

Islamophobia, Trump's Racism and 2020 Elections!

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“Send her back”¹ is the new racist theme introduced by Trump’s supporters in the aftermath of his recent bigoted twitter attack on four Congresswomen (Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York). The chant took place during a 90-minute campaign rally in North Carolina, which witnessed Trump doubling down on his earlier attacks and stoking the crowd into a despicable racist frenzy.

In his earlier tweets, Trump pointed out that the governments of countries of origin of the four representative women of color are “a complete and total catastrophe, the worst and most corrupt” then followed it with a call on the four democratic women representatives to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came.”²

Trump’s attacks hit a new low for a president that has broken all existing political, social, racial, and cultural taboos, not to mention his persistent sexism and misogyny. Here, Trump’s racist assault raises several critical questions as to the nature of the attacks, the factors at play, and how to understand the focus on the four democratic congresswomen of color?

Trump’s racist attack is one of the crudest expressions of nativist and xenophobic tendencies that the country has seen in almost 50 years. One has to go back to the early 1960s and possibly earlier to find similar attitudes put forth by elected officials. The same rhetoric was deployed during the lead-up to the Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882, which targeted Chinese immigrants and other minorities. During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the majority of White Americans were opposed to integration and the granting of equal rights to African Americans with “go back to Africa” often deployed on signs and in public discourses.³ Trump’s “go back” home is a theme that has deep roots in America’s racial discourse and the contestation of citizenship rights even to four elected women.

Critically, a look back to the 2016 presidential campaign is essential to read what Trump is doing today. Research on the 2016 presidential elections points that “racial attitudes” and anti-Muslim sentiments played “a larger role in opinions” and driving White voters to support Trump. “Racial attitudes were highly determinative” was Philip Klinker, a Hamilton College political scientist, conclusion, which was supported by data analysis:

Moving from the least to the most resentful view of African Americans increases support for Trump by 44 points, those who think Obama is a Muslim (54 percent of all Republicans) are 24 points more favorable to Trump, and those who think the word “violent” describes Muslims extremely well are about 13 points more pro-Trump than those who think it doesn’t describe them well at all.⁴

Research on White electorate attitudes and Republicans, in particular, was the subject of work by Vanderbilt political scientists Marc Hetherington and Drew Engelhardt, which showed “how much more racially conservative Republicans have become in recent years” and that “it is not surprising that a candidate (Trump) who is well known for questioning President Obama’s citizenship . . . and said that black youths have ‘never done more poorly’ because ‘there’s no spirit’ would be attractive to a party that these days is dripping with racial resentment.”⁵

Trump's Republican Party is Whiter than at any time before, older and more conservative on immigration, race, women's rights, gun control and has adopted Islamophobia as the electoral wedge issue to rally the base around. Fanning the flames of fear and stoking racial anxiety among White voters is a tested and well-developed strategy for Republican politicians and selecting a minority target group is the needed ingredient. Is Trump racist? The answer is yes, but his attack on the congresswomen is a calculated move to rally White voters anew to his side. Trump's electoral strategy has several pieces to it.

Trump's singling out the four progressive Democratic representatives is a calculated electoral strategy intended to grow the existing fissure between the left and center-left of the Democratic Party. Targeting the four representatives, in Trump's strategy, will help push the Democratic Party into defending the four women of color against his racist attacks, which will project them as the public face of the Party.

Since the 2018 midterm elections, the Democratic Party is split between the newly elected and far more diverse freshmen/freshwomen class, which heavily leans left and the old leadership which is centrist with some even right of center. Pushing the Democrats into the left, according to Trump's strategy, will make it possible for his 2020 electoral campaign to peel away a portion of the centrist White Democrats from the Party and get them to vote Republican.

The White share of the electorate is 73.3%, and the turn-out was 55.2% in the 2018 midterm elections. In the 2016 presidential elections, Whites accounted for 73.6% of the electorate and 64.7% turn-out at the ballot box.⁶ Trump's electoral strategy is structured around driving as many White voters as possible to the Republicans and critically in swing states that account for the Electoral College. Indeed, the Republicans and Trump are fine in losing the popular vote as long as they can secure the Electoral College by peeling away White Democratic voters in swing states, and racism and Islamophobia are the tried and well-tested tools to achieve it.

Trump is also using the US's unquestionable support for Israel as a second wedge issue in attacking Representative Ilhan Omar and Representative Rashida Tlaib due to their support for the BDS movement and advocating for Palestinian human rights. Far from being principled, Trump is making a strategic electoral move by securing top pro-Israel donors as well as Christian evangelical support.

While American Jewish voters tend to be democratic with 71% casting ballots for Clinton in the 2016 elections, nevertheless Trump strategy calls for exploiting the critical shifts underway in the Democratic Party that is beginning to sour on the unquestionable support for Israel.⁷ The fact that both Ilhan and Rashida have embraced the BDS movement and a sizeable segment of the Democratic Party rank and file is no longer committed to supporting Israel no matter what is the opening that Trump's campaign is exploiting. Trump is counting on big pro-Israel donors breaking his way as well as possibly securing the votes of older Jewish Americans in the 2020 elections. The more Trump is able to fan the flames against the four women of color representative on the Palestine, Israel and BDS front, the more likelihood of peeling away older Jewish American voters in key battle states from the Democratic Party and possibly gain the support or at least get the silence of major Jewish organizations on his racism and open embrace of White supremacy.

Trump's attacks are part of a strategy, and are likely to be carried out with polling and focus groups testing language and issues for the 2020 presidential election. The only path forward for Trump's re-election bid passes through intensifying racism and Islamophobia, which guarantees the White voter flight into the lap of the Republican Party.

Responding to Trump's strategy is an uphill battle for the Democratic Party considering the internal split and the unresolved nasty political fight that handed the nomination to

Clinton in the 2016 elections. The Democrats must go back to their historical identity as the Party of the working class and fighting for the regular person; rather than the past 30 years attempt of being a softer copy of the Republicans. In order to win in 2020, the Democrats should embrace the diversity that came into office in 2018 while building consensus for a new and bold social contract that can address and provide a vision for all Americans.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/17/politics/donald-trump-greenville-rally/index.html>

² <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1150381395078000643>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/behind-trumps-go-back-demand-a-long-history-of-rejecting-different-americans/2019/07/15/aeb4539a-a712-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html?utm_term=.2d5ba5870e12

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/06/racial-anxiety-is-a-huge-driver-of-support-for-donald-trump-two-new-studies-find/?fbclid=IwAR3NNY1_sOcNkObrLi6dqyuAkJO3ruJTJarwvlo2wFHNeGqrD4dKqY9iloY&utm_term=.c25c74ab4d7f

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/03/how-political-science-helps-explain-the-rise-of-trump-the-role-of-white-identity-and-grievances/?utm_term=.1c6dc30b5886

⁶ <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>

⁷ <https://forward.com/news/353914/by-the-numbers-3-key-takeaways-from-the-2016-jewish-vote/>