

7/28/22

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Letters: More merit welcomed

To the Editor:

Lay persons or attorneys not engaged in courthouse work probably assume judicial selections are totally merit based. That is, the most experienced, courtroom savvy candidate becomes the next judge. In actuality (based on my own 30+ years in courthouses), this is not always the case. In at least two prior administrations, appointments were generally based upon party affiliation, gubernatorial friendship and donative or election support. In one past regime, a number of judges hailed from a spouse's old law firm. The cynical courthouse adage being "judges are merely lawyers with political connections and influential friends." In short, state judge appointments, like the completely patronage based (think Federalist Society) federal legal system, have traditionally been granted as rewards or payback to friends, supporters and sources of campaign help. Without some sort of "political juice", past finalists for any open state judicial slot were typically doomed.

To her immense credit, Governor Kelly has seemingly reversed this spoils system trend. As very recent judicial selections in Shawnee and Douglas County have demonstrated, she has selected individuals with distinctly pragmatic, courtroom based backgrounds without apparent regard to political pressure or election interest. She has done much to improve the practical depth of the district court bench throughout the region. Given two pending judicial positions in Douglas County, I think we have hope this pattern of qualifications over politics will continue.

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