

[ETSU Social Work Policy Podcast with Lacy Watson: Racism in Policy](#)

Cory Whitfield: Hello and welcome everyone to Social Policy podcast brought to you from East Tennessee State University's College of Clinical, Rehabilitative and Health Sciences, Department of Social Work. I'm Cory Whitfield, MSW Class of 2022 and today we have Eugene Lacy Watson was with us to discuss racism and policy, in 2020 Eugene Watson ran for West Virginia's Congressional District, So I'm just wondering, can a candidate win an election with a racism centered framework?

Lacy Watson: Great question and I believe recent history has shown that certain individuals have that ability to run on divisive policy, such as racism, and be successful. I don't think that's the case for minorities. I wouldn't prescribe that strategy in our particular races. And again, it comes down to your state and the demographics of that state. When we look at the populations of West Virginia and Tennessee, we know that the African-American populations there, there in minority, we are the minority status. So, to solely depend on one ethnic group to carry you throughout a campaign would be unrealistic. Therefore, I believe specifically, candidates in the Appalachian region, minority candidates in the Appalachian region wouldn't be successful running that type of campaign. Again, if you are located in a more urban area such as maybe Minneapolis, or Atlanta, those type of strategies could be beneficial. But again, when we look at the overall health of our nation, we need to solidify our efforts and obtain and maintain allies as much as possible in the construction of this new 21st century that will be more equitable to everyone.

Cory Whitfield: You just brought up the topic of allies. We need allies. The problem that I've often encountered is, though, that allyship only goes one way. We'll advocate for other individuals, but then when it's time for other individuals and groups to advocate on our behalf, they're missing. What do you feel are the true qualities of a great ally?

Lacy Watson: Three qualities that come to mind, specifically, number one, having a clear understanding of the historical injustice and bias that we as African Americans have endured. And then from that understanding, engaging with the African-American community. In a way, that leverages your power as a white individual or someone outside of the African-American community. Leverage your power in ways that facilitate the establishment of our own individual power and our collective power. I think allyship is a relationship that isn't static, it isn't one that exists on a certain perspective or playing field. This allyship it bleeds and it merges with the social problems and the identities that are affected within our community. So that this friendship and this friendship should be illustrated in three ways politically, economically, and socially. When which we gain independence and freedom. So allyship should have a clear understanding of the history. It should also seek to maintain and establish genuine relationships and then leverage power where in which we, the community, become independent and able to voice our concerns in the larger body politic in order to effectuate change for ourselves.

Cory Whitfield: So, in these true allies, do you think it's necessary for a true ally to advocate for the African-American community using a racism centric framework in order for us to get the tangible results that are needed?

Lacy Watson: I believe it depends on the strategy that we are trying to in place. If the strategy calls for awareness via the vocalization of the racist policies that have existed in the past. Then I am all for that. I

just can't make a blanket statement, not knowing the specifics of the candidate, the demographics of the community, and the region that community lives in as it pertains to the political strategy that would facilitate. Calling racism to the forefront in order to facilitate change that would shift policy. I believe that policies and the allies that we do have in common need to be linked in a way that gives voice and prominence to the voices they are actually speaking for. So, to fully address your question, if that particular ally is working within the community and that understanding is firmly embedded in the minds and the particular outcomes that are looked forward to, then I am all for such a strategy. But when we look at the realities that exist in our current media, that type of narrative, I believe will only add to the destructive conversation that exists right now. When we think of race and when race is brought up from the Republican Party, we see individuals that make statements that are inflammatory, gestures that are offensive and make propositions that are, you know, in my opinion, somewhat ludicrous when it comes to politics. And there's no censure, there's no punishment. There's no correction for these behaviors. Therefore, to follow that fire up with more fire will only exacerbate problems in my opinion, that strategy wouldn't be effective, I think, for our states, but for larger, more urbanized black communities, I think that message could highlight some of the injustices that have occurred, which will prompt people to change. I think a good example of that could be the state of Georgia with the election of Raphael Warnock and the future candidacy of Stacey Abrams. I think allies speaking out, you know, in that regard would be beneficial for those populations to spur, you know, more civic engagement. But, you know, Atlanta, Georgia is just one African-American community, among the many others that exist, and we are not monolithic. Not all black people think the same. Therefore, again, the strategy that may be good for Atlanta may not be good for West Virginia nor Tennessee.

Cory Whitfield: So, you kind of touched on some of the inflammatory remarks that come from the conservative parties sometimes. But in regards to directly combating racism, are progressive legislators any better than the conservative legislators?

Lacy Watson: Great question. And I would believe so because when we look at just the definitions of the terms progressive and conservative, we see. And I'll give you my definition so that we can be on a clear understanding. My definition of conservative would be someone that has values that are linked to a prior era in American history that gave them security, comfort, and a sense of self. And these conservative values, as much as they were a part of American history and a positiveness about American history, there was also a darker side to that conservatism. We look back to the 1960s, 50s, 40s, 30s and African-Americans never enjoyed those same qualities of American life. Therefore, when we speak on the values that we once had, it's very important for conservatives to understand that not everyone benefited and for us to live in a prosperous 21st century to have a nation that is economically strong and socially viable, we need to recognize those injustices and ensure that those injustices don't repeat themselves as we move forward in our history. The progressive wing of the perspective are associated with democratic values of social equality, economic equality, and political equality. Associations that would include the growth and the inclusion of more individuals of all sexes, races, ethnicities, preferences into conversation that includes everyone to participate in the political, economic and social endeavors that we have and maintains this connection, giving everyone an identity that again we can build a 21st century nation that is more inclusive, that is more prosperous than what we've seen in the past.

Cory Whitfield: Let me just paint the image. I am a gentleman. I come up to you and I say brother Lacy look by 2053. The net value of Black America would be zero dollars. We're dealing with gerrymandering,

police brutality, we have crime rates that are through the charts and we can link much of those crime rates to our economic situation. We have all of these health care disparities going on, we have housing insecurities, our communities are being turned into brown fields. We have food insecurities. We live in food deserts. When I look around me, nothing tells me that we're going to have a positive outcome. What would you tell me on the policies that could be passed to alleviate these issues and would on the greater greatest barriers to prevent those policies from being passed?

Lacy Watson: To answer that question, I believe we are facing that exact question today with voting rights. Voting rights, I guess. Restrictions that some states are putting on their minority communities. We see that many, many states are implementing changes in their policy to make it harder for individuals to vote. I think what's missing, what's missing is the, again, the historical understanding of the actualities that took place within the United States and the policy makers that support such views, I feel, are consciously and systematically putting up barriers that are obvious to the communities that they hurt, these tactics that we see in voter suppression laws are the same tactics that were used against us right after the Emancipation Proclamation and during reconstruction, when we look at particularly the state of Virginia in 1877 and we saw how communities of color and their allies reshaped the Constitution, and as a result, the political, economic and social benefits for those individuals at that point in time, we saw more black legislators in the body politic of Virginia than we've ever seen in any point in time. Then what do we see, 1895. White backlash to that. They totally, totally destroy the economic, political and the social system that we once had, and we now have the Constitution in Virginia that we've had since then in place. So, when we talk about the progressive or conservative policy makers and their actions. We witnessed today we only are witnessing a backlash to a progressive movement that only wants to empower citizens of this very nation to participate and to have full access to the benefits of what it is to be an American.

Cory Whitfield: Well, with that, I would like to thank you, brother Lacy, for this wonderful interview that you did for the social work department and for ETSU.