



DeSantis appoints third Florida Supreme Court justice, completing conservative makeover

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John Kennedy

The appointments shift the court away from a liberal-leaning majority.

TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Ron DeSantis made his third selection Tuesday to a reshaped Florida Supreme Court with the appointment of longtime Republican legal counsel Carlos Muniz.

Muniz, 49, most recently served as general counsel to U.S. Education Department Secretary Betsy DeVos, an appointee of President Donald Trump, and formerly was chief of staff to former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi.

The naming of Muniz, who has never been a judge, follows DeSantis' selection of Justices Barbara Lagoa and Robert Luck over the past two weeks. They'll fill vacancies left by the mandatory retirements at age 70 of Justices Barbara Pariente, Fred Lewis and Peggy Quince, the seven-member court's last appointees by a Democratic governor.

Lagoa, 51, and Luck, 39, both served on the 3rd District Court of Appeal in South Florida. Given their ages, the three new justices could shape the direction of the court for years to come.

"I wanted someone with a top-flight intellect, and with Carlos, we have found that justice," DeSantis said, standing next to his latest appointee outside the Governor's Mansion.

Muniz, who earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia before attending Yale Law School, first came to Tallahassee in 2001 to serve as a deputy general counsel under then-Gov. Jeb Bush, where his immediate boss was current Justice Charles Canady.

Muniz also served as a deputy chief-of-staff and counsel under Republican Florida House speakers, including Marco Rubio. And he's worked in private practice and for a state agency.

"One of the great things about going through a process like this is being reminded about how many people really care about you and want the best for you, regardless of the outcome," Muniz said.

Along with his Republican credentials has come controversy. He was an adviser to Bondi when she chose not to pursue any state legal action against Trump University, the real estate seminar associated with the president that was subject to widespread consumer complaints.

His work with DeVos, whose family is a major donor to organizations supporting school choice initiatives in Florida and around the country, has been criticized by Democrats, but melds with the approach of the new governor, who this week pledged to expand the state's tax credit scholarship program.

DeSantis also opened the door Tuesday for the Legislature to consider measures that could bring the issue of private school vouchers back before the new-look Supreme Court, which is now stocked with more conservative judges. In 2006 the Supreme Court overturned as unconstitutional Bush's first-in-the-nation, statewide voucher program, but DeSantis said it may be time for the court to review that ruling.

"If you look at how Florida's educational options have developed since then ... in some ways, it may just be obsolete," DeSantis said of the court's 5-2 ruling, in which the now-retired Pariente, Lewis and Quince were part of the majority.

Florida Democratic Party Chair Terrie Rizzo blasted Muniz's selection.

"From his appointment it's clear that Ron DeSantis has not respect for the rule of the law, and is seeking to stack the courts with his political allies," Rizzo said.

In pointing out that no black nominees were among a list of 11 finalists for the three openings — making it the first time in 36 years that there will be no black justice — Rizzo said her party was ready for many confrontations with DeSantis.

"From equal access to free quality public education to women's ability to make personal decisions about their own bodies, Democrats will stand up to the governor's offensive to dismantle hard-fought civil rights," she added.

Republican officials, however, praised Muniz's selection.

"As I have said with each of Gov. DeSantis's selections, it is important that we have well-qualified justices who are committed to the rule of law," said Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody.

"With all three selections, Gov. DeSantis has appointed highly-qualified, high-character individuals," she added.

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