

Celebrate competitive state Supreme Court races

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Corrected



Seattle Times illustration

Credible opposition campaigns for three state Supreme Court positions on the ballot in November serve the public's interest.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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THE last time state Supreme Court candidates were on the ballot, voters could snooze right past the choices. A lack of credible challengers vying for a spot on the nine-justice court gave incumbents a pass and voters too little choice.

That changes this year. The three justices up for re-election each draws credible opposition. The competition reflects the extra attention owed to a court that has thrust itself into leading political issues in Washington.

Chief Justice Barbara Madsen, who has been on the court since 1992, is challenged by Greg Zempel, the elected Kittitas County prosecutor. Justice Charlie Wiggins, up for re-election for the first time, is challenged by Dave Larson, the presiding judge of the

Federal Way Municipal Court. And Justice Mary Yu, first appointed in 2014, faces Gonzaga University law professor David DeWolf.

All should be vetted during a rigorous campaign season.

At the forefront of election season debates should be the court's education-funding McCleary ruling, and its aggressive interpretation of the separation-of-powers doctrine. So, too, should the court's ill-timed ruling on charter schools, which threatened the new schools only days after they had started; the Legislature found a solution.

Supreme Court elections have at times in the past been political proxy wars between special-interest groups, including the state teachers union and the Building Industry Association of Washington, resulting in mega-dollar campaigns. Those battles don't serve the public, which needs a robustly independent high court. Voters must pay attention to who funds the campaigns of incumbents and challengers.

But the court also needs to represent the entire state. Currently, four are from Seattle or Bainbridge Island. Only Justice Debra Stephens has bona fide Eastern Washington roots, with a home in Spokane. None of the current justices have served as elected prosecutors. None of the justices have discernible conservative leanings.

Justices serve six-year terms, rarely face vigorous challenges once in office and, as a group, wield power at least equal to the Legislature and governor. Incumbents deserve to face hard questions about their rulings, and the challengers should be carefully vetted.

Voters get real choices this year, and they should consider their options carefully.

Information in this editorial, originally published May 26, 2016, was corrected May 27, 2016. A previous version of this editorial incorrectly identified Chief Justice Barbara Madsen's and Justice Charlie Wiggins' challengers.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).