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Republican Lawmakers Are Coming Around to the Idea of Police Body Cameras

The recent police shooting of Walter Scott has prompted a congressional hearing on the use of body cameras as a way to reduce officer malpractice.

By Eric Garcia

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The Senate Judiciary subcommittee has agreed to hold a hearing on body cameras for police officers, showing a willingness among some conservatives to consider monitoring law enforcement in the wake of a recent fatal police shooting of an unarmed black man earlier this month in South Carolina.

Republican Sen. Tim Scott on Wednesday sent a letter to Lindsey Graham, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism, and Chuck Grassley, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, requesting a hearing on the technology.

Graham, Scott's fellow Republican senator from South Carolina, said Thursday afternoon that he accepted the request.

"It's a great idea and I appreciate Tim for pushing it forward," Graham told the [Associated Press](#). "I look forward to scheduling a hearing on this important issue."

On April 4, Walter Scott [was fatally shot](#) by a police officer. The lone witness captured video of the shooting on a cell phone, evidence that officials say played a crucial role in the decision to fire the officer responsible and charge him with murder. The incident occurred in North Charleston, South Carolina, Tim Scott's hometown.

Police officer Michael Slager initially claimed that Walter Scott [took](#) his Taser. The video footage, however, shows Scott running away from the officer, with his back turned when he was shot.

Tim Scott said the importance of this evidence in the investigation of the shooting is "undeniable," and makes a case for the use of body cameras for cops. In his letter to Graham and Grassley, Scott pointed to a [study](#) that found that officers' use of force in interactions with civilians declined 60 percent and public complaints dropped by 90 percent when body cameras were used.

The hearing has yet to be scheduled, but its existence signals a growing openness by some conservatives toward the idea of greater police oversight. Earlier this year, Sen. Rand Paul, now a contender for the Republican presidential nomination, introduced [a bill](#) with Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz for a pilot program to help state and local police departments purchase body cameras.

While he has not explicitly supported police body cameras, Paul's Republican sometimes-sparring partner, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, [signed a bill](#) in September of last year in his state requiring new municipal-police patrol vehicles to be equipped with video cameras.

South Carolina's Republican Gov. Nikki Haley is [considering](#) buying more body cameras for cops around the state. The state's highway patrol already has 50 body cameras for its personnel.

Prospective Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson, who had previously [criticized](#) President Obama's response to the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, called this month's shooting in South Carolina [an "execution."](#)

Adam Bates, a policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, told *National Journal* that the footage of the South Carolina shooting was key to the investigation of what happened.

"What appears on that tape is so beyond the pale," he said.

Scott's request for a federal hearing on more oversight of local police forces—and Graham's warm embrace of it—somewhat challenges Republican orthodoxy, which is to usually defer to state and local governments on judicial matters. But Bates said there is a strong case for using body cameras on libertarian grounds that could make body cameras more palpable: Police interaction is likely to have a significant effect on a given American citizen and therefore should be closely monitored to ensure there's no government overreach. After all, that's the kind of approach small-government advocates would want to see with any government agency.