BROWN IS THE NEW WHITE

How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority

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To my mother and father, who fought the fights that opened the doors that gave me the chance to succeed;

To Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr., who risked his life to show the world the power and potential of an electoral rainbow coalition connected to the movement for social justice. I was paying attention;

To Susan, without whom none of this would have been possible, and by “this” I mean pretty much anything meaningful I’ve accomplished in the past twenty-five years;

And to all those working to change the organizations and institutions you are a part of to make them more reflective of the New American Majority and effective at fostering justice and equality. This book is for you.
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Names matter to people who have battled discrimination and oppression. Although I haven’t seen the miniseries *Roots* in nearly forty years, there’s a scene I’ll never forget where the slave master forces LeVar Burton’s Kunta Kinte character to accept his slave name, “Toby.” Burton’s character is tied to a post and whipped repeatedly while the overseer asks, “What’s your name?” Each time the character says “Kunta Kinte,” he receives another lash of the whip across his bare back until finally, bloodied and broken, he whispers, “Toby. My name is Toby.” Flash forward two hundred years from that scene’s moment in history to 1967—during the height of the civil rights and Black Power movements—when boxing legend Muhammad Ali was trying to get people to stop referring to him as Cassius Clay, his “slave name.” One of Ali’s opponents, Ernie Terrell, made the mistake of continuing to call him Cassius Clay. As Ali dominated the boxing match, he preceded each flurry of punches by asking Terrell, “What’s my name?” and then punched his opponent in the face again. So, yes, names matter.

The choices I’ve made about how to describe the ethnicity and race of people and groups—terminology, style, etc.—in this book also matter. The task was complicated by the fact that how people prefer to refer to themselves continues to change (my grandmother used the word “Colored” to describe my racial group). I have tried to respect and honor the identity and history of each particular group and community discussed.

In the pages that follow, I capitalize “Black” and “White,” and use the terms “Latino” (instead of “Hispanic”), “Native American,” and “Asian American.” I also refer frequently to “progressives” and “Democrats,” the former being part of a broader movement for social change and the latter being people who generally cast their ballots for candidates of the Democratic Party. (Also, sometimes, when referring to “Democrats,” I mean the leadership of the Democratic Party.) My rationale and reasoning for these choices can be found in Appendix B: What’s in a Name?
They said this day would never come. They said our sights were set too high. They said this country was too divided, too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose. But on this January night, at this defining moment in history, you have done what the cynics said we couldn’t do.  
—Barack Obama, January 3, 2008, victory speech after winning Iowa caucus

At 6:00 p.m. on April 4, 1968, Jesse Jackson was in the parking lot of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, waiting with civil rights leader Andy Young and others to accompany Martin Luther King Jr. to a community meeting. At 6:05 p.m., Dr. King stepped out on the balcony of the motel and called down to saxophonist Ben Branch: “Ben, make sure you play ‘Precious Lord, Take My Hand’ in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty.” Then Jackson and the group heard what sounded like a car backfiring and looked up to see Dr. King lying prostrate on the balcony in a pool of blood, his shoe dangling over the edge, the life draining from his body.  
Forty years later, on November 4, 2008, standing in Chicago’s Grant Park with tears streaming down his face, Jackson was again gazing upward at another young Black leader—Barack Hussein Obama, president-elect of the United States of America. In the forty years between King’s death and Obama’s election, America had undergone a profound transformation.

In the four decades since King’s death, the percentage of people of color in the American population has tripled, ushering in a new political era, scrambling the old electoral equations, and creating the conditions for a lasting New American Majority. In 1968, America was home to approximately 25 million people of color, or 12 percent of the U.S.
population. By 2008, people of color numbered more than 104 million people, or 36 percent of the population. The civil rights movement pushed through two laws in the mid-1960s that paved the path for the demographic transformation of the American voting public. First, the Voting Rights Act of 1965—a signature accomplishment of civil rights activists such as King, Young, Jackson, and many others—eliminated obstacles to voting that had effectively disenfranchised most of the African American population since shortly after the end of the Civil War a hundred years earlier. Second, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed race-based immigration barriers that had been in place since the founding of America. After the passage of those two laws, Blacks began to register and vote in much larger numbers, and millions of Asians and Latinos could finally legally enter the country. The color and composition of the country’s electorate would never be the same.

Most of the attention paid to the country’s changing demographics focuses on the trends showing that Whites will one day be a minority of America’s population. Many articles and analyses look to a distant date when the United States will become a “majority minority” nation. According to the most recent census projections, that year is expected to be 2044.³ There are two major problems with emphasizing the point when Whites will lose their majority status. First, it presumes that all White people are and will continue to be at odds with all people of color, which is untrue and unfounded. A meaningful minority of Whites have always sided with people of color throughout U.S. history. The second problem is that the focus on 2044 overlooks the equation that’s been hiding in plain sight, one that shows what happens when you add together the number of today’s people of color (the vast majority of whom are progressive) and progressive Whites. It’s this calculation that reveals that America has a progressive, multiracial majority right now that has the power to elect presidents and reshape American politics, policies, and priorities for decades to come. Not in 2044. Not ten years down the road. Today.

Watching the tears stream down Jesse Jackson’s face the night of Obama’s election moved me personally because Jackson’s presidential
I was a delegate to Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 campaigns, and I took a year off from college to serve as the California student coordinator of his 1988 campaign. Through that baptism by political campaign, I learned some lasting truths about politics and social change. Before Barack Obama went to law school, before Spike Lee made his first movie, before Shonda Rhimes could even dream of writing television shows featuring actors of color, a forty-two-year-old Black civil rights leader shook up the political system by running for president of the United States of America. To get from Martin in 1968 to Barack in 2008, we needed Jesse in 1984 and 1988.

It was during the presidential elections of the 1980s that the seeds planted in the 1960s began to sprout and become visible in national politics. Jackson was fond of saying, “When the old minorities come together, they form a new majority.” The potential of this prophecy came into sharp focus in the 1988 campaign as Jackson won the presidential primaries in eleven states, led the race for the Democratic nomination near the halfway point, and finished as the Democratic runner-up with the most votes in history up to that time.

The key to Jackson’s success—and Obama’s electoral victories twenty years later—was the power of connecting the energy of people of color and progressive Whites seeking justice, equality, and social change to a political campaign for elected office. I’ll always remember how the Jackson for President campaign organized a march with Latino farmworkers in Delano, California, that culminated in Jesse kneeling and praying with Cesar Chavez, who was on a hunger strike at the time. I witnessed Asian Americans across the country thanking Jackson for being the only presidential candidate to call for justice for Vincent Chin, who was killed in a hate crime. I walked my first picket lines with members of the Rainbow Coalition standing in solidarity with the Watsonville cannery strikers and saw those formerly disempowered workers, who were mostly Latinas, become effective political organizers. And I learned about courage and compassion watching Jackson visit and comfort gay people suffering from AIDS, at a time when their plight was unrecognized and their humanity disrespected.

As a result of these types of efforts, millions of people of color and progressive Whites were inspired to register to vote and turn out at the
polls in 1984. Two years later, large and enthusiastic voting by people of color helped Democrats win closely contested U.S. Senate races in the heavily Black and Latino Southern and Southwestern states of Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Maryland, Nevada, and North Carolina, capturing control of the Senate from the Republicans. Because the embryonic New American Majority had begun to flex its power in this fashion, when Ronald Reagan nominated radical right-wing judge Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1987, the Democrats were able to defeat the pick, forcing Reagan to put forward the more moderate Anthony Kennedy. Twenty-eight years later, in 2015, Kennedy provided the swing vote that established marriage equality as the law of the land.

Although I have many criticisms of Democratic politics over the past several years, I have loved having Barack Obama as my president. From providing health care to all Americans to working to bring undocumented immigrants into the American family to saving the U.S. economy from collapse and creating millions of jobs to reestablishing U.S. respectability and relationships with countries around the globe, to the incalculable positive impact on American children in allowing them to see a Black First Family in the White House for eight years, America and the world are better places because Barack Obama became president of the United States.

Yet despite meaningful and significant progress in the public policy realm, Democrats and progressives have failed to maximize the opportunity to build and secure a lasting multiracial political majority for positive social change by investing in, strengthening, and solidifying the communities that comprised the Obama coalition. As a result, we are at risk of losing the advantage the demographic revolution has presented us, and of losing the chance to move toward becoming a more just and equitable society.

Too often, people in power in the progressive movement in general and the Democratic Party in particular have not seen the New American Majority as a political force to advance a progressive agenda and expand the terms of debate. Instead, they tend to see people of color and progressive Whites as nuisances who need to be silenced for fear of alienating White swing voters. As one national progressive leader
told me in 2010, “Whenever you mention racial issues to anyone in the West Wing, White House staffers curl up into the fetal position.” For example, the leaders of the Democratic Party in 2009 and 2010 defunded and dismantled the constituency desks targeting voters of color because they preferred a “color-blind” approach to voter outreach. In 2010, a top Obama advisor tried to pull the plug on a large march for jobs planned by a coalition of civil rights and labor groups for fear that it would alienate White swing voters. In 2014 an audit of Democratic Party spending confirmed that the lion’s share of the money—97 percent of more than $500 million in consulting contracts—was going to White consultants. What these leaders have failed to appreciate and understand is the essential interplay between the multiracial movement for social justice and the nation’s public policy process. There would have been no Voting Rights Act or Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 without the marches, protests, bloodshed, and sacrifices that took place in the streets of Selma, Alabama, earlier that year. As Jesse Jackson observed, “The Voting Rights Act was written in blood before it was signed in ink.”

The problem is not limited to the White House. Most leaders of the Democratic Party still operate under the mistaken belief that Republicans took control of Congress because White swing voters switched their allegiances to the Republican Party, resulting in the crushing losses in the midterm elections of 2010 and 2014. The real problem in those races was lack of turnout of the Democratic base, but that analysis has not been done by the Party higher-ups, and hundreds of millions of dollars are being wasted in the futile pursuit of winning back White swing voters when a permanent progressive governing coalition could be established by investing those same millions in organizing the diverse communities that make up the New American Majority.

We are at a pivotal point in history with incredible potential, but we must act boldly and decisively or else it could all slip away as conservatives make inroads with people of color while progressives are sleeping. Democrats run the risk of being lulled into complacency and false confidence by the historic election of Obama, while many Republicans are aggressively getting with the multiracial program.
This book seeks to provide a quantitative analysis of the numbers and math that prove the existence of a New American Majority, offer a qualitative look at the groups who make up this majority, and present a constructive critique showing what progressives and Democrats are doing wrong and need to do better.

The first two chapters unveil the New American Majority. Chapter 1, “51 Percent (and Growing Every Day): The New American Majority,” identifies progressives in each racial and ethnic group and shows how their numbers add up to a majority of the country’s eligible voters. Chapter 2, “Meet the New American Majority,” offers a more qualitative picture of who people of color and progressive Whites are by looking through the lens of the lives of a cohort of activists and change makers, using their stories to offer a window into the historical and political dynamics of the nation’s racial and ethnic groups.

The next set of chapters offers a candid critique of the progressive movement, exposing how and why it is so far behind the curve in understanding and embracing the demographic revolution and the New American Majority. Chapter 3, “Blinded by the White,” explores the depth and breadth of America’s longstanding preference for White people, and how that preoccupation continues to influence all aspects of politics and society. Chapter 4, “Requiem for the White Swing Voter,” explains how the conventional wisdom about the importance of chasing White swing voters is both mathematically wrong and politically perilous. Chapter 5, “Fewer Smart-Ass White Boys,” details how progressive politics suffers because so many of the people in charge don’t reflect the composition of the New American Majority and lack the cultural competence to communicate with its members.

The next two chapters move toward solutions. Chapter 6, “Invest Wisely,” draws from the world of business to identify principles of successful investing and how those principles should be applied to the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on politics and social change. Chapter 7, “What Is Justice? Policy Priorities for the New American Majority,” focuses on public policy solutions for the New American Majority by rooting the inquiry in history, exploring how contemporary inequality came to be, and examining what can be done to foster greater justice and equality.
Chapter 8, “Conservatives Can Count,” concludes by offering a strong warning that Democrats and other progressives need to take action urgently because many conservatives are actively responding to the demographic revolution. Examples abound of conservatives who are moving more aggressively than progressives, creating the real possibility that the progressive movement will squander this historic opportunity to solidify a lasting multiracial New American Majority.

For hundreds of years, what most mattered in America was whether you were White or not, and that question has continued to be the driving force in our politics, as consultants and candidates have competed for the support of White swing voters thought to be essential to winning elections. But the growth in the country’s communities of color has created a new touchstone and starting point for assembling the majority needed for victory. It is becoming abundantly clear, through recent elections and political analysis, that the needs, hopes, dreams, conditions, and concerns of people of color should be driving politics today and into the future. The political party that gets this, and meets the needs of the New American Majority the best, will govern for decades to come.

Progressives cannot win going forward without large and enthusiastic support from people of color. White can no longer be the starting point. We must now begin with Brown, and that is why Brown is the new White.

To be clear, this is not a book about how to end racism, and it is not a book about how to build a multiracial coalition in which there are no more “isms.” That’s a tall task, and we’ve been fighting those battles for a few centuries.

What this book does do is focus on how to build political power that can go a long way toward addressing and redressing the effects of racism, discrimination, injustice, and inequality. Electing Barack Obama president didn’t end racism and discrimination; far from it. In fact, if anything, it inflamed many people to see a Black “Kenyan,” “socialist,” and “Muslim” occupy the White House. And we don’t need to look any further than any given day’s news reports to see that racism and discrimination are alive and well. But electing Obama and a
relatively progressive Congress resulted in millions of people getting health care coverage. It resulted in millions getting jobs. It resulted in a Black attorney general—who had been appointed by the Black president—uprooting and replacing the entire police leadership in Ferguson, Missouri, in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown in 2014. Organizing and mobilizing the New American Majority in Baltimore’s 2014 election resulted in the victory of Marilyn Mosby as state’s attorney, putting in power someone with the authority and accountability to arrest the police officers charged with the murder of Freddie Gray in 2015.

If these electoral victories have showed us anything, it’s that we can win elections and push the progressive movement forward while we work on other, deeper, and more intractable issues such as racism, injustice, and inequality. We don’t have to wait for every single person to fully understand and embrace every single racial or ethnic group to make progress toward greater racial and economic justice. In fact, we can’t afford to wait. We can work and win at the ballot box while we learn and grow in the movement.

One of my early organizing experiences involved coordinating Stanford University’s 1987 Martin Luther King Day celebration, which had the theme “The Unfinished Business of Martin Luther King, Jr.” Law professor William Gould gave a speech during the event in which he connected King’s unrealized dream to Abraham Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg, where Lincoln said, “It is for us the living to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.” Lincoln and King both left unfinished work. Both gave their lives in service of the cause of democracy, equality, and racial justice. (Few know that days before assassinating Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, in reaction to Lincoln’s speech announcing the surrender of Southern general Robert E. Lee, said, “That means nigger citizenship. . . . That is the last speech he will ever make.”) Both Lincoln and King helped bring about changes and laws that laid the foundation for the creation of a New American Majority composed of people of color and progressive Whites.

During much of U.S. history, it must have seemed there would
never come a day when the majority of American voters would embrace and elevate a person of color to the highest office in the land. But that day has come, and it is for us the living to study it and understand what and who made that possible and then act with courage and conviction to cement a political majority that can build and protect the kind of society for which millions of people have struggled, sacrificed, and died.

A new day has dawned in America. By strengthening the progressive, multiracial New American Majority, we can make this day one of lasting equality and justice for all.