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ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS: A CASE STUDY OF HMONG AMERICANS IN

ST. PAUL, MN

by

Thilee Yost

A Thesis Submitted to Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Political Science and Philosophy)

The Honors College

The University of Maine

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Despite being a relatively new refugee group relocating to the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, Hmong Americans have emerged as a major political influence in St. Paul, Minnesota. With a population of over 68,000 Hmong Americans, St. Paul has been called the Hmong capital of the world. It has a very dense network of Hmong individuals who have proven to be an emerging political force. During the past November 2018 midterms seven, a record number, of Hmong Americans were elected to public office in the Twin Cities area. Since Asian Americans are expected to make up 10% of voters by 2040, it is important to understand how Asians can and have become an influential political force.

The goal of this study is to better understand how the Hmong as a relatively recent refugee group have been able to become an emerging force in Minnesota's mainstream politics. A qualitative study was conducted regarding the political activity and reasons for that activity among Hmong Americans in St. Paul. When immigrants or refugees relocate to the U.S. we must take into consideration multiple factors including historical context, the push and pull factors of migration, and the context of reception from locals in the place of relocation. We also look to the idea of linked fate and how that may effect the Hmong's political action.

Six interviews were conducted for this study: three interviews with community or Hmong organization leaders and three with Hmong Americans who were elected to public office. Two interview instruments were used for the two types of participants to cater to the individual's scope of knowledge. Using a grounded theory approach to

qualitative data analysis, four major themes arose from the data. First, multiple participants were able to shed light on the Hmong refugee experience from fleeing their home country to coming to the U.S. Second, participants shared how the Hmong community in St. Paul were motivated to be a voice in mainstream politics despite the initial discrimination they faced when relocating. Third, all participants spoke on this strong sentiment of community that the Hmong have in St. Paul – it influences much of their ideas and actions around social justice and politics. And fourth, there was a clear trend in observed generational differences between older Hmong and younger Hmong. Some differences included different rates of turnout and different values.

Conclusively, it was found that four key factors, the major themes above, contributed to the success of the Hmong's political incorporation and their ability to become a new and emerging force in Minnesota politics, setting precedent for possible trends we could see from Asian Americans on the national scale.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing and completing the honors thesis was one of the most exciting, stressful, challenging, and rewarding experiences of my undergraduate academic career. None of it would have been possible without the support and guidance of those around me.

I would first like to thank Dr. Amy Fried, who met with me every week for a whole year and helped guide me through the challenging academic experience of the honors thesis. Thank you for letting me sit in your office for an hour every week. Thank you for your patience in helping me learn the process of research and conducting interviews. This research would not have been completed without your expertise and advice in qualitative research in politics.

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Thank you to each of my thesis committee members: Mark Brewer for making time to advise and take interest in my undergraduate research; Jennie Woodard for introducing me to material early in my undergraduate career that began my interest in my own Asian American identity; and Jessica Miller for making my very first semester at the University of Maine so positive that I decided to stay instead of transferring to Boston University.

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Of course, I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me through out my undergraduate years. Thank you to my mother and sister who gave unyielding love and support. Thank you to my father for instilling in me an unmatched work ethic. Thank you to all my dear friends who gave me countless memories. Thank you Allison Watson for being my very first and best friend in college, and now lifetime friend. And thank you to Mary Celeste Floreani and Mal Robinson who gave me unprecedented care and support throughout my undergrad.

Most of all, I want to thank the Hmong American community of St. Paul, Minnesota. Not only is their success in mainstream American politics an inspiration to other Asian American communities, but they have been one of the most welcoming communities I have had the privilege of speaking with. The individuals who spoke with me gave incredible insight into the Hmong American's community and history in St. Paul, and each left me with even more excitement about the Hmong community and Asian politics than I thought imaginable. Without these inspirational individuals, this project would not exist. Because of you, I am not just more knowledgeable, but also wiser and pursuing life with even more purpose than ever before.

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## INTRODUCTION

I timidly stepped onto the metro at Central Station, which was still only one of a handful of times I've taken public transit. Only five stops away, it was a straight shot on the Green Line that I'd find a small, community library, the Rondo Library, on Dale St. Until then, I sat watching people jump on and off the cars - almost as if they were playing a game of double jump rope hopping in and out of the moving ropes. Tall brick buildings outside my window began to be replaced by smaller cement and wood ones. Business signs went from commercial banks and restaurant franchises in English to family owned ones in Hmoob (the written Hmong language). I stepped off the metro, struggled to cross the street with the ice and many stop lights, but then finally reached the entrance to the library. Upon entering, the first thing I noticed were all the families and their children, not because there was many of them but because children and their families were black, brown, and Asian, but none white. Some children and mothers wore hijabs. Children speaking in English, Hmong, and Somali ran back and forth between the children's section and their parents sitting at the public computers, to tell them about something exciting they found.

Looking around more, there was a traditional Hmong jacket encased in a frame hanging high up on the wall. There was a glass wall with characters from different languages engraved on the surface, and to the left of it all was a community board full of flyers advertising programs and community events in English, Hmoob, and Somali. Events included city wide clean ups, community youth health councils, Somalis and

Minnesota talks, Cuban film nights, and anti-war protests. All of these events were aimed at serving the community, with many put on by local neighborhood members.

When beginning this research project, I wanted to analyze census data on Asian Americans and their contemporary political participation. Census data interested me as I tend to look at the federal and national level trends and policies. But upon further research, I realized that census data, or other aggregate data, did not do justice the struggles that many Asian immigrants and refugees had to face when coming to the U.S, nor does aggregate data even accurately explain the national trends we see in Asian American civic and voting engagement. Realizing that aggregate data cannot do these groups justice, I decided to take a community approach to Asian political incorporation.

During my trip to St. Paul, I was learning about the Hmong community, and more specifically investigating the question: What explains the sudden political emergence and political influence of the Hmong community in Minnesota? The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group that only began coming to the U.S. during the mid 1970s under the Indochina and Migration Act of 1975. The Hmong have a long history of movement and displacement beginning in the 16th century that continues until today. Hmong are widely dispersed around the world and there are still Hmong from Laos and Vietnam coming to the United States. The largest phase of their diaspora occurred during the 1970s as political war refugees and they only make up 1.43% of the United States' Asian population, meaning they only make up 0.092% of the total U.S. population.

This study contributes to research on Asian Americans and their incorporation into politics, specifically, Hmong Americans in St. Paul, Minnesota. Asian American sociological and political behavior has been understudied in academia. Compared to other

racial groups, Asian Americans have been either overlooked or over generalized. The lack of robust research combined with stereotypes, Asian Americans have been depicted as apathetic towards politics when in reality they are the “sleeping political giant.” Like all immigrant groups, Hmong Americans have had a unique history that has contributed to their ability to mobilize and become incorporated as strong force in mainstream American politics.

In this thesis, I will discuss other research on the political incorporation of immigrants, provide the current data on Hmong Americans, outline their long history of displacement and involvement in the Laotian Civil War and Vietnam War, and discuss this paper’s research design and results. Moreover, I will argue that the Hmong American experience as political refugees, as an Asian ethnic group coming to a predominantly white area, and as U.S. allies and war veterans contribute to Hmong being a political influence in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. First, I turn to data on Asian American political participation and some influential theoretical perspectives of immigrants.

## CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Asian Americans

When we look at the racial group of Asian Americans, we often associate them with high socioeconomic status. Indeed, compared to other non-white groups, they have relatively high levels of income and education. Over 51.1% of all Asian Americans have a Bachelor's degree or higher, about 15.6% have a high school diploma or equivalent, and only 13.1% have less than a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> This is relatively consistent with white Americans as 88.8% of white Americans have a high school diploma or higher, and 89.1% of Asian Americans have a high school diploma or higher.<sup>2</sup> Asian Americans are actually the highest income earners with an average 2017 income of \$81,331 per year compared to the average income earned for whites at \$68,145.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it has been well established that higher levels of income are strongly associated with higher voter turnout,<sup>4</sup> a historical trend that was only further exemplified in the 2016 presidential election. We also know that higher levels of education are correlated with higher voter turnout as well. But this correlation isn't what is being currently observed in Asian Americans across the national scale.

Research has found that Asian American political participation is below the national average in voter turnout and members of this group are underrepresented in the

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<sup>1</sup> "Community Facts: Hmong Americans and Asian Americans," accessed April 7, 2019, <http://facts.aapidata.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015," accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.html>.

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau, "Household Income: 2017," accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/acs/acsbr17-01.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "This Is the Link between Voting in Elections and Income," World Economic Forum, accessed April 8, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/low-voter-turnout-increasing-household-income-may-help/>.

federal government. Currently, there are over 20.4 million people of Asian descent living in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Asian Americans currently makeup 5.2% of the population but as the fastest growing racial group the the U.S., they are expected to make up over 10% of the eligible voters in 20 years time.<sup>6</sup> And despite this prediction, there are still limited data gathered on Asian Americans as a political group and its various ethnic subgroups. That being said, we do know that during the 2016 Presidential Election Asian Americans had a voter turnout of only 49.3%. This was a whole 17 percentage points behind that of non-Hispanic white voters who had a turnout of 65.3%.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, in the U.S. Congress there are 15 Asian American Representatives and three Senators,<sup>8</sup> with Asian Americans making up 5.8% of the U.S. population,<sup>9</sup> proportional representation would be 22 seats in the House and at least 5 in the Senate. Asian Americans historically have stayed with this trend of being the lowest or second lowest voting rate group. Considering these national trends and patterns, Hmong Americans seem to be the exception to the rule; this will discussed later in this thesis. First, we must also consider how Hmong are not just Asian voters, but also a voting immigrant group.

### *Political Incorporation of Immigrants*

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<sup>5</sup> “Key Facts about Asian Americans,” accessed January 16, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>.

<sup>6</sup> Aastha Uprety, “5 Ways to Increase Asian American Voter Turnout,” Center for American Progress, May 7, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2018/05/07/450310/5-ways-increase-asian-american-voter-turnout/>.

<sup>7</sup> Jens Krogstad and Mark Lopez, “Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016 US Election,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed October 30, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/>.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Dickson, “115th Congress Will Be Most Racially Diverse in History,” Text, *TheHill*, November 17, 2016, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/306480-115th-congress-will-be-most-racially-diverse-in-history>.

<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: UNITED STATES,” accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US#>.

When looking at how the Hmong were able to become involved in politics, it is important to consider the broader patterns of how immigrants become politically incorporated. According to political scientist Michael Suleiman, several components can impact the level of political incorporation that occurs for immigrant and refugee groups. Looking at the two major phases of the Arab immigrant experience, Suleiman found major differences in how different waves of Arab immigrants responded to relocating to the U.S. due to historical and contextual factors. The first wave of Arab immigration consisted of “sojourners” meaning “as people who were in, but not a part of American society,”<sup>10</sup> – they saw their emigration as only temporarily away from home. The primary goal of early Arab arrivals was the “fast accumulation of wealth.”<sup>11</sup> But this proved difficult as they were low income, unskilled, and had little education. Lack of being able to be a part of the main work force led to further cultural isolation and so these immigrants stayed away from mainstream politics and culture. This is what is called an ethnic or cultural hardening. The second wave of Arab immigration was quite different in that they were more diverse (from many more nations than just Syria and Lebanon) and they were both Christians and Muslim coming whereas it was primarily Christian during the first wave. Additionally, with political unrest, immigration no longer seemed temporary but more permanent. Post 1920s immigration was when the identity really formed where they were Arab American and assimilating into mainstream culture and politics.

The first group initially felt their emigration to the U.S. was temporary so they did not feel the need to assimilate. This group of Arab immigrants tended to keep a very

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<sup>10</sup> Michael W. Suleiman, *Arabs in America* (Temple University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Michael W. Suleiman.

insular community keeping traditional cultural customs and their native language. The second, post WWII, wave of Arab immigrants felt a much stronger need to assimilate to mainstream culture and politics as their immigration was seen as permanent and the reception of Arab immigrants was extremely negative as international political climates changed. Looking at these two groups, Suleiman concluded that no two immigration experiences are the same – history, individual factors and motivations, and the context of migration and reception matter. Each of these factors influence a given group's assimilation experience.

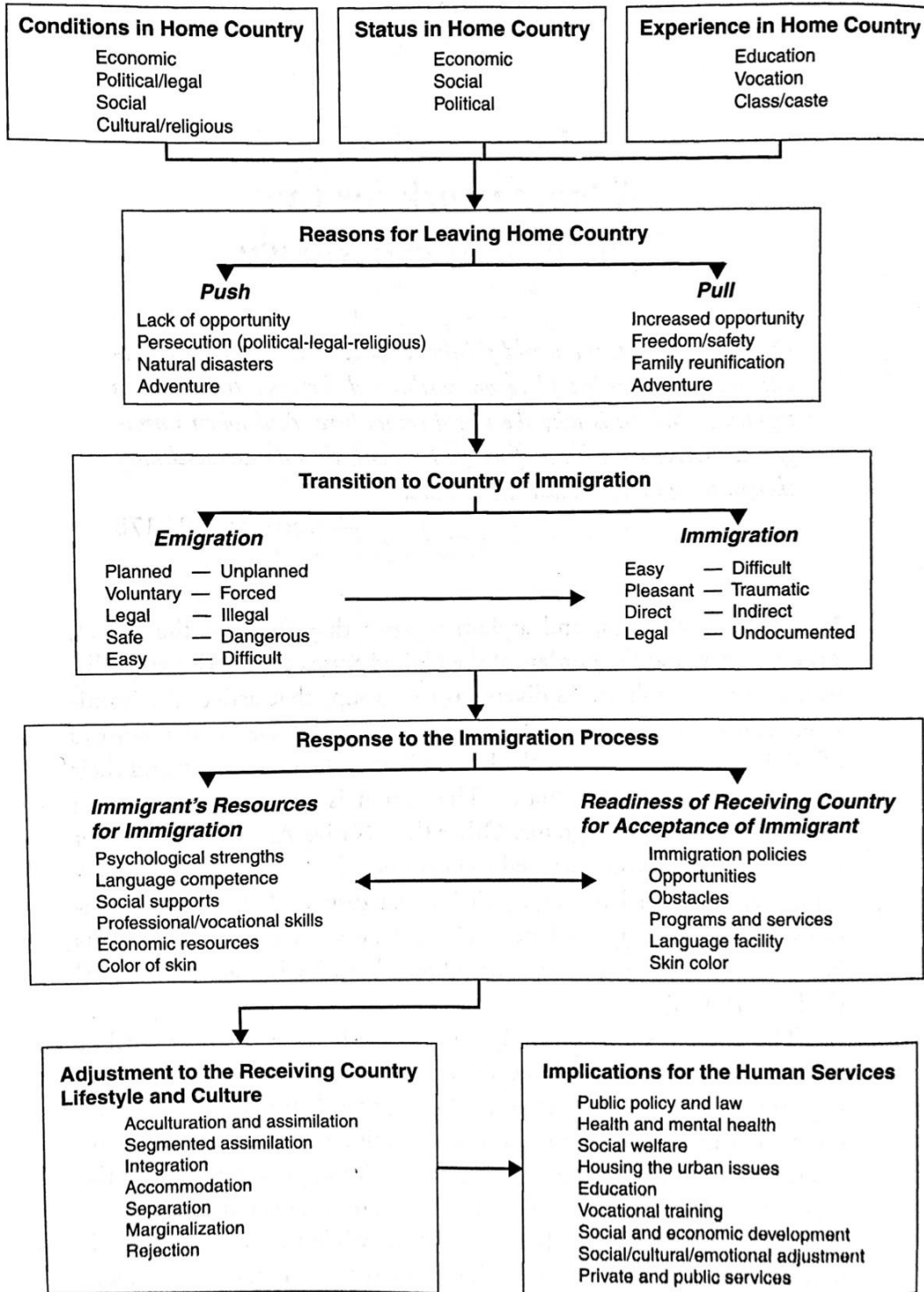
Assimilation is the process of a person or group gradually changing their behaviors and practices by adopting the local culture that is more often than not different from their own. In conforming, they become a member of that social society and begin to identify as the new nationality - in this research, identifying as American. The opposite of assimilation is cultural or ethnic identity hardening, which is when the person or group immigrating experiences the need to make their ethnic and cultural identity even more pronounced and kept intact. This can take form in keeping one's native language and not feeling the need to become fluent in English and staying within neighborhoods where other individuals from their ethnic group live. Ethnic hardening often occurs when the reception from locals is negative - when there is discrimination and hostility and othering towards immigrants. Suleiman provides for us the key factors to determining assimilation experiences for immigrants: the historical context, reasons for leaving matter, and the context of reception matter.

Uma A. Segal's framework for immigration compliments Suleiman's conclusions. First, we must look at the status and experience of the home country. Is there political



unrest? Are there limited economic opportunities? Is there danger for particular groups? These conditions can lead to push factors. For every immigrant group, there are push and pull factors that lead them to emigrate from their homeland. Push factors are reasons for leaving while pull factors are reason for choosing a particular area to arrive at. We must also consider the experience of the actually travel and transition between emigrating and immigrating. Was it planned? Unplanned? Was there access to safe travel or was it dangerous?

Figure 1. Uma A. Segal's Framework for Immigration



Additionally, there is a concept among racial minorities of linked fate. Linked fate is “the sentiment... that one’s prospects are ultimately tied to the success of the race.”<sup>12</sup> Linked fate was first identified within the African American community. There have been theories of group consciousness and interdependence when it comes to voting, for example, Pamela Conover theorized that group interests can become relevant and important to the individual, but group interests were not synonymous with self interest.<sup>13</sup> For Michael C. Dawson, linked fate functions more simply and more directly. Dawson claimed that “the historical experiences of African Americans have resulted in a situation in which group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest.”<sup>14</sup> Since Dawson, there have been attempts to apply this phenomena to other marginalized groups. Among Americans, as an ethnic minority, could potentially be a part of this phenomena.

For the immigrant groups that tend to assimilate into mainstream culture and politics, one can also look at how exactly that manifests in political party association. Asian Americans as a voting group are often referred to as a “sleeping political giant.”<sup>15</sup> Asian Americans as a whole historically have not been largely Democratic or largely Republican. Only recently have Asian Americans tended to lean slightly Democratic, but not overwhelmingly. As of 2017, 44% of Asian Americans identified as Democratic,

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore R. Johnson, “Will Black Voters Abandon the Democratic Party?,” *The Atlantic*, September 7, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-changing-outlook-for-black-voters/403975/>.

<sup>13</sup> Pamela Johnston Conover, “The Influence of Group Identifications on Political Perception and Evaluation,” *The Journal of Politics* 46, no. 3 (August 1984): 760–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130855>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Naomi Hsu, “Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Campaign Strategies, Political Parties, and the Puzzle of Asian American Under-Participation in Electoral Politics” (University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

42% Independent, and 12% Republican (a significant drop from the 25% who were in support of the Republican party in 1998).<sup>16</sup> Their overall turnout rate is about 49.3%.<sup>17</sup>

Some major reasons for the lack in strong party affiliation for Asian Americans:

1) immigrant status and the histories their homeland may have with certain political regimes;<sup>18</sup> 2) the two party system is difficult and insufficient to apply to Asian Americans;<sup>19</sup> 3) the two major parties, Democratic and Republican, have yet to figure out how to successfully attract Asian Americans as strong loyal constituents, and 4) Asian Americans as a racial group is so large it is difficult to generalize the group in their party alignment.<sup>20</sup>

Take, for example, Vietnamese Americans as an Asian refugee group. Compared to other Asian groups, Vietnamese Americans are the most likely to identify as Republican rather than Democratic.<sup>21</sup> During the Cold War, the U.S. sent nearly 2.6 million troops to Vietnam alone in support of South Vietnam to fight communist North Vietnam, or Viet Cong.<sup>22</sup> After communist Vietnam invaded Saigon, winning the war, South Vietnamese people began emigrating to the U.S. to flee persecution. The majority of Vietnamese immigrants are those who were not in support of a communist regime.

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<sup>16</sup> Media Inquiries, "Asian American Voters Remain Solidly Democratic | Pew Research Center," accessed February 21, 2019, [http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/20/1-trends-in-party-affiliation-among-demographic-groups/2\\_4-12/](http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/20/1-trends-in-party-affiliation-among-demographic-groups/2_4-12/).

<sup>17</sup> Jens Krogstad and Mark Lopez, "Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016 US Election," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed October 30, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/>.

<sup>18</sup> S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Ricardo Ramirez, *Transforming Politics, Transforming America*, ed. Taeku Lee (University of Virginia Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Ramakrishnan and Ramirez.

<sup>20</sup> Aastha Uprety, "5 Ways to Increase Asian American Voter Turnout," Center for American Progress, May 7, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2018/05/07/450310/5-ways-increase-asian-american-voter-turnout/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ramakrishnan and Ramirez, *Transforming Politics, Transforming America*.

<sup>22</sup> C. N. N. Library, "Vietnam War Fast Facts," CNN, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/01/world/vietnam-war-fast-facts/index.html>.

This strong violent experience with a communist regime in conjunction with a Republican president, President Gerald Ford, signing the Indochina and Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, many Vietnamese immigrants formed strong bonds to the Republican Party.<sup>23</sup> For Vietnamese Americans, the risk of political persecution in Vietnam from communist powers was the main push factor while safety in the U.S. was the pull factor. Vietnamese were able to immigrate to the U.S. and the reception was relatively positive as it was publicized the Vietnamese people who were coming to the U.S. were either allies or people worthy of being saved. Discrimination for Vietnamese Americans definitely occurred and still exist today, but the American media often depicted the Vietnamese as a people to be empathized with.

A similar phenomenon has been observed in the Cuban American community as well. The tension between Cuba and the U.S. began in 1850s when the U.S. was divided about whether or not to colonize Cuba or liberate Cuba during the Spanish American War. Congress decided to let Cuba gain their independence but it was a quasi independence as the U.S. still took control of Guantanamo Bay and Cuba's foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. continued to militarily intervene whenever there was a political crisis, often only entering for economic interests such as sugarcane. President Franklin Roosevelt decided to claim neutrality in an internal uprising within Cuba. During 1952, Cuban President Batista suspends the constitution and imposes an oppressive rule. In response, Fidel Castro led a communist uprising.

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<sup>23</sup> Farai Chideya, "Vietnamese-Americans Are No Longer A Lock For The Republican Party," *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), October 18, 2016, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/vietnamese-americans-are-no-longer-a-lock-for-the-republican-party/>.

<sup>24</sup> "A Brief History of America and Cuba - YouTube," accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chYBlArm9Ao>.

At this time, since the U.S. was so focused on anti-communist ideals, the U.S. supported Batista despite the highly oppressive regime he imposed, as he at least was not a communist. Eventually, Castro took power in 1959 and the U.S. took even more drastic action by sending trained CIA agents into Cuba. Cuba then involved another large world super power by making a relationship with the Soviet Union. Avoiding World War III, all involved eventually backed off but with tension. Escaping social and political oppression, many Cubans (125,000) fled to Florida. Fleeing from a communist regime, many Cubans, once becoming U.S. citizens, became extremely loyal to the Republican party. During the 2004, 78% of Cuban Americans in Florida voted for George W. Bush, compared to the national scale where Bush had 56% of the Hispanic vote.<sup>25</sup> Many Cubans felt the Republican party was the party of capitalism or at least anti-communism and to Cubans, communism was the main cause for the oppression they experienced in Cuba. This is still especially true for the older generation of Cubans, but young Cuban Americans are shifting the group's percentages.

When it comes to the two party system, it can be difficult to apply to Asian Americans as many are foreign born and their homeland politics do not exactly translate into the mainstream American two party system so party affiliation. Taeku *et al.* pose that there must be made the distinction between identifying with a party and acting like a partisan. Additionally, not all immigrant groups are familiar with this political model and the model tends to ignore race and ethnic identity. Instead, Taeku *et al.* write that we must understand the process of racial formation and immigrant acculturation to better

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<sup>25</sup> Media Inquiries, "After Decades of GOP Support, Cubans Shifting toward the Democratic Party," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/24/after-decades-of-gop-support-cubans-shifting-toward-the-democratic-party/>.

understand how immigrants and people of color in American come to identify with a particular party.<sup>26</sup>

Not only does the two party system ignore racial formation but the two parties currently do not make effort to attract Asian voters. In 2016, it was reported only 33% of Asian Americans were reached out to by a candidate while outreach to white voters stood at 46%.<sup>27</sup> This low level of outreach can make Asian Americans feel overlooked and their needs and interests unaddressed.

Another reason it is difficult to pinpoint what party Asians tend to support more often and how often they turn out is because of aggregate data that over-generalize the Asian population in the United States. Aggregate data are summaries of data that are typically used for public reporting and census reporting. Disaggregated data is data collected from multiple sources with multiple measures, variables, or individuals, and in doing so, it breaks up aggregate data into smaller units or variables to reveal underlying patterns and trends that aggregate data cannot show. In regards to this research, an example of aggregate data is the 2016 presidential election voter turnout for Asian Americans at 49.3%.<sup>28</sup> However, if we disaggregate this data into ethnic groups rather than just one large racial group, we can see differences in rates among the different ethnic groups. “Comprehensive data collection that is disaggregated by ethnicity would provide candidates and policymakers with a more complete picture of the Asian American community, allowing them to take an active role in increasing Asian American voter participation.”<sup>29</sup> For example, there are huge differences between the Asian Indian

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<sup>26</sup> Ramakrishnan and Ramirez, *Transforming Politics, Transforming America*.

<sup>27</sup> Karthick Ramakrishnan et al., “2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey,” 2016, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Krogstad and Lopez, “Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016 US Election.”

<sup>29</sup> Uprety, “5 Ways to Increase Asian American Voter Turnout.”

immigrant experience, who tend to have extremely high socioeconomic status and high voter turnout, and the Cambodian immigrant experience, who tend to have much lower socioeconomic status and lower voter turnout. Asian Americans account for groups that are from 20 different nations from different different cultural regions such as East Asia, and Southeast Asian, and South Asia (which is the area the Hmong are considered to be from). Before turning to others' findings relevant to Hmong Americans, we must first briefly review the Hmong people's history, their reasons for leaving the homeland, and their context of arrival to the U.S.



## CHAPTER II: HMONG HISTORY AND RELOCATION

### A History of Displacement

The Hmong people have had a long history of displacement that contributes to the seven million Hmong in the world today residing in five different continents. Prior to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hmong primarily lived in the central China in the Hunan region before the Han Chinese invaded the land. For many years, the Hmong stayed and tried to resist military power, the taxations, and forced cultural assimilations. Eventually, the Hmong were pushed down to the mountain regions of northern Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, where many Hmong still reside today. But even when settled in the mountains, the Hmong still had to face military pressures, this time from the French. From the 1850s to the 1890s French forces colonized the region to establish French Indochina. Efforts to gain independence from France were not successful. Japan took control of the area during the 1940s when France was being occupied by Germany. War in the region continued into the 1940s and 50s during World War II.

### The Laotian Civil War

War in Laos broke out once again during the Cold War and Vietnam war. Much of the reason Laos was going through a civil war was because of the social and political unrest. There were main conflicts between Royal Lao and communist Pathet Lao. In 1961, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) secretly established an alliance with the Hmong army Laos which was being led by General Vang Pao, therefore supporting

Royal Lao. Hmong forces then fought for the U.S. by blocking Northern Vietnam efforts which saved many U.S. soldiers.

At the Geneva Conference in July of 1962 Laos claimed it wanted to remain neutral throughout the Cold War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to honor Laos's neutrality until the U.S. "decided to fight a clandestine war."<sup>30</sup> Part of the U.S.'s strategy was to target Communist Vietnamese who resided in two Laotian theaters: one in northern Laos and the other was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. For both locations, the CIA recruited a large number of Hmong people to carry out these attacks. This "secret" Hmong army was heavily tasked with high risk operations. The Hmong became allies to the U.S. military since the U.S. provided humanitarian aid to Hmong communities during the 1960s and 70s. The Hmong were once again a displaced people which affected their ability to be self sufficient. They could no longer support their own farming practices due to the lack of land and abled bodied people. So the community began to become dependent on U.S. food airdrops.

The secret Hmong army was responsible for stopping the advancement of North Vietnam into South Vietnam, rescuing U.S. soldiers who were taken prisoner or otherwise imperiled, and furthering enemy intelligence.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. had no hesitations when it came to using the secret Hmong army for these dangerous operations. An estimated 30,000 - 40,000 Hmong soldiers died during U.S. motivated missions<sup>32</sup> and the secret war, out of a 350,000 total regional population.

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<sup>30</sup> Himilce Novas, Lan Cao, and Rosemary Silva, *Everything You Need to Know About Asian American History* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Himilce Novas, Lan Cao, and Rosemary Silva.

<sup>32</sup> Chio Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (University of Illinois, 2010).

### *The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*

When the war ended with the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and as Communists took over Laos, many Hmong, especially Hmong who fought on behalf of the U.S., fled to Thailand. It wasn't until the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act was extended to include Laotians, which included the ethnic groups of Laos, Hmong, and more that refugees began coming to the U.S. Mass movement of Hmong refugees began with 14,404 Hmong in the 1970s followed by 43,598 in the 1980s, and 36,581 in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup> These decades contributed to the total 130,000 Hmong who came to the U.S. as political refugees.<sup>34</sup> It wasn't until the 1980s that the U.S. government acknowledged the Hmong people's role in the war and shed light on it to the public, and it was not until 2000 that Bill Clinton signed into law the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act where many Hmong were able to gain citizenship. In 1990, St. Paul had a Hmong population of 17,764. By 2010, there was a Hmong population of 66,000 in St. Paul.

### Hmong in America Today

Currently there are nearly 301,300 Hmong living in the United States,<sup>35</sup> the majority of the world's Hmong population still live in East and South East Asian. The largest number of Hmong at 3,000,000 - 3,500,000 still live within China's borders; about 1 million in Vietnam, half a million in Laos and 150,000 in Thailand. For Hmong who no longer live in Asia, some larger populations include France at 15,000 and French

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<sup>33</sup> Chio Youyee Vang.

<sup>34</sup> Chio Youyee Vang.

<sup>35</sup> *Hmong Populations World Wide* (Hmong Cultural Museum, n.d.), accessed March 11, 2019.

Guiana and Australia at 2,000 each. But the largest population of Hmong abroad are the Hmong who reside in the United States. Hmong primarily reside in three states: California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.<sup>36</sup> While California has the largest Hmong population in the U.S. at over 98,000, Minnesota has the most densely populated areas of Hmong, specifically in the Twin Cities area (Minneapolis and St. Paul). Minnesota has over 73,000 Hmong Americans living within the state borders, and 94% of them live in the Twin Cities area. Large parts of St. Paul, like nearly all of University Avenue for example, is lined with Hmong owned markets, restaurants, shops, and services such as the Hmong Cultural Center, Hmong American Partners, and law offices with Hmong American attorneys. Additionally, the local university, Concordia University, has a Center for Hmong Studies. The strong presence in the community is a special phenomenon for Hmong Americans living in St. Paul compared to other Hmong Americans, for example those who live in California and Wisconsin (as will be discussed later).

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<sup>36</sup> "Community Facts: Hmong Americans and Asian Americans."

**Table 1. Hmong Population Size around the World**

Country / State	Number of Hmong People	Percent of World Hmong Population
China	3,000,000 - 3,500,000	42.9 - 50.0%
The United States	301,300	4.30%
France	15,000	0.21%
Germany	500	0.01%
Australia	2000	0.03%
New Zealand	150	0.002%
French Guiana	2000	0.03%
Argentina	500	0.01%
Canada	640	0.01%
Minnesota	73,110	1.04%
California	98,372	1.41%
Wisconsin	53,803	0.77%

*Data from the Hmong Cultural Center, St. Paul, MN and AAPI Data*

Nationally, Hmong Americans do not follow the same political behaviors as the broader racial group suggests it would. Hmong Americans actually have relatively low socioeconomic status compared to Asian Americans in general. Only 17.5% of Hmong Americans had a Bachelor's degree or higher; 23.9% had a high school diploma or equivalent; and 29% of Hmong Americans had less than a high school degree. Furthermore, 28% of Hmong Americans are in poverty compared to Asian American rate of 12.5% and Americas total national average of 11%. Hmong Americans have an

average annual income of \$51,056<sup>37</sup> (with some regional disparities between Hmong Americans in California and Hmong Americans in St Paul to be discussed later). Despite the lower socioeconomic status compared to other Asian Americans, the Hmong have been able to make extremely large strides in building community, getting involved in politics, and raising their own socioeconomic status over time in the Hmong capital of the world, St. Paul. But before we discuss how they were able to do so, we must know where they came from and how they got here.

**Table 2. U.S. States with highest Asian American and Hmong Populations**

**Top States**

<b>Top States</b>	<b>Asian American</b>	<b>Hmong</b>
1	California (6,432,756)	California (98,372)
2	New York (1,864,781)	Minnesota (73,110)
3	Texas (1,493,998)	Wisconsin (53,803)
4	New Jersey (935,236)	North Carolina (11,594)
5	Hawaii (810,627)	Michigan (6,430)
Total population in States	11,537,398	243,309

*Data provided by AAPI Data*

Literature on Hmong American Political Involvement

Since coming to the U.S., there has already been a small yet growing discourse around Hmong Americans and their involvement in politics. There is the *Hmong Studies Journal* which publishes academic discourse on the Hmong population on a regular basis.

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<sup>37</sup> Mark E. Pfeifer, "Hmong Americans in the 2013 American Community Survey," *Hmong Studies Internet Resource Center*, November 2014.

With their own journal dedicated to Hmong studies, there is clearly a growing academic interest in the Hmong community.

Jeremy Hein's research echoes Suleiman's analytical approach to Arab Americans to Hmong Americans and suggests that we must look at the context of reception and, for Hein, reception in the form of resources. Hein's research in "The Urban Ethnic Community and Collective Action: Politics, Protest, and Civic Engagement by Hmong Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul," focuses on two questions: 1) given Hmong Americans' particular contexts of exit and contexts of reception, how and to what extent have Hmong former refugees and their U.S.-born children been incorporated into the U.S. political system? 2) How do broader political contexts or homeland circumstances shape Hmong American politics and the state's treatment of Hmong in the U.S. and abroad? To answer, Hein looks at social ecology, institutional completeness, and urban village.

Hein points out that there are extremely high levels of civic engagement by Hmong Americans. As stated before, St. Paul has the highest density of Hmong Americans. With St. Paul being the "ethnic capital"<sup>38</sup> of the world for Hmong, Hmong people have a lot of economic opportunities in the community and city meaning as a group they are able to respond to both local and national level issues that are especially pertinent to the Hmong. This ability to have capital but also respond as a group is powerful. "Hmong Americans reveal that strong ethnic communities can promote internal social solidarity and engage in much needed collective action to solve social problems.

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<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Hein, "The Urban Ethnic Community and Collective Action: Politics, Protest, and Civic Engagement by Hmong Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul: THE URBAN ETHNIC COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION," *City & Community* 13, no. 2 (June 2014): 119–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12063>.

This finding implies that public policies can facilitate the adaptation of immigrants and refugees by increasing the collective efficacy of their communities.”<sup>39</sup> Hein concludes that it is the combination of “endogenous and exogenous resources” has been a “key mechanism through which Hmong Americans have been able to participate in the U.S. political system. Hmong Americans’ degree of political incorporation is a byproduct of the interplay between Hmong-led mobilization and the responses of the state.”

Furthermore, Yang Lor echoes this sentiment as he found that “local and state context plays an important role in shaping access to resources that can facilitate Hmong political participation.”<sup>40</sup>

Stephen Doherty’s research has focused more on the major “social, cultural and political facts that have shaped Hmong-American political behavior... [and] Hmong-American candidates who have run for electoral office.”<sup>41</sup> Doherty discusses how despite expected trends of immigrant political incorporation is generally low due to psychological dissonance, cultural and language barriers, as well as perceived low efficacy in small being a minority. But Doherty claims the Hmong are an exception to this trend and have high levels of political participation in the form of running for office. Doherty claims there are two main motivations for Hmong candidates to be running for office: 1) to mobilize their Hmong community and 2) gain more recognition and create awareness on Hmong issues. Reasons for running for office and garnering support are explored in this paper’s research.

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<sup>39</sup> Hein.

<sup>40</sup> Yang Lor, “Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (2009): 53.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Doherty, “Political Behavior and Candidate Emergence In the Hmong Community,” *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2007, 1–35.



While the majority of literature and discourse discusses the uniqueness of the Hmong community in their political incorporation, not all researchers have found extraordinary amounts of civic engagement. In 2012, Kau Vue, a student at California State University, conducted a study regarding Hmong political participation in the U.S. Using two models, the socioeconomic model and the group consciousness model, Vue gathered information on how Hmong participate in U.S. politics. Vue's data was gathered via an online survey to answer two questions: 1) Are Hmong politically active? 2) What variable influence their political participation?

Vue's survey found that 71.1% of respondents were registered to vote.<sup>42</sup> This is higher than the national average considering 44% of Asian Americans were not registered to vote in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>43</sup> Hmong tended to only slightly lean towards the political left with 60.8% identifying as Democratic, 34.2% Independent, and 5.1% identified as Republican.<sup>44</sup> Vue found that in regards to party affiliation, the Hmong population tends to reflect the average trends of the greater national Asian American population, writing "the Hmong are more passive participators, engaging in political discussion with friends and family."<sup>45</sup> But in their overall political behavior and participation, Vue found that "the Hmong are not as civically engaged as other Asian Americans."

But this has changed recently. One aspect of political participation that Doherty's research supported that Vue's did not, was the the Hmong's "unexpected tendency to run

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<sup>42</sup> Kau Vue, "Hmong Political Participation in the United States" (California State University, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Chris Fuchs, "Nearly 40 Percent of Asian-American Voters Don't Favor a Party. Can the DNC Change That?," NBC News, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/nearly-40-percent-asian-americans-voters-don-t-favor-party-n862806>.

<sup>44</sup> Kau Vue, "Hmong Political Participation in the United States."

<sup>45</sup> Kau Vue.

for elected office (Sturevent 2000; Associated Press 2000),” which has been demonstrated with the Hmong’s history in running for office and continuing to do so while winning seats. As discussed below, researchers have established that Hmong Americans are civically and politically engaged as group due to resource availability.

Taking into account the importance of historical context, the context of leaving and reception, and the idea of linked fate, led me to do qualitative research at the community level. I determined that a community level approach would allow for the collection of disaggregated data which would tell a more complete picture of how the Hmong were able to become a part of mainstream American politics.

### CHAPTER III: THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The purpose of this study is to better understand how Hmong Americans have been able to successfully be involved in politics as a recent Asian immigrant group. In the initial stages of this research, broad aggregate data were being analyzed but upon further research, aggregate data did a disservice to the stories of Hmong displacement and immigration. As Lien notes, “it is impossible to try to present a more comprehensive profile of the political participation of Asian Americans without paying proper attention to these decisions and actions [to negotiate and fight repressive systems.]”<sup>46</sup> Aggregate data does not allow us to take into consideration the factors of historical context, the reasons for leaving their homeland, and the context of reception. Instead of an aggregate data approach that can often only give us generalized statements, a community focused approach was taken here so that we may be able to take into consideration those key factors.

Hmong Americans in St. Paul make for an excellent case study for Asian immigrant political incorporation for several reasons. First, their recent political involvement has set historic records. In the 2018 midterms, there were a record number of Hmong Americans who not only ran for public office but were also elected to office in Minnesota. During the midterms nine Hmong Americans ran for office and seven were elected. Those elected included: Samantha Vang, Jay Xiong, Kaohly Her, Fue Lee, and the two Hmong Americans elected to judiciary positions are Paul Yang, and Adam Yang.

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<sup>46</sup> Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian American through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2001).

Second, compared to other Hmong communities in the U.S., the Hmong in St. Paul have a higher socioeconomic status. As established, they are still below the average rates of education and income for all Asian Americans, but Hmong in St. Paul have a higher SES in St. Paul than they do in areas like Fresno, CA. And while by pure numbers Fresno has a higher number of Hmong Americans living there, Hmong are more densely populated in St. Paul and make up a higher percentage of the total population in relation to the state population. In California, Hmong only make up 2% of the Asian population whereas in Minnesota Hmong makeup 32% of all Asians. Hmong in St. Paul also have more access to resources than Hmong do in Fresno, CA.<sup>47</sup> That being said, even though Hmong in St. Paul have a higher socioeconomic status than Hmong in Fresno, Hmong in St. Paul still have relatively high levels of poverty or at still very low income.

Third, the St. Paul Hmong community already has established a history in being able to get representatives into elected offices. The first Hmong American elected to office was Choua Lee for St. Paul School board in November 1991. Between 1995 and 2017, 15 Hmong Americans have been elected to public office in Minnesota. Mee Moua was the first Hmong to be elected to a state senate position in 2002 and Cy Thao was the first to be elected to the state house. Hmong political representation has only continued and increased with the record number of Hmong who ran for office during the the November 2018 midterms, and the record number of Hmong who won their races (seven individuals). Furthermore, St. Paul also has a robust and dense network of Hmong who have created Hmong specific organizations. Organizations include Hmong Americans for Justice, Hmong American Partners, the Hmong Cultural Center, the Association of

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<sup>47</sup> Yang Lor, "Hmong Political Involvement in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California."

Hmong in Minnesota, and Maiv PAC, the all Hmong Women run political action committee. The new Hmong state representatives also just created the Hmong caucus.

### Methodology

The design of this research follows a grounded theory method (GTM). Originally developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, GTM is the research method in which theory is constructed from the qualitative analysis of data. It is “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research,” (Glaser and Strauss 1967), as opposed to theory derived from logic and previous assumptions, and then using data collection to confirm or deny a theory or hypothesis. Using a grounded theory approach, data was evaluated from the six interviews.

I traveled from Bangor, Maine to St. Paul, Minnesota from March 10 to March 16, 2019. I stayed in an AirBnB apartment on Wabasha Street in downtown St. Paul, right next to the Green Line of the metro. St. Paul is a 56 square mile city with a population of 304,000 (World Pop Review 2019). The racial composition of St. Paul is: 57.4% white, 18.0% Asian, 15.9% black, and 9.6% Hispanic or Latinx (US Census 2017). There is a clear concentration of Asian people in St. Paul as Asians only make up about 5% of the total national population. With respect to language, 70.8% of the St. Paul population speaks only English while 15.2% speak an Asian language, 7.0% Spanish, and about 7.0% speak other languages. But the Green Line, which follows University Avenue, goes through largely a Hmong area with Hmong owned businesses. I was able to travel to St. Paul and stay in an AirBnB due to a generous fellowship award to me by the

Center for Undergraduate Research at the University of Maine as well support from the Honors College Legacy Fund.

To gather participants to be interviewed, a snowball sampling method was used. Once deciding to study the Hmong community in St. Paul, an initial list of elected Hmong Americans and Hmong specific organizations was created via an internet search. By researching different organizations and using official office use email list potential participant list included 21 potential contacts including organizations such as Hmong Americans for Justice, Hmong American Partners, Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia, and the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as a list of Hmong Americans who currently hold a public elected office.

All organizations and persons were initially contacted by email (see appendix A) between four and seven weeks prior to March 10th (the travel departure date). Some potential contacts were reached out to multiple times via different email addresses and follow up emails. Once participants responded and agreed to participate, appointments for interviews were made. Times and locations of the interviews were determined by availability and convenience for the participants. Reminder emails of interview date, time, and location were sent to all the participants one week prior to travel to make sure the appointments would still work for the individual. This was especially important as many of the participants were taking time out of their regular job, especially for those participants who were in elected positions and had to be in the State Office Building during legislative matters.

Once arriving in St. Paul, six interviews were conducted in one week's time. Five interviews were completed in person and one was done over the phone. Two interviews

took place on Monday, one on Tuesday, one on Wednesday, and two on Friday. Interview recordings were between 28 minutes and 55 minutes long, but the actual appointments were between 45 and 60 minutes. Each interview took place at a location chosen by the participant. Locations included a local cafe, over the phone, and at the State Office Building. All interviews were recorded with the Memos recording application on an Apple iPhone 6 plus. Notes during the interviews were taken as well with pencil and paper in order to highlight major areas of interest, as well as writing down follow up questions as the interview progressed. The interviews were then transferred and stored on a MacBook laptop and listened to at later dates for data analysis.

Two sets of questions were used as the data collecting instrument during the interviews. One questionnaire was designed for general participants (see Appendix B). General participants were those who have been involved in the Hmong community and have a intimate perspective into the community. This included those who were directors of cultural programs and any other participants who were did not run for office. The second questionnaire was designed for those directly involved in politics - Hmong Americans who have been elected to public office or ran for public office (see Appendix C). Both sets of questions were used with flexibility with room for follow up questions and the ability to ask the questions out of order to help produce a more organic interview.

Within these interviews, lines of questions touched on four major areas: 1) Are Hmong Americans in St. Paul politically active and in what ways? 2) Why are Hmong Americans particularly involved in politics? 3) Do Hmong Americans feel like there a

sense of linked fate and solidarity? 4) How were Hmong Americans able to gain support when running for office?

### Participants

The participants of this study consisted of adults who have been involved in the Hmong community and/or Hmong American politics in the St. Paul, MN area. A total of six participants were interviewed. Two participants were involved in directing cultural events, two were from political action organizations, and two were Hmong Americans who were recently elected to public office. Participants were gathered via a snowball sample. An initial list of participants was created from an article in the *Twin Cities Pioneer Press* describing the seven Hmong Americans who were voted into public office. Additionally, an online internet search was used to find the contact information of several Hmong cultural and political groups. From this initial list, potential participants were contacted via email. This email included asking for referral to other potential participants as well as an attached PDF of the informed consent form (see Appendix D). All participants were above the age of 18 and received a document of informed consent during the request for interview. Four men and two women were interviewed. Five out of the six participants were ethnically Hmong.



**Table 3. Participant Type and Scope of Knowledge According to ID Number**

Interview ID	Participant Type	Time (minutes)	Scope of Knowledge / Highlights of Interview
0144	Elected Official	41:08	The lived Hmong experience, wanting to represent more than just Hmong in politics, gaining support from community to run for office, systems of oppression
0306	Elected Official	53:09	Gaining support to run for office, discrimination, the intersection of Hmong identity, Asian identity, and being in politics, systems of oppression
0449	Hmong Organization Leader	47:12	History of Hmong in St. Paul, community, discriminations of today and past years,
0561	Hmong Organization Leader	28:52	The refugee experience, historical and present discrimination, Hmong community's desire to educate the public on who Hmong are
0579	Hmong Organization Leader	47:54	Recent occurrences of discrimination against Hmong community, how Hmong respond to discrimination, community, what Hmong are doing today in political and social organizing, generation differences in Hmong population
0845	Elected Official	35:49	The lived Hmong experience, garnering support from Hmong community to run for office, Hmong capital of the world, strong sense of community, generational differences in Hmong population

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was used to review the data. In addition to the notes taken during the interview, post interview impression notes were also taken. A couple hours after each interview, I would sit and write down more notes highlighting the key areas the participant spoke on. Additionally, the recordings were reviewed multiple times with a grounded theory approach to extrapolate common themes and sentiments that

multiple of not all the candidates were mentioning. Once determining the four major themes, the recordings were listened to once again so that major quotes could be pulled and organized into the four chosen categories.

### Results

As stated before, the four main areas I intended to investigate were: 1) Are Hmong Americans in St. Paul politically active and in what ways, 2) Why are they involved in mainstream politics, 3) Do Hmong Americans feel a sense of group consciousness or linked fate, and 4) How are the Hmong different than other Asian American groups. When using the interview instruments (see appendices B and C), however, four major themes became apparent: 1) the Hmong immigrant experience, 2) resilience and becoming political, 3) the strong aspect of community, 4) and the value of representation and generational differences. Each of these four areas contributed to understanding the Hmong American community in St. Paul and the political incorporation they have been able to achieve.

### The Hmong Refugee Experience

One major theme that arose within the six interviews were certain aspects of the Hmong American experience as a recent refugee and immigrant group. One really important aspect about the Hmong people is that it is a largely veteran population that resides in America. “Every single Hmong person you meet here in America, they are related one way or another to a veteran that fought in the war. That’s how everyone got here - through that war and through service in that war,” (Interview 0306). The Hmong

fought for the U.S. against communist powers in both the Vietnam War and the Laos Civil War. At high risk for political persecution, many Hmong fled to the U.S. under the Indochina and Migration Act. Now the population is related to or descendants of war veterans. With this veteran experience and pride, many felt a strong sense of deserving civic rights and voting rights. Serving with and for American forces gave Hmong veterans a claim to citizenship. In 2000, the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act facilitated the ability for many refugees and Hmong war veterans to gain citizenship and voting rights.

Additionally, participants were able to speak to the discrimination the Hmong have faced when first coming to the U.S. Discrimination upon first arrival were largely racially charged and included a lack of understanding who the Hmong were and how they were not foreign enemies. "In the early 70s and 80s there was discriminations," said one participant. "Many people did not know who we are. They thought we were Japanese; they thought we were Vietnamese. There was already racism and discrimination about [those] groups of people. When they talk to young Hmong, they said 'You are Jap. You need to go back to your country,'" (Interview 0561).

The local Minnesotans did not understand who the Hmong were as many Hmong who fought on behalf of the U.S. fought in the Laotian Civil War which was not covered by mainstream American news media. Newspaper headlines included "Hmong gardens vandalized for the third time this spring," (StarTribune, June 11, 1987) "Hmong field huts called eyesores by some in Rosemount," (StarTribune, June 9, 1987) and "Residents say refugee shelters should be 'Americanized,'" (StarTribune, June 8, 1987). Continuing in

1998, a radio station had to apologize for remarks they made earlier in the year stating “Hmong should either assimilate or hit the road,” (StarTribune).

While racial discrimination has lessened over the years, acts of racism and discrimination still exist today (Interview 0561). “To think that [discrimination] is something of the past is inaccurate,” (Interview 0449). In 2004, Minnesota radio station, KQRS had two DJs used racist stereotypes to talk about the local Hmong people. “Stay in your cave. Marry 15 women. Beat your children. All the wonderful things about your culture. Let’s talk about those things shall we? Murder your wives. Murder your husbands. Leave nine orphans behind,” (Chue Moua Hmong Tribune 2004). In 2005, a Hmong man killed six deer hunters. Instead of being considered an isolated act of violence, the story was made out to be about the individual’s ethnicity. In response to this incident, a Nazi group spread fliers throughout Minneapolis with racist, anti-Hmong fliers. The fliers included phrases such as “Is diversity worth even one American life? These six Americans were killed protecting their private property/hunting rights... Are you next?” According to the same article, incidents of harassment towards Hmong people in St. Paul increased (Pioneer Press, 2005).

The context of arrival included prejudice toward the Hmong and this anti-Hmong and anti-immigrant language continues to today. In 2015, a “Twin Cities property manager refused to rent to Hmong family members, trying to charge them for translation expenses and pointing to language limitations for rejecting them as tenants,” (StarTribune, Paul Walsh, April 23, 2015). The Hmong landlord wanted an extra \$500 just for the need of translation.

It wasn't until one mayor of St. Paul had to inform the public of the Hmong people's contribution to the U.S. that the public had more positive reception to the growing Hmong community in St. Paul (Interview 0561). This experience with largely being a veteran population has had a large influence in Hmong Americans becoming political in the face of adversity and discriminations.

### Resilience and Becoming Political

When asked about getting involved in politics, participants spoke to a multitude of reasons they as individuals and as Hmong people decided to get involved in politics. Of the responses, some key points included: 1) the experience of political oppression and being a war veteran gives the Hmong people a sense of having civic rights, 2) the lived experience of Hmong influencing political affiliation, and 3) organizing around a candidate or cause.

One of the reasons the Hmong people were able to become mobilized in mainstream politics is because of their unique demographic of being heavily a veteran population. Moreover, the Hmong have a long history of displacement. With the combined experiences of shared political oppression and fighting on behalf of the U.S., the Hmong community was actually very motivated to become a part of mainstream politics. The Hmong people have been pushed out of their ancestral lands multiple times throughout history. At first, they were pushed out of China, then out of Laos and pushed into Thailand and Vietnam. Once fighting on behalf of the U.S. and then emigrating to the U.S., many Hmong felt they had gained a strong sense of civic duty and civil rights. "We [the Hmong people] see ourselves as Americans. When our grandparents and

parents made the decision to come here, they wanted to start a new life here but they didn't just want to come and bow down to anybody. They still have that very Hmong thinking in their minds where they come and they're like 'I'm Hmong, I'm independent, I have dignity and I deserve to be treated equally with others,' (Interview 0845).

Despite facing initial discriminations in St. Paul, the Hmong people have been very resilient in that these discrimination actually motivated them to become more involved in the local mainstream politics. "That history of being a part of something bigger than themselves... Everybody wants to be a part of something bigger than just themselves and politics is an arena where you can do that whether you are a candidate, volunteer, flan baker, or financial donor," (Interview 0845). The Hmong have made great strides in educating their community and becoming a part of mainstream politics as multiple community members have been elected to office.

This involvement in mainstream politics as an immigrant group is especially interesting because of the two most common experience immigrants face in terms of assimilation. As reviewed by Suleiman, there are two major responses immigrant groups have when emigrating to a new place: a cultural or ethnic identity hardening, or cultural assimilation. A hardening of one's ethnic identity means to distance oneself from the mainstream culture and politics of the area of arrival. This insular behavior can manifest in multiple ways including: staying in isolated neighborhoods where one can live without needing to learn English, not registering to vote in local or national politics, and keeping strong cultural traditions and practices. Assimilation is when one wants to almost abandon one's cultural or ethnic identity and conform to the mainstream culture. This can take the form of learning the dominant local language, the rule of law, and learning about

civic duty. It can take the form of learning to dress in mainstream fashion as well. And it can also mean abandoning values once held that contradict or differ from the mainstream.

Hmong Americans occupy a very interesting space in between the two. The Hmong are clearly civically and politically involved in mainstream American politics, but they have not abandoned their ethnic heritage and cultural identity either. This can be seen in the Hmong Cultural Center that is visited by Hmong year round. It can be seen in the local fliers and pamphlets that are written in the Hmoob (the written Hmong language). And it can be seen in Hmong markets that are Hmong owned serving traditional Hmong food next to closeted vendors selling various vibrant Hmong dress, jewelry, and other textiles and goods. Hmong Americans are not abandoning their language but incorporating it into the local community and culture.

The Hmong community has not only been able to be incorporated into mainstream politics but also it has also led for many of their representatives and community members to align as progressive, which is especially unique for an immigrant and refugee group who had fought communist powers. When we look to Cuban Americans or Vietnamese Americans (those who have also fought communist powers or have experienced oppression under those political regimes), once they were incorporated into American politics they dominantly leaned right or conservative. With the Hmong fighting communist powers in Laos and Vietnam, it would follow that the initial group of Hmong coming to the U.S. would have their experience translate into American conservative politics, especially since the Indochina and Migration Act of 1975 was signed by republican President Gerald Ford. But many experiences beyond the 1975 Act led Hmong to be more progressive and lean left.

According to one person interviewed, “Our lived experience tends to shift the Hmong community towards the left,” (Interview 0845). These lived experiences often included fairly severe poverty. “I grew up really poor. I grew up in public housing with a single mom. A roach infested home. I remember when you want to eat so badly and you open the fridge and there’s nothing in there and you make a wish and there’s nothing there,” (Interview 0144). The Democratic Farmer Labor (DFL) party has a long history of “electing strong, progressive leaders to public office,” (Minnesota DFL). Caucuses within the party include: caucuses for African American, Disability, Environmentalism, Latinx, Muslim, Progressive, Somali American, Veterans, Asian Pacific Americans, Hmong American, Feminist, and more. One of the most recently formed caucuses is the Hmong Caucus that was just formed by the newly 2018 elected Hmong lawmakers (Pioneer 2018).

One participant said they value “forward, open minded thinking, open to new ideas...” Other values included being “inclusive of all people, race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation... also being willing to working across the aisle” (Interview 0579). When first coming to the U.S., many of the Democratic policies were ones that gave the Hmong people assistance to be able to afford housing and food, “it gave us a fighting chance” said one participant (Interview 0845). This led to many Hmong being quite loyal to the Democratic party. Overall, when asked about the Hmong community’s success, participants said that “a lot of it is community support.” (Interview 0845).



## Community, Community, Community

Hmong Americans have a deep sense of community. Hmong Americans were able to incorporate themselves into American politics because of their willingness and ability to mobilize - to “come together and gather around a cause,” (Interview 0579). One example of this is an incident with police and the Hmong community. Grand Rapids, Minnesota is predominantly white and suburban. There was a Hmong grandmother who was in her sixties out in the backyard going to the shed. A neighbor thought it was a robbery so they called the police. When the police came, they used canines to take hold of the elderly woman. Then the police took her to the back of the car and interrogated her but she did not speak any English. One of the Hmong American based organizations felt the need to respond. “We talked about this issue and how the police can work better with the Hmong community,” (Interview 0579). “For the Hmong community, it’s in their identity as a cultural community. They get involved through their community lens... There’s a lot more connectedness. Everybody’s related to someone,” (interview 0845). This community lens is what also leads the Hmong to “continually and consistently turn out,” (Interview 0579). This idea of coming together and supporting a Hmong issue and Hmong candidates is very much related to the concept of linked fate.

Linked fate is the idea that one’s own success and prosperity is connected to the racial or ethnic group and when that group is uplifted and prospering, so will the individual. By responding to incidents that happen in the Hmong community and by turning out for Hmong candidates, it is clear Hmong Americans feel that supporting a Hmong candidate will be lifting up their community and their needs via representation (to be discussed further below). Support for Hmong candidates is also in donations. “We

don't get a lot of financial donations from the non-Hmong community... Most of my funding comes from the Hmong community so we owe a lot to Hmong business community who have done well and donate," (Interview 0144). The Hmong community in St. Paul is also unique due to their economic opportunities and higher socioeconomic levels. One participant said Hmong people know that "when one Hmong does well, all Hmong do well" (Interview 0144).

St. Paul is the "Hmong capital of the world," (Interview 0845). St. Paul's large and dense population of Hmong allow for there to be a consumer base that will support Hmong owned businesses. Furthermore, Hmong can "pool [their] resources and invest in big companies," (Interview 0845). Relative to other areas where Hmong reside in the world, St. Paul is leading in economic opportunity and education, allowing them to pursue a higher socioeconomic status. This status can also be seen in the Hmong community beginning to have charter schools to help get more Hmong students into college and university. With a dense Hmong population and thriving Hmong businesses, there is a strong base for Hmong candidates to run for office and have support. "Knowing you have numbers is really important," (Interview 0306).

### Representation and Generational Differences

Multiple participants also spoke on the importance and value of ethnic representation in campaign runs and government. "[Having a Hmong candidate] brings a level of enthusiasm to our campaigns, where everywhere we go hundreds of Hmong supporters would turn out to support us. If we were to compare that to other mainstream candidates... they don't gather that many supports. Everywhere we went, every event we

had, hundreds of supporters would come. So it really brought attention to us and our issues and the issues in our community. Like a blast of fresh air and new energy,” (Interview 0845).

Representation is important for the Hmong just as it is important for any racial minority or immigrant group. Some of the first Hmong candidates who ran for office really helped set an example for future Hmong Americans to run for office. “Historical races created excitement, opportunity. It opened peoples eyes to possibility for young people to imagine themselves in office,” (Interview 0579). Another participant said “I see a lot of other Hmong individuals who want to run for office. I’ve definitely seen that grown. Many come up to me now and say you inspired me to run, I’m looking to run for this seat, a lot of them come to me for advice on running... I am very happy to see that more and more people feel they can run and are qualified to run,” (Interview 0845). Racial representation can inspire others to run for public office. But it can also have smaller everyday effects that make non-white, and in this particular case, Hmong constituents, feel more comfortable in their city. “Other Hmong have come to me and said ‘Yeah I feel much more confident going to the DMV because you’re in office,’” (Interview 0845).

Furthermore, representation and exposure is important to Hmong not only for their ability to run for office but to have pride in their identity. One participant spoke on how the lack of exposure to Hmong and people of color left her with an identity crisis. “I felt really angry I had been lied to... I bought into the narrative I’ve been told my whole life. It took me a really long time,” (Interview 306).

That being said, the importance of representation takes different forms for the different generations. As veterans and those who have experience political oppression, elder Hmong value civic rights, the right to vote and to have a political voice. “That shared experience of being in Laos and having to go through all those struggles and coming to America it makes them much more attuned to political advancement, political consciousness, and so I think that older generation has that civic minded dedication. I think that accounts for the difference in how they view politics,” (Interview 0845).

Senior Hmong tend to highly value a candidate simply being Hmong. When elders see a Hmong candidate, they instantly feel represented: “they are going to fight for [their] needs,” (Interview 0845); “If they see a Hmong person running, they are going to vote for that person,” (Interview 0306). On the other hand, young Hmong do not value that ethnic representation as highly. “The issues that the Hmong seniors are fighting for, doesn’t necessarily meant those are issues that the Hmong youth are fighting for or that speaks to them personally... They’re not veterans, they’re not refugees, they grew up in America. They can already speak English, they don’t need translation services whereas the seniors do,” (Interview 0845). Another participant said “The younger generation feels educated. They do not want to be clustered in a group: ‘you’re Hmong, you’re going to vote for a Hmong person.’ They want to have their own identity,” (Interview 0579). Being born in the U.S., the younger generation tends to assimilate in some ways of even more so into mainstream culture and politics. They are bilingual or only speak English and they tend to value affordable housing and affordable education over ethnic representation.

This generational difference could contribute to the sense of linked fate being lessened over time, but that is to not say the Hmong community is hopeless. One participant said “these young people have very high ambitions and are very much politically engaged,” (Interview 0449). While young Hmong participation and turnout tends to be lower, there are still individuals in the community who are motivated to be in mainstream politics. Additionally, another said “our young Hmong community are great advocates. They know how to organize... Young people give me hope,” (Interview 306). The younger generation are becoming more aware more quickly in that they can sense when there is something wrong, especially something wrong within the system (Interview 0306).

**Table 4. Four Main Themes from Interview Analysis**

Theme	Main points
Hmong Refugee Experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hmong fled due to risk of political persecution</li> <li>2. Almost all Hmong Americans are related to a war veteran</li> <li>3. Reception was a mix of positive and negative, but overall discrimination existed and still exists today</li> </ol>
Resilience and Becoming Political	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Experience of political oppression and being a war veteran gives the Hmong people a sense of having civic rights</li> <li>2. Hmong are majority left leaning due to their lived experience, despite their past of fighting communist powers</li> <li>3. Hmong have an ability to organize around a candidate and/or cause</li> </ol>
Community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hmong in St. Paul are living in the “Hmong Capital of the World” meaning they have a higher socioeconomic status compared to other Hmong</li> <li>2. There are clear indications of linked fate</li> </ol>
Representation and Generational Differences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Voter turnout rates are different between the older and younger Hmong in St. Paul</li> <li>2. Ethnic and racial representation is more important to the older Hmong than younger Hmong</li> <li>3. There are different values between the generations</li> </ol>

These four major areas in the St. Paul Hmong experience shed light on their history, migration experience, and the reception of relocation - all of which contribute and shed light on their success in emerging as a major political influence in St. Paul.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

### Future Questions and Directions for Research

This project has led me to have more areas of interest for research regarding the Hmong American community in St. Paul. A concept I would like to do further research into is how intersecting identities function within politics. Participants for this study consisted of both men and women. Some participants spoke to how there were still patriarchal structures within the Hmong community being combined with the patriarchal and oppressive structures of American politics. One participant was able to speak on being not only an Asian woman involved in politics but a Hmong woman in multiple patriarchal social and political structures. How do these intersecting identities affect their lived experience and politics? Are there differences in beliefs and policy proposals between Hmong men and women in politics? Or does being Hmong provide a unifying factor? One participant spoke on how it is the older generation and the women in the Hmong community that actually have the highest voter turnout within the community as both groups have faced aspects of oppression more so than Hmong men and young Hmong Americans.

I would also suggest further investigation into the generational differences in the Hmong community. As stated before, many participants mentioned not only that the younger generation of Hmong do not turn out as much and there are differences in values between older Hmong and the younger Hmong. Some participants reported that there are sentiments among young Hmong Americans about not wanting to just be identified as Hmong and automatically voting for any Hmong candidate. Hmong youth tend to look

more at issues rather than racial or ethnic representation and they value things like affordable education and housing rather than some of those services older Hmong value. As first generation American-born Hmong, they have their own experience and relationship to mainstream American culture and politics that is worth exploring. For example, it would be important to ask the role of ethnic and racial identity in their voting behavior and how they value demographic representation?

And of course, an overall commentary on data and research regarding Asian American populations, there is a need further research that disaggregates data. When we over generalize Asian Americans into one large racial group, we completely wash over the individual experiences that tell the real stories of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants. We become desensitized and forgetful of the individual community's story and stop meeting its needs. The Hmong people are advocates of disaggregated data and our research should support that as well.

### Conclusion

Asian Americans nationally tend to have lower rates of political participation than other racial groups. Taking into account the importance of disaggregate data, the research looked at the particular case of Hmong Americans in St. Paul who tended to be the exception to the national rule in that they are above average in their civic engagement and political participation. Hmong Americans in St. Paul just had a record number of Hmong voted into public office. This research wanted to know what explains the sudden political emergence and influence of the Hmong community in Minnesota.



This study followed the advice of Suleiman and took into account this historical context and context of reception and response to analyze how Hmong people have been able to incorporate themselves into mainstream American politics. From the interviews, four major themes occurred: the Hmong refugee experience, which touched on reasons for leaving but also the context of reception from local Minnesotans. Another theme was resilience and becoming political, meaning how the Hmong responded to discrimination was not to disassociate or stay away from politics but to be motivated to be heard in the mainstream area. Connected to this was the aspect of community and how the Hmong population in the U.S. is largely a veteran population which caused many Hmong to have a sense of civic rights and voting rights. A final theme was representation and generational differences in that many participants spoke on this aspect of the older Hmong turning out to vote more but also valuing ethnic representation more highly than young Hmong. Each of the themes spoke to an aspect of historical context, push and pull factors, as well as reception, as Suleiman emphasized. The Hmong refugee experience provided important context as participants spoke to the need to flee from Laos and Vietnam, but also once relocating the lived experience of being quite poor. Additionally when speaking on the aspect of community, Hmong Americans has a strong sense of linked fate since they believe that when one Hmong succeeds, all Hmong succeed.

In a couple of short decades, Asian Americans are expected to make up 10% of the total voters in the U.S. Hmong Americans in St. Paul serve as a leading model in the impact Asian Americans can have in politics in the future. Hmong Americans in St. Paul have been shown to have a real political influence in elections and policy. With Asian voters increasing across the U.S., the racial voting bloc will begin to have more pull in

influence in national politics as well. Hmong Americans show the immense weight Asian voters could have in America in the future. As one participant said, “we can’t be ignored,” (Interview 0306).

## APPENDIX

### **A. Email to Participants**

Subject heading: Request for Interview

To whom it may concern,

My name is Thilee and I am a fourth year student at the University of Maine. I am currently doing research for my thesis and I am looking for participants.

My research is focusing on Hmong Americans in St. Paul and how the community has gotten involved in American politics in voter turnout and running for public office. I would love to meet for an interview if you have the time. I am planning a trip to St. Paul during the month of March 2019 (specifically between the 11th and 16th). The interview would be about an hour long, recorded, and we could meet wherever is most convenient for you, or we could do a phone interview as well if meeting in person is too difficult to schedule.

Please let me know if you would be interested in participating in this study and available to meeting during the mentioned week. And if you are not available, is there someone you would suggest I reach out to as well?

Attached to this email is the consent form with more information about the study. If you have any questions, please email me at [thilee.yost@maine.edu](mailto:thilee.yost@maine.edu) or you can reach out to the advisor for this project, Dr. Amy Fried, at [amyfried@maine.edu](mailto:amyfried@maine.edu).

Thank you so much.

## **B. General Participant Interview Instrument**

1. Could you please state your name and your position?
2. What is your background in the Hmong community and American politics?
3. What kind of work does your organization do? (if applicable)
4. Can you tell me about key moments in the history of the Hmong in St. Paul?
5. What discrimination, if any, did the hmong historically face and what discrimination are still present today?
6. From your perspective, what do you think accounts for the growth in political activity amongst the Hmong community?
7. Was there a certain point in history or event that mobilized the Hmong community to become a more active part of American politics?
8. Do you see your fate as linked to others in the Hmong community? Do you feel a sense of solidarity?
9. Do you think of yourself or this organization as a part of a grassroots movement?
10. Are there other organizations outside of the Hmong community you work with or would like to work with?
11. Do you feel the Hmong community here effectively mobilizes for political issues/causes? (if need be: What does that look like, when, etc.? Look for an example)
12. When you think about other racial and ethnic groups in the Twin Cities, how does their involvement in politics compare to the Hmong people? What about the Hmong in comparison to other Asian groups?
13. Do you feel Hmong Americans were able to become engaged in politics more quickly than other immigrant groups?
14. Is there anything else I should know about this organization or the Hmong community here?
15. Do you have any questions for me?

### **C. Elected Official Interview Instrument**

1. Could you please state your name and your position?
2. What is your background in the Hmong community and American politics?
3. Can you tell me about key moments in the history of the Hmong in St. Paul?
4. How did you decide to run for office?
5. How were you able to garner support?
6. How do Hmong American communities spread candidate information and does that differ from what you have observed amongst non-Hmong outreach efforts?
7. From your experience, how does Hmong culture relate to political engagement?
8. From your perspective, what do you think accounts for the recent growth in political activity and mobilization amongst the Hmong community?
9. Do you see your fate as linked to others in the Hmong community?
10. Do you think of yourself as a part of a grassroots movement?
11. Do you feel being elected to office has made a difference in your community? If so, how can you tell?
12. Is there anything else I should know about you or the Hmong community here?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

#### **D. Informed Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a study being conducted by Thilee Yost, a senior student at the University of Maine in the Political Science Department. The purpose of the research is to investigate how the Hmong in St. Paul have been successful in incorporating themselves and their communities into American politics.

What will you be asked to do?

In choosing to participate, you will be asked a series of questions regarding Hmong Americans, and the Hmong community and their political engagement in St. Paul. These questions could take up an hour or more of your time. The entirety of this interview will be recorded.

Questions include but are not limited to:

- What is your background in political organizing?
- What can you tell me about the Hmong community in St. Paul?
- Can you walk me through some of the specific tactics that you used to mobilize the community and build enthusiasm?

Risks

Your only risks with participating in this research are time and inconvenience.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you.

Confidentiality

Your names will not appear on any documents or the thesis made from the results of this research. A code number will be used to protect your identity. Any data collected during the interview will be kept in a locked room. Data refers to the recording of the interview, any hand written notes taken during the interview, and your name and specific position and organization to which you belong to. The information collected will be destroyed by December 2019.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the interview. You can skip answers you do not want to answer or go back to questions you felt you did not answer clearly enough.

Contact Information

If you have questions about this study, you can contact me, Thilee Yost, by phone at (207) 350-9898 or by email [thilee.yost@maine.edu](mailto:thilee.yost@maine.edu). You may also contact the advisor of this project, Amy Fried, at [amyfried@maine.edu](mailto:amyfried@maine.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, (207) 581-1498, or (207) 581-2657, or email [umric@maine.edu](mailto:umric@maine.edu).

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