

Some have familiar names, others don't; but Oakland's precinct delegates hold power with GOP, Democrats

When voters go to the polls for Tuesday's primary election, they will be nominating party candidates for high-profile positions such as governor, the state legislature, Oakland Circuit Court and the U.S. Congress.

But they will also be electing precinct delegates — a position Democrats and Republicans describe as the "backbone" of their respective parties.

The job carries considerable responsibility, but no salary and few — if any — perks. Yet more than 250 Democrats and 360 Republicans are running for

precinct delegate from Oxford, to Southfield townships and from Troy to Milford.

Among the Democrats are State Rep. Nancy Quarles of Southfield; Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi of Farmington Hills as well as his wife and son; and businessman Robert D. Nicholson in Birmingham.

Republicans running for precinct delegate include financial planner Mildred G. Pangman of Rochester Hills; county information manager Kathleen Brang of Pontiac; and Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Pat-

terson in Waterford.

Party VIPs

"Precinct delegates are very, very important," said GOP county chair Cathy Long of Troy, who said a political party could not function effectively without them. "They represent the grass roots," she explained.

Gary L. Kohut, the Democratic county chair agrees. "They're absolutely critical," he said. "They're the key building block of any political organization."

On a day-to-day basis, precinct delegates serve as a conduit for information, Kohut explained. "They tell candidates and party leaders what their neighbors are thinking," he said, "and they answer questions about the

party's positions and candidates."

Precinct delegates also attend the party's conventions at the county and state levels, and they elect the party's officers and executive committees. "In that sense, they shape the party," said Birmingham attorney Scott Romney, who is also looking to precinct delegates to boost his chances of winning the GOP nomination for state attorney general.

Mildred Pangman estimates that she spends about 16 hours a week — at least now, with a major election pending — as a delegate in the 12th precinct of Rochester Hills. She likes stimulating interest in the political system, especially the GOP, and she likes talking about issues. "I talk politics when I buy a dress," she said. "It's that important to me."

Democrat Aldo Vagnozzi said he first ran for precinct delegate in 1948, the same year G. Men-

nen Williams made his first bid for governor of Michigan. "Sonny won, but I lost," he chuckled. "Two years later, I ran again and I've been at it ever since."

Family affair

Vagnozzi is the Democratic delegate in the 12th district of Farmington Hills — in addition to being the city's mayor. The job is so essential, he said, that he encouraged his wife Lois to run in the 12th district and his son, Paul, in the 22nd District.

Being a Democrat in Birmingham isn't as lonely as it might seem, said Robert Nicholson, one of four people running for precinct delegate in that community. Republicans, in contrast, have 18 people running for the same positions.

"There are a lot of closet Democrats in Birmingham," he said, "and they like to talk about issues and candidates. I enjoy that part of being a precinct delegate."

Here is the lowdown on delegates

■ Who can be a precinct delegate?

Any registered voter who files an affidavit of identity with the county clerk's office at the appropriate time before the election.

■ What do precinct delegates do?

They provide information to party leaders about concerns at the grass roots.

■ Where do delegates perform their duties?

Many places. From their homes, in the neighborhoods and from the floor of the county convention.

■ When do they do their jobs?

County conventions — when delegates elect convention delegates or local party officers — are scheduled periodically.

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