**MPR News | Minnesota Now Political scientist: Attacks on Somali Minnesotans in midterms was part of longstanding playbook 01M70TNS99695G6244KSETMYSA**

**NINA MOINI:** Republicans in Minnesota and beyond echoed President Donald Trump in fixating on Somali Minnesotans ahead of the midterms. Governor candidate Lisa Demuth and US Senate candidate Michele Tafoya made, quote, "Somali gangs," as it was called, a key campaign issue. Ads supporting Tafoya also denounced, quote, "Somali fraudsters" and attacked Democrat Amy Klobuchar, governor-elect, for speaking a few words in Somali to a crowd.

Voters, meanwhile, elected Democrats to statewide seats and majorities in the Minnesota legislature, including several Somali candidates. Joining me to talk about how anti-Somali campaign rhetoric played out is University of Minnesota political scientist Michael Minta. Thanks very much for your time.

**MICHAEL MINTA:** Thanks for having me.

**NINA MOINI:** Continuing the conversation we were just having with Natalie Alms in a way there from Washington, we had seen President Trump and allies like Minnesota Congressman Tom Emmer, a top Republican leader there in Congress, make generalizations about Somali Minnesotans and fraud. Trump has said blatantly racist things, calling the community garbage. We don't need to go into everything folks have heard over the past decade or so. And then the idea of gang violence or group violence among young people became central to some campaigns, particularly after a shooting this fall near Eden Prairie High School at a football game. What stood out to you about how politicians used race in their arguments about issues like fraud and violence?

**MICHAEL MINTA:** Well, it's part of the playbook, unfortunately, we see in campaigns that try to use fear in order to make people or voters not support the other party, whether it's-- or their candidates. And it's been used by white politicians against Black politicians, Black top politicians against other Black politicians. And it could be--

And what we see here is this relationship where you see religion, Islam, and race intersecting, and politicians using it to deal with real issues that are plaguing the community in terms of crime and corruption, but only focusing or putting a face to Somalis or Muslims that may not be a fair characterization of the crime or to corruption that we have here in the state and in other states. And so it's what politicians do. They think fear, or it may even anger.

So we see it with Ilhan Omar is because she wears hijab, she's like the visible manifestation of when you think of someone who's Muslim, you see her. And so Republicans, particularly here in our state, they've been attacking her since she's run for state legislative office to Congress. So I imagine this election will not stop-- one election will not stop candidates from using these type of attacks, unfortunately.

**NINA MOINI:** And we know in this instance of this midterm, there was this blue wave that people hadn't seen anything like it in recent history. Voters, of course, reelected Congresswoman Ilhan Omar to a fifth term. Several state lawmakers, we mentioned, were elected. A first Somali Minnesota legislator from St. Cloud, which has a big population of Somali Minnesotans. So with that in mind, how much of the results of the election were a rebuke of this type of messaging, versus voters just being interested in other issues? The bills are too high. My gas prices are too high.

**MICHAEL MINTA:** Yeah. It's hard to say. I do think there is a segment of the population that are repulsed by these line of attacks. But a lot of times when economic conditions get so bad, people are willing to try other things. And so are they voting against Trump because of the tactics and the immigration raids here in the Twin Cities, or is it just because of economic--

Right now, I think the economic conditions probably are the biggest motivating factor right now, and the fatigue with the Trump fatigue and their tactics of going too far. I think we can say here, Republicans tried to position this election as a referendum on the Walz administration and tried to tie all Democrats to what they call Somali fraud. Again, these implicit racial appeals.

And what we know about in political science research is the way to really make people understand that these are racist appeals, that you have to call them out and say, this is explicitly racial. But I've looked and I haven't really seen many groups actually call out these political ads and these line of attacks here in Minnesota. And so that's somewhat unfortunate. Some of the groups that we think about, some of the civil rights groups we think of, like the NAACP, the Urban League, they really haven't gone on record-- at least I haven't seen it yet. It might be out there-- of criticizing that.

And so taking advantage of some of these divisions within the Black community in order to make these attacks where many Black Americans may not see themselves or their fate related to Somalis. So this line of attack has been effective. And again, I anticipate it will be used again. And I would like to think that we have moved beyond just this. It's not just purely an economic issue that people are rejecting this type of politics. But again, I think it's going to take more than one election for parties to change their strategies on using these type of attacks.

**NINA MOINI:** Do you think that in the past 10 years or so, that these types of attacks have become worse, more common, or normalized? Because you think of so much conflict throughout history and other groups that may have been new to the country or scapegoated, or used to create fear and you wonder about how this moment compares to that. I think one of the things we saw from a lot of politicians here in Minnesota is they're not using the blatantly hateful rhetoric that President Donald Trump uses.

But they're talking around some issues and naming people. Some of the just facts that we have here is from the Feeding Our Future meal program, which we talked about in the last segment too. There have been 80 to 81 defendants, 62 pleaded guilty. The vast majority are East African. So not just from-- not of Somali heritage only. This is from Matt Sepic, our reporter who's been following this for a long time. So that's 100 people or so out of 100,000. So what are we seeing unfold right now, and how does it compare to other points in history?

**MICHAEL MINTA:** Well, again, like you said, the scapegoating of immigrants and using it to try to explain why we have bad economic conditions. You lost your job because an immigrant came in and took your job, that we have to worry about this invasion. And what we're seeing right now, which is very interesting, I mean, throughout history, this type of nativism has been used to try to scare people against immigrants, whether they're white immigrants coming from Europe or Black and Brown coming from Latin America these lines of attacks have been used.

But what we've seen in political science, we thought that this is-- it faded away, that it's not the mainstream anymore, that usually you see these nationalist groups, radical groups making these line of attacks against groups that most people in the mainstream are saying unacceptable. But I think when Donald Trump ran in 2016, his embrace of many of these white nationalist groups have really brought this type of rhetoric back into the mainstream.

And so really most of research has really thought that we've moved away from that, but the president has brought it back with his Muslim ban. Then they had to change it when it struck down saying, no, you can't discriminate against religion. And they said, OK, it's just certain countries that are being banned. I think the president and the Make America Great, or the MAGA, have used this because they see as a strategy in order to mobilize whites or-- and not just whites, but people who are in the country, even Blacks, to say, hey, it's us against them.

You're losing your jobs, so we need to do something to keep them out. And the whole focus on the border. And again, really the focus on South of the border and not Canada, because that is part of our border, really brings this type of thing, you need-- it's us against them. They're not like us. And those type of attacks are not fair. And then, like you said, Feeding Our Future. The ringleader of Feeding Our Future is a white woman, but you saw very few ads where attack of a white woman.

And also, if you're talking about crime, about Somali gangs, like I said, I was at the Eden Prairie football game, watching it there where it was evacuated, and it's a very unfortunate event that happened. But by no means is violence just to the Somali community. And so not focusing on other things, like the annunciation shooting or also the guy that came and shot the state legislators.

**NINA MOINI:** Michael.

**MICHAEL MINTA:** Those things were not put in ads. Oh, sorry.

**NINA MOINI:** No, no, no, that's OK. I just-- we only have a minute or so left and I really want to get this in. It does relate to what you're talking about. You're talking about representations of different racial and ethnic identities, but there were a lot of candidates who won by leaning into who they are. So what did you notice about candidates representing their own racial and ethnic identities in their campaigns? Like, what was different, or what worked this time? Oh, Michael. Do we have Michael? OK.

Unfortunately, we don't have Michael here. That was a question we hoped to learn the answer for, but it looks like we lost his call. So our thanks to Michael Minta, a professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. We'll hope to have him back again soon.