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They didn't meet in a smoke-filled back room - neither man smokes - but there was still plenty of deal-making between the bosses of the Montgomery County Republican and Democratic parties this fall.

The result: The Republicans will not challenge county Prosecutor Mathias **Heck**, a Democrat, in 1996. The Democrats won't challenge Republican Sheriff Gary Haines. And neither side will take on any of the seven incumbent common pleas or appellate judges up for election next year - two Republicans and five Democrats.

The Republicans say **Heck** is doing a fine job - so why spend money to beat him? Ditto, the Democrats say, of Sheriff Haines.

Both say it seems useless to spend time and energy to try and defeat entrenched incumbents who simply aren't likely to lose.

``We're not king makers," said Dennis Lieberman, chairman of the Montgomery County Democratic Party. ``These people are already there, and if you were betting in Las Vegas on these people keeping their jobs, the odds would be astronomical."

Jeff Jacobson, Montgomery County Republican chairman, said the agreement - which only holds for the 1996 races - is in the best interest of the community. ``Why create disputes where none exist?" he said.

Not everyone sees it that way. Robert Adams, an associate professor of political science at Wright State University, says voters - not party bosses - should decide who holds office.

``The public deserves competition. It is not served when two political party leaders privately decide not to challenge each other for two major political offices," he said.

``It's almost an affront to citizens that they're willing to stand up and reveal this deal that they made. It's like saying, `What are you going to do about it?' "

Adams said the the decision shows weaknesses in both parties, and allows politicians to get too comfortable in their jobs.

``Haines and **Heck** are two good public servants, but in politics, every elected official needs to be a little insecure about his or her job," he said. ``You have a better quality servant if they know that there is competition out there ready to run against them if they screw up."

Haines, who is serving his second four-year term, said he won't take his job for granted, despite the deal. ``The bottom line is that the sheriff's office does not belong to Gary Haines or the Republican Party or Democratic Party."

If the community isn't satisfied with his work, an independent could get elected, Haines said. ``But if the community feels I'm doing a good job, the decision of the parties will stand."

Haines praised Lieberman and Jacobson for making their agreement public, saying such agreements are usually informal.

``I give them credit for having the intestinal fortitude to say that two political party chairmen can sit down and talk about things realistically," he said. ``I compliment them for this."

Jacobson said former party bosses in Montgomery County cut similar deals for years and the public ``was never the wiser."

But Jacobson and Lieberman said they wanted to make this process public.

``We both feel it is important enough to be open about it. We're convinced it's the right thing to do," Lieberman said. ``We're not hiding anything."

Jacobson said voters will have plenty of races to focus on next year and both parties want to devote time and money to those contests.

He said few people want to run against incumbent judges anyway, and, ``This makes sense from the position that we have a prosecutor everybody says is unbeatable. Why take that chance?"

Lieberman agreed. `No one thinks Haines is so vulnerable we can beat him without spending a lot of money. Why spend that money when he's doing a good job?"

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