

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2017

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SENATE BILL DRS15324-MMY-145B

Short Title: Judicial Vacancy Sunshine Amendment.

(Public)

Sponsors: Senators Daniel, Newton, and Randleman (Primary Sponsors).

Referred to:

1 A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
2 AN ACT TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION OF NORTH CAROLINA TO PROVIDE FOR
3 A NONPARTISAN JUDICIAL MERIT COMMISSION FOR THE NOMINATION AND
4 RECOMMENDATION OF NOMINEES WHEN FILLING VACANCIES IN THE OFFICE
5 OF JUSTICE OR JUDGE OF THE GENERAL COURT OF JUSTICE AND TO MAKE
6 OTHER CONFORMING CHANGES TO THE CONSTITUTION.

7 The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

8 SECTION 1. Article IV of the North Carolina Constitution is amended by adding a
9 new section to read:

10 "**Sec. 23. Merit selection; judicial vacancies.**

11 (1) All vacancies occurring in the offices of Justice or Judge of the General Court of
12 Justice shall be filled as provided in this section. Appointees shall hold their places until the next
13 election following the election for members of the General Assembly held after the appointment
14 occurs, when elections shall be held to fill those offices. When the vacancy occurs on or after the
15 sixtieth day before the next election for members of the General Assembly and the term would
16 expire on December 31 of that same year, the Chief Justice shall appoint to fill that vacancy for
17 the unexpired term of the office.

18 (2) In filling any vacancy in the office of Justice or Judge of the General Court of Justice,
19 individuals shall be nominated on merit by the people of the State to fill that vacancy. In a manner
20 prescribed by law, the Nonpartisan Judicial Merit Commission shall receive nominations from
21 the people of the State and provide for evaluation of each nominee without regard to the
22 nominee's partisan affiliation, but rather with respect to whether that nominee is qualified or not
23 qualified to fill the vacant office, as prescribed by law. The evaluation of each nominee of the
24 people of the State shall be forwarded to the General Assembly, as prescribed by law. The
25 General Assembly shall recommend at least two nominees for each vacancy to the Governor. For
26 each vacancy, within 10 days after the nominees are presented, the Governor shall appoint the
27 nominee deemed best qualified to serve from the nominees recommended by the General
28 Assembly.

29 (3) The Nonpartisan Judicial Merit Commission shall consist of no more than nine
30 members whose appointments shall be allocated between the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court,
31 the Governor, and the General Assembly, as prescribed by law. The General Assembly may, by
32 general law, provide for the establishment of local merit commissions for the nomination of
33 judges of the Superior and District Court.

34 (4) If the Governor fails to make an appointment within 10 days after the nominees are
35 presented by the General Assembly, the General Assembly shall elect, in joint session and by a



1 majority of the members of each chamber present and voting, an appointee to fill the vacancy in
2 a manner prescribed by law.

3 (5) If the General Assembly has adjourned sine die or for more than 30 days jointly as
4 provided under Section 20 of Article II of this Constitution, the Chief Justice shall have the
5 authority to appoint a qualified individual to fill a vacant office of Justice or Judge of the General
6 Court of Justice if any of the following apply:

7 (a) The vacancy occurs during the period of adjournment.

8 (b) The General Assembly adjourned without presenting nominees to the
9 Governor as required under subsection (2) of this section or failed to elect a
10 nominee as required under subsection (4) of this section.

11 (c) The Governor failed to appoint a recommended nominee under subsection (2)
12 of this section.

13 (6) Any appointee by the Chief Justice shall have the same powers and duties as any other
14 Justice or Judge of the General Court of Justice, when duly assigned to hold court in an interim
15 capacity and shall serve until the earlier of:

16 (a) Appointment by the Governor.

17 (b) Election by the General Assembly.

18 (c) The first day of January succeeding the next election of the members of the
19 General Assembly, and such election shall include the office for which the
20 appointment was made.

21 However, no appointment by the Governor or election by the General Assembly may occur after
22 an election, as prescribed by law, to fill the vacancy has commenced."

23 **SECTION 2.** Section 10 of Article IV of the North Carolina Constitution reads as
24 rewritten:

25 "**Sec. 10. District Courts.**

26 (1) The General Assembly shall, from time to time, divide the State into a convenient
27 number of local court districts and shall prescribe where the District Courts shall sit, but a District
28 Court must sit in at least one place in each county. District Judges shall be elected for each district
29 for a term of four years, in a manner prescribed by law. When more than one District Judge is
30 authorized and elected for a district, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court shall designate one
31 of the judges as Chief District Judge. Every District Judge shall reside in the district for which
32 he is elected.

33 (2) For each county, the senior regular resident Judge of the Superior Court serving the
34 county shall appoint from nominations submitted by the Clerk of the Superior Court of the
35 county, one or more Magistrates who shall be officers of the District Court. The initial term of
36 appointment for a magistrate shall be for two years and subsequent terms shall be for four years.

37 (3) The number of District Judges and Magistrates shall, from time to time, be determined
38 by the General Assembly. ~~Vacancies in the office of District Judge shall be filled for the~~
39 ~~unexpired term in a manner prescribed by law.~~ Vacancies in the office of Magistrate shall be
40 filled for the unexpired term in the manner provided for original appointment to the office, unless
41 otherwise provided by the General Assembly."

42 **SECTION 3.** Section 18 of Article IV of the North Carolina Constitution is amended
43 by adding a new subsection to read:

44 "(3) Vacancies. All vacancies occurring in the office of District Attorney shall be filled by
45 appointment of the Governor, and the appointees shall hold their places until the next election
46 for members of the General Assembly that is held more than 60 days after the vacancy occurs,
47 when elections shall be held to fill the offices. When the unexpired term in which a vacancy has
48 occurred expires on the first day of January succeeding the next election for members of the
49 General Assembly, the Governor shall appoint to fill that vacancy for the unexpired term of the
50 office."

51 **SECTION 4.** Section 19 of Article IV of the North Carolina Constitution is repealed.

1 SECTION 5. Subsection (5) of Section 22 of Article II of the North Carolina
2 Constitution reads as rewritten:

3 "(5) Other exceptions. Every bill:

- 4 (a) In which the General Assembly makes an appointment or appointments to
5 public office and which contains no other matter;
- 6 (b) Revising the senate districts and the apportionment of Senators among those
7 districts and containing no other matter;
- 8 (c) Revising the representative districts and the apportionment of Representatives
9 among those districts and containing no other matter;~~or~~
- 10 (d) Revising the districts for the election of members of the House of
11 Representatives of the Congress of the United States and the apportionment
12 of Representatives among those districts and containing no other
13 ~~matter,matter;~~
- 14 (e) Recommending a nominee or nominees to fill a vacancy in the office of Justice
15 and Judge of the General Court of Justice, in accordance with Section 23 of
16 Article IV of this Constitution; or
- 17 (f) Electing a nominee or nominees to fill a vacancy in the office of Justice or
18 Judge of the General Court of Justice, in accordance with Section 23 of Article
19 IV of this Constitution.

20 shall be read three times in each house before it becomes law and shall be signed by the presiding
21 officers of both houses."

22 SECTION 6. The amendments set out in Sections 1 through 5 of this act shall be
23 submitted to the qualified voters of the State at a statewide general election to be held in
24 November of 2018, which election shall be conducted under the laws then governing elections
25 in the State. Ballots, voting systems, or both may be used in accordance with Chapter 163A of
26 the General Statutes. The question to be used in the voting systems and ballots shall be:

27 "[] FOR [] AGAINST

28 Implement a nonpartisan merit-based system that relies on professional qualifications
29 instead of political influence when nominating Justices and judges to be selected to fill vacancies
30 that occur between judicial elections."

31 SECTION 7. If a majority of the votes cast on the question are in favor of the
32 amendment set out in Sections 1 through 5 of this act, the Bipartisan State Board of Elections
33 and Ethics Enforcement shall certify the amendment to the Secretary of State, who shall enroll
34 the amendment so certified among the permanent records of that office. The amendment becomes
35 effective upon certification and applies to vacancies occurring on or after the date of the general
36 election.

37 SECTION 8. Except as otherwise provided, this act is effective when it becomes
38 law.