

ACLU hopes to educate Utah voters about the powerful role of a prosecutor ahead of the 2018 election

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It's an election Utahns might not hear a lot of buzz about — the race for county attorney — but the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah says it's an important one, given the amount of power prosecutors have in the criminal justice system.

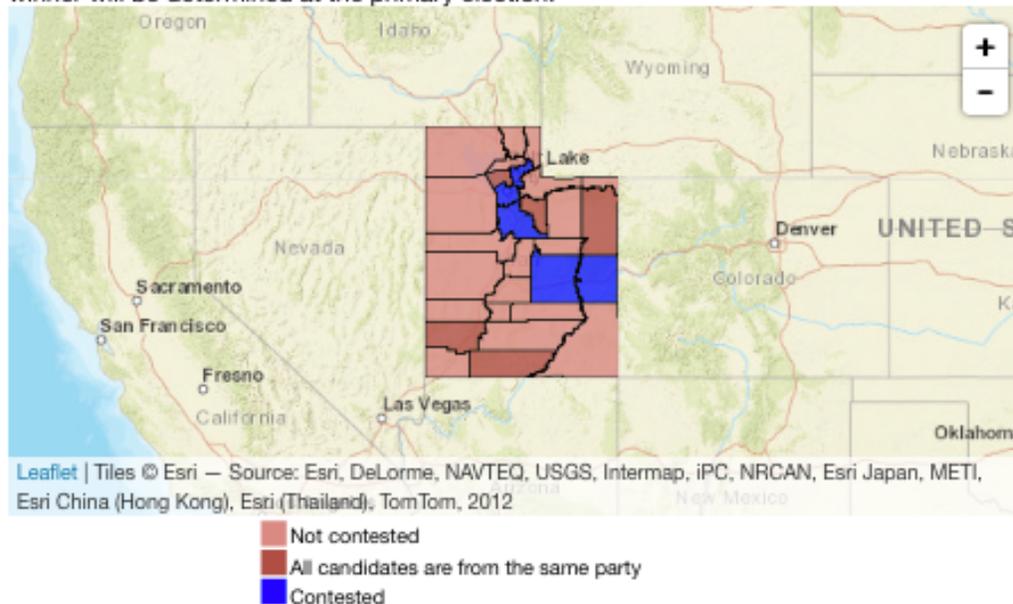
And as part of a national ACLU effort called Smart Justice to end mass incarceration, Utahns will likely be seeing the local chapter of the civil rights group talking more about county attorney races.

Jason Groth, the Smart Justice coordinator for the ACLU of Utah, said last week that the group has two goals: Educate voters about a prosecutor's role in the criminal justice system and encourage Utahns to vote "reform-minded" county attorneys into office.

But this year, most Utahns won't have a lot of options for who will be the top prosecutor in their counties. Of the 29 counties in Utah, only 10 will hold contested elections — and half those feature candidates from only one political party, meaning the winner will be decided in a primary election.

County attorney races in Utah

Of the 29 counties in Utah, there will be only ten contested county attorney elections in 2018. Five of those counties feature candidates from one political party, meaning the winner will be determined at the primary election.



Source: American Civil Liberties Union of Utah

"If the voters understand the complexity of the role of the elected prosecutor, they can start asking questions of their own prosecutors," Groth said. "At least questions can start being asked."

People often don't realize how much power elected county attorneys have, Groth said. They dictate office policies about how charges are filed, when to offer plea deals and what kinds of sentences are recommended to a judge.

"They will be holding a lot of power in the courtroom," Groth said. "The person in charge [of cases] is surprisingly not the judge; the prosecutor decides what those outcomes will be." And those outcomes, Groth said, can contribute to bigger problems in the criminal justice system, such as racial disparity and a growing prison population.

Groth said that along with prosecutorial reforms, the Smart Justice campaign in Utah also will focus in the future on parole reform. Nationally, the ACLU has set a Smart Justice campaign goal of reducing the U.S. jail and prison population by 50 percent over the next several years. The ACLU of Utah will soon submit questionnaires to county attorney candidates to gather their positions on criminal justice issues, and Groth said the group hopes to host a public forum for candidates in contested elections to discuss the issues.

The only county attorney contests with candidates from two parties are in Salt Lake, Utah and Emery counties. Morgan and Grand counties have multiple candidates vying for the top prosecutor job, but the races there do not have party affiliations at the county level. The remaining five contested elections — in Davis, Wasatch, Uintah, Kane and Iron counties — will be decided at the Republican primary election.

There is no one running for county attorney in Piute, Rich or Wayne counties, which means a prosecutor would be appointed by county officials. In Daggett County, the county attorney job is contracted to an attorney or law firm, according to the ACLU.

