

OPINION

My opponent's refusal to debate hurts democracy

Voters deserve to hear from candidates and learn how they respond to tough questions.



Credit: Video

(The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

By Ashwin Ramaswami

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When I decided to run for the Georgia state Senate in District 48, I prepared myself for the challenge of going head-to-head with an incumbent state senator on ideas and policies. I believe that our democracy thrives on the strength of healthy debate. That's why I'm disappointed that my opponent, state Sen. Shawn Still, has refused to debate me.

In August, Still and I were invited to participate in our first debate, scheduled for Oct. 9. This debate wasn't just any event; it was part of a tradition upheld by Student Leadership Johns Creek, moderated and run by local high school students. Unfortunately, our debate was canceled because Still chose not to participate. This outcome is particularly disappointing considering that Still participated in 2022 but now, as an incumbent, no longer finds it a priority.

This incident is part of a broader pattern: Still has also declined to attend the Gwinnett NAACP’s “Meet the Candidate” forum in mid-October, where we were invited to address community concerns and discuss our visions for District 48. In fact, every single time we both have been invited by local groups to a debate or candidate forum, Still has declined to participate.



Credit: AP

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Debates are the bedrock of our democratic process. For voters, debates are a direct line to the candidates’ thoughts and values — a chance to see how well we understand the issues and whether we have the courage to stand by our proposals. The visibility of down-ballot candidates is already limited in a presidential election year. The debate in Johns Creek and the candidate forum in Gwinnett offered a rare, critical chance for voters to learn about where we stand — beyond campaign ads and talking points.

Still’s refusal to engage in a public debate is, in essence, a refusal to be accountable and a fundamental dereliction of duty of a public servant. How can voters trust that we are working on their behalf if we don’t have the willingness to stand up, answer questions and justify our policy decisions?

The debate was an opportunity to outline stark contrasts between our visions for the future of District 48. I believe in safeguarding access to reproductive health care, but Still **supports** Georgia’s abortion ban. I want to pass common sense gun safety laws to keep students safe from the next mass shooting, while Still has **promised** to oppose any gun safety laws, even reasonable ones. I support fully funding our public schools, while my opponent has **backed** measures that divert funding away from public education. And I have been vocal about my support for Medicaid expansion to provide health care to hundreds of thousands of Georgians — a move that Still has never expressed support for.

Further underscoring this lack of accountability is Mr. Still’s criminal **indictment** for his part in the fake elector scheme around the 2020 presidential election. The voters of District 48 deserve an explanation for why Still disregarded Georgia’s electoral vote outcome and went against leaders in his own party, such as Gov. Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger. But Still has refused to answer for his activity that has led to several felony charges against him.

Debates are not supposed to be comfortable “safe spaces.” The questions aren’t predictable, and that’s the point. Leadership is about answering tough questions under pressure. By refusing to debate, Still is sidestepping the challenges that come with defending his record and views — something all leaders should be prepared to do.

Throughout my campaign, I have made myself available to voters. I have knocked on countless doors, held town halls and met face-to-face with as many constituents as I can. I am willing to debate because I believe those who want to represent our community should be willing to do the hard work of answering directly to the people they wish to serve. The people of District 48 deserve more than talking points — they deserve a real discussion about the future of our district.

It's not too late for Still to participate in a debate. Our democracy works only when candidates are willing to stand up, speak out and engage with the voters they wish to serve. I am ready to have that conversation — because our community is worth it, and our future depends on it.

Ashwin Ramaswami is the Democratic candidate for Georgia state Senate in District 48.