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Kansas to have say on electing Supreme Court. Who's behind, against vote?

BY KACEN BAYLESS kbayless@kcstar.com

When Kansas voters head to the ballot box on Aug. 4, they will be tasked with a monumental decision over whether the state's Supreme Court justices should be elected.

The high-stakes choice comes more than a year after the Kansas Legislature, with firm GOP majorities, placed a constitutional amendment on the ballot asking voters if they want to directly elect the court's seven justices.

The vote sets the stage for a grueling summer of campaigns and advertisements over whether voters should insert partisan politics into the judiciary. At the core of the election is the state's protracted fight over abortion as Republican lawmakers seek to clamp down on a court that protected access.

A chorus of Republicans, such as Attorney General Kris Kobach, and conservative organizations, like Americans for Prosperity-Kansas, have backed the proposal, arguing that it would allow voters to have a direct say in how justices are chosen. Republicans have long attempted to cast the Kansas Supreme Court as too liberal.

"Voters will now get to decide whether to reclaim the right to vote for justices, which they enjoyed from statehood until 1958," Kobach said in a statement after the measure's passage last year.

Over the weekend, a coalition of opponents launched a campaign opposing the measure. The campaign, called Kansas United for Impartial Courts, warns that electing justices would politicize the court and result in bitter, money-fueled judicial races.

The proposal would allow justices to make political contributions, take part in political campaigns and hold office in — or lead — political parties.

"The proposed amendment, pushed by billionaire political donors, threatens a complete overhaul of our Court, allowing tens of millions of dollars of outside money to determine who sits on the bench," retired Supreme Court Justice Carol Beier said in a statement supporting the opposition campaign.

The proposed amendment would clear a path for Republicans to assemble a new, anti-abortion majority on the court after a landmark 2019 decision that protected reproductive rights. The proposal marks another tool for Republicans to

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