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NC Supreme Court races draw political interest

BY ANNE BLYTHE

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RALEIGH — Few North Carolina Supreme Court justice candidates become household names.

Some of the most seasoned lawyers in this state acknowledge their own difficulties knowing who's who in the statewide judicial races often relegated to the tail-end of the ballot.

But the seven justices on the state Supreme Court play a powerful role in deciding what happens in issues of great public consequence. They will be asked to rule on new election laws, educational policies and criminal justice matters of great weight.

With four of the seven seats on the ballot this year in a state where politics have become hyperpartisan, there have been accusations of gamesmanship in races that until recently had not seen a huge infusion of outside money.

Ola Mae Lewis, the senior resident Superior Court judge in Brunswick County, told Wilmington TV reporter Justin Smith last week that her last-minute decision to enter the race for the top seat on the state Supreme Court was influenced by "political gamesmanship."

Mark Martin, senior associate justice and a Republican, was expected to have an unopposed campaign for the seat that Chief Justice Sarah Parker will vacate because she is reaching mandatory retirement age.

Lewis, an N.C. Central University law school alumna who has clerked for Democrat Dan Blue when he was speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives, campaigns as a Republican in the nonpartisan race.

Though Lewis initially talked about running for the same N.C. Supreme Court seat as Cheri Beasley, a Democrat appointed to the court by former Gov. Bev Perdue, the Brunswick County judge pulled out of that race shortly before the end of the filing period.

Mike Robinson, a civil litigator in Winston-Salem and a Republican, entered the race and Lewis



Eric Levinson



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made a surprise entry into the chief justice race, drawing rebukes from some Republicans such as Joyce Cotton, a 2nd District GOP chair, who ended up "un-inviting" Lewis to a district convention this month.

Efforts to reach Lewis were unsuccessful on Friday.

But her challenge for the chief justice seat is just one of the N.C. Supreme Court races that has North Carolina pols talking.

Jeanette Doran, a former general counsel and executive director at the N.C. Institute for Constitutional Law, an organization supported by Art Pope, the state's budget director and a leading financier for conservative candidates and organizations, also entered a Supreme Court race days before the filing period closed.

Incumbent Robin E. Hudson, an associate justice seeking a second term, found herself in a surprise primary runoff that is likely to be of greater interest to Republicans than Democrats because of a high-profile contest for U.S. Senate.

Mecklenburg County Superior Court Judge Eric L. Levinson, a Republican, who was unsuccessful in a 2006 bid for a state Supreme Court seat, also is in the race.

Though judicial races are nonpartisan, the field of three will be narrowed during the primary election.

Republican Party leaders have said they are considering endorsing candidates this year in the statewide judicial races.

In 2012, outside groups funneled nearly \$2.3 million into North Carolina to help Paul Newby, a Supreme Court incumbent seeking re-election, defeat a challenge by Sam Ervin IV.

The victory helped conservatives maintain a 4-3 majority on the court with an onslaught of new election law challenges and other legal cases born from the first time in a century that Republicans controlled both state houses and the governor's office.

That balance of power is at issue this year, too.

"Supreme Court races are always important and always seem to be overlooked by the general electorate," said Claude Pope, chairman of the N.C. Republican Party. "It's important for so many reasons. Obviously, they are the last and final arbiters of all legal issues. This makes for an interesting dynamic from a party standpoint."

Other races include:

- Ervin, a N.C. appeals court judge and Democrat, is facing off in November against Robert N. Hunter Jr., also a N.C. Appeals Court judge but a Republican. They are campaigning for the seat that Martin vacates. Voters will also chose between Beasley and Robinson on the November ballot.

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