

# Democrats Abroad

*Democrats Abroad Vietnam has had a lot to smile about recently. Not only have they seen an end to eight years of Republican rule, but they have helped drive their membership, and interest, upward. Words by **Will Peach**. Photos by **Rico Gonzales**.*



LAST YEAR'S US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION campaign was largely unprecedented. As millions of Americans at home flocked to the polling stations, the rest of the world became swept away in a tide of "Obama fever." Vietnam was no different.

The Democrats Abroad Vietnam (DAVN) was particularly active in the lead up to November 2008, with both its Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City chapters running events. Taking out bipartisan weekly advertisements in the English-speaking press, the organisation also encouraged a rise in absentee voting and helped to illustrate just why it was important to do so. Obama, it seems, became their key man, helping them enjoy new levels of attention both inside and outside Vietnam.

"Obama was the headline of the main narrative. He made politics mainstream," say their members.

## History

Operating in Vietnam since 2004, Democrats Abroad Vietnam was formed by a small group of American expats who came together in the run-up to the Kerry-Bush presidential elections.

Thinh Nguyen, the DAVN country chair, moved from the San Francisco Bay Area back to Ho Chi Minh City in 2001. He recalls those early days.

"I was disappointed with the direction the country was going," he says. "It wasn't the one I used to know. I had a few friends, and when we met and talked we realised we were disappointed and angry. We realised we had to do something."

The group only grew more incisive in its action when Bush inexplicably won another term (winning the electoral vote with 286 to Kerry's 251).

"After that there was a large amount of disappointment and we felt we should do more," recalls Nguyen.

As a result he travelled to the Democrats



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Abroad Global Meeting in 2006 and spoke directly to Obama on the phone. “That was where the interest in a formal branch grew,” he explains.

Upon returning, Nguyen met future DAVN secretary Tim Crowley, who had previously been involved in Democrats Abroad Hong Kong, and helped, together with members Dana Doan, Scott Solsberg, James Ortmann and others, to officially launch the chapter in April 2008.

#### ◦ Visibility

Despite their newfound status, those involved in the group quickly found that stimulating expat interest was somewhat of a challenge.

“Most people didn’t know we existed or what we do,” says Minnesota-native James Ortmann, who helps orchestrate key events. “A lot of Americans here are busy and don’t spend a lot of their time worrying about politics.”

Nguyen also agrees, but sees a slightly different picture, largely due to his own position as a Vietnamese immigrant who moved to the US at sixteen. “It’s difficult due to the situation. Vietnamese-Americans freeze when confronted about political issues; they just don’t feel comfortable talking about it.”

According to James and Nguyen, the candidacy of Obama seemed to change all that. Suddenly more people became interested in their projects.

“He did something magical no other politician has,” says James. “I did phone banking urging people to vote and a lot of people said they were excited to vote for him. I myself saw face-to-face with him with his positions on the war in Iraq, gay issues, Guantanamo Bay and particularly the *War on Terror* and his emphasis on diplomacy.”

#### ◦ Gathering Momentum

The group maintains that it’s easy to get involved in the organisation.

The main Democrats Abroad website ([www.DemocratsAbroad.org](http://www.DemocratsAbroad.org)) provides a link to the Vietnam chapter enabling people to register for their mailing list which provides updates about events, meetings and other related information. Whether pre or post-election, the group still meets every first Wednesday of the month, and holds fundraising events such as that for Georgian senator Jim Martin.

However, where the group really reached its apex, it seems, is when Obama won the Democratic Primary.

“In the run up to the presidential election, we held an event with a representative from the Obama campaign that discussed the campaign and focused attention on voting,” says Tim.

He adds: “We also held a very successful fundraising event for the Obama campaign (where Obama discussed the campaign via conference call), as well as a victory party after Obama won the election.”

Even networking tools like Facebook helped raise their profile during and after the election. James, who helped to organise a celebration of Obama’s first 100 days, used the site to promote the event in April.

#### ◦ Inroads

Aside from Obama, another quality that it has in its favour is size.

Branching out with chapters all around the world (including most recently Afghanistan), Democrats Abroad, according to Scott, “is recognised as a ‘state’ Party by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and is represented on the DNC by eight voting members.”

What’s more is that their bipartisan-style advocacy of the organisation [VoteFromAbroad.org](http://VoteFromAbroad.org) (a website enabling absentee voting), goes beyond any political affiliation and encourages all Americans to have their say in the political process despite their geographical separation.

And as DAVN continues to lobby [VoteFromAbroad.org](http://VoteFromAbroad.org) to reconsider and improve its set-up, their inroads in the political process speak louder than their Republican compatriots who were unavailable for comment.

“Last month we went to Washington and pushed the Democrats Abroad platform urging absentee voting to be made easier,” says Nguyen.

#### ◦ Deeper Impact

Whether Americans continue to vote from abroad or not, DAVN can count its blessings. Not only is it an organisation that encourages political participation, but it is also a fun one that adds diversity and spice to the expat scene.

James, at least, has taken more away from it than just political experience.

“It’s a lot of fun. You meet a lot of people that you wouldn’t otherwise and there’s always interesting conversation.”

Perhaps the old adage is true, “Politics makes strange bedfellows.” 

