



Episode 1,159: Did “Racists” and “White Supremacists” Get Trump Elected?

Guest: Musa al-Gharbi

WOODS: I saw your article in The American Conservative, and then I read your scholarly piece. What's the name of the periodical again?

AL-GHARBI: The American Sociologist.

WOODS: The American Sociologist, right. I've got them both open here. There is a Thomas Wood you refer to who wrote something I think in The Washington Post. I'm a different person altogether. I have an S at the end of my name, but I thought, I wonder if he thinks that's me. But anyway, all right, I want to talk about your piece, not because I'm particularly a cheerleader of Trump or any president, for that matter, but just because, like you, I'm concerned about academia and I want standards to be observed and I want there to be a respect for facts and we've got to just go where the facts take us. And that doesn't really seem to be the case in a good deal of the social science literature dealing with the election of Trump. And I think that's the position you're coming from, as somebody who's in sociology, you want to see your discipline flourish, and it's not going to flourish if people view it as nothing but political hackery. Is that right?

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, absolutely. I'm not a Trump supporter either. In fact, there's this strange thing where if you criticize people who are critical of Trump, they assume it must be because you're for Trump yourself. So the idea of sort of a dispassionate analysis is largely lost in a lot of social research fields and actually journalism. But I think that it's to our detriment. Again, I'm in one of the most progressive fields out there, and I usually also publish in progressive outlets myself, but I feel like it's a real problem for our discipline that a lot of research is, one, very activist-oriented but activist-oriented in a way that undermines the actual quality of the research and, in fact, its impact as well.

WOODS: It's funny because what they're doing is very similar to the neocon approach to people who were opposed to, say, the war in Iraq; it's to say: well, you must support Saddam Hussein.

AL-GHARBI: Yeah.

WOODS: No, why would you think that? That has nothing to do with it whatsoever; I just have X, Y, and Z reasons for thinking A, B, and C happen to be true, but no, it has nothing — All right, so let's talk about this main claim —

AL-GHARBI: And I should add, though, and what's striking about the war in Iraq case too was this was another example where people who were dissenting were villainized, but they were ultimately right, the sort of orthodox position, the consensus position about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction program, etc., was wrong. It was just wrong. We know that now. And so this is another case where the Iraq example is actually telling, because there is these histories of people adopting a very coherent view and anyone who dissents from that view is demonized, but often they're ultimately vindicated.

WOODS: Now let's get into this main claim that we've heard over and over again that Donald Trump got elected because white people in America rose up, they rose up to take their country back after eight years of an interloper in the White House, and they were going to assert their interests at the ballot box, and what was Clinton going to do in the face of a white tsunami like this? And what's interesting is what you've done in both your piece at *The American Conservative* and in the scholarly piece is all you're doing is just laying out the raw data. You don't even need any commentary; just lay out the raw data.

So what's interesting I think to me and I bet surprising to a lot of people is to realize that the numbers they think are so are actually not so in terms of who voted for Trump from where and how did Trump's white vote compare to Romney's and how did his vote among non-whites compare to Romney's. Almost the — well, not almost. I would say the exact opposite of what people would be led to believe about all those metrics happens to be the case.

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, absolutely. As I point out in *The American Sociologist* piece, Trump got a lower share of the white vote than Mitt Romney did. White turnout was stagnant compared to the previous cycle and lower than 2008. Obama, far from the election being a referendum on Obama or what he allegedly represents, Barack Obama remained popular throughout the cycle, and in fact, even as Trump and Clinton's own popularity plummeted over the course of the cycle, Barack Obama became more popular and remains popular even two years into Trump's presidency.

Yeah, I mean, you can go point by point. And the most striking thing about this, the reason that it's so damning is because a lot of these studies or these correlational studies and other studies are supposed to be explaining why people voted, but they aren't addressing the actual data that they're supposed to explain. They're supposed to explain a certain electoral outcome, but they aren't actually engaging with the data that they're supposed to be explaining. They're in fact confounded by that very data.

And I focused on race in this paper, but actually, you could do the same thing with gender. So for instance, Hillary Clinton actually got the lowest share of the female vote of any Democrat of the last 20 years other than John Kerry. And you can actually go on a lot of these metrics with women too. You can make the exact same kind of argument. So despite the fact that the election, in addition to this sort of race frame as being depicted as this Trump won because of misogyny and sexism, etc., you could do this same kind of analysis that I did in *The American Sociologist* on race, you can do that same thing on gender, actually. And I have an article coming out soon that's going to demonstrate that as sort of a proof-of-concept piece.

WOODS: I'm just looking at the key bullet points, because I read *The American Sociologist* piece, and then I've got this TAC piece in front of me. The bullet points on the subject of race seem pretty decisive to me. First of all, Obama's popularity, you say, remained high throughout the 2016 cycle, so the idea that this was some kind of a rejection

of Obama by angry white people just doesn't seem to hold. His popularity grew over the course of the campaign, while Trump's and Clinton's kept falling. Obama is still popular even over a year into the Trump presidency. He wins — now, this is an interesting point. He wins a larger share of Hispanics and Asians than his predecessor, along with the largest share of the black vote of any Republican since 2004. And at one point in at least one of these articles, you speculate that, actually, the decisive factor that may have put Trump over the top was not in fact angry whites but could in fact have been the edge that he enjoyed among non-whites vis-a-vis Romney.

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, because he won a smaller share of the white vote than Romney, the reason he was able to win was likely because of these gains that he made among people of color. And I should add, another thing that's striking about this whole narrative is that Barack Obama actually did much better with whites than Hillary Clinton did. So yeah, this narrative is problematic.

And in fact, let me return to the gender thing, because it intersects with the race thing in an interesting way. So a lot of people point out, for instance, that Donald Trump won a majority of white women, and they make it sound like these women who voted for Trump, like, this is extraordinary, like, Oh, white women who would normally vote for Democrats switched over to vote for Trump because they chose race over gender despite Trump's misogyny and Hillary Clinton being the first female candidate at the top of a major party ticket.

But actually, Trump's performance among white women was middling at best. Republicans, you can go back 40 years all the way through to Nixon, and Republicans have won the majority of white women for all except for two races, which were in 1992 and 1996, Bill Clinton. But Bill Clinton didn't even win a majority of the white-woman vote; he only won a plurality. Democrats have literally never in recent modern history ever, ever won a majority of the white female vote. So the fact that Trump won a majority of the white-female vote is actually the most banal election outcome that you could conceive of as it relates to — And again, he didn't win an exceptional share of the white female vote; he won middling at best, lower than a lot of his predecessors among white women. So there's this myopia where they take these very ordinary, banal election outcomes and try to spin them into something extraordinary when there's actually just a lot less there than a lot of these scholars would like you to believe.

WOODS: You have what you call a turnabout test that you use as kind of a thought experiment to imagine whether we might see the same treatment doled out to Hillary Clinton that we saw from the media and scholars toward Trump. So let's take something that might not have been the motivating factor, to put it mildly, in Clinton voters' voting decisions, and that is Hillary Clinton's foreign policy, her hawkishness.

Now, I think the mainstream of the Democratic Party is not particularly peacenik, but I think the base by and large, even if antiwar is not their number-one issue, they're not really itching for a fight. So I think when they supported Hillary, I think you're correct to suggest that they were holding their nose on that point. But then the question becomes: why couldn't Trump voters have been holding their nose about some of his controversial comments? Why do we indulge Hillary Clinton and her voters and demonize Trump's voters? I don't know that there's an answer to that.

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, absolutely. So that test, the turnabout test was invented by Philip Tetlock, who is just phenomenal. And yeah, so the basic idea behind it is you take a certain frame of analysis that you're using to study one phenomenon, and then you change the group that this analysis is referring to and see if your views on that form of analysis, of that structure of analysis and its legitimacy change in a dramatic way depending on who you're studying. And if they do, then that's a sign that your research design is probably biased and you need to rethink the way you're analyzing this question.

So yeah, absolutely. With regards to Hillary Clinton and war, she was one of the most hawkish candidates. Even on the Republican side when there were 16 Republicans in the field, she was more hawkish than basically any of them except for maybe Lindsay Graham. And I mean like a long record of hawkishness. It goes all the way back to her time as First Lady when she was taking a very active stance in favor of a number of interventions. There has literally never been a conflict that was proposed or brought forward in Hillary Clinton's whole public life that she was like, "We shouldn't do that. That's a bad idea."

In fact, to the contrary, she is very staunchly for pretty much all of these conflicts, again, from the stuff in Yugoslavia in the '90s to Iraq and Afghanistan during the Bush administration to during the Obama era, Syria, trying to create an intervention in Syria; spearheading the U.S. efforts to intervene in Libya; trying to strike a confrontational position with Russia and urging us to be involved in Ukraine; Iran since similarly. So yeah, I mean, there's basically never been a war that Hillary Clinton didn't like.

And this is a well-known part of her stance. Even during the campaign, she made it central to her campaign, so it's not like it's a peripheral issue. Like her Democratic National Convention, American flags everywhere, veterans talking, war generals talking, all these themes about being strong and taking the fight to our enemies. And a lot of commentators after the convention talked about how it seemed more like a Republican event than a Democratic event. And she'd brag on the campaign trail about her support from people like Henry Kissinger.

So yeah, it was like very central to her identity as a politician, but we don't say: oh, look, she has this really long record as a hawk and it's very central to who she is even in this campaign; therefore, the fact that her hawkishness wasn't disqualifying means that all of her supporters must therefore be hawks. But we do say: oh, Trump has this long record of racially problematic rhetoric and it's central to his campaign, this sort of problematic rhetoric; therefore, anyone who voted for Trump must be voting for him because they either explicitly or implicitly support that rhetoric. So there's an obvious disconnect between the way that people analyze Trump and Trump voters versus Clinton and Clinton voters.

And the ironic thing is that in the case of Clinton, again, there's an actual record of policy decisions that she made and implemented and proposed to implement over the course of her own administration, whereas in the case of Trump, it's mostly rhetoric. I mean, he hasn't been in a position to actually implement, until now I mean, anything that's sort of racialized. So it was even more purely speculative on the Trump side than on the Clinton side, but we still are willing to give Clinton the benefit of the doubt despite this record that we're not willing to extend to Trump despite a lack of an actual record, despite it being almost purely rhetorical.

WOODS: I was going to read a few paragraphs of yours, but instead I think I'll just set it up and let you do the explaining. But you take the fact that Trump won 37% of eligible non-

Hispanic whites and we've got 36% abstaining from voting and another 27% outright supporting other candidates — you know, Clinton, Johnson, Stein, or McMullin — and you go from that point to — well, you know what? I know where you go with it, and I want you to set this up, because the point that you ultimately draw here is to say: I could make a similar statistical argument about another group and nobody would think it was valid, but yet methodologically it's being done exactly the same.

So the idea here is that even if we assume everybody was motivated primarily by anti-minority or white supremacist, let's say, sentiment who voted for Trump, even that we couldn't make sweeping claims about whites overall. But now pick up from there and run with that.

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, so the lead-in to that statistic actually that's sort of important is that one story that's actually much more compatible with the data than the story that's prevailing is that, for most white voters, you could argue based on the data that most white voters did find Trump's rhetoric, etc., disqualifying. 37% of eligible non-Hispanic whites, the vast majority, 63% either chose to vote for other candidates or abstain. So the idea that you can make sweeping inferences about the state of white America and white people and their sort of psychology on the basis of this 37% was the problematic thing.

So the parallel I set up — and this is again a turnabout test similar to what Tetlock proposed. So can you make sweeping inferences about the state of a group on the basis of such a dubiously representative sample? Because it's not just the case that we have 37% that voted for Trump and we don't know anything about where the other people fall. Again, we know from polling that Trump was unpopular, so those people who didn't vote, a lot of them didn't like Trump. We know that a lot of the other people explicitly voted for other candidates instead of Trump. So we know that a large share of whites who did not vote for Trump simply do not meet the portrayal of whites that people want.

So, the turnabout test. About the same share of whites who voted for Trump you could say is about the same share of black men who expected to do time in the carceral system over their lives. So according Bureau of Justice Statistics, about one third of African-American men can expect to do time in the carceral system over the course of their lives. But none of us would think it's appropriate if we saw a black man, like me, to assume that they were a criminal. And in fact, as we saw in Starbucks and in other instances like that — and there's instances where that does happen — there is widespread condemnation of it, because we recognize it is totally inappropriate to make those kinds of sweeping generalizations on the basis of a sample that we know is non-representative. Most black men are not criminals.

But we think it's perfectly okay to impute that most whites are racist on the basis of the fact that 37% of whites, of eligible non-Hispanic white voters, voted for Donald Trump. And so even if we assume that 100% of those voters were purely driven by racism and they had no other motive or even that that was their primary motivation, we still wouldn't be able to make sweeping generalizations about whites or declare some epidemic of racism that Trump's election would represent.

But in fact, we know that a lot of the people, again, who did vote for Trump were driven primarily by other issues. We know that many of them condemned Trump at length, at least those sorts of comments at length, very explicitly, but either voted for him because there were other priorities that they thought were sort of more pressing, just like a lot of

Democratic voters voted for Hillary Clinton knowing that if she was elected she was going to be killing people in the Middle East and other parts of the world, but they had other priorities that were more pressing. Or they just thought that the alternative was worse.

WOODS: More on Trump and the social science literature after this brief message.

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How would you respond to a critic of your discipline — and you could respond in defense of your discipline or with criticism — but to a critic who says: what you've identified here are some pretty serious methodological errors or political bias seeping in to a number of articles and writers on the subject of Trump, and it seems implausible to suggest that this level of bias appeared ex nihilo in 2016. There has to be some kind of — this has to be part of a trend. Why would I not suspect that there's something fundamentally politically biased about sociology in general if it goes so quickly and dramatically off the rails because of one presidential election?

AL-GHARBI: Yeah, so I think that there — so, two things. One, I think that there is something that Trump does generate a sort of unique visceral reaction from a lot of social scientists, not just sociologists, but sociology is more left- and activist-oriented than a number of other social research groups. So I think there is something unique about Trump. With that said, I don't think — so I think that a lot of the sort of errors that are related to research about Trump maybe, some of them anyway, wouldn't have — like some of the more glaring examples wouldn't have gotten through if we were discussing some other more banal candidate that people were not so heavily invested in.

With that said, there is a long history in social research — and not just in sociology, again. In psychology, for instance, there's this long tradition of research basically defining conservatism as something akin to a pathology or a mental disorder. And political science research even predating Trump, a lot of research that's trying to decide why voters vote Republican start by assuming things like, oh, well, they must be driven by racial resentment or gender or things like this. So this whole literature that really blew up this election with regards to Trump, it does have precedents that sort of roll back. So there is this longstanding problem of bias against Republicans or conservatives or whatever in social research, in part because these fields tend to be dominated by people on the left, and they have been for some time.

And that influences the research on a number of levels, from how problems are framed, including from how issues are framed and understood, from the tools and methods they use to how they interpret the data that they're presented with. I mean, on every level. And it's not necessarily that conservatives or libertarians or anyone who would necessarily be more objective or dispassionate. My guess is if the field was overwhelmingly dominated by conservatives, you would see the same kinds of errors skewing in the other direction.

The problem is that the fields have grown too homogeneous, and whenever you see the kind of homogeneity that you see in social research fields today, it creates problems like this where you can have these misinformation cascades where problematic assumptions don't get checked, where glaring errors can seep through because they confirm the picture of the world that people already believe or that they want to believe. And so the real solution here or what needs to happen is that there just needs to be more robust engagement in these fields and especially on political issues, controversial political issue with people who are not

inclined to share the sort of — who don't have the same priorities and commitments as the predominant view in the field. I mean, I also, again, hate Trump, but I don't — well, I won't say I hate Trump. That's overstating. I mean, I am no fan of Trump. We'll put it that way [laughing].

WOODS: Fair enough.

AL-GHARBI: But I don't share the same kind of team mentality, tribal mentality with the Democrats or whatever because I'm not like this super partisan sort of person. And so what there needs to be is more engagement with people who are skeptical, who don't share the same priorities and commitments, and the sort of homogeneity in social research fields is a big problem.

WOODS: Before I let you go, I note that you are a research associate with Heterodox Academy. Can you explain what Heterodox Academy is all about and why you are associated with them?

AL-GHARBI: Sure. So Heterodox Academy is a consortium of right now about 2,000 professors and graduate students who recognize that there's a problem in social research related to this sort of uniformity of commitments and perspectives, and so what we want to try to do is help foster more diversity, viewpoint diversity, and broadly construed. That includes political diversity, but also diversity in terms of socioeconomic diversity. Most people who are in social research fields and especially at elite institutions tend to share similar socioeconomic backgrounds, for instance. So socioeconomic diversity and racial diversity and gender diversity and diversity of nationality, because again, immigrants, for instance, also tend to have radically different understandings of a number of social issues than sort of native-born progressive Americans might. So this is what we want, is we want to help increase and support viewpoint diversity and mutual understanding and constructed engagement across difference — because we believe that this will make social research both more accurate and also more effective in actually sort of addressing social issues and impacting social policy.

WOODS: What's your website?

AL-GHARBI: My personal website is MusaalGharbi.com, and then of course there's HeterodoxAcademy.org.

WOODS: All right, I will link to both of those at TomWoods.com/1159, and I'll link to the work that you've done on this subject. And I'm glad to have had the chance to speak to you, and I hope Columbia's treating you well, as it more or less did me in the old days. And thanks so much.

AL-GHARBI: Thank you for having me.