

## Q&A with Leaders and Practitioners: Steve Phillips

S. Karthick Ramakrishnan

Our understanding of the politics of race, indigeneity, and ethnicity is informed not only by the work of scholars, but also by the work of leaders and practitioners, many of whom are pioneers in their respective fields. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (JREP)* is proud to continue our Q&A series with Steve Phillips, founder of Democracy in Color, an organization focused on race and politics, and author of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* bestselling book, *Brown Is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*. Our hope is that forums like these will help advance our collective scholarship by better informing our research agendas, validating some of our claims, and building more bridges between the worlds of research, politics, and policy.

Steve Phillips is a national political leader, civil rights lawyer, and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. He is the founder of Democracy in Color, an organization focused on race and politics. He is co-founder of PowerPAC+, a social justice organization dedicated to building a multiracial political coalition. PowerPAC+ conducted the largest independent voter mobilization effort backing Barack Obama, Cory Booker, and Kamala Harris. In 2014, Phillips co-authored the first-ever audit of Democratic Party spending and was named one of “America’s Top 50 Influencers” by *Campaigns and Elections* magazine. Phillips is author of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* bestselling book, *Brown Is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, and is a regular columnist for *The Nation* and writes op-eds for the *New York Times*. He is a graduate of Stanford University and Hastings College of the Law.



1. *You are the founder of Democracy in Color. Can tell us about it? How did it get started, and what does it do?*

Democracy in Color, founded in mid-2016, is dedicated to empowering the New American Majority, the multiracial, multicultural, and progressive coalition in this nation of progressive people of color and whites. We empower that majority through media, public conversations, research, and analysis on race and politics. Our mission is to build power by supporting the New American Majority through shining a light on and lifting up progressive people of color and whites, and calling for transparency and accountability from our leaders.

My book, *Brown Is the New White*, came out in early 2016. I wrote it as a wakeup call to Democrats and progressives warning that if they continued to take voters of color for granted and continued to focus attention and resources on moderate whites, they would lose (which of course, is what happened). After the book came out,

it became immediately clear that while the book's messages were getting out there, I needed to create a larger, national platform, an organization, that could push the book's messages out on an ongoing basis, to continually push the Democratic and progressive movement, with data-backed evidence, toward understanding that they cannot win without the New American Majority.

Our work centers around campaigns that focus the public's and decision makers' efforts on ways to make the Democratic Party and the progressive movement reflective of, and accountable to, the hopes and aspirations of the New American Majority—especially people of color—and to elevate leadership and practices that expand and deepen the voice and vote of people of color. Democracy in Color also works with groups on the ground in key states to support campaigns such as Georgia House Minority Leader Stacey Abrams' race for governor (which would make her the first African American woman governor in U.S. history).

In early 2017, Democracy in Color released our "Return of the Majority" plan, the only data-backed plan on how Democrats and progressives can take back the country. In mid-June, we just released our Return of the Majority Mid-Year Report. We called the report "Another Billion-Dollar Blunder?" because right now Democrats and progressives are on track to repeat their mistake of spending most of their time and resources on moderate whites, and losing. Also, last summer, we organized the first-ever gathering of progressive women of color leaders in politics at the Democratic National Convention. Earlier this year, we held the first Democratic National Committee Chair candidates panel focused on race and diversity.

We are also very proud of our Democracy in Color podcast, hosted by Democracy in Color President Aimee Allison, which features today's best and brightest political leaders, strategists, and thinkers of the New American Majority. We've featured Senator Cory Booker; Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal; San Francisco Supervisor Jane Kim, Stockton, California Mayor Michael Tubbs; BART Director Lateefah Simon; writer Eric Liu; #Goodmuslimbadmuslim co-host Tanzila Ahmed; New Yorker writer Jelani Cobb, and writers Rebecca Solnit and Jeff Chang, among many others.

2. *Why is this work important?*

There is no other organization out there doing what we do: empowering the New American Majority with data-backed reports, campaigns and a podcast that emphasize how we (Democrats and progressives) will continue to lose if we do not start seriously investing millions in mobilizing and inspiring voters of color. Considering the speed at which the rights and humanity of the New American Majority are being stripped by the current administration, which won via a campaign centered on racism, xenophobia, and misogyny, the stakes are higher than ever. We feel strongly that the singular work we do—helping to create real social and racial justice change for progressives especially through impacting electoral politics in this country—is more important than ever.

3. *Many pundits and party operatives looked at the 2016 election and saw Clinton's defeat as the Democratic Party's failure to appeal to white, working-class voters. What is missing from those perspectives?*

In short, data-backed evidence. These pundits and operatives have bought into a false narrative, generated by the media, that Democrats lost because so many white, working-class voters who had voted for Obama “switched” in 2016 and voted for Trump. Hence, Democrats and the progressive ecosystem’s current obsession on winning Trump voters “back.” But there are no data to support that narrative.

Here is what really happened: Democrats lost because the Democratic ecosystem largely took African-American voters for granted, and Black turnout plummeted. \$0 was spent by outside groups on Black voter mobilization until after Labor Day ( just 60 days before the election). After two successful past presidential elections with an African American on the ticket, the Party returned to an all-white ticket. Facing a candidate who was riding and fueling a wave of racial resentment, the Democratic strategy was to run a color-blind campaign emphasizing his temperament instead of his racism.

Democratic and allied progressive groups spent more than \$1.8 billion in 2016. The Democratic Party wasted most of its millions during the 2016 election cycle on television (TV) ads, most of which were targeted at white swing voters, instead of on field operations aimed at existing New American Majority voters who helped

re-elect Obama in 2012. On the independent side, when plans for the first \$100 million of outside spending were announced last spring, *no* money was allocated for mobilization of black voters, who made up 23% of all registered Democratic voters in 2012. Eventually, \$20 million was moved to efforts to turn out black voters, but that was still less than 10% of the more than \$200 million spent by the outside groups.

Democrats also lost because many Obama voters defected to Jill Stein and other third- and fourth-party candidates.

4. *What strategies have you found to be most effective in mobilizing communities of color?*

We know that hiring and training culturally competent individuals to then lead neighborhood teams to go door-to-door to get people to either come out and vote or register to vote works.

Twenty years of research and individual campaigns have proved that mobilization wins elections. For example, Representative Keith Ellison, Democrat of Minnesota, (currently deputy chair of the DNC) has consistently increased voter turnout in his congressional district over the past decade, and he has done it by focusing on personal contact. His campaigns have deployed hundreds of volunteers to go door-to-door in apartment buildings in his renter-heavy district. He has also organized “Souls to the Polls” programs in which black parishioners are picked up after church and driven to polling places (Ellison successfully worked to get the polls open on Sunday).

A permanent, year-round system can be established in minority neighborhoods for a fraction of the funds it takes to carpet-bomb voters with TV ads. Lisa García Bedolla, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of “Latino Politics,” has developed a concept called the “civic web” that is a synthesis of the old-fashioned precinct captain model, modern-day social networks and culturally specific community organizing. Paid staff members, neighborhood team leaders, and block captains are part of a seamless network where the employees recruit and supervise volunteers—especially mothers, who are critical to building good voting habits in their families and communities.

The civic web leverages face-to-face social networks and emphasizes long-term relationship building. In a battleground state such

as NV—which Mr. Obama won by about 66,000 votes—García Bedolla estimates, the civic web model could, by 2020, mobilize more than 100,000 additional Latino voters at a cost of \$3.1 million. The Clinton campaign and its allied super PACs spent \$2.5 million on NV TV-ads in last June alone.

Making smart investments in mobilization can tip the election in longtime battleground states such as NV, FL, and OH as well as emerging battlegrounds such as NC, AZ, and GA.

Unfortunately, this kind of campaigning is still an anomaly in progressive politics. One of the reasons is because placing TV ads is a lucrative business and it is not in the interest of those who have made fortunes off TV-ad-based campaigns to let those dollars be spent on community organizing.

5. *What can candidates do to counter the power of white nationalism and racial conservatism? How can they effectively hold together a winning coalition that includes both whites and communities of color?*

Candidates have to stop the practice of watering-down their policies and platforms out of a vain attempt to avoid alienating white, conservative, so-called swing voters. There are many white people who support racial justice and equality, and that meaningful minority of progressive whites is large enough to be part of a winning majority when joined with people of color. Candidates should be full-throated, unapologetic champions of racial justice and economic equality in this country and campaign on the issues of immigration reform, police brutality, and a wealth tax to eliminate the racial wealth gap and foster greater economic equality.

6. *How would you rank the relative importance of having a person of color at the top of the ticket versus having people of color in campaign and staff leadership positions? Can the Democratic Party win the presidency with one but not the other?*

They are both important, and I would add that it is not just about having people of color in campaign leadership, but having people with cultural competence in campaign leadership. DiBlasio showed in NY that a white candidate (albeit one with a Black son with an awesome afro) can galvanize voters of color with a

compelling policy agenda and strong stands on the side of people of color. Having said that, the indisputable evidence is that the only time Democrats have won the White House in the past dozen years is when there has been a person of color at the top of the ticket (Gore actually “won,” so not counting that election).

7. *How did you first get involved in politics? Is it something that was part of your household growing up, or something you picked up in college or afterwards?*

I have been involved in politics since I was a child. For whatever reason, I was drawn to electoral politics at a very early age. My next-door neighbor ran for state legislature when I was 8 years old, and I remember going to the victory party and enjoying the energy. We discussed politics in my household, and politics—and civil rights—have been passions of mine since elementary school (when I read all the biographies of Martin Luther King in my elementary school library).

8. *A lot of youth got energized by Obama’s 2008 campaign, but got disillusioned and disengaged afterwards. How can we inspire a new generation of youth to get involved in politics, and to stay involved?*

Young people especially are attracted to inspiring, bold, and courageous efforts to make the world better. Because of their obsession with white swing voters and their personal friendships with so many Wall Street donors, Democrats tend to tip-toe around the biggest problems of our time. Running candidates and pursuing and fighting for an agenda to end poverty, fight climate change, and eliminate racial injustice will capture the imagination of the youth. Then we have to stick with the fight and engage youth across the country in creative tactics to fight for these issues at every level—local, state, and national—and on campuses, and in the workplace.

9. *What can political scientists do to help ensure broader participation in American democracy?*

The extent to which hundreds of millions of dollars are spent in politics with little to know empirical evidence of the wisdom or effectiveness of those expenditures is breathtaking. Political scientists have

a critical role to play by bringing science to politics. Then those findings and conclusions have to be pushed far beyond the ivy-colored walls of academia and out into the public realm. Writing op-eds, holding briefings for political reporters, conducting media interviews are important to make sure that the scientific conclusions of the field are put into the day-to-day practice of politics.