

# For many Valley incumbents, election season means free pass to another term

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Vicki Crow was first elected in 2002 as Fresno County's Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector. She was re-elected without opposition in 2006 and 2010.

And now again, in 2014.

It's a familiar occurrence in Fresno County, where incumbents often get a free ride to another term.

This time around, it's not just Crow. Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims is unchallenged, as is County Clerk Brandi Orth and Fresno City Council Member Sal Quintero.

Sometimes, an officeholder will say it's a sign they're doing a good job. But more often than not, it's a case of political reality, experts say.

"It's very difficult to take out an incumbent unless there's a problem," said Susan Anderson, a former Fresno County supervisor. "It is especially true countywide. That is a lot of area to campaign in. You can't walk it, so you need money because you need media."

To make matters more difficult for a challenger, political donors are often hesitant to give the money needed to pay for television and radio commercials or to send out campaign mail.

"You don't want to just throw money at a race that doesn't have a good shot," Anderson said.

And, in the case of Mims and Crow, any challenger must meet special qualifications to even be a candidate.

A candidate seeking to oust Mims, for instance, would have to be a law enforcement professional who is registered to vote in Fresno County.

In Crow's case, there are several options, but it essentially narrows the field to either a certified public accountant, someone with a bachelor of arts degree in accounting or a professional internal auditor.

Taken together, it means not that many people can run for those seats.

"The pool of interested candidates is small for these types of races," said Fresno State political science professor Jeff Cummins.

In Clovis, it's to the point that the lack of City Council candidates has led to cancellation of the past two elections.

Such "free rides," as they are often called, are not good for democracy, experts said, because elected officials should have to stand before the people in what amounts to a job review that rank-and-file workers in both the private and public sectors have -- most likely on an annual basis.

The lack of challengers isn't just limited to nonpartisan city council or specialty county races.

Republicans this election cycle couldn't find an opponent for Assembly Member Henry T. Perea. The Fresno Democrat now won't have to spend a dime of his more than \$830,000 campaign war chest as he heads into his final term.

Instead, should Perea choose, he'll be able to farm out that cash to other Democrats around the state or to the state Democratic Party. If nothing else, experts say, Republicans should have at least found token opposition to tie up some of Perea's campaign cash.

That's not to say there's no candidates out there.

An open seat where an incumbent is retiring or termed out always attracts plenty of opponents.

A half dozen people have taken at least the initial steps for the District 4 Fresno County supervisor seat, where Judy Case is retiring. In District 1, five people are seeking the seat of retiring Supervisor Phil Larson. Challengers for these two seats have until Wednesday to file.

In District 1 on the Fresno City Council, seven people are looking at the seat of Blong Xiong, who is termed out -- and who is seeking Larson's supervisor seat.

But on occasion, even an incumbent who may have gone unchallenged in the past can wind up in a competitive re-election battle.

The prime example this year is Fresno County District Attorney Elizabeth Egan.

Like Crow, Egan was first elected in 2002 and was unchallenged in 2006 and 2010. But this year, she's facing former Deputy District Attorney Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp.

Already, Smittcamp has shown she can raise money. Her last name also helps with getting known to voters. Her father-in-law Bob Smittcamp, his brother Bill and their father Earl are known throughout the area for their ranching and business interests. Taken together, it is that rare occurrence when an incumbent is facing a tough re-election fight.

It certainly isn't the norm -- especially in Fresno County races below the Board of Supervisors.

"These races generate such low turnout and low interest that there's not as much to them as the higher-profile ones ... like the Board of Supervisors," Cummins said.

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