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High-court election candidates contrast in style

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By [Randy Ludlow](#)

The Columbus Dispatch • Friday September 26, 2014 9:47 AM

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In jeans and a tie, with a button on his jacket proclaiming “I am a shameless agitator,” Tom Letson seems an atypical candidate for the Ohio Supreme Court.

“I’m old and I’m a happy kind of guy,” said the 61-year-old Democrat, lawyer and term-limited member of the Ohio House of Representatives from Warren.

In contrast, his opponent, Republican Justice Sharon L. Kennedy, arrives carefully and conservatively dressed, carrying a polished resume and a list of major case opinions she has written.

Kennedy, a police officer-turned-lawyer, stresses her judicial experience, which includes 14 years as a Butler County Domestic Relations Court judge.

“It was like going home,” she said of winning election to an unexpired term on the Supreme Court in 2012. “It’s been revitalizing to learn new areas of the law.”

Letson, meanwhile, is not cowed — not by his limited judicial experience, not by his “not recommended” rating from the Ohio State Bar Association, not by Kennedy’s \$604,000-to-\$12,825 fundraising advantage and large poll lead.

“We both attended the same number of hours in law school. We both passed the same bar exam. I’m a quick learner,” Letson said. “When everybody steps in the voting booth, there are two names. We’ll see how it turns out.”



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Sharon L. Kennedy, left, and Tom Letson, right

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A recent statewide mail poll by *The Dispatch* found Kennedy with a lead of 21 percentage points over Letson, although more than half of the registered voters were undecided ahead of the Nov. 4 election.

Letson can't match the depth of Kennedy's professional experience on the bench, but she can't match some of his personal experiences.

He's a one-time machinist and an expert skier and has been known to jump out of perfectly good airplanes with a parachute. And he doesn't duck being a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for three-plus years.

Kennedy endorses a conservative judicial philosophy in strictly interpreting state law and giving deference to legislative intent. One does not make law from the bench, she said.

"My voice ends the moment it is declared law. You don't get to create a new sentence, to add or remove five words. It's not my job to rewrite it," she said.

Citing the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision barring separate schools for blacks and whites, Letson said that judges sometimes must be "aspirational" in how they rule. "That's not to say you rewrite the Constitution of the state of Ohio, but we do need to find our better selves."

Letson said he would bring a different perspective, admittedly colored by his background and politics, to a "predictable" court controlled 6-1 by Republicans. "It's a myth your political philosophy disappears," said the Columbus native.

Kennedy disagrees. "You lose your party affiliation (on the ballot) after the primary for a purpose. Balance doesn't come from politics. It comes from adhering to and applying the law," she said.

Kennedy did not participate in the ratings process of the Ohio State



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Bar Association's Commission on Judicial Candidates, saying it was "not neutral."

She was rated "not recommended" in 2012 when she defeated "highly recommended" Justice Yvette McGee Brown, a Democrat.

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