



**Commentary
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What if they held an election and no one came? While that old political joke was a reference to declining voter turnout, it could also be an allusion to elections in which candidates face no or only token opposition. Such circumstances are more common than one might think and evidence shows them to be on the rise.

Voters throughout Seminole County will have fewer votes to cast when they go to the polls in November because of the number of entrants either unopposed or confronting only write-in opponents. Included among the certain winners are three mayor, two county commission, and five city council candidates.

Political science literature is replete with studies about non-competitive elections in which incumbents face little, if any, challenge to their bids for re-election. While scholars have focused most of their attention on U.S. House and state legislative elections, a few students of the electoral process have examined the local arena and found that the phenomenon plays out there as well.

Of course, routine re-election of incumbents may not be inherently bad. It is possible that incumbents are simply better politicians. Additionally, evidence indicates that elected officials gain experience over time, generally work hard to learn what voters want, and try to faithfully represent their constituents. Accordingly, voters may return them to office because they approve of their performance.

Still, elected officials who entrench themselves may distort the democratic process and ultimately leave their constituents with less-meaningful representation. If and when this is the case, citizens may not be able to effectively hold their government accountable.

For some observers, the absence of strong challengers serves to impoverish the polity because voters miss an opportunity to hear robust debate about the political past, present, and future. Moreover, since voters are more inclined to show up at the polls when campaigns are competitive, uncontested elections inevitably lead to lower turnout.

Local elections have long been associated with low turnout due to limited media coverage, low challenger visibility, and inattentive public. To the surprise of reformers, measures such as non-partisan elections and term limits actually exacerbate these conditions and further weaken electoral competition. With respect to non-partisan elections, incumbency name recognition becomes more important in the absence of party labels. As for term limits, potential candidates often wait for seats to open up rather than challenge incumbents.

Studies of local elected officials have discovered that few are concerned that voters will turn them out at the ballot box. This is an unhealthy condition because democracy thrives on competitive electoral choices to sustain citizen influence and facilitate government responsiveness to political change.

And because democracy matters, this is Michael Hoover.