Unopposed candidates leave voters little choice

By Scott Daugherty
The Virginian-Pilot
© October 6, 2013

CHESAPEAKE

Chris Falk knows the odds are not in his favor.

Friends have likened his quest to unseat Commonwealth’s Attorney Nancy Parr to “career suicide.” She has more money, more endorsements and more name recognition.

But that isn’t deterring the 42-year-old attorney. He said he is willing to take on the two-term incumbent if only to give people a choice on Election Day.

“It should be an election, not an appointment,” said Falk, noting Parr was unopposed for re-election four years ago. “No one should win by default.”

Most incumbents running this fall for local office in South Hampton Roads will do just that, though. Candidates in 12 of the 20 constitutional office races are running unopposed and 11 of the 16 House of Delegate races involve only one candidate.

So why are so few people willing to compete for public office? Lots of reasons, say local political science professors and political observers.

There is the money needed to buy the signs and advertisements, the time it takes to run a campaign and knock on doors, and the often overwhelming advantage incumbents hold in name recognition and fundraising.

“If you don’t think you have a good shot at winning, you probably don’t run,” said Bob Holsworth, a political analyst who previously chaired a bipartisan advisory panel on redistricting.

He noted that uncontested races are common across Virginia. The state reports that happening in 45 out of 100 House of Delegates elections this fall.

Jesse Richman, an Old Dominion University political science professor, added that most viable candidates — those with deep pockets, strong community connections and histories of public service —
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“Politicians are strategic creatures,” Richman said. “That way you don’t have to make the case for someone to be removed, just that you are the better candidate.”

Years of gerrymandering also has helped deter competition in the House of Delegates, said Quentin Kidd, director of the Wason Center for Public Policy at Christopher Newport University.

“Once you win a seat, it is really difficult to lose it,” he said, explaining the lines of the various districts have been redrawn several times over the years to benefit whichever party’s in power.

While the last round of redistricting helped the Republicans, Democrats similarly took advantage in years past, professors said.

Of the few contested races on the ballot this November, a handful involve open seats. Most feature an incumbent facing off against a first-time candidate.

In terms of constitutional offices, Chesapeake features two uncontested races and two contested. Treasurer Barbara Carraway and Commissioner of the Revenue Ray Conner, both Republicans, are running unopposed – as they did four years ago.

Parr and Sheriff James O’Sullivan, also Republicans, are facing Falk and retired deputy Les Smith, respectively.

Parr has more than four times as much money on hand as Falk, according to their most recent campaign-finance reports. O’Sullivan has more than 10 times as much as Smith – $64,176 compared with $5,444.

Falk and Smith also are running as independents.

Smith said he sought the Democratic nomination this year but was unable to gather the necessary support during a June caucus. The party instead chose to go without a candidate.

“I’m disappointed,” Smith said, blaming his caucus loss on a few people in the party leadership. “They don’t speak for everyone.”

Richman said a Democrat should have a decent shot at winning in Chesapeake. He noted that President Barack Obama won the city in 2008 and 2012.

“It suggests there’s an opportunity there that isn’t being exploited,” Richman said. “It certainly didn’t look much like a Republican town in 2012.”

Randy Menefee, chairman of the Chesapeake Democratic Committee, did not return calls and emails seeking comment.

Officials from the state’s Democratic and Republican parties acknowledged last week they can’t effectively compete in all 100 House of Delegate races this fall.

The Democrats are running 69 candidates to the Republicans’ 74.

“While we are moving forward, there are still areas that are traditionally Republican,” said Ashley Bauman, spokeswoman for the Democratic Party of Virginia.

Parr said she liked not having to campaign four years ago – it’s like having a second full-time job, she said – but called contested elections a good thing.

“If an elected person gets to the place they think they shouldn’t be challenged, I think they shouldn’t be in office,” Parr said. “I don’t take it for granted at all.”

Richman said contested elections are generally good for democracy, encouraging people to debate ideas and view problems from multiple angles.

At the same time, however, he argued the lack of competition in Virginia isn’t “necessarily awful.” If the incumbents weren’t doing a decent job, more people would oppose them, he said.

“It at least means they haven’t done anything to antagonize the people,” Holsworth said.

In Falk’s case, if voters disagree with his uphill fight, he won’t be upset.

“Even if I lose, I’ll feel like a winner,” he said. “I’ll have at least made this an election.”

Pilot writer Mike Connors contributed to this report.

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