

Judicial Elections
Challengers fare worst in Dade Bar poll

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Judicial challenger Denise Martinez-Scanziani fared the worst in a Dade County Bar Association judicial poll released Monday.

Almost 71 percent of 192 respondents in her race considered her unfit to be a judge, while 6 percent found her exceptionally qualified for the judiciary.

Martinez-Scanziani rejected the poll results as inaccurate.

"When you look at the actual number of people who voted, it doesn't amount to many people," she said. About 23 percent considered Martinez-Scanziani qualified to be a judge. "It doesn't really translate very well when you look at the raw numbers."

She is challenging Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Bernard Shapiro, who received an exceptionally qualified rating from 38 percent of 732 respondents. About 50 percent rated him as qualified, and 12 percent rated him unqualified.

A total of 1,436 members of the association responded to the survey by a June 20 deadline. Bar members rated all Miami-Dade judges whose seats were open this year and any challengers in the Aug. 26 primary as exceptionally qualified, qualified or unqualified.

Challenger Abbie Cuellar also fared poorly: 53 percent of 269 respondents find her unqualified for the bench. Eighteen percent found her exceptionally qualified, and 29 percent rated her qualified.

Cuellar said she wasn't surprised by her bar poll results, adding it was part of running as a challenger to a veteran judge.

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"Anyone who's done this before knows that there aren't many incumbents who haven't gotten better ratings than the challenger," she said.



Her opponent, Circuit Judge Jeri Beth Cohen, had a strong showing despite recent campaign missteps. A commission of the Dade County Bar recently concluded Cohen committed an unintentional violation of a judicial canon by speaking at a Coral Gables Area Democratic Club meeting without her election opponent present. Her campaign also solicited signatures on an endorsement letter that listed the names of some attorneys who hadn't endorsed her.

Of 810 respondents, 47 percent found Cohen exceptionally qualified, while 17 percent said she is unfit to be a judge.

"I gratefully appreciate the bar's continued confidence in me," she said in a statement. "I hope I will be able to continue to serve our community."

Web Extra:
[The Bar poll](#)

Another judge who scored highly was Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Kevin Emas. Of 765 respondents, about 70 percent found him exceptional, with only 5 percent finding him unqualified.

Of the candidates and judges in the poll, Emas, who was re-elected without opposition, got the highest percentage of exceptional votes, which left him cautiously optimistic.

"I'm honored to be rated that qualified," said Emas, who has been passed over for promotion to the 3rd DCA. "But you have to temper the results of any judicial bar poll. I think it's much more significant than simply a beauty pageant, but it's not the end-all, be-all to rating competence to the bench."

Some judges who were viewed as vulnerable fared well in the polls. Miami-Dade County Judge Eric Hendon narrowly avoided drawing an opponent after Martinez-Scanziani switched races at the last minute.

Ten percent of 435 respondents found Hendon unqualified to be a judge, while 57 percent found him qualified, and 33 percent found him exceptionally qualified.

Some judges who drew no opponents fared poorly.

Circuit Judge Margarita Esquiroz fared the worst of any sitting judge, with 43 percent of 898 respondents finding her unqualified. She did not return calls seeking comment by deadline.

About 30 percent of 494 respondents found Circuit Judge Spencer Eig unqualified as a judge, 46 percent found him qualified and 24 percent found him exceptionally qualified. Eig was slated to be challenged by attorney Roniel Rodriguez, but Rodriguez pulled out of the race at the last minute under pressure from the Cuban American Bar Association.

Of 222 respondents, 41 percent found Maria Sampedro-Iglesia unqualified. She drew no opponent and is slated to take a vacant circuit judgeship. She did not return calls seeking comment by deadline.

Circuit Judge Douglas Chumbley had the highest exceptionally qualified rating among four judges seeking re-election. County Judge Norma Shepard Lindsey had the highest negative rating among challenged incumbents with a 24 percent unqualified rating.

As in past years, candidates who didn't fare well in the polls say the low number of respondents does

Segarra's poll found him unqualified to be a judge, for example. He is running against Migna Sanchez-Llorens for an open circuit judgeship.

By contrast, 32 percent of respondents ranked her as unqualified. About 36 percent rated her as qualified. And 31 percent said she was exceptionally qualified.

"I am disappointed that only 253 out of more than 10,000 attorneys practicing in Miami-Dade County responded," Segarra said. Despite his low rating, Segarra said he found the poll a valuable asset.

"I think they are great to have. They are part of the democracy, and I think people should be allowed to have an opinion about their colleagues and other members of the bar," he said. "I just wish more people responded."

Sanchez-Llorens said she hoped the Bar poll ratings "prevail on August 26."

"I'm excited. It's humbling to consider, since my background has been with the public defender's office, which limits the number of attorneys I'm in contact with on a daily basis," said Sanchez-Llorens, an assistant public defender running against Segarra.

Coral Gables solo practitioner Ricardo Corona, who is running for an open seat against Miami-Dade Circuit general counsel Abby Cynamon, echoed Segarra's opinions, adding that such polls have a lot to do with areas of practice.

"I don't think at 216 voters that would be representative of the whole profession," he said. "I don't think they [the bar polls] are representative of the profession as a whole."

Cynamon was understandably bullish about the poll. She received the best ratings of the judicial candidates, with 24 percent rating her unqualified, 44 percent said she was qualified and 31 percent rated her exceptionally qualified.

"I'm incredibly pleased and gratified that three out of every four people voting found me qualified to serve the public as a judge."

Some candidates, like Assistant State Attorney Jorge E. Cueto, had middle-of-the-road results. Of the 238 who voiced an opinion, 24 percent rated him exceptional, about 45 percent found him qualified, and 31 percent found him unqualified.

Only 12 percent of 248 respondents found his opponent, Josie Perez Velis, exceptionally qualified, while 51 percent found her unqualified. Her office phone line was not accepting calls Monday.

Cueto was happy but uncertain about the significance of the poll results and took them as a referendum on the work he has ahead of him.

"I don't know about these polls. I don't know how many people really know you," he said.

With the judicial campaign hurtling toward a conclusion in the heat of the summer, candidates like Cueto are hitting the campaign trail harder.

"Hey, if there are three cockroaches who want to hear me talk, I'm there," he said.

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