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## Your View: Targeting Fetterman's stroke is an ableist red herring

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Pennsylvania Democratic Senate candidate Lt. Gov. John Fetterman and Republican candidate Dr. Mehmet Oz shake hands prior to their televised debate on Tuesday, October 25, 2022 in Harrisburg. (Greg Nash/Greg Nash/The Hill/Nexstar)

Republicans had a field day after the Oct. 25 debate between U.S. Senate candidates John Fetterman and Mehmet Oz. Major criticisms of the way Fetterman communicated during the debate stem directly from the aftermath of the stroke he suffered in May.

Now major news organizations such as the New York Times (“Fetterman, Showing Stroke Effects, Battles Oz in Hostile Senate Debate”), USA Today (“After Fetterman, Dr. Oz debate, we need to talk about Lt. Gov.’s health”) and the New York Post (“John Fetterman debate was painful and shameful — he is physically incapable of being a senator”) are running headlines

centering Fetterman's stroke as the key takeaway from the debate, insinuating he is unfit to serve as Pennsylvania's next senator.



Maggie Riegel (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Every criticism that stems from this focus on Fetterman's stroke is not only a red herring but an ableist one as well. The definition of a red herring is a logical fallacy that is used to mislead or distract from the argument in question.

Rather than criticize Fetterman's platform or history of serving as Pennsylvania's lieutenant governor, Republicans would rather target his disability instead. This is no surprise given the example set by former President Donald Trump, who publicly mocked news reporter Serge Kovalski in 2015 for his arthrogryposis, a congenital condition affecting the joints.

Additionally, the definition of ableism, according to the [Center for Disability Rights](#), is "a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or

psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other.”

Ableism is often covertly intertwined in our culture, but in the Republican targeting of Fetterman, it’s loud and obvious. Centering the aftermath of Fetterman’s stroke as the reason he is unfit to serve as our senator is no better than being a schoolyard bully who picks on the classmate for being in a wheelchair.

This is nothing new in American history, considering the Americans with Disabilities Act was only signed into law in 1990. Before then, it was still legal to discriminate against those with disabilities in education, employment, housing and transportation. Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt never disclosed to the American public that he required a wheelchair due to the effects of polio, concerned it might discredit his ability to serve as the nation’s leader. Despite serving in a wheelchair, he went on to be one of the most successful presidents in American history.

Yet during times of heightened political tensions, we seem to forget the most basic level of respect for those who may not walk or talk the same as us. A person’s disability does not define them or change their fundamental character, but we are quick to forget that when that person is running for public office. Ableism is not a concept to be taken lightly and the attack on Fetterman for his stroke should make us all ashamed of our collective lack of compassion.

In Fetterman’s role as lieutenant governor, he has consistently fought for immigration reform, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s reproductive freedoms and the average working class American. He is a lifelong native and public servant of Pennsylvania. Fetterman should neither be defined by his stroke nor discounted as the most legitimate candidate to serve our commonwealth and represent us in Washington. Regardless of how his stroke may have impacted his ability to communicate during Tuesday’s debate, it does not and should not factor into the kind of leader he is and the leader he will be for all Pennsylvanians. He has demonstrated the kind of determination and strength of character to overcome the challenges of his stroke and for that alone I would be proud to call him my senator.

I encourage all Pennsylvanian voters to look beyond an ableist gaze when they approach the voting booths this month.

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