



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Asian and Asian American Studies Faculty  
Works

Asian and Asian American Studies

---

1997

## Political Formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles: Visions of Political Power, 1992-1996

Edward J.W. Park

*Loyola Marymount University*, [edward.park@lmu.edu](mailto:edward.park@lmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/aaas\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/aaas_fac)



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Sociology Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Park, Edward J.W. 1997. Political Formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles: Visions of Political Power, 1992-1996. Los Angeles: Southern California Studies Center, University of Southern California.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian and Asian American Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian and Asian American Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

**Political Formation  
of Korean Americans  
in Los Angeles:  
Visions of Political Power,  
1992-1996**

---

Edward J.W. Park  
Department of Sociology  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA

A publication of the  
Southern California Studies Center  
University of Southern California  
October 1996

© 1997 Southern California Studies Center  
and Edward J.W. Park

## Table of Contents

---

I. Abstract 3

II. Introduction 3

III. From Politics Of Insularity To Politics Of Engagement 4

IV. Community Divided 8

V. Conclusion 14

# Southern California Studies Center

## Mission Statement

The Southern California Studies Center (SC2) was established at the University of Southern California in the fall of 1995. The Center is a unique, campus-wide, interdisciplinary initiative. Its principal goal is to monitor and guide the transformations in environment, politics, economics, culture and society of Southern California. Both basic research and applied aspects of this mission are equally important. The Center has three fundamental objectives:

**Research and Information:** *to promote research on Southern California through construction of a centralized data source that will enhance existing campus capacities for information storage and retrieval, and data processing and imaging;*

**Outreach:** *to initiate and participate in community dialogues and strategic partnerships to guide the future growth of Southern California;*

**Curriculum Development:** *to encourage a transformative impact on teaching and curriculum development in the academy.*

The combined energies that the Center assembles will give the University of Southern California significant roles as a premier repository of accessible regional data, a lead research center on regional issues, a cutting edge innovator of teaching technology, and a partner in collaborative leadership in community-building into the twenty-first century.

Southern California Studies Center

University of Southern California

3601 Watt Way, GFS 304A

Los Angeles, California 90089-1696

Telephone: (213) 740-5303

Fax: (213) 740-5302

## **I. Abstract**

---

ince the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992, Korean Americans have taken their first steps toward mainstream political participation and inclusion. From its initial stages, their struggle for political empowerment has been marked by profound partisan divisions. These divisions implicate a range of issues and point to pivotal concerns that organize and divide the political formation of the Korean American community. As the Korean American community is being transformed by its political engagement, mainstream politics in Los Angeles is also undergoing change as it confronts the new issues and complexities Korean Americans have brought to the city's political agenda.

## **II. Introduction**

---

he Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 and its political aftermath have marked an important transition for both American race relations and the Korean American experience. For American race relations, the Civil Unrest demonstrated that U.S. race relations can no longer be understood in predominantly Black and White terms. While the Black and White approach to U.S. race relations has always been incomplete, the focus on large urban centers as the primary site of the study of American race relations since the 1960s has made Black-White the prototype for much of American race relations (Omi and Winant 1994). The Los Angeles Civil Unrest has (re)introduced Asian Americans and Latinos as central and defining players in American race relations and forced Americans to confront our multiracial realities (Marable 1995). The inclusion of Asian Americans and Latinos as central participants has only deepened in contemporary national politics: since 1992, immigrants have joined the "underclass" as the new political lightning rod and inter-minority relations (from Korean-Black conflicts in Los Angeles and New York to Latino-Black conflicts in Washington D.C. and Miami) have taken an equal place as majority-minority relations in defining American race relations in the twilight of the 20th century (Abelmann and Lie 1995, Portes and Stepick 1994, and Rodriguez 1995).

As American society begins to confront its multiracial realities, Korean Americans have collectively begun their struggle for political integration and empowerment. The impetus behind their commitment for political engagement comes from a clear sense that the inordinate economic losses suffered by Korean Americans during the Civil Unrest and the lack of government response in the community's rebuilding efforts stem from their political marginality (E. Park 1996, W. Park 1994, and Min 1996). To remedy their political exclusion, Korean Americans have begun the difficult process of institutional building and political activism in their search for mainstream political integration. While their national political formation has begun to take shape with the founding of some key organizations, their efforts have taken the most concrete shape in Los Angeles, the center of Korean American population and the site of the most devastating racial unrest in modern American history.

Based on the growing literature on post-Civil Unrest Los Angeles and Korean American politics, 45 in-depth interviews and fieldwork conducted in the Summer of 1996, this paper examines the political formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles since the Civil Unrest of 1992. In their struggle to find political empowerment, Korean Americans in Los Angeles reveal the complexity of post-Civil Rights politics in America and identify a number of pivotal issues that shape their political formation. Central among these issues are politics of racial identity, political ideology, and class cleavages. In addition, the political mobilization of Korean Americans in Los Angeles has transformed the community itself: since the Civil Unrest, the Korean American community has seen an overhaul of its political leadership and a sharpening of its ideological and class differences. Finally, even in their initial inclusion, Korean Americans have made a profound impact on the mainstream political process, forcing it to confront new issues and complexities. Ultimately, the Korean American experience in Los Angeles provides important clues and insights to how groups new to U.S. politics will negotiate their inclusion and redefine American politics.

### **III. From Politics of Insularity To Politics Of Engagement**

---

The Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 had a transformative impact on Korean Americans. Korean Americans, representing less than two percent of the Los Angeles population, lost 2,300 businesses and sustained \$350 million of the \$785 million dollars in property damage (Min 1996:1). Along with this massive and unprecedented economic crisis, the Korean American community faced an immediate political crisis in the debate surrounding the causes of the Civil Unrest and a more sustained political crisis in the politics of rebuilding. In addition to pressuring the community to mobilize, both of these crises had the effect of shifting the community's political leadership.

Even as Civil Unrest began on April 29, 1992, the public discourse surrounding the causes of the Civil Unrest implicated Korean Americans as a major contributing factor (Oliver, Johnson, Farrell 1993 and Morrison and Lowry 1994). At the center of this discourse was the Soon Ja Du incident of 1991. The incident involved a Korean American store owner - Soon Ja Du - who shot and killed a thirteen year-old African American girl - Latasha Harlins - in a dispute over a bottle of orange juice. When Superior Court Judge Joyce Karlin fined Du \$500 and sentenced her to probation and 400 hours of community service, Karlin's decision was met with profound dismay and protest from the African American community and inflamed the existing tension between Korean American merchants and African American community activists (Sonenshein 1996:716). Many observers - from journalists and academicians to elected politicians and persons on the street - cited the Soon Ja Du incident as one of the major contributing factors leading to the Civil Unrest, and used the incident to explain the inordinate economic loss suffered by Korean Americans (Morrison and Lowry 1994:34 and Oliver, Johnson, Farrell 1993:121 and Min 1996:84-86).

From the Korean American perspective, the invoking of the Soon Ja Du incident and the Black-Korean tension was seen as a case of scape-goating Korean Americans for the Civil Unrest and the inordinate economic loss the community suffered (Cho 1993 and Kang 1992). Many Korean Americans felt "re-victimized" by discourse which blamed them for the Civil Unrest and seemingly offered a justification for the ethnic pattern in looting (Chang 1994:114). A Korean American student at UCLA recalls a number of non-Korean American students, who linked the Soon Ja Du incident with the Civil Unrest, repeatedly telling her that "Korean Americans got what they deserved." K.W. Lee, a longtime journalist and observer of the Korean American community, argues that "this scape-goating was the real victimization that Korean Americans were made to suffer. We were told in a back-handed way that we were to blame for the riots and that we should rightly bear the burden."

As frustration and anger within the community grew, the existing political establishment within the Korean American community - represented most powerfully by the Korean Federation whose political legitimacy came with its close identification with the South Korean government - could not defend the community. Bound by language barriers and a lack of institutional ties, the Korean Federation vented its frustration within the confines of the Korean American media, having little impact on the mainstream discourse. Members of the Korean Federation also charged local African American politicians with turning their backs on the Korean American community even though they received financial support for political campaigns from various Korean American organizations, including the Korean Federation. However, their bitter charges only underscored the failure on their part to influence the mainstream political system. A Korean American volunteer at a senior citizen center states:

*"I lost all respect I had for the Korean Federation. They have always claimed that they were the leaders of the community, even calling the President the 'Mayor of Koreatown.' But during the riot, our mayor could not even come on the television and tell the rest of America that Korean Americans should not be blamed for the riots and that our suffering is as real as anyone else's."*

While Korean Americans were frustrated and angered by what they perceived to be an effort to place the blame for the Civil Unrest on their community, the politics of rebuilding further demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the existing Korean American political power structure. In the aftermath of the Civil Unrest, Korean Americans had little or no representation in official rebuilding efforts. In the creation of "Rebuild Los Angeles" (RLA), the sole official response to the Civil Unrest from City Hall, Korean Americans were notably absent from the leadership. Even after RLA's leadership was diversified with the creation of four co-chairs, the "Asian co-chair" went to Linda Wong, a Chinese American (Regalado 1994:207). In addition, when both of the presidential candidates - George Bush and Bill Clinton - toured Los Angeles in the midst of election year politicking, Korean Americans were notably absent from their entourage as locally elected officials took the spotlight and articulated the rebuilding agenda (Kang 1993a). The Korean American community, confronted with unprecedented crisis, keenly felt its marginality in the politics of rebuilding and was reminded of the real cost of this political marginality. A first-generation executive director of a community food distribution center recalls:

*"When these rebuilding efforts were going on, it really showed the shortcomings of the established Korean American leadership right after the riots. We didn't have anyone who had the ability to work effectively with people outside the Korean American community. I'm a good example. During Sa-I-Gu, I was an assistant minister at one of the largest Korean American churches in Koreatown, and I once served as an officer in Korean Federation. But, even though I lived in the U.S. for 15 years, I can't speak enough English, let alone speak English with lawyers and government bureaucrats. So, people like us stood by and hoped for new leaders to come in."*

In the discourse surrounding the causes of the Civil Unrest, the Korean American community, literally overnight, found a new leader in Angela Oh in the May 6, 1992 broadcast of ABC's Nightline (W. Park 1994:199). A second-generation Korean American criminal defense lawyer who had been active in liberal circles in Los Angeles politics but an unknown within the Korean American community, Oh finally articulated a Korean American perspective on the Civil Unrest. With enormous poise, she protested the media's coverage of Korean Americans as dehumanized gun-toting vigilantes and faulted the media for failing to discuss the decades of neglect of the inner-cities that created the conditions for the Civil Unrest. While her appearance in Nightline did little to reshape the discourse on the Civil Unrest, her entry into



the debate nonetheless marked an important turning point in Korean American politics: for the first time in the community's short history, a spokesperson emerged whose political ties fell outside of the entrenched Korean American community power structure. And by winning the support of Korean Americans, who saw in her an articulate spokesperson capable of advocating on behalf of the community in the mainstream media, Oh created a space for others to fill the political vacuum within the community (W. Park 1994:200). Oh was quickly joined by other Korean Americans such as Marcia Choo and Ryan Song who spoke for the first time as representatives of the Korean American community.

The politics of rebuilding also fueled the rise of a new generation of Korean American leaders. As others have shown, the politics of rebuilding in Los Angeles unfolded through new institutions that placed a premium on inter-racial and inter-ethnic collaboration (Regalado 1994). RLA, with its four Anglo, Latino, African American, and Asian American co-chairs, reflects racial consolidation as a key strategy from City Hall to facilitate the rebuilding effort. At the same time, the major rebuilding efforts outside of City Hall also placed a premium on inter-racial and inter-ethnic coalitions in an effort to exercise greater leverage on mainstream political institutions. New organizations that have provided much of the "unofficial" political leadership in the rebuilding effort, such as the Multicultural Collaborative (MCC), an organization that brought together social service agencies from all major racial groups, Asian Americans for a New Los Angeles (APANLA), and the Asian Pacific Planning Council (APPCON) demanded inter-racial and inter-ethnic coalition building as a requirement for participation in the rebuilding process (Regalado 1994:226-227 and E. Park 1996:163-164). These organizational efforts collectively had the effect of bringing into the Korean American community a new group of political leaders with the requisite language skills and political familiarity to participate effectively in multiracial and multiethnic settings. Based on these imperatives, individuals such as Bong Hwan Kim (Executive Director of the Korean Youth and Community Center [KYCC]) and Roy Hong (Executive Director of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates [KIWA] - a progressive labor organization), became key Korean American figures in the rebuilding effort and new political figures within the Korean American community (Kang 1993a and Chavez 1994).

With the benefit of four years of hindsight, it is now clear that the shift in Korean American political leadership occurred along two dimensions. Most visibly, the shift represents a generational change where many of the immigrant-generation leaders stepped aside as second-generation and the so-called 1.5-generation - those who immigrated to the U.S. as young children - emerged as key political leaders. The political ascendancy of Angela Oh, Bong Hwan Kim, Roy Hong, Cindy Choi (Co-chair of MCC), and Michelle Park-Steel (Republican activist and a key figure in the Korean American Coalition's Youth Leadership Conference) represents this generational shift within the Korean American political leadership. While this generational change has received a great deal of attention, a less visible transition saw the decline of those whose political base was rooted in "homeland" politics and the rise of others (first-generation included) who had political ties with mainstream political institutions (E. Park 1996 and Brackman and Erie 1995:286-7). On this front, Congressman Jay Kim (R-Diamond Bar) and T.S. Chung (a longtime Democrat activist and a Clinton appointee to the Department of Commerce) represent first-generation Korean Americans whose political ties to the mainstream political system leveraged their political careers to unprecedented levels for Korean Americans. As an unequivocal sign of concession to the changing political realities within the Korean American community, the Korean Federation changed their main organizational mission from "representing the collective interest of Koreans living in the U.S." to "supporting the effort of Korean Americans for political representation."

---

## IV. Community Divided

While Korean Americans in Los Angeles agree on the necessity of participating in mainstream politics, they have been profoundly divided over how to best channel their political resources and community support in the complex political landscape of contemporary American society. At the center of this division lies explicit partisan politics that have emerged within the Korean American community. This partisan division reflects both the change in the community's political leadership discussed above and the political developments facing the Korean American community since the Civil Unrest. Most importantly, the changes in the political leadership brought in new political leaders who had clear party loyalties. Liberals such as Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim were clearly identified with the Democratic Party, while conservatives such as Jay Kim and Michelle Park-Steel brought with them clear institutional ties to the Republican Party. In this way, a central component of shift in the community's political leadership was the introduction of explicit partisan politics within the Korean American community.

Korean American liberals have argued that, as it embarks on the road to political empowerment, the Korean American community ought to align itself with the traditional Civil Rights Coalition within the Democratic Party (see Marable 1995:chapter 2 and Sonenshein 1994). In particular, they argue that Korean Americans are victims of racial oppression in America and have been alternatively excluded from immigration, the mainstream economy, and equal protection under the law. At the same time, they also argue that whatever rights and equality Korean Americans currently enjoy have come largely from the Civil Rights struggles of African Americans and Latinos, including the passage of the Hart-Celler's Act (1965) which finally removed racial barriers to immigration and allowed Koreans to immigrate. From this vantage point of racial oppression and historical linkages to other racial minority groups, Korean American liberals argue that the Civil Unrest of 1992 was a culmination of racial injustice in America where decades of inner-city neglect and racial oppression resulted in an explosion that victimized *all* communities of color. From this assessment, they argue that the best hope for Korean Americans in their effort to find lasting political empowerment is to join other communities of color and white liberals who are committed to issues of racial equality and justice. In practical terms, this vision of Korean American political incorporation urges the community to join the Democratic Party and its established structure of racial minority incorporation.

This vision of political incorporation became prominent within the Korean American community immediately after the Civil Unrest. Angela Oh became one of the first openly liberal political leaders within the community by linking the Civil Unrest with Republican neglect of the inner-cities and racial inequality on the part of mainstream political institutions, including the criminal justice system (W. Park 1994 and Oh 1993). In the massive "Peace Rally" organized by Korean Americans and attended by 30,000 participants on May 11, 1992, placards such as "Justice for Rodney King," "Justice for All People of Color," and "More Jobs for the Inner-City" implicated institutional racism and economic inequality as primary causes of the Civil Unrest. Moreover, these messages reflected a sense of common victimization and destiny that Korean Americans felt with the African American and Latino communities.

A Korean American woman and labor activist who participated in the Rally argues:

*"There was a definite racial tone to the March. Korean Americans were angry at the white power structure, even more than at those who took part in the looting. The Koreans felt that they paid the cost of a racist justice system and years of inner-city neglect. More than that, they felt that the white power structure sacrificed Koreatown to take the full brunt of people's anger. Only when the looting spread to places like Hollywood or the Westside did Daryl Gates and Pete Wilson send in the troops to quell the looting. Many Koreans marching through the heart of the heavily*

*Latino and African American Koreatown were yelling 'Join us, who want racial justice just like you!' And, many Latinos and African Americans did just that."*

Another Korean American woman who works as a secondary school teacher states, "I thought Korean Americans would use the March to show our anger at the looters and the March would be a display of our narrow nationalism. However, I was completely wrong. The March was really about Koreans reaching out to other groups, especially to African American and Latino communities."

Along with this sense of common victimization, the political protest in the Peace Rally took on a partisan tone. Among the marchers, one woman held up a large red sign that read "Is This a Kinder, Gentler Nation?" in reference to President Bush's 1988 campaign. Another woman held up a sign that read "Wilson—You Were Three Days Too Late" in reference to Governor Wilson's decision to send in the national guard on May 2, three days after much of South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown laid in ruins. For many Korean Americans, the timing of the Civil Unrest, coming after over a decade of Republican control of both the White House and the Governor's Mansion, placed the blame squarely on Republican leadership and their policies of fiscal austerity and political hostility toward the inner-cities. A middle-age Korean American man who is member of the Board of Directors of KIWA states:

*"I was surprised by the political insights of so many Korean Americans. They felt that the American government systematically ignored the plight of poor in the inner-city and abused racial minorities. Especially in the Peace March, there was no difference between what Koreans were saying and what the African Americans and Latinos were saying. 'We want justice for Rodney King, we want jobs in the inner-cities, we want racial equality, and we want you to stop abusing our communities.' Old-time liberals like us who felt we were a small minority in the community was really quite stunned with what we saw."*

Within the Korean American community, the Korean American Democratic Committee (KADC) has become a platform for organizing the political activities of liberals and progressives. Founded in 1992, KADC's had difficulties for much of its existence as most visible liberals and progressives channeled their political activities in coalition efforts. Leaders such as Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim played key roles in the formation of MCC and APANLA but did not actively provide leadership in Korean American partisan politics (E. Park 1996:164). In addition, KIWA, perhaps the most progressive organization in the community, spent most of the intervening years in a bitter fight with the Korean American Relief Fund in a struggle to win Korean American and Latino workers a share of the relief money that flowed into the community after the Civil Unrest (Lee 1994). However, with the presidential campaign in full swing, and the prospect of bitter partisan fights over issues of affirmative action in state politics (California's Proposition 209) and immigration and welfare reform in national politics, KADC was revitalized in the Summer of 1996 with Angela Oh, Bong Hwan Kim, and K.S. Park (an organizer at KIWA) joining KADC as officers. In its revitalization, KADC launched an ambitious program to politically organize Korean Americans for the 1996 election, including launching a voter-registration drive, compiling a voter's guide (a first time for the community in a non-primary election), and conducting a coordinated voter-education drive through the Korean American ethnic media.

Despite their recent entry into the mainstream Los Angeles politics, Korean American liberals have already made some major impact on mainstream politics in Los Angeles. This is especially true in the formation of new liberal coalitions that have emerged since the Civil Unrest. Both Angela Oh and Bong

Hwan Kim have played an instrumental role in the formation of MCC and APANLA, with Cindy Choi becoming one of the founding co-directors of MCC (E. Park 1996:163). As Regalado (1994:226-7) has pointed out, MCC represents one of the most important and powerful progressive voices within Los Angeles politics and APANLA has made Asian Americans more politically visible then ever. Through this engagement, the more concrete political victories Korean Americans have enjoyed have been the hiring of K. Connie Kang - a Korean American journalist - by the *Los Angeles Times* and the securing of Clinton's appointment of T.S. Chung to the Department of Commerce.

In addition, KIWA has engaged in a number of highly visible labor conflicts in which they worked with predominantly Latino rank-and-file labor unions. With KIWA's alliance, unions such as Justice for Janitors and Local 11 were able to resolve labor conflicts that involved Latino workers and Korean or Korean American employers without having these conflicts grow into racial conflicts, pointing a way to multi-racial organizing and cooperation (Kang 1995). Similarly, the Korean Youth and Community Center's efforts with the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Training (a predominantly African American anti-substance abuse organization headed by Karen Bass) to convert Korean American liquor stores damaged during the Civil Unrest to other types of businesses received a great deal of media coverage for representing a new possibility in Black-Korean relations (Chavez 1994 and Sonenshein 1996:721). In a short period of time, Korean American liberals have become important figures within Los Angeles politics and brought a new set of issues to the city's political agenda.

While liberals urge Korean Americans to join other communities of color through the Civil Rights Coalition within the Democratic Party, conservative Korean American activists have urged the Korean American community to align itself with the conservative politics of the Republican Party. Where liberals cite racial injustice and inner-city neglect as the cause of Civil Unrest, Korean American conservatives have argued that the root of the Civil Unrest can be found in the failure of the liberal welfare state and the Civil Rights Coalition. Moreover, they argue that the Korean American community, with its large segment of small entrepreneurs and accelerating residential suburbanization, can best pursue their political interests through a Republican Party that has championed fiscal conservatism and law and order (E. Park 1996:160-1 and W. Park 1994:214-6).

While appealing to the material interests of Korean Americans, they have also emphasized the recent changes within the Republican Party. More specifically, they cite the increasing prominence of racial minorities such as Colin Powell, Ward Connelly (an African American member of the University of California Regent and a key architect in the undermining of the state's affirmative action programs), Jay Kim, and Wendy Gramm (a Korean American appointee to the Department of Commerce under Bush and the wife of Senator and Presidential Candidate Phil Gramm) within the Party as evidence that the Party is now inclusive of racial minorities and "legal" immigrants. While Korean American liberals point to the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party for removing past discriminatory policies, Korean American conservatives point to the symmetry of the Republican political agenda and the material interests of the Korean American community as well as the new politics of inclusion within the Republican Party.

If the Peace Rally represented a high point in the Korean American community's public display of liberal sentiments, the politics surrounding the rebuilding of the liquor stores showed the profound barriers between the Korean American community and the Civil Rights Coalition and created an opportunity for conservatives to make their appeal to the Korean American community. Well before the Civil Unrest, liquor stores in the inner-cities were a major source of tension between African American and Korean

American communities (Min 1996 and Sonenshein 1996). African Americans charged that liquor stores saturated inner-city communities and served as magnets for criminal activities ranging from drug dealing to prostitution, while Korean Americans cited their basic right to engage in a legal commercial activity (Sonenshein 1996:729). The Civil Unrest provided an unexpected opportunity to settle this impasse between the two communities when 200 liquor stores were destroyed. The racial dimension to the rebuilding of the liquor stores became apparent when it was found that 175 of the 200 liquor stores were owned by Korean Americans and local African American politicians were seizing this opportunity to severely curtail the number of liquor stores (E. Park 1996:161-2). While local African American politicians saw this as an opportunity to show their accountability to their largely African American and Latino constituency, Korean American conservatives saw this as an opportunity to rally the community toward the Republican Party and reframe the Civil Unrest and its aftermath from a conservative perspective.

Working with white and Latino liberals in the Los Angeles City Council, local African American political leaders, headed by city council members Mark Ridley-Thomas and Rita Walters and state assembly member Marguerite Archie-Hudson, launched "The Campaign to Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores" and successfully imposed a conditional use variance process that would allow City Hall, in consultation with local residents, to impose conditions for rebuilding the liquor stores. These conditions included restricting the hours of operation and requiring uniformed security guards (Sonenshein 1996:722). The Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO), representing the Korean American liquor store owners, sought to bypass City Hall altogether by going directly to the California legislature where they worked with Paul Horcher, then a conservative Republican from East San Gabriel Valley. In consultation with KAGRO and KARA, Horcher sponsored AB 1974 in the state legislature which would have removed the conditional variance process in Los Angeles. Ultimately, AB 1974 was defeated in the committee by a coalition of Democrats with strong objection from Republicans. Two years later, only ten of the 175 Korean American-owned liquor stores were back in business (E. Park 1996:161).

While Korean American conservatives clearly lost the policy battle, the politics surrounding the liquor stores became a major victory for the newly emergent Korean American conservative activists. First, the liquor store controversy allowed many Korean American conservatives to gain political visibility within the Korean American community for the first time. New figures such as Michelle Park-Steel, whose political ties with the Republican Party ran deep as the wife of Republican Party activist Shawn Steel, and Jerry Yu, who placed his mainstream legal career on hold to advocate full-time for KAGRO, represent conservative activists who became highly visible in the Korean American community through the liquor store controversy. Much like their liberal counter-parts, they gained their political legitimacy by demonstrating to the community that they can make an impact on mainstream politics and move mainstream political institutions on behalf of the Korean American community. Second, Korean American conservatives were able to use the liquor store controversy to sharpen the political differences between the Korean American and African American communities and undermine the liberal's vision of rallying Korean Americans quickly and easily into the Civil Rights Coalition. In their defeat over the liquor store controversy, Korean American conservatives pulled no punches as they blamed the African American community for depriving Korean Americans their economic rights. In an editorial published in the *Korea Times*, Michelle Park-Steel and Shawn Steel, urged Korean Americans to use the liquor store controversy to "carefully assess who are their friends and who are their enemies" as they charged African American politicians for "unleashing a legislative terror" (Steel and Park-Steel 1994). Jerry Yu linked the issue of liquor store controversy to the more fundamental failing of the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party. In an interview with the *Korea Times*, he claimed that "these African American politicians" are blaming Korean Americans for "decades of their own failed policies in the inner-cities that caused the riots in the first place" (Kang 1994b).

A Korean American student whose family store was burned down during the Civil Unrest and remains closed after four years states:

*"My family's American Dream died when the city prevented us from rebuilding our store. We were victimized by the racism of the black community who want us out of South Central. Never mind that we have the right to conduct business and make a living. We are the wrong skin color from their point of view, and we don't belong in their community. However, last time I checked, there were no signs that read 'You Are Now Entering the Black Community' at the borders of South Central. If whites did this to Blacks, then this would be a huge incident. But, I guess Black racism against Koreans is okay."*

A member of KARA argues that "the liquor store issue really stopped the rise of liberals like Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim. The liquor store issue made [Oh and Kim's] claim that Korean Americans must join Blacks and Latinos to fight white racism seem simple and idealistic," pointing out that "it was clear to all Korean Americans that it was the white Republicans who fought for our community and it was the blacks who wanted nothing less than to drive us out." Another KARA member observes that "the liquor store controversy refreshed the memories of Koreans of the real problem of inner-cities—African American and Democratic politicians would rather go after some bogeyman such as white racism or evil Koreans rather than telling people they have to work hard, get off welfare, and rebuild the economy."

While KADC has begun to organize the Korean American community with an explicit partisan label, KARA has become one of the most visible political forces in the Korean American community since the Civil Unrest. Its major political victory came only months after the Civil Unrest with the election of Jay Kim to the House of Representatives in November, 1992. As the very first Korean American to be elected to a federal office, Kim brought immediate legitimacy to KARA and energized Korean American conservatives. In his four years as Congressman, Kim has aggressively pursued his ultra-conservative agenda, refusing to join the Democratic-dominated Asian American Caucus in the House and becoming a co-sponsor of California's politically-charged Proposition 187 that sought to deny government benefits to undocumented immigrants (Yi 1993 and E. Park 1996:161). In 1995, KARA stepped up their activities to the presidential level when it successfully hosted a fund-raising dinner for Phil Gramm's presidential campaign and, in 1996, co-hosted Bob Dole's victory speech in California's primaries in Orange County. Finally, Mark Kim, a Korean American Assistant Deputy in Los Angeles District Attorney's Office and the president of KARA, took a leadership role within the Korean American community in advocating California's Proposition 209, which would preempt affirmative action policies in state government agencies, including public employment and government contracting. In their entry, Korean American conservatives have joined other conservative racial minorities to bring new legitimacy to the Republican Party's claim for racial inclusion - a central theme in the Republican Party's National Convention in 1996 - and brought new complexities to racial politics surrounding affirmative action and immigration reform (see Takagi 1992 and Hing 1993).

## V. Conclusion

---

The Civil Unrest of 1992 marks a fundamental change in Korean American politics. It is clear that the Civil Unrest has resulted in the community's commitment to engage the mainstream political process and to find political empowerment. This new commitment has resulted in shifts within Korean American political leadership by bringing in new leaders who can participate in the mainstream political process

and work in multi-racial and multi-ethnic settings. While Korean Americans are united in their commitment for collective empowerment, they are profoundly divided along partisan lines. At the center of this division lies conflicting "racial visions" of where Korean Americans fit into America's racial landscape, as well as conflicting assessments over the Civil Rights Coalition. Liberals have argued that Korean Americans are an oppressed racial minority group and their rights and interests can be best protected by joining the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party. In contrast, conservatives have insisted that Korean Americans have fundamental economic and political differences with key members of the Civil Rights Coalition and that Korean Americans can better meet their interests through the Republican Party and its commitment to fiscal conservatism, law and order, and the dismantling of the welfare state. The emergence of KADC and KARA has given a well-defined institutional base to the community's partisan politics at the very inception of Korean American political formation. Clearly, it is too early to tell which one of these partisan efforts will succeed in leaving a lasting impact on Korean American political formation. As the Korean American community has become transformed in its search for political empowerment, the inclusion of Korean Americans and other new immigrant groups have posed new challenges for the mainstream political system and its more established participants. As the Democratic Party attempts to revise the traditional Civil Rights Coalition to include Korean Americans, the Republican Party seeks to reinvent itself as an inclusive party in the face of America's changing demography. As the massive entry of African Americans into the mainstream political system transformed the American political system in the post-World War II era, we are standing on the verge of another transformation as a new group of Americans makes its way into the American political system.

## Bibliography

---

Abelmann, N. And J. Lie. 1995. *Blue dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles riots*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Barringer, H. R., R. W. Gardner, and M. J. Levin. 1993. *Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Brackman, H. And S.P. Erie. 1995. Beyond "politics by other means"? empowerment strategies for Los Angeles' Asian Pacific community. In *The bubbling cauldron: race, ethnicity, and the urban crisis*, edited by M.P. Smith and J.R. Feagin (pp.282-303).

Chang, E.T. 1994. America's first multiethnic 'riots.' In *The state of Asian America*, edited by K. Aguilar-San Juan (pp.101-118). Boston: South End Press.

---. 1988. Korean community politics in Los Angeles: The impact of Kwangju uprising. *Amerasia*. 14:1,51-67.

Chavez, L. 1994. Crossing the culture line. *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. 28 August.

Cho, S. K. 1993. Korean Americans vs. African Americans. In *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by R. Gooding Williams (pp. 196-211). New York: Routledge.

Doherty, J. 1992. Black-Korean Alliance says talk not enough, disbands. *Los Angeles Times*. 24 December:A1.

- . 1992. Korean American hail Kim's victory. *Los Angeles Times*. 8 November: City Times, 11.
- Dun, A., P. J. McDonnell, K. C. Kang, and J. L. Mitchell. 1993. Ethnic groups look to future as crisis passes. *Los Angeles Times*. 19 April: A1.
- Espiritu, Y. L. 1992. *Asian American panethnicity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Freer, R. 1994. Black-Korean conflict. In *The Los Angeles riots*, edited by M. Baldassare (pp. 175-204). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Guerra, F. J. 1987. Ethnic office holders in Los Angeles County. *Sociology and Social Research*. 71:89-94.
- Gladstone, M. 1994. Bill to ease rebuilding of Korean American stores fails. *Los Angeles Times*. 30 August: B3.
- Hing, B.O. 1993. *Making and remaking Asian America through immigration policy, 1850-1990*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kang, K. C. 1995. L.A. Hilton owner will keep service workers. *Los Angeles Times*. 10 January: B3.
- . 1994a. Store owners fight restrictions on reopening. *Los Angeles Times*. 21 July: B3.
- . 1994b. Asian American groups organize to fight measure. *Korea Times: English Edition*. 2 September: 1.
- . 1993a. Asian-Americans seek role in L.A. renewal. *Los Angeles Times*. 29 May: B3.
- . 1993b. Korean riot victim still devastated, study finds. *Los Angeles Times*. 23 July: B3.
- . 1993c. Plan to convert liquor stores unveiled. *Los Angeles Times*. 3 June: B1.
- . 1993d. First national civil rights group for Asian Americans organized. *Los Angeles Times*. 13 May: A30.
- . 1993e. 40% of Koreans in poll ponder leaving. *Los Angeles Times*. 19 March: B1.
- . 1992a. Understanding the riots — six months later; touched by fire. *Los Angeles Times*. 19 November: JJ3.
- . 1992b. Understanding the riots — six months later; money and power. *Los Angeles Times*. 18 November: JJ8.
- . 1992c. Understanding the riots — six months later; separate lives. *Los Angeles Times*. 16 November: JJ6.
- . 1992d. Korean churches reach out. *Los Angeles Times*. 16 November: B1.



Kang, K. C. and M. Lacey. 1994. Court rejects appeal of rules for liquor stores. *Los Angeles Times*. 15 July: B1.

Kang, M., J. J. Kim, E. J. W. Park, H. W. Park. 1993. *Bridge toward unity*. Los Angeles: Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates.

Kim, B. H. and A. E. Oh. 1991 "Don't fall for 'divide and conquer'." *Los Angeles Times*. 4, September: B7.

Kim, E. H. 1994. Between Black and White. In *The state of Asian America*, edited by K. Aguilar-San Juan (pp. 71-100). Boston: South End Press.

---. 1993. Home is where the Han is. In *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by R. Gooding Williams (pp. 215-335). New York: Routledge.

Kim, I. 1981. *New urban immigrants: The Korean community in New York*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kim, J. 1994. Debate on 'Contract with America.' Program on Radio Korea. 28 December.

*Korea Times*. 1994. Asian Pacific Americans opposed to Proposition 187. 7 September: 5:English edition.

Kwoh, S., A. E. Oh, and B. H. Kim. 1993. Don't let up now that verdicts are in. *Los Angeles Times*. 3 May: B7.

Lee, H. 1994. 4.29 displaced workers justice campaign. *KIWA News*. 1:6-13.

Light, I. and E. Bonacich. 1988. *Immigrant entrepreneur: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lope, R., L. Renwick, and D. Seo. 1993. Charting a new course. *Los Angeles Times*. 28 May: B8.

Marabel, M. 1995. *Beyond Black and White: rethinking race in American politics and society*. New York: Verso.

Min, P.G. 1996. *Caught in the middle: Korean communities in New York and Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morrison, P.A. and I.S. Lowry. 1994. A riot of color: the demographic setting. In *The Los Angeles Riots*, edited by M. Baldassare (pp.19-46). Boulder: Westview Press.

Oh, A. E. 1993. Rebuilding Los Angeles: why I did not join RLA. *Amerasia Journal*. 19:157-160.

Oliver, M.L., J.H. Johnson, and W.C Farrell. 1993. Anatomy of a rebellion. In *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by R. Gooding Williams (pp.117-141). New York: Routledge.

Omi, M. and H. Winant. 1994. *Racial formations in the United States*. 2d ed. New York: Routledge.

Park, E.J.W. 1996. Our L.A.?: Korean Americans in Los Angeles after the civil unrest. In *Rethinking Los Angeles*, edited by M.J. Dear, H.E. Schockman, and G. Hise (pp.153-168). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Park, K. 1996. Use and abuse of race and culture: Black-Korean tension in America. *American Anthropologist*. 98:3 492-499.

Park, W. 1994. Political mobilization of the Korean American community. In *Community in crisis*, edited by G.O. Totten and H.E. Schockman (pp.199-220). Los Angeles: Center for Multiethnic and Transnational Studies.

Regalado, J.A. 1994. Community coalition-building. In *The Los Angeles Riots*, edited by M. Baldassare (pp.205-236). Boulder: Westview Press.

Rodriguez, N.P. 1995. The real "New World Order": the globalization of race and ethnic relations in the late twentieth century. In *The bubbling cauldron: race, ethnicity, and the urban crisis*, edited by M.P. Smith and J.R. Feagin (pp.211-225).

Sandalow, M. 1994. GOP defends immigration plan. *San Francisco Chronicle*. 14 April:A3.

Seo, D. 1993. Fire and pain. *Los Angeles Times*. 31 January: City Times:18.

Simon, R. and M. Lacey. 1993. Mayor prepares to round out a diverse cabinet. *Los Angeles Times*. 13 July: B1.

Sonenshein, R. J. 1996. The battle over liquor stores in South Central Los Angeles: the management of an interminority conflict. *Urban Affairs Review*. 31:6 710-737.

---. 1994. Los Angeles coalition politics. In *The Los Angeles Riots*, edited by M.

Baldassare (pp.205-236). Boulder: Westview Press.

---. 1993. *Politics in black and white: race and power in Los Angeles*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Steel, S. and M. E. J. Park-Steel. 1994. Outcome of AB 1974: Korean-Americans strangled again. *Korea Times: English Edition*. 7 September:3.

Stewart, E. 1993. Communication between African Americans and Korean Americans. *Amerasia Journal*. 19:23-54.

Takagi, D.Y. 1992. *The retreat from race: Asian-American admissions and racial politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Vrana, D. 1993. Coalitions may yet benefit L.A. in unexpected ways. *The Los Angeles Business Journal*. 26 April:19.

Wallace, A. and K.C. Kang. 1993. One year later, hope and anger remain. *Los Angeles Times*. 30 April:A1.

Yi, D. 1993. "From NAFTA to immigration: Rep. Kim speaks out before KA Republicans." *Korea Times: English Edition*. 6 October:1.