

Candidates' ballot designations can be amusing, strange or some say ... misleading

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Opponents of Los Angeles City Council candidate Mitchell Englander protested recently that he overstates his law-enforcement role as an LAPD reserve officer by identifying himself as a "policeman" on the primary ballot.

Election officials say the objection came too late to change the March 8 voter material, even if they saw the need.

But the flap draws attention to the complications - and occasional comedy - that arise when politicians try to squeeze selected high points of their resumes into the brief phrases printed below their names on ballots.

"Some are amusing," said Jinny Pak, assistant chief of the city Election Division.

Pak didn't have to think long to recall the weirdest case of the past few years: a Los Angeles mayoral hopeful who wanted to be described in voter material as "Exorcist of Presidents."

Pak said the description of Englander, a candidate to succeed retiring City Councilman Greig Smith representing the northwest San Fernando Valley, is one of at least a handful that stirred complaints as 2011 ballots were being finalized.

This, after the 2010 state election provided several examples of candidates seeking advantage through creative ballot wording, as well as foes seeking advantage by griping about it.

Political analyst Barbara O'Connor said these so-called "occupational designations" are especially important in elections such as Los Angeles' in which candidates aren't listed with party labels, and can be significant in an era when voters are more likely to prefer candidates with non-government backgrounds.

"(These days), anyone can go to a website and do our own independent research on a candidate," said O'Connor, retired director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media at Cal State Sacramento. "But for older voters, ballot designations on sample ballots, door (hangers) and street signs are still a way they make up their minds."

Ballot designations must conform to regulations that take up two full pages in the L.A. city elections code and no fewer than 12 pages in the California elections code.

Reading the rules, one gets the image of politics as a board game: Ballot designations must be no more than three words, though place names ("San Fernando Valley") count as a single word. A hyphenated word is permitted only if it appears in a standard dictionary. There are restrictions on the sorts of adjectives you can use.

Uh oh: Correct spelling and grammar are required.

Generally speaking, city and state election codes require the designations to identify candidates' principal "professions, vocations or occupations."

While the designations are submitted under penalty of perjury, city elections officials don't investigate whether candidates are telling the truth, forcing some complainants to go to court, Pak said.

On the November 2010 state ballot, office-seekers chose designations ranging from grand ("Attorney General of California") to prosaic ("Retail Worker"), with touches of the enigmatic in between ("Cultural Spiritual Advisor").

Official challenges - or at least eyebrows - were raised over the requested designations of several candidates: A California attorney-general candidate who called himself "Assistant Attorney General" (he served as outside counsel for the South Dakota attorney general). A legislative aide running for the Assembly who listed himself as "Consumer Affairs Commissioner" (though an opponent complained he hadn't attended a meeting of the commission in question in more than a year). And rivals for a congressional seat from the San Joaquin Valley who called themselves a "rancher" and a "farmer" (though both were elected officials).

Three-term Assemblyman San Blakeslee, R-San Luis Obispo, won a state Senate race last November in which he listed himself as "Independent Business Owner," alluding to his family's financial-planning firm.

Similarly, when three-term Assemblyman Tony Strickland, R-Simi Valley, ran successfully for a seat in the state Senate in 2008, his ballot line emphasized not his Capitol experience but his role as an "Alternative Energy Executive" with a startup company.

"Being an incumbent right now is not a good label in any form," O'Connor said.

Perhaps wishing to fit an anti-government mood, 60 percent of the non-incumbents on City Council ballots this year call themselves business owners, and nearly half of those note they're "small business" owners.

Also among people who filed papers to run for City Council, Board of Education and Community College District Board: a "Candy Factory Owner" and a "Hydrographer, City of Los Angeles."

Englander, making his first run for office after serving as Smith's chief of staff, asked to be identified as "Policeman/Councilmember Deputy."

Smith himself used the same designation when he successfully ran for the office eight years ago.

"It is an occupation," Englander, 40, said of his 16 hours or more per month as a Level II member of the LAPD Reserve Corps, noting that he carries a gun and makes arrests. "If that doesn't qualify you to call yourself a police officer, I don't know what does."

LAPD spokeswoman Norman Eisenman agreed.

"They (reservists) absolutely have the right to call themselves police officers," Eisenman said.

But Englander's opponents protested that "policeman" is misleading because he is not a full-time cop.

"There is a difference," said Kelly M. Lord Jr. (a commercial real-estate agent who calls himself a "Small Business Owner"), another of the five candidates in Council District 12.

Glenn Bailey, a San Fernando Valley activist, wrote to Election Division Chief Arleen Taylor on Jan. 7, asking for Englander's occupational designation to be changed. Taylor wrote back Tuesday, saying voting-booth materials have already been printed.

Bailey said Friday he "will be pursuing it, but I don't know exactly (how)."