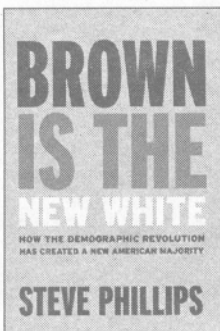
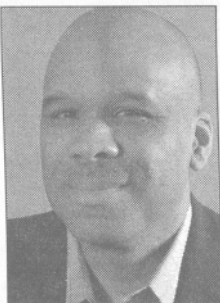


Courting color

Steve Phillips, author of "Brown is the New White," says candidates need to pay better attention to the rainbow coalition that is the new American majority



BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

If today's political scene has left you feeling less than hopeful, consider the work of Steve Phillips.

Phillips is a civil rights lawyer and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress who has analyzed the body electorate and its major population growth among people of color. His book, "Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority," lays out the progressive power in the numbers: Combined, progressive people of color and whites make up 51 percent of all eligible voters today.

Candidates should take note.

That's the underlying message behind Phillip's best-selling book – that despite some of the dominant rhetoric of this year's presidential cycle, progressives hold the cards.

Phillips was looking forward to casting his first vote for president when he began following Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. He was only 20, and he describes the experience as transformative – melding his personal interest in the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr. with its tangible legacy in the electoral sphere. He felt a part of the continuum moving forward, witnessing real change taking shape.

It was that experience that helped him see the potential of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential bid. He co-founded PowerPAC+, which became the largest

independent voter mobilizer backing Obama and other candidates.

Phillips spoke to Street Roots about the book prior to his engagement with the Color PAC Action Fund in Portland. We started by clarifying, for the purpose of his new book, what he defines as progressive.

Steve Phillips: The definition of progressive is admittedly elusive. I felt the best data set are the exit polls. So I use the 2012 exit polls as data – both because it was after the "hope and change" enthusiasm had worn off, but also because the president had a record: universal health care, immigration reform, equal pay for women. People voted for his record, so he had gone on the record and those were the elements. That's why I define progressive on lines of universal health care, immigration reform, equal pay for women, marriage equality – that was an agenda that he was clear about and people voted to for four more years of that. So that gives us the data set, so who wanted four more years of that is 81 percent of voters of color and 39 percent of white voters. And when you apply those percentages to the entire eligible voter population in the country, that's 51 percent of the country.

That is the urgency of this book at this time. Which direction are we going to go? And to fuse a sense of urgency into the Democrats that this structural advantage can be very fleeting if they don't invest heavily in it.

Joanne Zuhl: *Fleeting in that the progressives are not going to be progressives any longer?*

S.P.: Because the conservatives and the Republicans do see this math, and they have a dual strategy – suppression and seduction. The suppression continues at pace – undermining the Voter Rights Act, creating voter ID laws – and the seduction continues. They're running a rainbow coalition slate for president. And a lot of their top elected officials – Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Marco Rubio – this rainbow tableau that on its face can be appealing.

J.Z.: *You talk about the changes in laws, movements and population since 1965. What's the diverging course that has, even today, the white population directing the course of politics?*

S.P.: Actually, in 2012, the African-American turnout was higher than the white turnout. That was the first year that had happened. The black turnout has continued to increase over the past decade. The Latino and Asian population voting is a different issue. It's tied into those '65 realities, but there is a shorter history in this country. Seventy-four percent of Asian-American adults are foreign born, because it was illegal for Asians to come to this country. And so there's not the same tradition in history in that sense. And then the biggest challenge is around Latinos,

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