

## A lack of debate | CSNY

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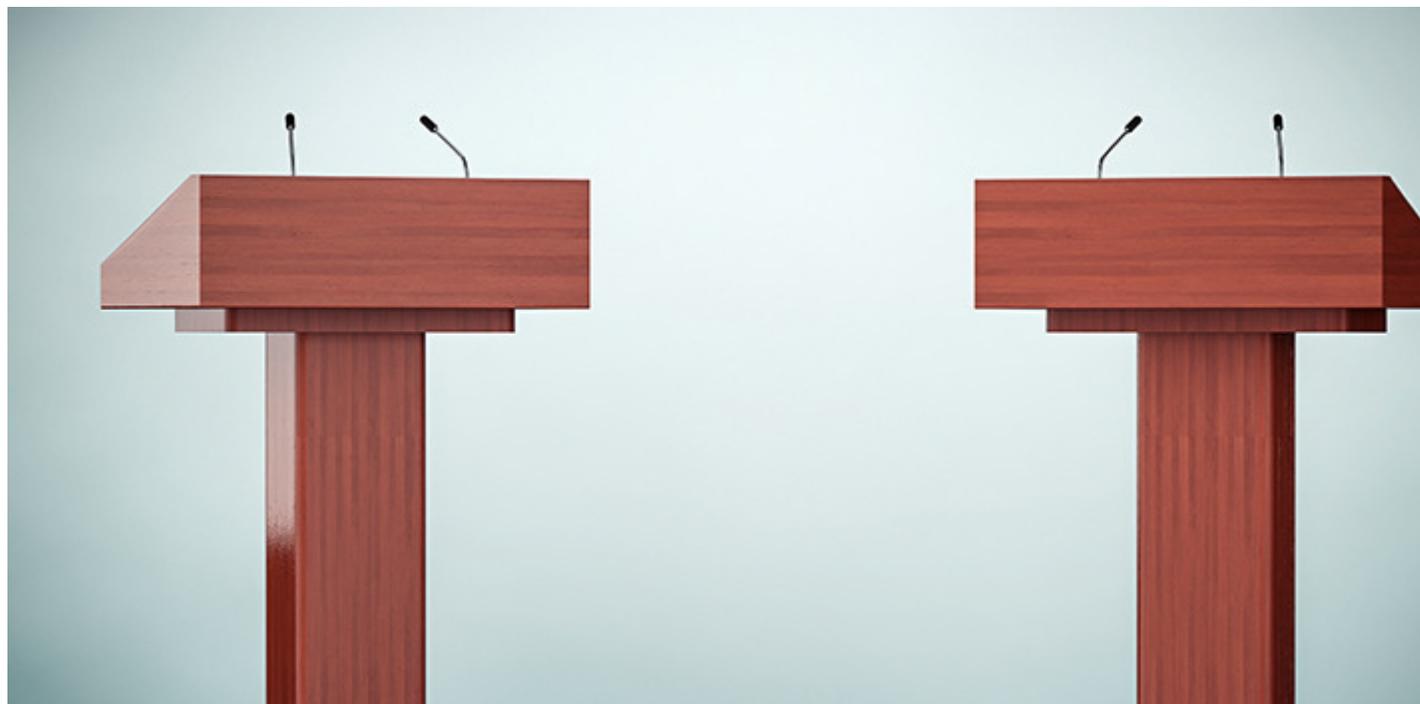


Photo illustration by Alex Law

Frontrunners are playing it safe by avoiding debates. It happens more often than you might think.

Debates between candidates for office have so long been a hallmark of the American election process that it's easy to forget no one is actually required to square off in front of the public. This year, some incumbents in both parties – including Gov. Andrew Cuomo – are taking advantage of that fact, so far declining to participate in debates against their challengers.

In addition to Cuomo, incumbents who have not yet agreed to official debates this year include Republican members of Congress Chris Collins – a Western New York representative who is under indictment and facing a close race against Democratic challenger Nate McMurray – and Lee Zeldin on Long Island. Zeldin did, however, [participate in a forum](#) discussing environmental issues with his Democratic opponent Perry Gershon.

Candidates in other statewide races [will debate](#), including New York City Public Advocate Letitia James and Keith Wofford who are vying for the open seat of the state attorney general's office. U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, too, [will face](#) Republican Chele Farley and state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli [already](#) took on challenger Jonathan Trichter.

While Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul debated challenger Jumaane Williams in the Democratic primary, there have been no announcements about a debate between Hochul and her opponent in the general election, Republican Julie Killian.

And though debates seem like the norm in New York campaigns, this isn't the first time that they

have gone missing in some pivotal races. In the 1994 gubernatorial race, Republican state Sen. George Pataki challenged then-Gov. Mario Cuomo, and despite [declining to show up](#) for a debate with Cuomo and the minor party candidates, still pulled off a victory. In the next election in 1998, Pataki [refused to debate](#) his opponents and won reelection.

“We’re not talking about something that’s been going on forever,” said Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. “The expectation in the electorate is simply based on the willing compliance of people running for office.”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who [leads](#) his Republican challenger, Marcus Molinaro, by 23 points in a Quinnipiac poll released Thursday, has not shown any signs that he’ll agree to debate Molinaro – or Libertarian Larry Sharpe, Green Howie Hawkins and Serve America Movement candidate Stephanie Miner, for that matter. Although Cuomo debated his general election rivals in [2010](#) and [2014](#), he hasn’t indicated he’ll do this same this year, despite pressure from some critics in both parties.

“The opponent is not Donald Trump, the opponent is Marc Molinaro,” Democratic City Councilman Ruben Diaz Sr. told the [New York Post](#). “Stop hiding! Show the people why you deserve a third term.”

Cuomo’s resistance to a debate should not be surprising, Benjamin said, as there’s rarely an advantage for incumbents. “Incumbents are well-known and they have stature, and they don’t want the alternative person to be regarded as equal,” he said. “It’s often the view that a debate is a kind of an equitable and neutral way of informing the public about alternatives, but from a politician’s point of view, it’s a risk-benefit calculation.”

Still, there are some advantages to debating for incumbents. An incumbent might make a strategic choice to debate for the sake of claiming moral high ground – “I don’t have to do this but I’m doing it for good government reasons,” Benjamin offers.

Unlike Cuomo, Collins holds a [slimmer lead](#) of just 3 points over McMurray, according to Quinnipiac. While Cuomo has had some some rough headlines pertaining to corruption charges against [some of his associates](#), Collins’ recent indictment for [insider trading](#) throws a bigger wrench into his reelection efforts.

To date, 1,354 people have signed a [MoveOn.org petition](#) for Collins to agree to a debate with McMurray. It’s possible, however, that Collins has calculated the risks of debate are higher than any possible reward. “He’s in a heavily Republican district, he’s a Republican incumbent, he has a good chance of losing, and he doesn’t want to elevate his opponent further,” Benjamin said.

While 2018 is not the first time candidates in New York and elsewhere have broken with tradition by refusing to debate, the spate of such refusals this year may reflect a trend in politics towards violating past bipartisan norms. Presidential candidates always released their tax returns, for example, until a certain New Yorker proved in 2016 that he could get away with not doing it.

Good-government advocates universally condemn Donald Trump’s unwillingness to give the public access to information about his potential personal financial conflicts of interest, but experts are less unanimous in their take on debates and whether the absence of them matters. While some may consider political debates to be integral to democracy, forcing opponents to discuss their policies and positions openly for the public, others suggest the practice doesn’t offer much in the first place. “I think debates aren’t really substantive,” Benjamin said. “I think they have to do with presentation and a kind of ancient Colosseum-like confrontation between gladiators. They appeal to the sporting instinct of political observers.”

Benjamin admits that his opinion may be the minority, but if the multitude of presidential debate-themed [drinking games](#) thought up by news outlets in 2016 are any indication, he's likely not alone in viewing debates as more entertainment than substance. "Maybe putting somebody in a stressful situation and expecting them to perform, maybe that's important," Benjamin said. "But I'm inclined to think it's more entertainment than anything else."