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N.J. Senate committee unanimously votes to keep Supreme Court justice on the bench

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A powerful group of New Jersey lawmakers unanimously voted Thursday to keep a state Supreme Court justice on the bench, paving the way for him to be approved by the full Senate.

All 11 members of the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to give Faustino Fernandez-Vina a “lifetime appointment,” which actually ends at the mandatory retirement age of 70. Justices on New Jersey’s top court serve a seven-year term before lawmakers re-consider their tenure.

“I would be honored to continue serving our state,” Fernandez-Vina told the committee. His job was to make sure lawmakers' intentions were realized when ruling on legislation, he said.

Fernandez-Vina was born in Cuba, and he invoked that country’s history and his parents' experience to note the importance of the rule of law, and to say how damaging it could be when “totalitarian regimes come into power with no regard for individual freedoms.”

A re-appointment will be relatively brief. Fernandez-Vina is 68, and his term will end in February 2022.

State Sen. Nicholas Scutari, D-Union, praised the justice’s work.

“Fernandez-Vina has proven to be a fair-minded and neutral jurist,” Scutari said in a statement, adding “we understand the importance of a diverse and balanced Supreme Court, so major decisions affecting our state can be decided free from political bias.”

The entire hearing lasted only about 15 minutes.

State Sen. Michael Doherty, R-Warren, spoke critically of some of the court’s past decisions about legislative districts, saying justices had allowed counties to be improperly carved up, but he and his colleagues were otherwise complimentary toward the justice before them.

Fernandez-Vina is a Republican. He gained early bipartisan support when he was first appointed by then-Gov. Chris Christie in 2013, and he was later approved by the Senate without a single “no” vote.