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Tennessee's new chief justice: Court backs judicial selection

Holder says partisan elections are opposed

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Tennessee's new chief justice says those on the high court all strongly favor the state's system of selecting appellate court judges.

Janice M. Holder, who has been on the state Supreme Court bench since 1996, this week became Tennessee's first female chief justice.

She said her court is unanimous in supporting the Tennessee Plan, in which the governor chooses judges from three-person panels determined by the Judicial Selection Commission.

Appeals judges must later stand for retention elections, but only one judge has not been retained in the yes-no votes since the plan went into effect in 1994.

Justice cites benefits

Speaking at Tuesday's swearing-in ceremony, Holder said the state Supreme Court illustrates "the benefits of the Tennessee Plan."

"This court is not in favor of partisan election in which judges are obligated to raise millions of dollars for campaigns. This court is in favor of the current principles that comprise the Tennessee Plan."

Some Republican lawmakers have been calling for Tennessee to directly elect all judges, and there is expected to be major debate over the issue next legislative session. The Tennessee Plan is set to expire unless lawmakers renew it next year.

Those who favor changing the judicial-selection method say it violates a state constitutional provision that says "the judges of the Supreme Court shall be elected by the qualified voters of the state."

Holder told reporters after the ceremony that she and her colleagues "can be vocal about our desire for the Tennessee Plan or something like it to continue and about the dangers of a partisan election system."

Gov. Phil Bredesen is considering three candidates to fill a vacancy created by the retirement of former Chief Justice William M. Barker.
