

Egan, Smittcamp face off in Fresno County DA forum (video)

BY JOHN ELLIS

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<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/10/3870236/egan-smittcamp-face-off-in-fresno.html?sp=/99/217/&ihp=1>

The digs were subtle but pronounced as Fresno County District Attorney Elizabeth Egan and her opponent, Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp, met face-to-face for the first time Thursday morning.

Neither candidate lost their cool in the highly anticipated debate, sponsored by the Lincoln Club of Fresno County. But there was a noticeable tension in the room that has matched the tenor of the campaign.

Egan was first elected in 2002, and went unchallenged in 2006 and 2010. This year, however, Smittcamp -- a former prosecutor under Egan -- has stepped up to run against her former boss.

It has led to an already bitter campaign, and has driven a wedge into the city's legal, law enforcement and political communities, who have found themselves taking sides.

At the same time, it has caught the interest of those same communities, as the full house at Pardini's in northwest Fresno showed.

Both candidates largely gave attendees their money's worth.

Smittcamp hinted that Egan put politics over policy in the DA's office and took a shot at Egan for not prosecuting cases while in office.

She suggested that Egan has chased away experienced prosecutors and has not done a good job of mentoring younger ones.

"I understand the need to have a district attorney who not only is a good and proven prosecutor, who has been in the mud, who has prosecuted cases herself, but who also has the ability to lead young lawyers," Smittcamp said.

Egan talked about the challenges of leading the office through the toughest economic downturn in recent memory and suggested that Smittcamp lacked the ability to head an office through such hard times.

"It takes experience, commitment and leadership to keep a team working that hard, especially when they've suffered a lot financially over the years," Egan said.

Egan hit Smittcamp for holding several jobs over the years and claimed that her criticism of the DA's office has instead cast a negative light on her former colleagues. Egan also hinted that Smittcamp may be soft on crime because she advocated for more money for the public defender's office.

But as both tried to play offense in the almost 90-minute exchange, they also found themselves on defense.

Smittcamp, for instance, denied she was criticizing rank-and-file DA employees. It was directed, she said, at Egan and her chief assistant district attorney, Kelly Keenan, who was never mentioned by name.

As for the public defender's office, Smittcamp stood by the statement that it needed more money. If the office isn't properly funded, she said, it bogs down the judicial system. Victims have to wait longer for justice, she said, and witnesses may have to be coaxed to return to court another day to testify.

And Egan worked to fend off allegations that she chased away prosecutors and faced low morale.

"Our record in this office shows that we are a fine-tuned machine," she said.

The two clashed on prosecuting agriculture and copper-wire theft. They debated over conviction rates. Is it 92%, as Egan said, or 52.5% -- and 32nd in the state -- as Smittcamp says?

Smittcamp got her numbers from the Judicial Council of California, which Egan suggested was more business-numbers related than conviction-related.

Egan was pressed by moderator Tal Cloud, the Lincoln Club's political director, about whether it was appropriate to make a campaign issue about Smittcamp's holding of the liquor license for The Lime Lite restaurant on Shaw Avenue near Fig Garden Village. The story brought Smittcamp's brother-in-law and his drug arrest into the campaign debate.

It was a fair issue, Egan said.

And Cloud asked Smittcamp if it was all right to post an anonymous letter on her website from an insider in Egan's office that was critical of Egan's running of the office. Smittcamp said it was appropriate.

In her final remarks, Egan cast herself as an attorney making a case to a jury, and one who successfully showed a contrast of "rhetoric versus a record of action."

Her conclusion: "Indeed, I have made my case."

But Smittcamp said the DA's office has been in a downward spiral of fewer successful prosecutions, one that is fiscally mismanaged and staffed by micromanaged prosecutors afraid to act. It is time for a change, she said.

"You have to have somebody who is not beholden to politics, who is not beholden to political relationships, who is going to lead this office with experience and compassion and caring for the employees," Smittcamp said.

KEY DATES

May 5: First day to vote by mail (also the day most sample ballots are mailed)

May 19: Last day to register to vote

May 27: Last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot by mail

June 3: Primary Election Day

Nov. 4: General Election Day

ELECTION OFFICES

Fresno County: 2221 Kern St., Fresno; Details [here](#) or (559) 600-VOTE (8683)

Tulare County: 5951 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia; Details [here](#) or (559) 624-7300

Kings County: 1400 W. Lacey Blvd., Hanford; Details [here](#) or (559) 582-3211, ext. 4401

Madera County: 200 W. Fourth St., Madera; Details [here](#) or (559) 675-7720

Merced County: 2222 M St., Merced; Details [here](#) or (209) 385-7541

Mariposa County: 4982 10th St., Mariposa; Details [here](#) or (209) 966-2007

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