31 Florida Lawmakers Faced No Opposition

Lakeland's McKeel among those who faced no opponent in this election.

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TALLAHASSEE | For 31 incumbent lawmakers, today's election was over before it started.

Five senators and 26 representatives are walking into office with no opposition - some would argue in part because of the way the districts were drawn in previous reapportionments.

Among Polk County, incumbents only Rep. Seth McKeel, R-Lakeland, did not face opposition in his bid for re-election to House District 63.

But those safe districts could disappear, or be harder to draw, based on the results of voting on a pair of constitutional amendments on today's ballot that would change the way districts are drawn in the future.

Last session, Democrats held 14 of the 40 seats in the Senate and won't field challengers for three incumbents in the chamber, including incoming Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island.

Similarly, majority Republicans, who are looking this year to increase on their 26 seats in the upper chamber, will cede races to two Democratic senators, including presumptive Minority Leader Nan Rich, D-Weston.

In the House, where Republicans held a 76-44 majority last session, Democrats are not challenging 15 incumbents and Republicans will field no opposition for 11 sitting lawmakers.

In still other races, one of the two major parties is sitting the race out, but a Tea Party or independent candidate is in the race.

Many of the unopposed, especially in the House, are influential members of their parties.
The same is true of the Democrats.

On both sides of the aisle, many of the unopposed incumbents come from districts that are drawn, arguably, to produce no opposition, which has been a rallying cry for supporters of Amendments 5 and 6, dubbed the FairDistricts amendments.

The chairwoman of the campaign behind those amendments, Ellen Freiden, said recently the high number of incumbents facing no opposition is one of the main reasons she is pushing the FairDistricts proposal.

The amendment, if approved by at least 60 percent of Florida voters, would guide the 2012 round of redistricting.

The measures - one covering legislative districts and the other congressional - would require district-drawing, which must be done to reflect population shifts revealed in the Census, to not favor incumbent politicians or political parties.

"The purpose of Amendments of 5 and 6 is to create a situation where districts are not intentionally rigged so that incumbents don't get challenged," Freiden said.

Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner, who has researched the effect of incumbents running unopposed in previous years, agreed.

"It's gerrymandering. It's really not even that complicated," he said. "It's a product of term-limiting plus gerrymandering, which (causes) likely candidates to wait until (lawmakers) are term-limited out so they don't have to campaign against incumbents" in a district that heavily favors one party or the other.

Scores of political science research like Wagner's shows that incumbents are typically re-elected at high rates, even in years like this one where incumbents are not popular.

Wagner said that is because there are so many strong-leaning districts on both sides.

"The likelihood is that the one party won't field a candidate or won't field a good candidate," he said. "We've created huge number of non-competitive seats."

Wagner said the number of unopposed incumbents this year is a little lower than previous years, but he quickly added that it was higher than it should be.

"Think about how many you have running in a general election in a year that people don't like incumbents," he said.

"If anything, it should be zero. It shows how institutionalized it is," he said.

In a 2009 study, Wagner found an average of about 14 unopposed Democrats and about 24 Republicans between 1996 and 2006 in the House.
In the Senate, there have been about four Democratic seats and seven Republican seats on average unopposed during the last decade.

The numbers are smaller in the Senate in part because the Senate is smaller, and in part because only half of Senate seats are up every two years, while all House terms are for two years.

In addition to the 32 incumbents running unopposed, there are some newcomers who will walk into the Legislature with no opposition.

For example, Republican David Simmons, has already won Senate District 22 in central Florida because the Democrats don’t have a candidate.

And in still other seats, the incumbent, or in some cases a newcomer, has only token opposition.

They're not technically unopposed, because they face a write-in candidate.

But write-in candidates' names don't appear on the ballot and in modern times, none has ever been elected. Incumbent Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Valrico, is in that class.

Democrats fielded no opposition to Storms' defense of her Tampa-area seat, but there's a write-in candidate qualified in the race.

A non-incumbent in that position in the Senate is Rene Garcia, who technically faces opposition for Senate District 40, but his name will be the only one on the ballot.