In the general election, Xiong received more than 53 percent of the vote, defeating Miller by a margin of about 800 votes to become the first Hmong ever elected to the Fresno City Council (Magagnini 2006). After a year in office, Xiong was unanimously elected council president.

### **Hmong in St. Paul, Minnesota**

Despite its extreme weather conditions characterized by cold winters and hot and humid summers, Minnesota has become home to thousands of recent immigrants from across the globe in the past several decades. Many recent immigrants are attracted to Minnesota because the state is perceived to be more welcoming to immigrants and to offer more opportunities for immigrants to become established. Indeed, in a survey of immigrants in Minnesota, over half of them cited job availability as the primary reason for the move to Minnesota while a mere 11 percent cited better welfare benefits (Mattesich 2000). This perception of Minnesota as a thriving state is mostly true, especially in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, commonly referred to as the Twin-Cities, where most immigrants in Minnesota reside. In a report published by the Brookings Institution in 2003, the Twin-Cities fared very well compared to other metropolitan cities of its

size on measures such as employment rate, educational attainment, and income level (Brookings Institution 2003). The Twin-Cities ranked second among the largest metropolitan cities for its share of adults participating in the labor force and it had the lowest unemployment rate. It also has one of the most highly educated populations in the country as both cities rank high on the percentage of residents with bachelor's degrees, and schools in Minnesota consistently rank atop the list of the highest performing public schools in the nations.

In addition to good schools and a vibrant economy, Minnesota also attracts immigrants because of its history of active volunteerism with immigrant and especially refugee communities. The heavy involvement of Minnesota groups and individuals serving as refugee sponsors has been a factor in establishing immigrant communities in the state (Mattessich 2000). Private foundations and organizations, mostly faith-based, in the state have played an important role in providing social services to help immigrants adjust to the state (The Minneapolis Foundation 2004). There are several major agencies that work to resettle refugees in Minnesota and each has a national affiliate that works with the State Department in the resettlement efforts (League of Women Voters of Minnesota). Several private foundations like the St. Paul and Minneapolis Foundations have also been involved in the resettlement efforts by providing funds for special projects and supporting community-based immigrant organizations.

Because of its strong social service infrastructure due in part to the existence of large religious organizations and its active charitable sector, Minnesota was one of the first states to take an active role in the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the late 1970s. Most of the refugees that arrived in Minnesota during this period were Hmong. The first Hmong family arrived in Minnesota in 1976 (Downing 1984). Thereafter, the Hmong population grew rapidly until 1982 when it began experiencing a decline. According to the Refugee Program Office of Minnesota, the Hmong population in September of 1978 was 800, and by October 1980, the

population had reached 8,000 (Downing 1984). The Hmong population peaked in late 1981, when a Hmong population of 12,000 was recorded. By this time period, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area became the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the United States. By 1982, however, the population began decreasing as many families migrated to California. In the mid-1990s, however, poor economic conditions and the lack of employment combined with more stringent welfare reforms drove many Hmong to migrate from California to Minnesota and other states throughout the Midwest (Faruque 2002; K. Yang 2001). It is estimated that as many as 8,000 Hmong migrated to Minnesota from California during the late 1990s (Shafer 2000).

Today in Minnesota, there are at least 45,000 Hmong (Minneapolis Foundation 2004; Pfeifer 2005). Though the Hmong population is miniscule in proportion to the overall state population, they are the largest Asian ethnic group and form a sizeable portion of the minority community in Minnesota. Of Minnesota's 5 million people, 87 percent are white, 4.5 percent are African American, 1 is percent American Indian, 3.5 percent are Asian, and 3.8 percent are Hispanic. The Hmong population is about a third of the Asian population, and they are concentrated in the Twin-Cities. Of the 41,000 Hmong residing in the Twin-Cities, about 25,000 live in the city of St. Paul, where they are the largest ethnic group (Pfeifer 2005). The Hmong population comprises over 80 percent of the 32,000 Asian Americans in St. Paul and their population alone is larger than that of the Hispanic population in St. Paul. Besides the white population, only African Americans have a larger population than Hmong in St. Paul (Shafer 2000).

In St. Paul, the Hmong community has made tremendous progress with respect to the number and variety of businesses and community organizations. On the business side, the St. Paul Hmong community is only one of two Hmong communities in the country to have a chamber of commerce. The 175-member Minnesota Hmong Chamber of Commerce, located in



St. Paul, includes a wide array of businesses from restaurants and grocery stores to law firms and medical clinics (Magagnini 2004; Hmong Chamber of Commerce 2008). Some notable businesses owned or managed by Hmong in Minnesota include two Hmong newspapers, a bank, a bar and night club, a Hmong real estate company, and the only Hmong bookstore in the country. Revenues from Hmong businesses are estimated to exceed \$100 million dollars, and the revitalization of University Avenue in St. Paul, home to many ethnic businesses, both Hmong and non-Hmong, has been attributed to the investment of Hmong entrepreneurs (The Minneapolis Foundation 2004).

The visibility of Hmong businesses has reflected positively on the Hmong community as it shows that Hmong are contributing members of society. Va-megn Thoj, a policy associate to St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, explains how the decline of Hmong on public assistance and the increase of Hmong businesses and homeownership have shifted public opinion about Hmong in St. Paul:

I think back then, in 1994, we were still seen as refugee-people who were in need of service, in need of handouts, government subsidy, and [that] we take instead of give; we were seen as very needy and maybe also people who drain resources. I think the difference now is that we still have people who are like that but we also have people who contribute, we have homeowners, people who have business. The balance is that now we are contributing, whether it be in the political sector or private sector, in all segments we are contributing and we are making some of the decisions ... we are seen more as an integral, natural part of the city and not as newcomers who are outside of the community (Thoj 2006).

Very much like the strong social service infrastructure that drew Hmong to Minnesota, the St. Paul Hmong community has also developed an extensive network of Hmong community organizations. There are over 10 Hmong community organizations in St. Paul. A few of the major organizations are the Center for Hmong Arts and Talents (CHAT), Hmong American Partnership (HAP), Hmong Cultural Center (HCC), and the Center for Hmong Studies. As the

first Hmong arts organization in the U.S., CHAT is one of the many ethnic arts organizations in the Twin-Cities that contribute to the area's reputation as an international arts community. HAP was founded in 1990 focused on providing basic refugee resettlement issues but has evolved to become one of the largest Hmong social service organizations in the U.S. HCC is an organization whose mission is to promote greater awareness of Hmong culture between Hmong and non-Hmong in the Twin-Cities and contains the Hmong Resource Library, a large collection of academic materials related to the Hmong. The Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia-University, initiated in 2004, was the first institution of its kind in the U.S.

The Hmong community in Minnesota has also made significant inroads in local and state politics. Hmong in St. Paul have been involved in politics for almost two decades. Today, Hmong can be found at almost every level of government in the city. Hmong political involvement in Minnesota started with the election of Choua Lee in 1991 to the St. Paul School Board. Following Lee's decision not to seek re-election, Neal Thao ran in 1995 and won a seat on the St. Paul School Board, where he served for seven years. The Hmong made headline news in 2002 when Mee Moua was elected to the Minnesota State Senate. That same year, Cy Thao ran an effective campaign and became the second Hmong person to be elected to the Minnesota State Legislature, where he serves as a state representative. The following year in 2003, Kazoua Kong-Thao was elected to the St. Paul School Board.

Away from electoral politics, Hmong Americans are also represented within local governments and the offices of politicians. Sia Lo, a Hmong real-estate developer and attorney, was a senior policy adviser to St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly who served as mayor of St. Paul from 2001 to 2005. In 2005, Chris Coleman was elected mayor of St. Paul and upon taking office, he appointed two Hmong Americans to his office. Va-megn Thoj was appointed to the position of policy associate and Vally Varro took over the position of education director. On the

congressional side, Hmong Americans have served as staff to several Minnesota congressional representatives. Furthermore, Minnesotan politicians have worked closely with the Hmong community to address a number of important issues. Congressman Bruce Vento and the late U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone were both instrumental in advocating for the passage of the Hmong Naturalization Act, which provided special exemptions to Hmong veterans when they apply for naturalization. As noted above, in 2004, the St. Paul mayor led an unprecedented trip with a delegation of mostly Hmong educators and professionals to Thailand to assess the conditions of 15,000 Hmong refugees recently sponsored by the U.S. government to come to America.

As evidenced by the Hmong-related causes taken up by Minnesotan politicians and the election of Hmong to public office, the Hmong community in St. Paul is a growing political force. To illuminate some of the factors contributing to the increasing political clout of the Hmong community in St. Paul, I will examine the campaign of Minnesota State Senator Mee Moua. In particular, I will discuss the impact of the Hmong vote on the success of Moua's campaign.

### **Minnesota State Senator Mee Moua**

The highest ranking Hmong elected official in the United States, Mee Moua, a member of the Democratic-Farm-Labor (DFL) Party, is currently serving her 3<sup>rd</sup> term in the Minnesota State Legislature. Moua's rise to prominence began with her successful bid for the state senate seat in Minnesota's District 67 during a special election in 2002. She became the first Asian woman to serve in the Minnesota Legislature and the first Hmong ever elected to any state legislature. While in office, Moua was selected as a majority whip during her second year, and she has served as chair of the Judiciary Committee and a member of the Finance, Taxes, and Transportation Committees.

Moua's decision to run for the state senate seat in District 67 was prompted by the election of the incumbent, Randy Kelly, to the mayoral seat in the city of St. Paul. When Kelly was elected mayor, he left his former position as the state senator of District 67. As a result, a special election was held to find a replacement. Kelly was elected in the general election in November 2001 and the special general election for the District 67 senate seat was scheduled for late January 2002, giving potential candidates a period of less than 2 months to declare their candidacy and mobilize support for their campaigns. In this heavily DFL district, it was important for candidates to garner the endorsement of the party and, more importantly, win the DFL primary. Moua's success in each of these steps and her eventual victory in the special general election were largely due to an aggressive and effective grassroots mobilization strategy that concentrated on turning out first time and non-traditional voters to the polls.

District 67 is located on the east side of St. Paul, home to an ethnically diverse community of about 73,000 residents. Whites constitute the largest group in the area (64 percent), followed by Asians (15.7 percent), Hispanics (8.5 percent), African Americans (11 percent), and Native Americans (1 percent). Hmong account for a large share of the Asian population, with Census figures putting the number of Hmong residents at 10,000, though Hmong community leaders have provided estimates that are much higher due to undercounting among immigrant populations (Brown 2002b). There are about 50,000 potential voters in Senate District 67; nearly 12 percent are Asian, more than 8 percent are Hispanic, and 70 percent are white (Brown 2002a).

Moua's announcement that she was running for the state Senate District 67 seat came in late November 2001, giving her less than a month to campaign before her first big test - the DFL endorsement convention. It was at this convention where candidates could win the coveted endorsement of the DFL party. At the convention, Moua competed against State Representative

Tim Mahoney, who was backed by newly elected St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly and seen as the candidate most likely to gain the endorsement (Conte 2002). Moua, however, managed to convince DFL delegates to refrain from endorsing Mahoney because of her ability to mobilize over a hundred of her supporters, many of whom were Hmong, to the convention (Brown 2002a). As a result, no candidate received the DFL endorsement.

During the weeks leading up to the primary election, Moua utilized her network of family and friends to run an aggressive grassroots campaign aimed at turning out first-time and nontraditional voters on the east side of St. Paul. Moua relied on her extended Hmong clan network to recruit young Hmong professionals to serve as volunteers and campaign staff. She selected Pakou Hang, one of her close cousins and a graduate of Yale University, to serve as her campaign manager (Hang 2002). Louansee Moua, another cousin, who was a television reporter and producer, was recruited to assist Moua prepare for public appearances with community members and the media (Magagnini 2004).

To identify potential Hmong voters, Moua's campaign relied on information on the residences of Hmong in the district from Hmong real estate agents (Hang 2006). With information from real estate title offices about which homes were owned by Hmong, campaign volunteers called and conducted house visits to register all eligible voters. Information about potential voters from these calls and house visits were then entered into a database so that Moua's campaign could continue contacting them throughout the campaign.

To reach the greater population, Moua's campaign visited every household in the district. With over 300 volunteers, the campaign was able to canvass every one of the district's 27,000 households three times (Sturdevant 2002). These door-to-door visits consisted of more than just asking individuals to vote for Mee, but also opportunities for campaign volunteers to educate potential voters about the political process. Before going out to the field, volunteers were trained

to conduct impromptu civic lessons that included explaining the difference between a primary and a general election, demystifying the registration process, and describing what happens at the polls (Sturdevant 2002; Hang 2006). Through this and the Hmong community-specific outreach efforts, the campaign registered over 500 first-voters, with at least 300 of them being Hmong voters (Sturdevant 2002; Brown 2002b; Brown 2002c).

On Election Day during the DFL primary, Moua's campaign worked tirelessly throughout the whole day, contacting and encouraging voters to go to the polls. Hang recalled the exciting and chaotic scene in the campaign headquarters during Election Day: "There were so many people that we had to find any possible quiet space, corner, sometimes next to the garbage, just to make phone calls" (Hang 2006). Moua's campaign also provided a hotline for Hmong to call if they had any questions about where or how to vote and if they experienced any issues with voting. Furthermore, her campaign also provided transportation to and from polling places to anyone who needed it. At the end of the day, Moua was declared the winner, obtaining 1751 votes, 170 votes more than the runner-up, Tim Mahoney. Moua would go on to win the special general election held just 2 weeks later by a wide margin of at least a thousand votes, vaulting her into Hmong and Minnesota history.

### **Comparative Analysis**

The previous two sections on Hmong in Fresno and St. Paul provided an overview of the development of both Hmong communities and a description of the political campaign of one Hmong candidate in each city. This section will compare the two Hmong communities on four characteristics that affect Hmong political participation. These four characteristics are the socioeconomic status of Hmong residents, the racial and ethnic context of each area, the political context of each area, and the impact of Hmong candidates on Hmong political participation. These comparisons will illuminate differences that exist between both communities and provide

an explanation of why Hmong in St. Paul wield greater political influence than Hmong in Fresno.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

The socioeconomic model of political participation, which has proven useful in predicting political behavior, posits that individuals with higher levels of income and education and those employed in high-skill occupations are more likely to participate in politics than those who do not possess such characteristics (Verba and Nie 1972; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999). To examine the relationship between socioeconomic status and Hmong political participation, a comparison of the Hmong communities in St. Paul and Fresno on the basis of several socioeconomic indicators follows in Table 1.

**Table 1: Hmong Socioeconomic Resource Comparison**

<b>2000 Census Hmong Household Characteristics</b>	<b>St. Paul</b>	<b>Fresno</b>
<b>Median household income</b>	\$33,400	\$22, 400
<b>Household on public assistance</b>	30.2%	52.8%
<b>Poverty rate</b>	35.1%	56.4%
<b>Homeownership rate</b>	49.1%	13.4%
<b>Less than high school diploma</b>	57%	72%
<b>Workforce participation</b>	50.2%	41.5%

Sources: 2000 Census

Table 1 shows that the Hmong community in Fresno lags behind the Hmong community in St. Paul on all measures of socioeconomic status. The median household income for Hmong families in St. Paul is about \$33,400, \$11,000 more than that of Hmong residents in Fresno. Income determines, to a large extent, one's ability to purchase property as well as one's reliance on governmental assistance. Thus, the higher income of Hmong in St. Paul is associated with lower rates of poverty and fewer families receiving public assistance. The opposite trend is observed in Fresno. Over half of Hmong families in Fresno live below the poverty line and

receive some form of public assistance, compared to only about a third of Hmong families in St. Paul. Though educational attainment is still largely lacking in both communities, Hmong in St. Paul are doing slightly better, as 15 percent more of its residents hold at least a high school degree. The presence of two Hmong American newspapers in St. Paul is an indicator of the Hmong community's educational progress. Since most articles that appear in both newspapers are written in English, the existence of the newspapers point to a growing educated Hmong population or at least one that is literate enough in English to comprehend the content of these papers.

The most striking difference in the socioeconomic resource comparison is the percentage of Hmong homeowners between the two regions. In St. Paul, almost half of Hmong families own a home. Meanwhile in Fresno, less than a fifth of Hmong families own a home. It is important to emphasize the homeownership rate in this comparison because studies repeatedly find that through their investment in their homes, homeowners appear to be more involved in their communities, another finding that may help explain Hmong political participation in St. Paul (Dipasquale and Glaeser 1998; Dietz and Haurin 2003; Dietz 2003). Homeowners are found to be more concerned with local affairs and national policy than renters, to possess greater knowledge about local officials and voting, and to vote more often and consistently than renters (Dipasquale and Glaeser 1998; Drier 1994). The importance of homeownership to political participation is reflected in a comment by Fong Heu, a Hmong community advocate and co-founder of the Hmong DFL party in Minnesota: "Once they reach certain points, once they start owning properties, paying attention to certain issues ... sometimes, with certain things they said 'it is going to affect me, the quality of my living so I have to get involved'" (Heu 2006).



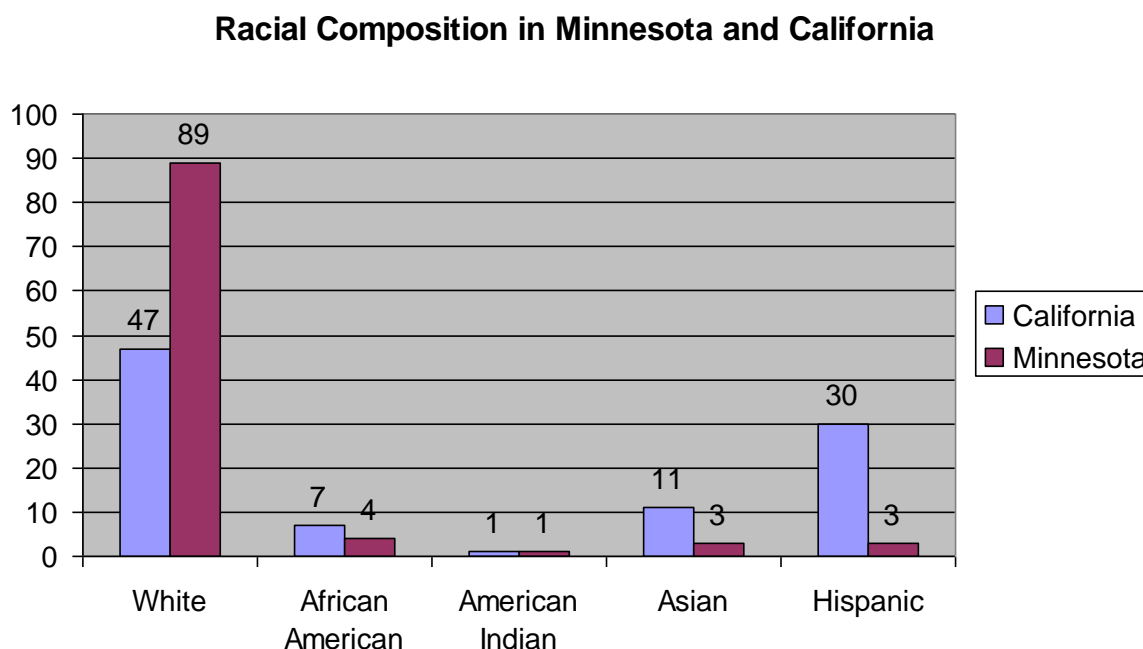
## **Racial and Ethnic Context**

Like the studies of Hmong political participation that cite the large population of Hmong in the Midwest as being important to their political success, a growing number of studies have investigated the impact of the size of minority populations on their political involvement (Ramakrishnan 2005; Leighley 2001). Leighley (2001) proposes a new model for examining minority political participation that takes into account, among other factors, the geographic racial context of a group's settlement. She theorizes that the racial and ethnic composition of the individual's immediate social context influence the likelihood of mobilization by candidates. Furthermore she argues that, for minority individuals, the potential benefits of participation are greater as their racial or ethnic group increases in size because the group consequently enjoys a higher probability of being successful in its political effort. Similarly, Ramakrishnan (2005) suggests that those who live in states or metropolitan areas with high concentration of coethnics are more likely to be targets of mobilization by political parties and candidates because the high concentration of coethnics lowers the per capital cost of ethnic mobilization.

Taking into account these studies, I examine the racial and ethnic contexts of both Hmong communities. Figure 1 shows a comparison of the racial breakdown of California's and Minnesota's populations. As shown by the bar graph in figure 1, California is the more diverse of the two states as whites constitute less than half of the total population in California. Minnesota, on the other hand, is still a state inhabited by a predominantly white population. The percentage of minorities in each state as well as their relative proportion to one another is drastically different. In California, a minority-majority state, the Hispanic population constitutes almost a third of the state's population, and it is about three times as large as the second largest minority group, Asians. In Minnesota, no minority group comprises more than 5 percent of the state's population. Instead, all minority groups are about even in terms of their overall population, with

the exception of American Indians. African Americans make up the largest minority group followed closely by Asians and Hispanics. The small size of the minority population in Minnesota and the fact that the minority groups there are all about the same size bodes well for Hmong in Minnesota because they form a substantial portion of the Asian population.

**Figure 1**



Source: 2000 Census Data

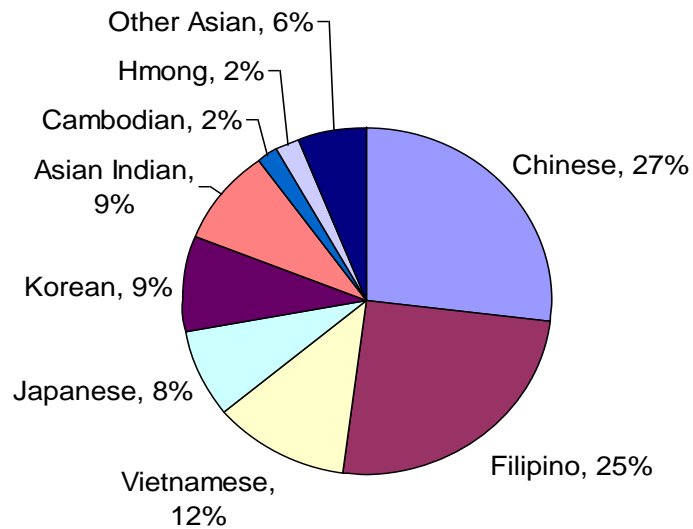
Within each state, it is also important to look at the size of the Hmong population in relationship to the overall population because the size of Hmong relative to other minority groups affects their visibility, and consequently the attention political candidates give them. Since the Hmong population is quite small in comparison to the overall state populations, it will only be compared to other Asian ethnic groups. Figures 2 and 3 show the percentages of Hmong relative to other Asian ethnic groups in California and Minnesota, respectively. In California, which has the largest concentration of Asians of any state, Hmong are one of the smallest Asian

ethnic groups, despite the fact that California has the largest Hmong population of any state.

Unlike in California, in Minnesota, which is home to the second largest population of Hmong in the U.S., Hmong are the largest Asian ethnic group, comprising almost a third of the state's Asian population.

**Figure 2**

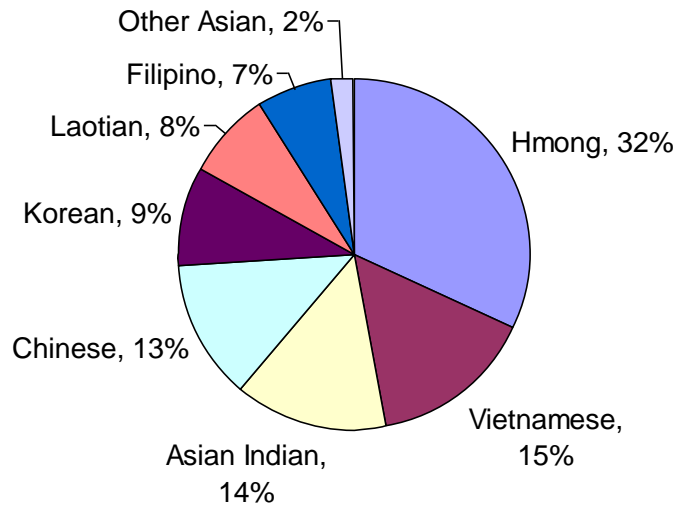
**Asian Ethnic Groups in California**



Source: The Diverse Face of Asian Pacific Islanders in California, Asian Pacific American Legal Center 2005

**Figure 3**

**Asian Ethnic Groups in Minnesota**

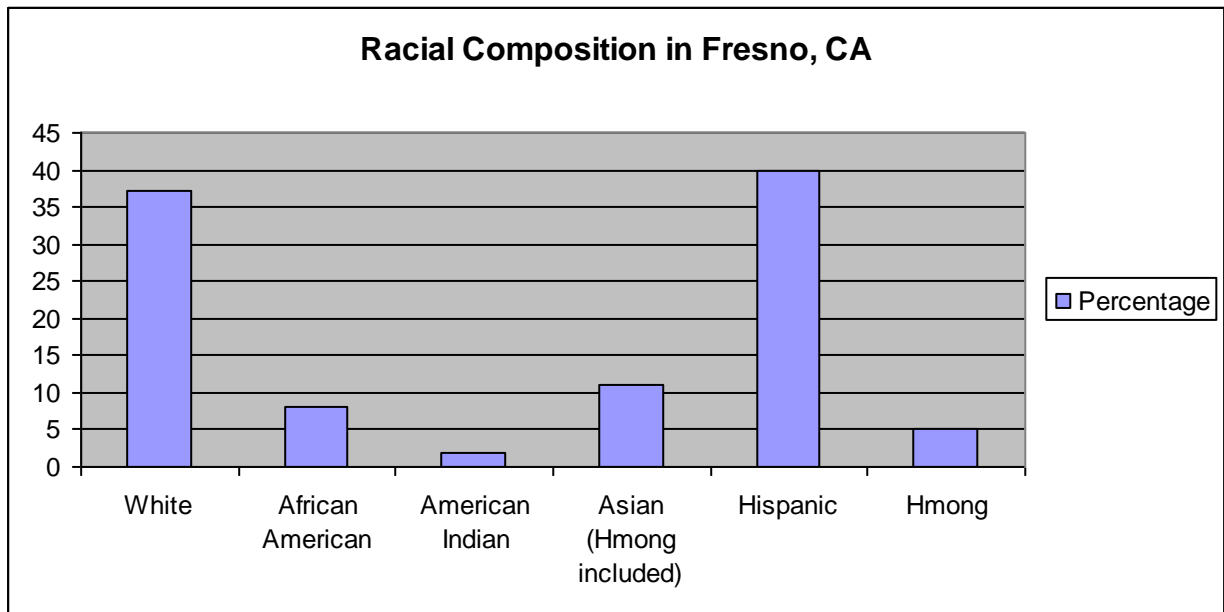


Source: A Community Contrasts: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States, Asian American Justice Center 2006

Thus far, we have examined the racial and ethnic breakdown of Minnesota’s and California’s populations. Now, we will turn our attention to the racial and ethnic composition of the local contexts. Figure 4 shows the racial composition of Fresno’s population. In Fresno, Hispanic makes up the largest racial group, followed by whites. Each group constitutes more than a third of the city’s population. The Hmong population in Fresno is about half of the city’s total Asian population, and overall, Hmong constitute five percent of the city’s population. The racial background of people living in St. Paul is depicted in figure 5. Unlike the state’s overall population, St. Paul is much more diverse as more minorities live in the city. With the exception of American Indians, the size of minority groups in the city is about the same. Asians are the biggest minority group (13 percent), followed by African Americans (12 percent), and then Hispanics (8 percent). Like the state’s Asian population, Hmong are the largest Asian group in

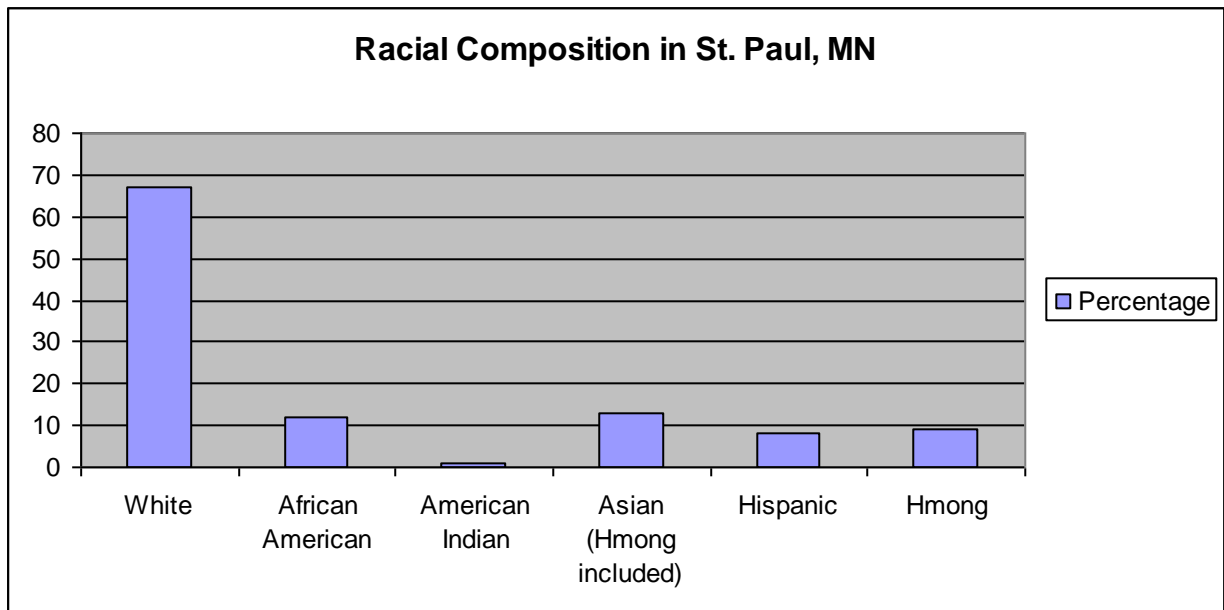
St. Paul. In fact, Hmong alone make up 9 percent of the city's total population, putting them just right behind African Americans in terms of minority population size. Though the overall number of Hmong in each city is similar, 25,000 in St. Paul and 23,000 in Fresno, the Hmong's share of the total population in Fresno is only about half of that of the Hmong proportion in St. Paul.

Figure 4



Source: 2000 Census

Figure 5



Source: 2000 Census

Given that all the minority groups in Minnesota, with the exception of American Indians, are about the same size and that Hmong are the largest Asian ethnic group, this context should be conducive in helping them garner the attention of local and state politicians. Locally, the St. Paul Hmong community is sizeable as they constitute almost a tenth of the city's population, ranking only second behind the population of African Americans. The same cannot be said of Hmong in California or in Fresno because their population is miniscule in comparison to the other minority groups. Taking into account the literature on the impact of the size of the minority population on political participation, Hmong in St. Paul, given their geographic concentration in the city, will eventually be, if they are not already, targeted by politicians and political organizations. This is because candidates and political organizations usually make efforts to mobilize ethnic or racial groups in areas where these groups are densely concentrated; thus the large number of Hmong in St. Paul puts them in a position where they are likely to be targets of registration and voting drives (Ramakrishnan 2005; Leighley 2001). Yet, whether or not political organizations and candidates will actually devote resources to mobilize the Hmong community in St. Paul will also depend on the political environment of the city and region. In the next section, I will discuss the political context of St. Paul and Fresno and what it means for Hmong political participation.

### **Political Context**

In addition to examining individual level characteristics such as education and income on voter turnout, studies on political participation have also investigated the impact of institutional barriers and political environments on the voting behaviors of individuals (Ramakrishnan 2005; Jones-Correa 2001; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Institutional factors as defined in these studies include registration deadlines and voting rules. These institutional barriers disproportionately affect those with fewer skills and knowledge. Immigrants, many of whom

have low levels of education, are likely to be negatively affected by these barriers (Jones-Correa 2001). Research on immigrant political involvement has also focused on the importance of community organizations in encouraging political participation (Bedolla 2005; Garcia 2003; Wong 2006). Furthermore there is a body of research on minority political involvement that suggests that having a history of past representation by a member of one's racial group can stimulate future political participation (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Thus in this section, I will focus on the political context factors that can either hinder or facilitate Hmong political involvement in each city. These factors are voter turnout and voting rules in each state; the number of Hmong non-profit organizations; and the history of Hmong political involvement in each city.

### **State Voter Turnout**

Some scholars have argued that in states where voter turnout is high, residents will face greater expectations from their social environment to participate (Ramakrishnan 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). In assessing voter turnout rate, most studies have relied on data on voter turnout in presidential elections and, as such, the measurement of voter turnout rate in this study is also based on voting in presidential elections (Putnam 2001; Ramakrishnan 2005). Table 2 shows a comparison of voter turnout in California and Minnesota in the presidential elections from 1992-2004. With the exception of the 2004 presidential election, voter turnout in California has been slightly higher than the national average. The voter turnout rate in Minnesota, however, is at least 12 percent higher than the voter turnout rate in California. In fact, Minnesota and the rest of the Upper Midwest usually lead the country in voter participation (Ostermeier and Jacobs 2006). In elections since 2000, Minnesota has led the country with the highest voter turnout. If voter turnout rate is an accurate predictor of the political context of a state, then these data suggest that Hmong in Minnesota are more likely to participate because they live in a state with a culture of active political participation.

**Table 2: Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1992-2004**

<b>Election Year</b>	<b>Minnesota</b>	<b>California</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>National Average</b>
<b>2004</b>	76.8	59.2	17.6	60.3
<b>2000</b>	69.6	55.7	13.9	54.2
<b>1996</b>	66.1	53.7	12.4	51.7
<b>1992</b>	73.7	60.3	13.4	58.1

Source: United States Elections Project, Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University

### **Voting Rules**

Registration is the first step in the voting process. The number of days in advance voters need to register for an election depends on the voting rules of the state. In California, the deadline to register to vote in an election is 15 days before Election Day. In Minnesota, any eligible voter can register to vote on the day of the election. Same-day registration in Minnesota has been credited for helping to contribute to the state’s strong voter participation as it accounts for anywhere between 15 and 21 percent of the state’s voter turnout (Ostermeier and Jacobs 2006). Table 3 shows the number of voters in Minnesota who register on the day of the election. Same-day registration works to the advantage of campaigns like Mee Moua that spend a great deal of resources to mobilize voters on the day of the election. These Election Day efforts are more likely to be successful because voters who have not yet registered can register and vote on the same day. Minnesota is one of just six states that permit same-day registration, and most of these states lead the country in voter turnout. The registration deadline is the only significant difference between California and Minnesota voting rules. Residents in each state have the choice of voting absentee.



**Table 3: Election-Day Registration in Minnesota, 1998-2004**

Year	Number of Election Day Registrations	% of Voters Registering on Election Day
2004	581,904	20.6
2002	342,978	15.0
2000	464,155	18.9
1998	332,540	15.8

Source: Ostermeier and Jacobs 2006

### **Community Organizations**

In addition to voter turnout in presidential elections, studies that seek to assess the effect of a state’s political and civic culture on voting have also utilized a measurement of the number of nonprofits per capita in each state. In light of Wong’s (2006) and Bedolla’s (2006) works on immigrant political incorporation that stress the importance of immigrant organizations in mobilizing immigrant communities, I will focus on organizations that have programs targeted towards Hmong. Organizations are important to political participation because they often serve as sites for mobilization by political elites and for the dissemination of information that might foster interests and knowledge about the political process (Bedolla 2006; Wong 2006).

Tables 4 and 5 list the names of non-profit organizations in Fresno and Minneapolis-St. Paul, respectively. Information for these tables was gathered through interviews with staff of some of these non-profit organizations and the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center’s (SEARAC) database of mutual assistance associations. Most of these organizations are run by Hmong to address Hmong issues; several non-Hmong organizations are included because they have programs that specifically target the Hmong community. Checkmarks identify whether these organizations have citizenship/civic engagement and voter registration programs. Citizenship programs as defined by SEARAC are classes that help people become U.S. citizens. Civic engagement and voter registration programs consist of programs that encourage community members to become more socially or politically involved in the community and that

helps community members register to vote. As the tables show, the number of organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul is almost twice that of the number of organizations that serve the Hmong community in Fresno. Fresno has 4 organizations that provide civic engagement programs and voter registration assistance compared to St. Paul's 6 organizations that do similar work. With respect to the number of organizations that provide citizenship classes, Minneapolis-St. Paul has 4 and Fresno has 3.

What should we make of this data? If we are only to look at the overall number of organizations, Minneapolis-St. Paul has many more organizations than Fresno. However, if we specifically look at only the organizations that provide programs that facilitate Hmong political involvement, there are few differences between the two regions. Nonetheless, the fact that Minneapolis-St. Paul has more organizations means that there is a greater likelihood that Hmong there will be exposed to information that encourages them to become more civically or politically engaged. Though some organizations may not provide any civic or political engagement programs, they still serve as spaces that can disseminate important information about politics to the community. As Kou Yang, a leading Hmong researcher puts it,

In Minnesota, they have more Hmong organizations and a greater variety of organizations to address the different needs. It may not advocate politically but it offers a communication channel. They cannot support a political candidate, but there might be people who get information and share the information with their friends and families; they can benefit from the passing on of knowledge (Yang 2007).

**Table 4: Non-profit Organizations in Fresno**

	Organization	Citizenship	Civic Engagement/ Voter Registration
1	Fresno Center for New Americans	✓	✓
2	Hmong American Community, Inc.		
3	Lao Ethnic Association		
4	Lao Family Community of Fresno, Inc.	✓	
5	Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries, Inc. (FIRM)		✓
6	Stone Soup Fresno		✓
7	United Hmong Foundation	✓	✓

Source: Southeast Asian Resource Action Center

**Table 5: Non-profit Organizations in Minneapolis-St. Paul**

	Organization	Citizenship	Civic Engagement/ Voter Registration
1	Association for Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota		
2	Center for Asian Pacific American Islanders		✓
3	Center for Hmong Arts and Talent		
4	Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association	✓	
5	Hmong American Partnership (3 locations)	✓	✓
6	Hmong Cultural Center	✓	
7	Hmong Minnesota Pacific Association		✓
8	Hmong National Organization, Inc.		
9	Lao Family Community of Minnesota	✓	✓
10	Lauj Youth Society		
11	Southeast Asian Community Council		✓
12	Center for Hmong Studies		
13	Take Action Minnesota		✓

Source: Southeast Asian Resource Action Center

## **History of Hmong Political Involvement**

Bobo and Gilliam (1990) show that African Americans living in high empowerment areas, which are defined as areas where African Americans assume significant positions of leadership within the local government, are more likely to vote. They find that the presence of blacks in local government influences black participation by contributing to a more trusting and efficacious orientation to politics and by greatly increasing black attentiveness to political matters. In light of their study, I also argue that Hmong who live in areas where they have had representation in local government will be more likely to participate in politics. Next, I will briefly summarize the history of Hmong electoral participation in each city prior to the election of Mee Moua in St. Paul and Blong Xiong in Fresno. In Fresno, no Hmong individual had been elected to political office until the election of Tony Vang in 2002, and he was the only one until Xiong was elected in 2006. Given the relatively recent election of a Hmong to Fresno city government, it would be expected that the engagement of Hmong in politics there is not as strong as it could be if they had a longer history or more representation in local politics.

In St. Paul, Hmong political involvement dates back to 1991, when Choua Lee became the first Hmong person in the U.S. to be elected to a public office. Following Lee, Neal Thao ran successfully for a seat on the St. Paul School Board. Given this relatively long history of having a Hmong in political office, there would likely be a more heightened awareness of the importance of political participation among Hmong in St. Paul. These successful campaigns are not only important for increasing feelings of efficacy or the perceived benefits for Hmong voters but also for laying down the groundwork for the campaigns of future Hmong candidates. Indeed, Mee Moua partly attributes her campaign's success at mobilizing Hmong voters to the foundation that was laid by the previous campaigns of Lee and Thao. According to Moua, "When Choua Lee ran, she and her family put together a political machine to do outreach in the

Hmong American community. The same happened with Neal Thao's campaign" (Moua 2008). The grassroots, Hmong-specific outreach tactics utilized by Lee and Thao in their campaigns were successfully adapted to the campaign of Mee Moua.

### **Hmong Candidates' Impact on Hmong Political Participation**

The increasing election of minority candidates to political office over the past several decades has drawn considerable attention from scholars interested in investigating the possible link between minority candidacies and the increased turnout of minority voters. Tate (1994) attributes the increased involvement of African Americans in electoral politics in the late 1980s to the candidacy of Jesse Jackson in his run for president in 1984 and 1988. She notes that Jackson generated massive support from African Americans and mobilized a much higher percentage of the African American community than any previous presidential candidates. Bobo and Gilliam (1990) find that the presence of African American candidates increases African American political participation by enhancing African American's interest in and knowledge of politics. Leighley (2001) suggests that the presence of a minority candidate on the ballot increases minority political participation for two possible reasons. First, the presence of a minority candidate on the ballot changes a minority individual's calculation of the potential benefits of voting; a minority voter will perceive a greater benefit if someone of his racial or ethnic background is elected. A second reason minority turnout might be higher is because minority candidates are more likely to direct resources towards mobilizing minority groups.

In this section, I will begin with a brief recap of the campaigns of Mee Moua and Blong Xiong before delving into an examination of the possible impact that their campaigns had on the political participation of the Hmong community. As it is made clear in the section on Hmong political involvement in Fresno, California, the political mobilization of Hmong was not a primary goal of Xiong. From interviews with Xiong and his supporters, there was no specific

mention of any other efforts beyond the utilization of the radio stations to mobilize the Hmong community. Aside from the Hmong community, Xiong made appeals to the Latino community and many of his volunteers were Latinos. The demographics of Xiong's district dictated the direction of his campaign, specifically how much resources he could devote towards mobilizing the Hmong community. The district in which Xiong was running for city council was comprised of mostly Caucasian and Latino middle-class families. Of the 26,000 registered voters in his district, only 300 of them were Hmong (Xiong 2007). Given the demographics of the district, Xiong's strategy focused a great deal of effort on reaching out to the non-Hmong population.

Though the Hmong vote did not play a significant role in the successful campaign of Xiong in Fresno, it played a critical factor in the campaign of Mee Moua in St. Paul. For Moua, the political participation of Hmong was pivotal at critical junctures in her campaign. Moua's first challenge during the campaign was during the DFL endorsement convention where she faced Tim Mahoney, the St. Paul Mayor-endorsed candidate who was seen as the most likely candidate to receive the support of the DFL party. Moua's ability to mobilize a contingent of mostly Hmong voters to the convention was crucial in preventing the DFL convention from awarding the coveted DFL endorsement to Mahoney. Prior to and during the DFL primary, Moua's campaign devoted considerable resources to increase Hmong participation in the election. Campaign staff located Hmong residents in the district through information from Hmong realtors. They then conducted house visits where they recorded information about eligible voters and provided information pertaining to the political process. On the days of the primary and general elections, Moua's campaign had over ten vehicles and translators available to provide transportation and assistance to Hmong voters (Hang 2002).

In light of the research regarding the impact of minority candidates on the political participation of minorities, the case of Hmong political involvement further demonstrates that

whether minority candidates devote resources to mobilizing minority communities depends largely on the context of their electoral campaigns. When comparing the campaigns of Hmong candidates in each city in terms of how much effort each candidate devoted towards encouraging Hmong to vote, it is clear that in St. Paul, Moua concentrated much of her efforts towards getting eligible Hmong voters to participate in the elections. Volunteers from her campaign visited Hmong households and provided information about the voting process. These efforts paid off as she was able to convince at least 200 first-time Hmong voters to cast a ballot (Sturdevant 2002; Balaji 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The comparative analysis in this paper has shown that Hmong in St. Paul are more likely to participate in politics and to play an important role in elections than Hmong in Fresno because Minnesota offers a social, economic, and political context that is favorable to fostering Hmong political involvement. Hmong in St. Paul have higher levels of socioeconomic resources than those in Fresno as evidenced by their higher median income and the greater percentage of Hmong who own a home. In addition, Hmong are a more visible group in St. Paul as well as in the state because of their large size relative to other minority groups in the region. Furthermore, the political environment in Minnesota with its active culture of political participation, history of Hmong political involvement dating back to 1992, and the large number of Hmong non-profit organizations all contribute to increasing Hmong political participation by enhancing their knowledge of politics and feelings of efficacy. As a result, Hmong have been targets of mobilization by Hmong as well as non-Hmong candidates who have devoted considerable resources towards educating the community and turning out voters.

The presence and interaction of all four factors, which are socioeconomic status, political context, racial and ethnic context, and ethnic mobilization, is important to the political

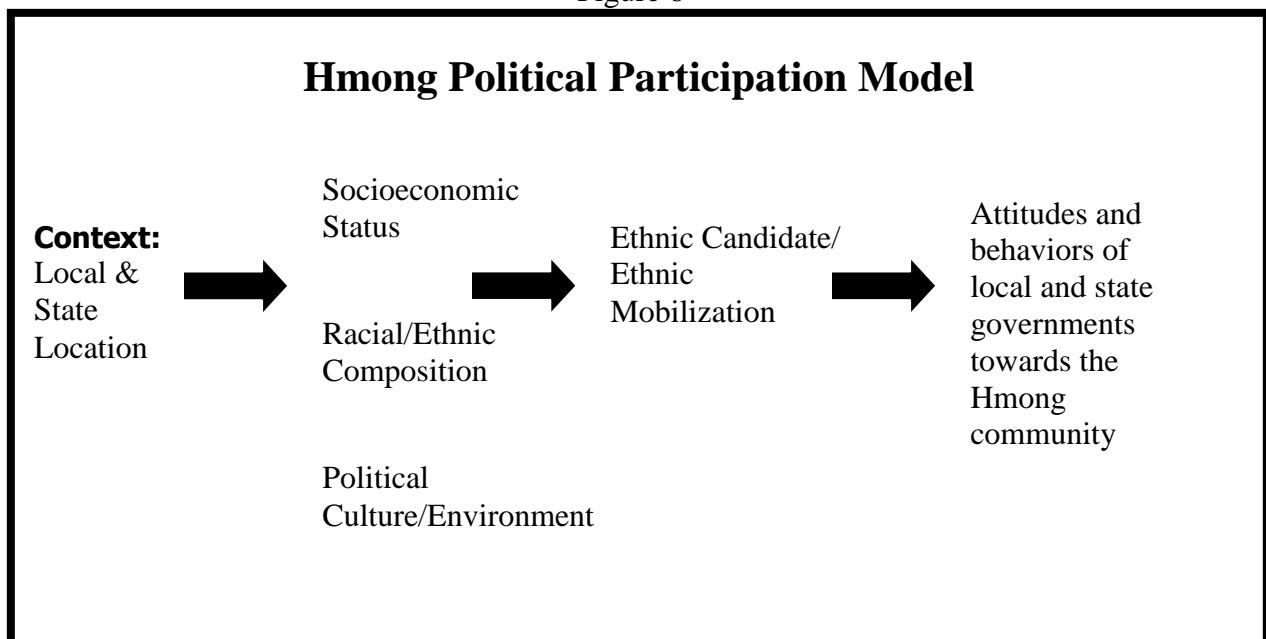
involvement and success of Hmong in St. Paul. Socioeconomic resources alone, without the presence of the other factors, may not necessary be enough to push immigrants like Hmong to participate in politics. Individual characteristics such as socioeconomic status can tell us who is more likely to vote, but whether or not they actually vote depends on a number of other conditions that are taken into account by the other factors in this study. Though the naturalization rates of Hmong in St. Paul and Fresno are similar, Hmong in St. Paul possess characteristics such as a higher income, homeownership rate, and educational attainment that make them more likely than their peers in Fresno to vote. These positive attributes help to further enhance their visibility in a city and region where they are one of the largest minority groups. In an environment where there is an active culture of political involvement, Hmong are influenced to become more active citizens and their size and visibility is also able to attract the attention of political candidates, especially Hmong candidates. The importance of Hmong participation in the successful campaigns of Hmong candidates such as Mee Moua have reflected positively on the Hmong community in the eyes of political candidates and elected officials, which helps to explain why Minnesota governments are much more likely than other local and state governments to respond to the issues of the Hmong community.

Overall, what this analysis shows is the importance of local and state context in facilitating political participation. As figure 6 shows, the location of Hmong residents, whether it is in Fresno or St. Paul, affects the availability of socioeconomic resources for upward mobility such as jobs and education; the size of the Hmong population relative to whites and other minority populations; and the political culture and environment in which the Hmong community resides. These three factors affect how Hmong candidates run their campaigns and the extent to which these candidates reach out to and commit resources to getting out the Hmong vote. The impact or significance of the Hmong vote in these elections, in turn, has a direct influence on the



attitudes and behaviors of local and state politicians toward the Hmong community. In Minnesota, the turnout of Hmong voters in Moua and Thao's elections have prompted political candidates as well as elected officials to be more active in addressing the concerns of the Hmong community. The trip sponsored by the St. Paul Mayor's office in 2004 to assess the conditions of incoming Hmong refugees to the U.S. and the condemnation of Hmong grave desecration in Thailand by the Minnesota State Legislature are public acts that have resulted from the increasing political clout of Hmong in Minnesota.

Figure 6



As the model shows, the socioeconomic conditions of Hmong are contextual; that is, they vary based on location. Indeed, analyses from the 2000 Census show that Hmong in the Midwest and other parts of the country are faring much better than their counterparts in California and Alaska (Pfeifer and Lee 2004; Grover and Todd 2004). A study conducted by the Federal Reserve Banks of Chicago and Minneapolis on Hmong homeownership in Fresno and St. Paul further shows how the region of residence impacts Hmong socioeconomic status, specifically the ability of Hmong to purchase homes (Grover and Todd 2004). Grover and Todd (2004) observed

that the disparity in Hmong homeownership between the two regions can largely be explained by the low level of skills, employment, and income in the Central Valley Hmong communities.

They observe that though the national Hmong homeownership rate in 1990 was under 10 percent, Hmong made significant economic gains in the 1990s and Hmong homeownership rose sharply across the country, except for in Alaska and California. They argue that the increasing skills, employment, and income of Hmong in Minnesota demonstrated by declining poverty rates, higher educational attainment, and greater employment levels contributed to the sharp rise in Hmong homeownership in Minnesota in the 1990s.

Similarly, Pfeifer and Lee (2004) also find that Hmong in the U.S. have made significant economic gains since 1990, with the exception of those residing in Alaska and California. Hmong in these two states have median household incomes that are at least \$10,000 less than Hmong living in other parts of the country. Furthermore, the public assistance and poverty rates in these two states exceed the rates of Hmong living elsewhere in the U.S. by at least 20 percent. Taking into account Pfeifer and Lee (2004) and Grover and Todd's (2004) findings, it is not surprising that compared to Hmong in Fresno, Hmong in St. Paul have higher income, are more likely to hold a high school degree, and own a home because they live in a state that provides greater economic and educational opportunities for the Hmong to achieve upward mobility. The availability of stable low-skills jobs combined with a good public education system and organizational resources have enabled Hmong to achieve significant economic gains in Minnesota, allowing them to buy homes at a rate that is almost three times that of their counterparts in Fresno. The low socioeconomic status of Hmong in Fresno is largely attributable to a lack of opportunities for upward mobility in the Central Valley in California. Hmong in Fresno live in an area that provides limited opportunities for not only Hmong but also the larger population to achieve economic success.

The region of residence also impacts the size of the Hmong population, but more importantly, the size of the Hmong population relative to other racial and ethnic groups. As shown in the racial and ethnic comparison in the comparative analysis section, the Hmong population in St. Paul, Minnesota is about the same size as the Hmong population in Fresno, California. Yet, the visibility of the Hmong population at the state and local level in these two regions are drastically different. Whereas Hmong in California are an almost invisible minority group, Hmong in Minnesota are the most prominent Asian ethnic group in the state, comprising over a third of the Asian population there. Locally, Hmong in St. Paul form 10 percent of the city's population, and the Hmong population alone is the second largest minority population. In Fresno, the Hmong population is only 5 percent of the city's population, and statewide, they are a little-known group. Unlike in Minnesota, a predominantly white state, California, the most populous and diverse state in the country, is a majority-minority state with the largest concentration of Asians in the U.S. Thus, in Minnesota, the Hmong have the advantage of being a much more visible group.

The political environment of Minnesota also works to the benefit of Hmong there, providing an environment that offers opportunities and incentives for Hmong to participate in the political system. With same day registration, residents in the state are able to register on the day of the elections, eliminating the 15 day advanced registration hurdle that residents in California face. More importantly, residents in Minnesota are much more likely than residents in California and other parts of the country to get involved in the political system. Minnesota consistently leads the country in voter turnout; its turnout rate is at least 12 percent higher than California's turnout for the past several presidential elections (Ostermeier and Jacobs 2006). Living amongst neighbors that are likely to vote exerts pressure on Hmong in the state to do the same. However, knowledge of what is required to participate and the belief that participation is beneficial are also

necessary conditions for Hmong to become engaged in the political system. These two conditions are also present in St. Paul, with its large number of Hmong non-profit organizations, many of which devote resources for political engagement programs, and with its history of elected Hmong officials, providing Hmong with concrete examples of the importance of having Hmong in public office.

The socioeconomic status of Hmong, their relative proportion to other racial and ethnic groups, and the availability of political resources to educate and stimulate Hmong political involvement, set the conditions for how Hmong candidates run their political campaigns, particularly the extent to which the campaigns involve the Hmong community. In Minnesota, where these three factors exist to the advantage of Hmong there, Hmong candidates have allocated substantial resources to getting out the Hmong vote. In turn, the Hmong vote has been important and critical at some stages for their electoral success. In Fresno, the lack of some of these factors sets up an environment where Hmong candidates cannot afford to set aside many resources for courting the Hmong vote, largely because of the relatively little impact that the Hmong vote will have in their elections.

The involvement of Hmong in these campaigns, particularly their voter turnout and their impact on these elections, has tremendous weight on how political candidates and elected officials view the concerns of their Hmong constituents. Due to the remarkable work done by Mee Moua, Cy Thao and other Hmong political candidates, including those who came before them, public officials and political candidates are now much more likely to seriously take into consideration the concerns of the Hmong community. Whether it is hiring Hmong campaign staff, employing Hmong staff in their office, or directly taking up the issues of the Hmong community, Minnesota politicians are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the Hmong community's support to their electoral success.

The importance of context, however, does not trivialize the work of the campaigns of Mee Moua and Cy Thao. Both campaigns worked tirelessly and innovatively to identify and get out the vote within Hmong and non-Hmong communities. From canvassing every household several times to providing transportation and assistance to Hmong voters during the day of the elections, these two campaigns demonstrated their commitment to reaching out to all segments of the population, including first-time and nontraditional voters. While recognizing the hard work of these campaigns, it is important not to discount how the Minnesota context has been extremely helpful in providing the conditions for Hmong in the state to establish themselves as an important player in the elections of political candidates.

### **Discussion**

There were two primary questions that guided this research. The first question was, why do local and state governments in Minnesota seem to be more willing to take up issues that directly concern the lives of Hmong? The second question, a follow up to the first question, asks what factors account for the increasing political influence of Hmong in Minnesota and whether such factors exist in Fresno. To answer these two questions, a comparison of the Hmong communities in St. Paul and Fresno was made based on four factors. These factors were socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic context, political context, and the impact of Hmong candidates on the political participation of Hmong voters. Through this comparison, it was shown that Hmong in St. Paul have achieved greater representation within local and state governments and received greater support from government officials than Hmong in Fresno because their voting has been crucial to the success of electoral campaigns. Hmong in St. Paul are more likely to vote and make an impact in elections because they have higher levels of socioeconomic resources and live in an area where they are more visible given their large size relative to other minority groups. Furthermore, they live in a state with an active culture of

political participation and they have had Hmong representation in elected office since 1992, factors which stimulate greater political involvement and contribute to increased feelings of efficacy.

Given these findings, the central argument in this study is that local and state context plays an important role in shaping access to resources that can facilitate Hmong political participation. All four factors considered in this study are contextual; that is, they each change depending on the area examined, whether it is in Fresno or St. Paul. These findings indicate support for the socioeconomic resource model of political participation because Hmong in St. Paul have higher levels of income and education than Hmong in Fresno. Higher levels of socioeconomic resources facilitate political participation through the mechanisms discussed by the socioeconomic resource model and the increased likelihood that Hmong are naturalized citizens. Group identity and group consciousness also appear to have an effect on Hmong political participation. The history of Hmong representation in local offices and the candidacy of Hmong individuals, in particular, have impacted Hmong political participation in St. Paul by fostering a greater sense of group efficacy. Political mobilization seems to have had the greatest impact on Hmong political participation. The campaigns of Mee Moua and Cy Thao each brought in at least 500 new voters, about 300 of whom were Hmong, and many people who did not traditionally vote. These efforts were successful because these campaigns devoted considerable resources to reach out to new and non-traditional voters. Campaign volunteers visited every household in each of the districts at least once and provided residents with information about the voting process. Furthermore, transportation and assistance with voting were provided for those who needed it during the day of the elections.

The findings in this study provide some suggestions on what can be done to increase the political participation of immigrants and low-income minorities in this country. Since

immigrants and low-income minorities do not possess characteristics commonly associated with active voters, they are not likely to be targets of mobilization by candidates and political candidates. Given the demonstrated importance of political mobilization in increasing the political participation of immigrants, it is troubling that those who are most in need of resources to participate in politics are the least likely to receive it. As such, anyone seeking to involve more low-income minorities and immigrants in the political system in this country must recognize that it entails an educational process that requires establishing personal contact with potential voters, helping them register and understand the voting process, and maybe even providing transportation and voting assistance during the day of the elections.

The candidacy of minority individuals can also have a positive impact on minority voter turnout. Minority candidates contribute to higher levels of minority political participation because they are more likely to devote resources to mobilize minority communities and their candidacies increase minority individuals' calculations of the potential benefits of voting. The lack of minority voter participation may be partly attributed to the lack of minority political representation. Thus, another way to increase minority voter turnout may be to encourage more minority individuals to run for political office. This entails community groups and organizations, as well as political parties and organizations, making a concerted effort to cultivate emerging young minority leaders who can run for political office when the opportunity presents itself.

Future research on Hmong political involvement should investigate the extent to which some of the factors in this study actually affect Hmong political participation. For instance, are Hmong individuals with higher levels of socioeconomic resources or greater involvement in community organizations more likely to vote than those lacking these attributes? Unlike the methodology of this research which utilized newspaper coverage and interviews with Hmong political elites, future research will likely require surveys and interviews with ordinary Hmong

citizens and voters in Fresno and St. Paul to get answers to these questions. Since this research was limited to only a comparison of Hmong in Fresno and Hmong in St. Paul, future research should address whether the factors found to be relevant in affecting Hmong political involvement in these two communities are applicable to understanding Hmong political participation in other cities as well. Lastly, this paper only focused on Hmong electoral participation in trying to explain why local and state governments in St. Paul are more likely than those in Fresno to respond to Hmong issues. It may be that other forms of political participation such as rallies and lobbying are also important in getting elected officials to address the needs of the Hmong community.



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