

Lisa Gamoian holds slim lead over Rachel Hill in Fresno County judge race

By Pablo Lopez

Lisa Gamoian SPECIAL TO THE BEE

The lone judicial race in Fresno County — on record as the costliest, nastiest and most hard-fought ever — was sizing up Tuesday night to be a close contest with no clear winner in sight.

With all 577 precincts counted, Fresno prosecutor Lisa Gamoian had 51.09% of the vote while Fresno attorney Rachel Hill had 48.47%.

The race is far from over. There still are thousands of absentee and provisional ballots to be counted.

But the count so far put a smile on Gamoian's face. She told her supporters at the downtown Fresno Deputy Sheriff's Association: "You only need to win by one."

Gamoian, who lead throughout the night, said the election was like a jury trial: "You put on your best evidence and wait for a verdict."

"The jury is the public. It's up to them right now," she said.

Hill held her election party at the Elbow Room in Fresno's Fig Garden. She said she was pleased with her strategy for getting elected: "We ran a strong campaign. We ran a clean campaign. I feel very good about it."

Hill also said she was "blown away" by her supporters. "It's been incredibly enriching," she said. "I have friends for life that I didn't have before and renewed the friendships I already have."

Gamoian and Hill are battling to replace Judge Robert Oliver, who is retiring from the Superior Court bench after nearly 20 years of service. The term is for six years. The position pays about \$178,000 a year.

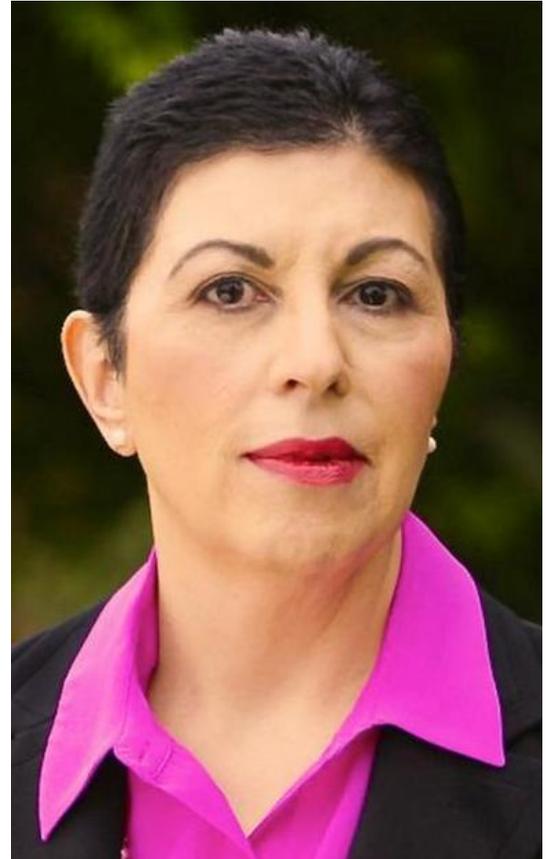
The two candidates are like salt and pepper.

Gamoian, 56 and single, was born in Selma and is a lifelong resident of Fresno County. In addition to being a prosecutor, Gamoian said she operates her family's 40-acre farm in Selma. She ran a tough, aggressive campaign that included attacks on Hill's credentials and calling her "a liberal activist jurist who will legislate from the bench."

Her ads also said Hill "does not share our values and beliefs."

Hill, 51, was born in New York and came to Fresno in 1990 and is married to Fresno County Superior Court Judge Jonathan Skiles. She has worked in the legal field for the past 24 years, including as a professor at the San Joaquin College of Law, teaching criminal and juvenile law.

She responded to her opponent's attacks by citing the California Judicial Conduct Handbook and statements from Fresno Police Jerry Dyer and District Attorney-elect Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp, who condemned Gamoian's



tactics.

Hill and Gamoian are in a face-off after outpolling three other candidates in the June primary. Gamoian was the top vote-getter with 34.4% of the vote; Hill had 28.9%.

Both sides have spent profusely on billboards and on radio, television and newspaper ads, as well as on political mailers and campaign signs. As of late October, Hill had received more than \$422,000 in contributions; Gamoian had received more than \$417,000, election records state.

Leading up to the election, Hill touted her diverse credentials that include 10 years as a Fresno prosecutor, six years as a criminal defense lawyer, four years with the Fresno law firm of McCormick Barstow and two years as an adjunct law professor. Her supporters say that breadth of experience will allow her to bring a more balanced approach to the bench.

Her endorsements include the majority of judges on the Fresno County bench (including Oliver), the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, Fresno and Clovis city firefighters and former Fresno Mayor Alan Autry. She also received endorsements from two candidates who lost in the June primary — Fresno prosecutor Jarrett Cline and administrative law Judge Steve Smith. The third candidate, Charles Magill, declined to endorse Gamoian or Hill.

Her biggest financial supporter is Fresno developer Darius Assemi, who gave her more than \$130,000, election records show.

Gamoian, who has worked for the Fresno County District Attorney's Office for 24 years, billed herself as Fresno's No. 1 homicide prosecutor. Her supporters say she is tough and has no problem putting offenders behind bars for life or on California's death row.

Her endorsements include the Fresno Police Officers' Association, Fresno Deputy Sheriff's Association and other law enforcement unions, as well as Sheriff Margaret Mims, former Sheriff Steve Magarian and county Supervisors Henry Perea, Debbie Poochigian, Judy Case McNairy and Phil Larson.

Fresno developer Ed Kashian, Gamoian's uncle, has donated at least \$230,000 to her campaign, more than half of her campaign funding.

The race is rare for voters because a vast majority of judges are appointed by the governor. And once appointed or elected to the bench, judges typically remain there until they retire or die.

Of the 21 Fresno County judges up for re-election this year, only Oliver's seat was up for grabs.

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