One in four candidates running for a seat in the Florida Legislature is unopposed

BY KEITH LAING crline The News Service of Florida

Next Tuesday could be a long Election Night for the candidates for U.S Senate, governor and the Florida Cabinet, but for 32 incumbent lawmakers, the night will be over before it starts.

As lawmakers await the results of voting on a pair of constitutional amendments on Tuesday's ballot that would change the way their districts are drawn in the future, five senators and 27 representatives will walk into office with no opposition - some would argue in part because of the way the districts were drawn in previous reapportionments.

Last session, Democrats held just 14 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 16 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. Among them are Rep. Scott Plakon, R-Longwood, who sponsored a challenge to the federal health care law last session that was removed from the ballot by the Supreme Court, and Rep. John Legg, R-Port Richey, who sponsored the controversial bill to end teacher tenure and tie salaries to student gains.

The same is true of the Democrats. Among the unopposed members of the minority party are Democratic Leader Pro-Tem Geraldine Thompson and Rep. Marty Kiar, the ranking Democrat on the Pre K-12 Committee.

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 Thursday 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 very high rates, even in years like this one where incumbents are not very 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."

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 4 Democratic seats and 7 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.

The high water mark in that period was 1996, when there were 51 unopposed incumbents in the House.

In 2002, all 40 Senate seats were up for election because it was a redistricting year.
But even that year, nearly half of those seats, 18, didn't have a candidate from one party or the other..

In addition to the 32 incumbents running completely 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 challenger 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.

Below are the 32 candidates running completely unopposed this year in both chambers:

**SENATE REPUBLICANS**

Don Gaetz

Mike Haridopolos

Joe Negron

**SENATE DEMOCRATS**

Arthenia Joyner

Nan Rich

**HOUSE REPUBLICANS**

Matt Gaetz

Brad Drake

Janet Adkins

Mike Weinstein

Charles Van Zant
Ritch Workman
Steve Crisafulli
Scott Plakon
John Legg
Rich Glorioso
Seth McKeel
Paige Kreegel
Gary Aubuchon
Denise Grimsely
William Synder
Estaban Bovo

HOUSE DEMOCRATS
Alan Williams
Mia Jones
Charles Chestnut
Geraldine Thompson
Betty Reed
Perry Thurston
Marty Kiar
Elaine Schwartz
Oscar Braynon
Joe Gibbons
Richard Steinberg