

[Social Work Policy Podcast with Congressional Candidate Lacy Watson: Full Podcast](#)

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 Corey Whitfield MSW Class of 2022 and today we have Eugene Lacy Watson with us to discuss racism and policy in 2020 Eugene Watson ran for West Virginia's Congressional District, where he fell a little bit short, but he is now preparing to make another run. So, with that being said, I would love to introduce a great friend of mine, someone that I respect and highly admire Eugene Lacy Watson. How are you today my friend?

Lacy Watson: Thank you so much. I really appreciate the wonderful introduction, Corey. Again, my name is Lacy Watson and I'm running for Congress in West Virginia's 1st Congressional District. We went from three congressional districts down to two. Now I'm running in the 1st Congressional District, West Virginia's Southern District. And again, as Corey said, I will be representing the Democratic Party throughout the primaries and hopefully to the general election.

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely perfect. And much success and luck with that future run. I'm definitely going to be supporting you and rooting for you.

Lacy Watson: Thank you.

Cory Whitfield: No problem. So, with all that being said, Lacy, if you don't mind, could you kind of give us some of your political background?

Lacy Watson: Absolutely. I started my political background after I came from Miami after I completed my master's in mental health counseling at Nova Southeastern. And when I got back to Bluefield, West Virginia, I started to teach at Bluefield State College, a historically black college in West Virginia, and that's when my political eyes were opened as it pertains to the number of representatives that we have in leadership representing our community. And then the lack of access that the African-American community has as it pertains to political, economic and social equity. So, that's how I really was introduced to the political process. From there, I ran two state races for Congress, where in which I use those races to get a feel for the environment, the political environment in West Virginia. I got a chance to highlight and recognize the key players, the parameters in which these officials work and the priorities and the policies that they hold dear. So, from there, I was really able to become entrenched in West Virginia politics. And my next step was to run for federal office, my first congressional race. And that race was, I was very happy with the outcome of the race in at the onset I had initially won, but after absentee ballots came back, they say that I lost by 67 votes and that small number really opened my eyes to the possibilities that African-Americans have in West Virginia politics. And to my overall reception within the constituency located in West Virginia, they were very

supportive of my race and I look forward to working with those individuals and meeting new individuals as I start my campaign this year. It's wonderful. And so, you know, I kind of was listening to how you were describing the political atmosphere in West Virginia for African-Americans.

Cory Whitfield: And I think when we talk about the Appalachians, what are the regions that we often forget is West Virginia, in my opinion. Do you think that at any point, race impacted your candidacy?

Lacy Watson: That's a great question, and one that I feel is multi-tiered. So if I can take the first tier and say that? Being an African-American and that identity just being with you, I think, affected my candidacy with some constituents in my district and those ideas or those beliefs held by those individuals are their own and respect them for their decisions to vote for me or to not vote for me, but I don't think that encapsulates the whole of West Virginia, so again, we have a certain population that I know won't vote for me because of my skin color, but then I think there's an openness in West Virginia politics that needs or that wants representation, regardless of the skin tone that fights for the values and the priorities that we hold in West Virginia and, for that matter, throughout the Appalachian region.

Cory Whitfield: So, the second I'm sorry.

Lacy Watson: Oh, you're fine man.

Lacy Watson: The second-tier answer would be that I feel that my skin tone has an effect on West Virginia in the fact that. When I win in twenty-two, I'll be the first African-American candidate that we've ever had and that level of distinction for West Virginia could bring in or highlight the progressiveness of West Virginians. Despite the narrative that is constructed in the larger media concerning West Virginians and people of Appalachia. So, I think on those two tiers. My skin tone affected the outcome of my race but I can't really judge because of the constituency, you know. They hold some ideas that you know, personally, they may not want to verbalize, so it's kind of a gray area when it comes to that particular question. I hope I answered your question fully, did I? .

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely. So, when you were running, as we remember, 2020 was a volatile year, not only with COVID, but with the situation with George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor. And that was compounded on with what we have with Tamir Rice, and Philando Castile and Trayvon Martin, and the names go on and on and on. And so, with the political and political environment, the way that it was in 2020, I know a lot of people in the African-American community wanted a lot of the policies to be centered on the oppression that we will be faced with. 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 are there in minority we are the minority status. So, to solely depend on one ethnic group to carry you throughout the campaign would be unrealistic. Therefore, I believe. Candidates. And 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, Miami, Los Angeles, 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 our lives 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. I know myself I often struggle with the concept of allies, not because I don't think we don't need allies. We definitely need allies, especially with African-Americans being 13 percent of the total population and with us being a pretty much wealthless group. We need allies. The problem that I've often encountered is, though, that allyship only goes one way in my humble opinion 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: Great questions. 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 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. That's how I would conceptualize true allyship.

Cory Whitfield: Excellent. 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? And if so, where should your advocacy begin?

Lacy Watson: Great question. I believe it depends on the strategy that we are trying to emplace. 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 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, make 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 and therefore, and 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 I was 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: So, let me ask you this, Lacy. When you were on the campaign trip? The moment that you step out and you were going to make a speech as the African American candidate, I would imagine many of your constituents automatically thought that you were going to go straight to racism or straight to race in general. Did you ever feel the need to avoid the race conversation to make your constituents feel comfortable?

Lacy Watson: That's a great question, and I have to say, no I didn't. That was something that I strategically did not bring up in conversations because I see, you know, again I feel I am shaped by my identity. For African Americans, we don't get the luxury to forget who we are. Our identity is shaped by our skin color, and that is enforced consciously and unconsciously. Once we step out of our doors and into the community, therefore, I feel it wasn't something that I need to highlight because it was the elephant in the room. The one thing that I did want my constituents to realize about me is the tenacity and the veracity that I have for policy and the and for that policy to really encompass the needs and the values of my constituents, so my message was one of progressive economics, a progressive economics that would. release the boot from individuals necks that are low in the socio-economic standing and these individuals, you know, in our community, they're not just the African-American community, but they are the poor white community. And historically those two communities have been treated the same as it pertains to law enforcement. So. My message centered on a progressive economics that would allow individuals and families to come out of their debt constraints and allow them to see the bigger picture that we have as far as climate change is concerned. Mm-Hmm. One point or one point that I would like to highlight would be the universal basic income. When we look at 21st century jobs right now today and we look at jobs from the perspective of living in Appalachia, we see many parts of our region without broadband access. We see many parts of our region without adequate infrastructure as far as roads, water, electricity, food. Where in which we need to ensure that the basic structures are in place so that we can ensure the viability of our people and the only way to do so is leading with an economic message. And that's the strategy that I chose.

Cory Whitfield: No, I'm loving this conversation because you just keep doing these alley-oops that lead me to another question.

Lacy Watson: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Cory Whitfield: When you were just discussing economics and the economics is always a great topic, especially when it comes to policy. Now, as a social worker, I think I get to see poverty on many different levels, different races, ethnicities, you name it. Some of the conversations that I come across is. You know, people like to discuss, "well, hey, I'm white and I'm poor also". So why should you feel like there's a difference between you and I when I'm not privileged because I'm white, I'm poor and you can go down the conversation of having was say there's a difference between black poverty and white poverty. I mean, I think we can look at the data to verify that, but you don't want to invalidate someone else's experience at the same time. So how do we validate the experiences of white Americans who suffer from economic depression?

While at the same time highlight disparities of the economic oppression in the African-American community.

Lacy Watson: Very, very good, great question. And I would like to tell you a story that touches on both of those points of interest. And this goes back to the 1968 Black Panther Party in Chicago, Illinois, and this party was led by a gentleman named Fred Hampton and Fred Hampton's progressive policies not only benefited the African American community, but they also benefited the poor white community and the other ethnic minority communities that existed in Chicago at the time. And what the Black Panther Party illustrated was the strength within our communities to join together in changing number one legislative policy in Chicago, at of time, but also the social conditions that existed or exist within our communities. These monumental efforts made by the party were undermined by false allegations of domestic terrorism, of insubordination to, you know, the Constitution, whatever. And that for me tells me that there's no real difference between poor whites and poor blacks in addressing your question. I feel the same initiatives and the same objectives could be met now in 2021 with the proper leadership. Therefore, when we speak on the plights of poor African Americans and poor whites, especially within the Appalachian region, we need to be conscious of the systematic efforts to number one keep us silent as far as our political voices. Number two people as poor as far as our economic liabilities. And number three, keep us divided based on our skin tones or our ethnic backgrounds. So, in summation, I believe there is no difference between poor whites and poor blacks, but through media misrepresentation, the communities are divided and left to pit economic resources, what are left of economic resources, against each other. If that answers your question.

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely, absolutely. And I'm just going to tell you, you threw me another alley-oop me thank you. We're doing more hoops, than James. You know, that's what we do.

Lacy Watson: Penny Hardaway and you're Shaq. Absolutely. Me too.

Cory Whitfield: To a Black Panther Party. Fred Hampton Bobby Rush also ran for, was the senator in the state of Illinois for many years. You go into Stokely Carmichael. Great political mind. MLK had a great political mind. When you look at a lot of our leaders from that era 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, they have wonderful political minds. Fast forward to 2021 I don't think we in the African-American community have the same political education now that we did then. What do you feel the African American community in 2021 gets warned about politics?

Lacy Watson: Great question and that is a question that I would need to unpack, and I say that number one, we get wrong that all black communities think and act alike. We are not a monolithic body in the United States. Black people in West Virginia think differently from black people in Tennessee, and that goes for New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. Therefore, when we look at what has what we get wrong as a community, it goes back to the historical miseducation that we have had as a people within this country. We have a history taught to us in textbooks that minimize the input of African Americans in the American story. Therefore, then therefore we have a lack of participation in politics from the black community, from that original

miseducation. Therefore, it's important for us to educate our community. And that's an education. Whether it be in school or Sunday or Saturday schools in our community, that gives us that background and gives us that foundation of understanding who we are and the contributions that we've made in society that will stimulate us to participate in political events and civic society. The second piece? I believe would. I believe could be surmised in we don't participate in government because there aren't many of us in government positions already. And there was a study that was conducted not too long ago, and it said that when African-American boys, they see a teacher that looks like them in school, that prompts them or gives them more encouragement to finish school as opposed to them never seeing an African-American male teaching them so. I take that understanding and transplanted to other activities in our lives, and I see that we lack the representation in our politics to really get black people involved in the political process. We saw that involvement with the election of Barack Obama and the turnout of African Americans once we see this in all elections, federal, state, local. The outpouring of black voices of black bodies into these positions. We will start to see and understand that the political process is for us. This government was not built for us, but through the integration of black bodies and black voices into the political process, we can make the government into what we need it to be for us by us.

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely perfect. So, you kind of discuss the government wasn't built for us, but we can make it work for us, and I definitely agree with that. With that, I know several policies in our history that have been passed like the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Homestead Act, even the Indian Removal Act. These were all policies that benefited White America significantly. And some of these policies, they were social welfare policies, let's just put it out there, they were social welfare policies. Why is it when the verbiage goes towards programs that benefit one community we call the social welfare policies, we call it the subsidies, we give it these nice, cuddly terms. But when he goes for another community, it's handouts. These people are always wanting a handout. Why do you feel that we have that gap when it comes for the government doing what is supposed to be doing, which is assisting the members of their community?

Lacy Watson: Yes, I believe that there is a misconception based off of a missed education when it comes to identity politics, identity politics is all politics. So, when individuals say I don't want to get into identity politics, identity politics has been the sole basis of all policies within the United States since its construction. Therefore. Identity politics and individual perceptions in regards to policy need to be addressed. And as you've already stated, historically, the United States has always given handouts to certain individuals while neglecting others. You have your examples, and I can just follow those up with Levittown in Pennsylvania, and New York City. We can follow that up with the housing. The housing movement from central Chicago to the suburbs in the 60s and the 70s. So, we have always been a nation of Socialized emancipation. But only for certain individuals. And the rhetoric that we see discussed right now, as far as the policies that are being debated currently comeback to identity politics, but we have certain individuals that choose to neglect or look over instances in history where in which they benefited themselves. And speaking of those Republican members of Congress who can say they traced their history back to when they were Irish or Italian or English, and they came over

here and they resettled and their forefathers benefited from those. Social policies that the United States implemented while again, excluding others and we have the civil rights movement of the nineteen late nineteen sixties that we saw to finally get the equality in certain aspects of our social lives in order. So, it's quite disturbing and it's quite shocking how educated individuals and leaders that we have in politics, policy and in government can overlook instances in history that they deem. Aren't contextual to the conversations that we're having right now.

Cory Whitfield: So, this is going to be my last, my last question for you. So let me 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 by 2053. We're dealing with gerrymandering. We're dealing with police brutality. We have crime rates that are due to chance, and we can most 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: Hmm. Great question. Great question. And 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've had 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 again a backlash to a progressive movement that only wants to empower again citizens of this very nation to participate and to have full access to the benefits of what it is to be an American. And if individuals choose that sort of stance against history, then history has shown that those individuals will be written off as those that could not visualize and could not conceptualize a new America that exists to ensure the longevity not only of our nation but out of our civilized world. There is great disparity when it comes to COVID vaccinations as it pertains to the global north and global south. We see backlash on African nations for reporting diseases faster and earlier, then what more modern nations can do and we see backlash to that. Well, you know,

they were able to isolate this variant of COVID 19 in South Africa. It took them 17-18 days to do so. They put it out. Well, we have to cut off these countries as far as their travel. When we do that, we are cutting off their economic opportunities to ensure their communities are healthy and viable. It takes the United States on average from the data that I've just received twenty-eight days to recognize a variant of the COVID 19 virus. Why are we as a nation punishing those who act quicker. And bringing awareness to a global health threat. And at the same time, we are not distributing vaccines enough to help the global south in maintaining its own health and viability because again, we cannot have a healthy planet or a healthy United States with a sick South Africa or a sick Southeast Asia or a sick South America. That's one thing that I'd really like to push and bring home as we finish this conversation is that there are obvious inequalities that exist within our nation and globally, and it takes all of us being a part of the conversation in order to alleviate these issues and problems.

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely.

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. Greatly appreciate it and for anyone that watches this, if you would like to support our dear brother Lacy Watson, go to his website, check out his platform he has really good stuff posted. Hey, make a contribution. We need to support these candidates that want to make these progressive changes for us, and nothing supports them more than that bank account. They really do need it, just being honest with you. So, is there anything you like to close with my friend?

Lacy Watson: I would just to say, brother, I thank you for your time. I thank you for your energy and your passion, you know, into setting up this podcast and your leadership. I look forward to working with you in the future, and I know you will do great things for your community and us in partnership together. We will make change across this nation to ensure that we have the social, political, and economic equity that we have justly been deserving since 1877.

Cory Whitfield: Absolutely. And just to kind of close that out, when you bought up reconstruction and the failure of reconstruction. I talk about that all the time, how you can draw that link to failure of reconstruction, to what's going on now. We have to get a firm understanding of reconstruction, in order to see what is going on. We're going to save that for another conversation.

Lacy Watson: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, because we can definitely talk about that.

Cory Whitfield: So, well my friend, I hope you have a great weekend and a safe holiday.

Lacy Watson: Yes, sir. Thank you so much for your time, brother.