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In Pennsylvania, Black voters' concerns go beyond Fetterman gun incident

The lieutenant governor pulled a shotgun on an unarmed Black man in 2013. But Black leaders, as well as his Black opponent in the Senate race, say that's far from the only thing on voters' minds.



Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman speaks at a news conference on criminal justice at the Capitol in Harrisburg on April 4. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

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ALLENTOWN, PA.—John Fetterman thought he heard shots. It was 2013, and the man who is now Pennsylvania’s lieutenant governor and the front-runner for the Democratic nomination for Senate was mayor of Braddock, a borough in the Pittsburgh suburbs. He saw a person running near where he had heard the gunfire—he couldn’t tell the individual’s race, he maintains, because they were so bundled up. After calling the police, he decided to follow. He had his own shotgun with him.

When Braddock law enforcement arrived, they found Fetterman with the individual, who turned out to be an unarmed Black jogger. He was upset and accused Fetterman of pointing the weapon at him, an allegation Fetterman has denied.

As the Senate primary enters its final stretch, the incident has become central to his opponents' efforts to take Fetterman down, with adversaries highlighting the racial component. But despite some concerns from Black Pennsylvanians, the attacks haven't yet stuck.

That didn't stop Rep. Conor Lamb from hitting him on the incident at last weekend's [debate](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2022/09/29/the-star-of-the-show-doesnt-show-at-pennsylvania-senate-debate/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-energy-environment%3Athe-star-of-the-show-doesnt-show-at-pennsylvania-senate-debate%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Aenergy-environment&utm_term=.811111111111) ([/s/717070/the-star-of-the-show-doesnt-show-at-pennsylvania-senate-debate/?unlock=PFXRRNNQFFOBM268](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2022/09/29/the-star-of-the-show-doesnt-show-at-pennsylvania-senate-debate/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-energy-environment%3Athe-star-of-the-show-doesnt-show-at-pennsylvania-senate-debate%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Aenergy-environment&utm_term=.811111111111)) [here](#).

“Given everything that’s gone on in this country, that is fatal to his campaign,” Lamb said.

Last spring, The Collective PAC, which works to build Black political power and endorsed state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta in the Senate race, ran digital and radio [ads](https://www.politicspa.com/dem-pac-hits-fetterman-on-2013-gun-incident/97969/) (<https://www.politicspa.com/dem-pac-hits-fetterman-on-2013-gun-incident/97969/>) that referenced the incident. Asked last week if The Collective planned to take any more action before the primary, founder and president Quentin James said, “We're discussing that right now.”

Lamb may not be the attack's most effective messenger. In a state where Black voters have in the past [pushed](https://www.ydr.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/03/14/black-pa-pennsylvania-voters-helped-biden-win-what-they-want-2022/9373906002/) (<https://www.ydr.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/03/14/black-pa-pennsylvania-voters-helped-biden-win-what-they-want-2022/9373906002/>), Democratic politicians over the edge in close races, some say their interests are being overlooked this campaign season.

“Black voters I’ve spoken to feel that they have largely been taken for granted this cycle,” said Joe Hill, who served as deputy campaign manager and political director for Gov. Tom Wolf in 2018, in a statement to *National Journal*. “A few photo ops with elected officials and church visits isn’t enough.”

Mustafa Rashed, the president and CEO of Philadelphia-based consulting firm Bellevue Strategies, largely agreed with Hill’s assessment.

“I’d like to hear them use their platform to talk about enshrining voting rights for African Americans in this country.” he said.

Asked by *National Journal* what he was doing to reach Black voters, Lamb replied: “Showing up. Taking every meeting I can get. Visiting every church I can get. We did an enormous candidate forum with the Black churches in Philadelphia, and after that I really found a lot more people wanted to meet me.

“The needs of the Black community, whether in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh or anywhere in between, are my highest priority,” he continued. “Voting rights is my highest priority. Stopping gun violence, reducing it, is my highest priority.”

Hill said white liberals have a tendency to assume Black people care about a narrow set of issues, like criminal justice and the social safety net, overlooking the fact that Black voters care about the same issues as all Americans.

‘John doesn’t have to be racist to be wrong.’

“I think Malcolm Kenyatta has largely represented an exception to that rule,” Hill said. “He’s resonated with a broad section of constituencies in every corner of the state but hasn’t had the resources to maximize his impact or draw contrasts with the rest of the field, which happens with Black candidates far too often.”

Kenyatta also called out Fetterman for the 2013 incident.

“John had nine years to not just apologize for taking an illegally loaded shotgun, chasing down the first person he saw ... but to understand why that was so dangerous,” Kenyatta said at the debate. “I’m a Black man in this country, and I have a bunch of moments that come to my mind right now.”

He named Trayvon Martin, the Black 17-year-old shot and killed by a member of a neighborhood watch; Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black jogger shot and killed after being tailed by his killers, who said they thought he was a burglar; and Kyle Rittenhouse, the white 17-year-old who fatally shot two people amid protests against police violence.

“So often as we have discussed this issue, it has all come down to whether John knew the jogger was Black,” Kenyatta said. “It doesn’t matter the color of the skin of the jogger. John doesn’t have to be racist to be wrong.”

Black sources who spoke to *National Journal* echoed that perspective. They don’t necessarily see the incident as disqualifying, nor do they consider it the most important facet of Fetterman’s candidacy. But they do wish he had apologized and acknowledged the risks of taking the law into his own hands.

“While we’ll never know what was in John’s heart, it seems to be a risky and unnecessary thing to do,” Rashed said. “I run outside a lot, and I think how terrified I’d be if a six-foot-eight guy pulled a gun on me. If someone got out of their privately owned vehicle and pulled a shotgun on me, I would think I was going to die.

“Whether or not [he] thought the runner was African American, is that the right strategy?” Rashed asked.

Mayor on call

As mayor, Fetterman regularly took on extra responsibility in crises.

“John, in essence, was on-call for 24 hours, 7 days a week,” said Braddock social worker Lisa Freeman, who is Black, in a Fetterman campaign [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fG_dyKqb-g) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fG_dyKqb-g) posted in February. “When a fire broke out, you would see John, on the fire truck or behind it. When there was a shooting, John was on that call. When there was a car accident, John was at that accident. You could see John directing traffic.”

The inclination to show up in moments of turmoil has been apparent even this year. In January, journalists reported that a scheduling conflict would prevent Fetterman from meeting President Biden when he visited Pittsburgh. But that day, a bridge collapsed, and Fetterman was at the president’s side surveying the rubble.

Ten days earlier, Fetterman had missed a forum with Black church leaders in Philadelphia, saying he had to preside over the state Senate. Some [slammed](https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/john-fetterman-2022-senate-race-black-clergy-20220125.html) (<https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/john-fetterman-2022-senate-race-black-clergy-20220125.html>) him, suggesting he was dodging questions.

“He very much wished [he] could be there, and he was happy to meet with members of the clergy at a few different events in the days and weeks after the forum to speak directly,” said Fetterman spokesperson Joe Calvello in a statement.

Fetterman has held private meetings with Black Philadelphia clergy, ward leaders, and other elected officials, as well as some community [roundtables](https://twitter.com/JohnFetterman/status/1504990412628496385/photo/1) (<https://twitter.com/JohnFetterman/status/1504990412628496385/photo/1>), even as he’s become known for drawing crowds in heavily white counties that backed Donald Trump.

“In terms of Fetterman, I’ve heard some Black voters express an interest in his potential to connect with Trump Democrats in more rural parts of the state,” Hill said. “Conor is straight out of central-casting for a senator from

Pennsylvania, and has made inroads to the Philadelphia political establishment in a way that neither John nor Malcolm have.”

Lamb’s supporters include former Philadelphia Mayor John Street and his son, state party vice chair Sharif Street, as well as Ryan Boyer, the first Black leader of the Building Trades Council. Given that Kenyatta is Black, however, Democratic strategists say Black voters likely gravitate toward him first.

Adrienne Bell, the executive director of Brand New Congress, said Kenyatta’s lived experience seeing eviction notices and working for \$7.25 an hour sets him apart. [Polling](https://www.scribd.com/document/548316380/Kenyatta-Viability-Survey-FQ-12-17-21?secret_password=s5TSc4r43nKQj797eTUW) (https://www.scribd.com/document/548316380/Kenyatta-Viability-Survey-FQ-12-17-21?secret_password=s5TSc4r43nKQj797eTUW) from Kenyatta’s campaign conducted in December showed him with a whopping 71 percent support among Black voters.



📷 State Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File) ASSOCIATED PRESS

White candidates the norm in statewide races

Nonetheless, some have written off his campaign because he has raised less money than his opponents. For his part, Kenyatta has acknowledged doubt—which he says is unfounded—about whether Pennsylvanians will vote for a gay Black man. The Keystone State has never elected a nonwhite senator, and the occupants of its statewide offices have remained almost entirely white, too.

Meanwhile, Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Chair Gary Peters maintains that the committee won't weigh in as long as it has a Democrat who is electable in November.

“Certainly that’s what we have in Pennsylvania, particularly with the top two candidates,” he said in an interview with [Politico](https://www.politico.com/news/2022/04/06/dems-frontrunner-fetterman-pennsylvania-00023543)

(<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/04/06/dems-frontrunner-fetterman-pennsylvania-00023543>).

last week, referring to Fetterman and Lamb.

“We haven’t issued endorsements in any challenger races yet, but we are not taking anything off the table,” said DSCC spokesperson Nora Keefe in a statement. “We’re keeping open lines of communications with all of the candidates, assessing campaigns, and holding the Republicans accountable while we build the infrastructure our nominee will need to win the general election.”

Pennsylvania’s Democratic coordinated campaign already has staff on the ground in Black communities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, while the DSCC has staff focused on Black outreach.

“I think we’re going to have a challenge, if we pick wrong, to energize the base of our party,” Kenyatta said in an interview with *National Journal*. “I think it’s a mistake for us to always wait until the end of the campaign to talk about the fact that turnout among young voters and Black voters is looking shaky. And this has been something we’ve seen time and again.”

Evoking a different sort of electability, Kenyatta suggested this week that Republicans will easily attack Fetterman on the 2013 incident. Rashed said such attacks could depress Black turnout in November.

The Collective commissioned polling last May which oversampled Black voters. After hearing criticism about the incident, 35 percent of Black respondents said they'd be less likely to vote in the general election if Fetterman became the nominee. The race has changed dramatically since then, with Lamb, as well as Republican front-runners David McCormick and Mehmet Oz, jumping in. But James said he thinks the finding still holds true.

“This will be used against all of us should he become a nominee,” James said. “If Pennsylvania voters want that, then that's a pill we have to swallow.”

Kenyatta's December polling (which also offers only limited perspective, especially given that Val Arkoosh since dropped her bid) found that when respondents were read statements about the candidates' perceived vulnerabilities—Kenyatta's inexperience and identity, and the 2013 Fetterman incident—Kenyatta rocketed into a tie with Fetterman, aided by rising support from Black voters.

Christopher Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion, said the small cohorts of Black voters included in public polls makes it difficult to fully understand their perspectives. But if there's little quantitative data available, the qualitative data is mixed. Insiders say Pennsylvanians are just tuning into the primary, but many think Fetterman has the nomination locked up. In any case, they agree that voters are not as informed about the 2013 incident as a year of tough media coverage might imply.

Last week, Fetterman Zoomed into a candidate [forum](#)

(<https://www.facebook.com/100064628172214/videos/704639704306021>), hosted by the Liberty City LGBT Democratic Club in Philadelphia. His internet seemed spotty, but with organizers holding two mics to a laptop, he acknowledged Kenyatta's experience as a gay man, then discussed his own allyship. When a moderator asked him about the 2013 incident, he started to respond, but his Zoom connection began to break up. Then it cut out entirely. A member of the club told *National Journal* that multiple people asked afterward what the incident was. Those attendees, politically minded enough to come out on a Tuesday night, didn't know anything about it.

Ready for prime time?

That's likely to change later this month, when the candidates will share a debate stage for the first time (Fetterman skipped the first debate). When Fetterman has previously addressed the incident, he has often pointed to the support he's received in Braddock. In an era when Black and white Americans often reside in segregated neighborhoods, he still lives in the predominantly Black borough. He won reelection to the mayor's office twice. He has the endorsements of the current mayor and two Black council members. Even the jogger he stopped, since imprisoned for an unrelated crime, [supports](#)

(<https://www.inquirer.com/news/senate-john-fetterman-2013-shotgun-black-jogger-confrontation-20210401.html>) his Senate bid.

Still, not all of Fetterman's neighbors are his biggest fans. Chardaé Jones, who was appointed mayor after Fetterman, said she lived next door to him for two-and-a-half years and they never had a conversation. Last spring, she endorsed Kenyatta, [saying](#) (<https://www.inquirer.com/news/braddock-mayor-endorses-malcolm-kenyatta-senate-john-fetterman-20210331.html>) she related to his story. She hadn't known him

until he called her to discuss their shared concerns about fracking. Her stated criticisms of the former mayor had less to do with the 2013 incident than with her perception that he could have done more for the community.

When it comes to what he delivered for Braddock, Fetterman often focuses on his commitment to ending gun violence. It was what originally drove him to run for office; when he was teaching, two of his students had been shot and killed.

“One of his proudest achievements is going five-and-a-half years without a loss of life due to gun violence in Braddock,” Calvello said.

Fetterman went on to create jobs for Braddock’s primarily Black residents. He worked with the police chief to institute a community-policing model. Now, as chair of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, he has made it easier to apply for clemency and encouraged the governor to issue more pardons. Doing so carries political risk—the National Republican Senatorial Committee has already [hit](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=453570519785538) (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=453570519785538>) him on the issue—but has helped many of the Black Pennsylvanians disproportionately impacted by the criminal-justice system.

Will a decade-old incident outweigh all that?

“Black voters aren’t a monolith,” Hill said. “But at least in my experience, they tend to be a lot more concerned with the candidate’s politics and stances on the issues than their past mistakes.”