

POLITICS

Handpicked? Too little support? Behind-the-scenes look at Attica Scott vs. Morgan McGarvey



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When U.S. Rep. John Yarmuth chose to retire from Congress, many expected a crowded free-for-all as Democrats battled to succeed him — but that didn't happen.

New details offer a window into what led up to Yarmuth's retirement announcement and Kentucky Senate Minority Leader Morgan McGarvey's campaign launch less than 10 minutes later. The Courier Journal examined how that, and other factors, shaped the race.

Yarmuth — who called McGarvey before he decided to retire to ask if he'd run for his job — recently said he worried state Rep. Attica Scott, the only other Democrat seeking his seat, wouldn't be able to win broad support from Black voters and keep Kentucky's super-Democratic 3rd Congressional District from flipping to GOP control.

That concern was sparked, in part, Yarmuth revealed, by the support he got from Tamika Palmer, Breonna Taylor's mother, after Scott challenged him for the office last summer.

Who is Attica Scott?: What to know about John Yarmuth's would-be successor

Who is Morgan McGarvey?: What to know about John Yarmuth's would-be successor

Scott maintains she has a diverse coalition of supporters, telling The Courier Journal: "I'm grateful to have the broad support of white voters and Black voters and Latinx voters and Asian voters and Indigenous voters..."

Scott and McGarvey are both duPont Manual High School grads and share progressive views on many issues, but their backgrounds are pretty different.

Scott grew up in the Beecher Terrace housing complex and came up through the social justice ranks as an activist who has clashed with party leaders.

McGarvey, who grew up in the wealthy Anchorage suburb, is an attorney who has become a trusted liberal voice in the party's leadership and raked in endorsements from Democratic officials.

Here's a deep dive into how the Democrats' primary to succeed Yarmuth has unfolded, including:

- Yarmuth's talks with Scott and McGarvey before his retirement announcement;
- How McGarvey launched his campaign so fast, and if that had a chilling effect on prospective candidates;

- New details on Palmer's lack of support for Scott and why she called Scott a "fraud" last year;

- What political experts think of Yarmuth's concerns about Scott's electability.

What led up to Yarmuth's big decision?

More than six months before Yarmuth's October retirement stunned Louisville, Scott called the congressman.

Yarmuth said she told him she wanted to run for the 3rd District but not if he was going to run for reelection. He told her he wasn't sure about 2022, but said he wasn't looking to run in 2024.

But by May 2021, Scott had publicly confirmed she was considering a bid for Congress. That July, she got into the race.

During a recent Louisville Forum event, Yarmuth said Scott "lied to me and decided to challenge me anyway."

Asked about that, Scott told The Courier Journal: "Sounds like gossip to me. That he's taken a one-on-one, personal conversation that we had and turned it into something inflammatory."

Palmer — who has advocated for justice and policy changes since Louisville police shot and killed her daughter, Breonna Taylor, in 2020 — pledged her support for Yarmuth the same day Scott kicked off her campaign.

"That gave me a lot of concern," Yarmuth said. So did what he heard from Black residents after Scott's campaign launch.

"I remember one weekend I was down at Shawnee Park. There was a vaccination event that was put on by NAACP, and ... one Black citizen after another came up to me and said: 'Don't you worry. We've got your back. We're not for her,'" he told The Courier Journal.

Late last summer, Yarmuth rang McGarvey.

"I had real concerns about whether (Scott) could successfully defend the seat," he said. "And so that's when I called Morgan and asked ... If I didn't run, would he?"

McGarvey said he needed to think about it and talk with his wife, Chris.

“We got back together in mid-September and I told him ... when he retired, I would run for his seat. That’s when he told me it was very likely he wouldn’t run this year.”

Yarmuth didn’t reach out to any other potential candidates.

"I always considered the possibility that my son (Aaron Yarmuth) would run," he said. “But beyond that ... people had talked about his (McGarvey's) desire to run for that seat eventually, so he was really the only one I knew who for sure had an interest in it.”

On Oct. 11, Yarmuth gave McGarvey a heads-up: He'd announce his retirement the next day.

Cue the mad scramble.

McGarvey already had a website, social media accounts and an easily updated logo as a state lawmaker, so he was able to sketch out a campaign launch in time for Yarmuth's retirement bombshell.

Within 10 minutes of Yarmuth's big reveal, McGarvey jumped into the race.

A day later, he said he'd raised over \$160,000 and scored endorsements from 18 current and former public officials.

“Look, I expected this to be a crowded primary, so I quickly got in the race and immediately started calling people to get support and put myself in a position to win,” McGarvey told The Courier Journal.

Several people publicly said they might run, including Aaron Yarmuth. Yet, by the Jan. 25 candidate filing deadline, no other Democrats decided to duke it out with McGarvey and Scott.

Did McGarvey's quick start ward off other would-be candidates?

It depends on whom you ask, but Yarmuth thinks so.

“I think Morgan did an amazing job of coalescing a lot of support in a very quick period of time,” Yarmuth, who endorsed McGarvey in February, said. “He scared a lot of people off, right off the bat.”

He thinks Louisville's incumbent-free mayoral race also attracted candidates who might have run for Congress.

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Louisville Metro Council President David James likewise thinks McGarvey's "well-executed" campaign rollout had a chilling effect.

"I mean, he called me within an hour of his announcement asking: ‘Can you help me?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely. I’ve been talking about this for years.’”

Khalilah Collins, a social justice practitioner and friend and supporter of Scott, thinks McGarvey's quick start dampened potential candidates' excitement about Yarmuth's open seat.

“People didn’t get a chance to even think about it,” she said. “It definitely felt coordinated, and so why would I jump in that race if I felt like the decision was already made?”

Regarding McGarvey's lightning-fast announcement, Collins said: “That feels like handpicked to me.”

Yarmuth said he announced his retirement in October to give people, including his son, time to consider running.

“If I had wanted to try to grease the skids for Morgan, I would’ve waited until Jan. 15,” he told The Courier Journal. “I just wanted to make sure that there was going to be a candidate that I was confident could win the general election.”

Democratic state Rep. Josie Raymond looked at a lot of factors when she thought about pursuing Yarmuth's seat.

She didn't expect to have to make that call so soon, though.

"The rumor was that Congressman Yarmuth was going to retire in 2024," she said. "And so I think many people were orienting thinking about a run toward 2024, and Morgan and Attica were just clearly ready a lot sooner."

Few people can raise \$100,000 in a month, let alone a day, she said. She believes there was an opportunity for another voice in this primary, but no one could lay the groundwork for a campaign before McGarvey leapt to a big financial lead.

Concerning Yarmuth talking to McGarvey in advance about his retirement, Raymond said: “I will say that I don't think Rep. Yarmuth had any obligation to operate differently. But I do worry that sometimes close, genuine relationships between similar types of people ... I think those can perpetuate patterns of leadership, and it can come across as exclusive or insider dealing.

“And that perception can discourage the participation, and potentially hamper the opportunity of, people of color, Black candidates, women, young people and low- and middle-class people.”

Emerge Kentucky founder Jennifer Moore decided not to go for Yarmuth’s seat for one reason: Timing.

This wasn't the right moment to step away from her law firm.

“My decision ... had zero to do with who was in the race or when someone got into the race.” she said.

Moore was surprised more candidates didn't sign up but expects the difficulties people faced since 2020 affected their decisions.

Democrats' list of primary candidates is short but doesn't lack for quality, she noted, saying: "Whether it's Sen. McGarvey or Rep. Scott, I have no doubt that this seat will stay in Democratic hands."

Why did Breonna Taylor's mother call Scott a 'fraud'?

"I look forward to supporting John Yarmuth in his campaign for re-election to U.S. Congress, and as he continues to push for legislation supporting police reform," the mother of Breonna Taylor, Tamika Palmer, said the day Scott announced her congressional bid in July 2021.

Scott's campaign website initially featured a picture of her standing by a portrait of Taylor. That soon got taken down.

It wasn't the first visible tension between the two women.

Palmer previously called Scott a "fraud" in a personal Facebook post. In April 2021, she said she couldn't "speak to it right now," but there was a reasoning behind it.

In a July 2021 interview with USA TODAY, Palmer gave that reason: She said Scott used her daughter's name for a bill she proposed without consulting with her first, and stood in the way of Senate Bill 4 — the law that largely banned no-knock warrants in Kentucky — being named in honor of Taylor, whom Louisville police killed after securing a no-knock search warrant.

During last year's legislative session, Scott advocated for her bill, named "Breonna's Law," prohibiting all no-knock warrants. Senate President Robert Stivers led SB 4's development, which mostly banned the warrants, but with limited exceptions.

Scott called for Stivers to work on her proposal instead and questioned why SB 4 wasn't named after Taylor.

"Why erase the work of a Black woman legislator who's been working on Breonna's Law?" she asked at the time. "Why erase Breonna Taylor? You're not even calling it Breonna's Law."

After lawmakers passed Stivers' bill, Palmer joined Gov. Andy Beshear as he signed it into law.

Palmer told USA TODAY last year: "The thing of it is ... Attica knew how important this thing was to get the bill going, period, for me. And for you to get upset because you didn't get your way on this thing and aggressively say 'we're not using Breonna's name' — or whatever the case, you know, whatever decision she made — was disrespectful to not come to me first. You knew how to reach me. You knew how to try to even inform me of any of those things, and you chose not to. And then when I wanted to talk to you about it, you chose not to talk to me at that time, as well."

Her attorney, Lonita Baker, told USA TODAY: "She (Scott) never tried to reach out to Tamika Palmer. ... She just kind of took Breonna Taylor's name and (used) it the way that she wanted to. And it came to a head when it came to the no-knock legislation that was passed in Frankfort.

"And when we had reached out to people in the House to ask, you know, if they would amend it (SB 4) to name it after Breonna, we learned that the reason that it was not was because Rep. Scott stopped it."

Scott said she doesn't have the power, as a Black woman and Democrat in the Republican-run legislature, to stop Stivers from naming his legislation whatever he wants.

"I've been there six years and never been able to block the president of the Senate from doing whatever he wanted to do with his bill," she said.

"It's sad that people are using such a devastating time in our city for the purpose of scoring political points," Scott added.

Through a spokesperson, Stivers told The Courier Journal SB 4 was a fantastic, needed piece of legislation they were able to pass. He had nothing else to add.

Kentucky's legislative rules don't prevent bills from sharing a name, or "short title," Legislative Research Commission spokesman Mike Wynn said. He's unaware of any way a legislator can unilaterally block a properly filed amendment to change a bill's title.

While Palmer's support for him gave Yarmuth doubts about Scott's campaign, the congressman also pointed to endorsements McGarvey got from local Black leaders, including the Rev. Kevin Cosby of Simmons College of Kentucky.

Cosby pointed to McGarvey's sponsorship of a 2021 law that let Simmons have a teacher accreditation program and expanded opportunities for its students as "transformative for Simmons College and for Black higher education."

He endorsed McGarvey because he wants him to win.

"And it is not an anti-Attica Scott vote as much as it is a vote for somebody who I have been working with for some time that yielded positive results for our community," he said.

Yarmuth doubts many Black voters would pick a Republican over Scott.

"But there's a question of enthusiasm and turnout," he said.

Scott, who got endorsements from groups like Sunrise Louisville and Showing Up for Racial Justice, said she's getting support from people whose names aren't heard.

"That is a deep honor," she said. "Because I know where I come from, growing up in the projects of Beecher Terrace, people didn't care about whether or not folks in

Beecher Terrace were voting for a candidate or not."

Is Yarmuth right to worry about Scott's electability?

Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, the Racial Healing Project's founder, said it's laughable for people outside of the Black community to decide what constitutes a unifying voice for that community.

"(Scott's) somebody who works authentically — not somebody who's perfect, but who is a person who has shown up" and taken risks.

"It's not that I dislike McGarvey," said Abdur-Rahman, who donated to Scott's campaign. "But I think as a community, for the past several years, Democrats have been sort of ... virtue-signaling that they want to support Black communities and support Black women," particularly in the context of Taylor's death.

The Democratic Party is mostly performative, he said, citing the inability to galvanize around a Black woman seeking a substantial office in Louisville as an example. (Notably, state Rep. Keturah Herron, a Black woman, got the Louisville Democratic Party's support for her recent Kentucky House bid.)

Abdur-Rahman dismissed electability as a good rationale for supporting or dismissing a candidate. "And I do think that we need more sort-of progressive and courageous politics at the state level, and we're not going to get there by ... some of this old-hat, sort-of archaic political analysis about ostensible electability," he said.

Louisville NAACP President Raoul Cunningham expects ballots cast by Black Democrats will be pretty split between McGarvey and Scott. (The NAACP doesn't do endorsements.)

"I think that if it were a general election, she (Scott) would carry the Black community," he said. "But in a primary ... I think Sen. McGarvey will have a much larger financial resource basis to campaign heavily in the Black community."

You can't predict if Black voters will support someone by talking to a few people, even if they're prominent residents, University of Louisville political science professor Dewey Clayton said.

Still, McGarvey's endorsements from Black leaders matter, he said. Cosby is especially influential.

"Who hasn't heard of Kevin Cosby?" Clayton asked.

Of course, Yarmuth's endorsement of McGarvey is biggest of all, he said.

"Yarmuth is giving his blessing, and how huge is that?"

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