

# Miami Herald

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## One-third of Florida Legislature faces no opposition at polls

BY MICHAEL VAN SICKLER  
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

Millions of voters in Florida will get no vote in choosing who represents them in the Florida House and Senate next year. That's because the deadline for candidates expired at noon Friday with no challengers qualifying to run against a third of the state Legislature.

The lack of opposition means candidates for eight state Senate seats — all incumbent Republicans — and 38 House seats — all but one an incumbent — automatically won their seats despite no ballots being cast in those districts. That will make 2014 even less competitive than 2012, when 24 percent of lawmakers ran unopposed.

In Miami-Dade, Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah and Sen. Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, R-Miami, will return to the Senate because they had no challengers in their primary or general election. A dozen House lawmakers from South Florida are going back to Tallahassee without having to campaign. Among them: Rep. Jared Moskowitz, D-Coral Springs, Rep. Katie Edwards, D-Plantation, Rep. Sharon Pritchett, D-Miami Gardens, Rep. Richard Stark, D-Weston and Rep. Cynthia Stafford, D-Miami.

"Isn't having a choice why we have a democracy?" said Darryl Paulson, a professor of political science at University of South Florida St. Petersburg. "The choices voters have when it comes to state government aren't much different than the options they'd have in a banana republic."

Of course, incumbents don't see it that way. Winners Friday included Rep. Jake Raburn, R-Lithia, who was first elected in 2012 and maintains a low profile as a backbencher in the House.

"Hopefully it's just a sign that we're doing a good job," Raburn said.

Incumbents are running in all 20 Senate races and 104 of the 120 House seats. In 2012, incumbents won 96 percent of their races.

As far as partisan politics, not much may change this year. In the Senate, where Republicans hold a 26-14 advantage over Democrats, only one Senate race, between Sen. Maria Sachs, D-Delray Beach, and former Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff, a Republican, is expected to be close. In the House, Republicans hold a 75-45 advantage. As long as Democrats have more than 40 votes, they can block certain Republican legislative maneuvers. Dropping below that two-thirds threshold, however, is unlikely.

That's because incumbents of either party usually face only token opposition at most. Fourteen lawmakers, including Sen. Tom Lee, R-Brandon, Rep. Dan Raulerson, R-Plant City, Rep. Darryl

Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, and Rep. Jose Oliva, R-Miami, face only third-party or write-in candidates that historically never win elections. When combined with unopposed incumbents, 43 percent of the Legislature was decided at noon Friday, more than four months before Election Day.

Many of the remaining races are intra-party affairs, providing no real competition in the general election. In the Senate, only five of the 20 races pit a Republican against a Democrat, the only two parties that hold seats in the Legislature. Of these races, the three Republican and two Democratic incumbents have raised a total of \$1.6 million compared to a meager \$112,826 so far by their challengers.

In the House, 52 races, fewer than half of the 120 seats in the chamber, will pit a Democrat against a Republican. But even these tend to be lopsided. Rep. Jeannette Nunez, R-Miami, raised \$187,000 through May. She faces a Democrat, Milagro Ruiz, a schoolteacher and political newcomer who has yet to raise a cent.

The 22 “write-in” candidates qualified to run may as well be invisible: they don’t appear on the ballot, they don’t pay any filing fees, they typically don’t campaign or raise money and they always lose.

Still, write-in candidates have real world consequences. In races where candidates from only one party qualify, all voters may cast ballots in the primary. But add a write-in candidate, and that changes.

Consider House District 61 in Tampa. Four Democrats qualified to replace Betty Reed, who was forced out because of term limits. On Friday, Nicole Santiago filed to run as a write-in, effectively denying Republicans and independents from voting in that contest. The same day, Daniel Johnson Matthews filed to run as a write-in in Tampa District 64, closing the Republican primary between Jamie Grant and Miriam Steinberg.

Overall, write in candidates closed 10 primaries in this way.

“I did not know I did that, that’s a very bad thing,” said Robert Kaplan, a 58-year-old write-in candidate running for House District 74 in Venice, which was left open when Republican Doug Holder was forced out because of term limits. Kaplan, along with a second write-in candidate, Shiloh Turner, shut out any Democrats from voting in the Republican primary.

Other write-ins are hard to reach. The number that Brunell William Martineau provided on his filing papers as a write-in candidate for House District 16, closing the Republican primary with Rep. Charles McBurney, R-Jacksonville, was the number of a Little Caesar’s pizza shop.

“He doesn’t work here,” said the manager who answered the phone. “You’re the second person to ask for him this week.”

“That’s what write-in candidates are used for, to close primaries,” said Lee, who said he doesn’t know the two write-ins facing him. “It’s so-called strategy.”

Herald/Times staff writers Steve Bousquet and Tia Mitchell contributed to this story.

## Uncontested Incumbents

About one-third of incumbents in the Florida Legislature will return to office because no one filed to challenge them in the 2014 primary or general election. Here are the unopposed lawmakers from South Florida who will be returning to Tallahassee next year.

## STATE SENATE

Sen. Miguel de la Portilla, R-Miami

Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah

## STATE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Rep. Patrick Rooney, R-West Palm Beach

Rep. Dave Kerner, D-Lake Worth

Rep. Lori Berman, D-Lantana

Rep. Irv Slosberg, D-Boca Raton

Rep. Jared Moskowitz, D-Coral Springs

Rep. Katie Edwards, D-Plantation

Evan Jenne, D-Dania Beach\*\*

Rep. Shevrin Jones, D-West Park

Rep. Sharon Pritchett, D-Miami Gardens

Rep. Richard Stark, D-Weston

Rep. Cynthia Stafford, D-Miami

Rep. Holly Raschein, R-Key Largo

\*\* Non-incumbent running for open seat

Source: Florida Department of Elections