

Who's Running for 20th Circuit Court Judge in the August Primaries

By Sandy Parker | Sparker's Soapbox | Published 2026-06-20

The 20th Judicial Circuit covers Lee, Charlotte, Collier, Glades, and Hendry counties, and two seats on the 20th Circuit Court are on the ballot in the August 18, 2026, primary election. For the Group 19 seat, incumbent Judge James Stewart faces challenger Vera Bergermann. For the Group 27 seat, incumbent Judge Amanda Levy-Reis faces challenger Ryan Kuhl. Both incumbents were appointed to the bench by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2025 and are seeking their first elected terms. These are nonpartisan races, so all registered voters in the 20th Judicial Circuit are eligible to vote, regardless of party affiliation.

Several other 20th Circuit Court judges were unopposed and therefore deemed elected: Trent Reichling (Group 9), Andrew Marcus (Group 11), Amy Hawthorne (Group 16), Chris Brown (Group 17), Rachel Spring Loukonen (Group 23), Michael T. McHugh (Group 25), and Darrell Hill (Group 32).

For background on the Florida Courts system, please visit [The Judicial Branch: A Soapbox Primer](#) on Sparker's Soapbox.

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What Makes a Good Judge?

Judicial races differ from races for legislative or executive office. Judges are not elected to make policy or advocate for particular positions. Instead, they are responsible for interpreting and applying the law fairly and impartially. As a result, judicial candidates often have fewer opportunities than other candidates to discuss their qualifications, judicial philosophy, courtroom experience, and approach to the role.

Voters can learn about judicial candidates by reviewing court website biographies, reading news coverage, checking bar association performance evaluations where available, and reviewing any [Voluntary Self-Disclosure Statements](#) candidates have filed with the Florida Bar.

The [Florida Bar's Benchmarks program](#) — an initiative of the Florida Bar's Constitutional Judiciary Committee — identifies the following considerations for evaluating judicial candidates:

- Legal education and areas of legal practice — breadth and type of legal experience

- Years of legal practice — depth of experience in the law
- Trial and judicial experience — hands-on courtroom and bench experience
- Knowledge of legal principles and procedures — ability to interpret and apply law to specific factual situations
- Temperament — demeanor, fairness, and conduct in the courtroom
- Administrative skills — ability to manage complex dockets and move cases to efficient resolution
- Integrity and character — honesty and truthfulness above reproach; the keystone of the judicial system
- Commitment to justice — demonstrated effort to improve the quality of justice for all citizens

To help voters learn more about the candidates seeking election to the 20th Judicial Circuit Court, I invited all candidates to complete a questionnaire. Their responses are shared in full so that voters can evaluate each candidate in his/her own words.

Group 19: James Stewart vs. Vera Bergermann

James Stewart

Background

James F. Stewart, age 43, was born and raised in Michigan. He earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science with a minor in Spanish from the University of Michigan in 2004 and a Juris Doctor from Northeastern University School of Law in 2007. He spent more than 17 years as an Assistant State Attorney for the 20th Judicial Circuit. In 2022, he became Deputy Chief Assistant State Attorney, leading the Collier County office, where he supervised more than 40 employees, trained and mentored prosecutors, and tried many high-profile cases, including homicides. He handled more than 100 jury trials over the course of his career. Governor Ron DeSantis appointed him to the 20th Circuit bench in 2025. He currently presides over circuit civil cases — General Civil, including Foreclosure — in Collier County. ([website](#); [20th Circuit profile](#))

His bar service includes serving as a Director of the Collier County Bar Association and the Collier County Bar Foundation, a member of the Michael R.N. McDonnell Chapter of the American Inns of Court, and current Vice Chair of the Florida Bar Constitutional Judiciary Committee. In 2023, he was appointed by the Florida Supreme Court to the Committee on Standard Jury Instructions in Criminal Cases. He volunteers for Mock Trial competitions at local high schools and law schools. ([website](#); [20th Circuit profile](#))

His campaign website states: “Judge Stewart believes that public trust in the justice system is strengthened when the law is applied equally, consistently, and without bias. He recognizes that appearing in court is often one of the most challenging moments in a person’s life. With that understanding, Judge Stewart is committed to treating every individual with dignity and respect, ensuring each person has a meaningful opportunity to be heard and receive a prompt and efficient resolution to their case.” ([website](#))

Candidate Questionnaire

- [Mr. Stewart’s Questionnaire](#)

Website and Social Media

- **Website:** keepjudgestewart.com
- **Facebook:** facebook.com/profile.php?id=61588190258783

Endorsements

Judge Stewart’s endorsers include State Attorney Amira Fox, Public Defender Kathleen Smith, Collier County Sheriff Kevin Rambosk, Lee County Sheriff Carmine Marceno, Charlotte County Sheriff Bill Prummell, Hendry County Sheriff Steve Whidden, Glades County Sheriff David Hardin, Naples Police Chief Ciro Dominguez, Lee County Clerk of Court Kevin Karnes, Charlotte County Clerk of Court Roger Eaton, and former 20th Judicial Circuit State Attorney Stephen B. Russell. ([website](#))

Vera Bergermann

Background

Vera Bergermann, age 68, has practiced law for more than 45 years. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with high honors from the University of Michigan, a Juris Doctor from Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and an M.S. in Taxation from Widener University. She began her legal career in 1979 as a summer intern with the State’s Attorney’s Office in Chicago, working in the Juvenile Division and the Homicide Unit. She later worked as a corporate staff attorney negotiating and drafting complex contracts for major technology and telecommunications companies — including ITT, Northern Telecom, UNISYS, and General Electric — handling regulatory matters, taxation, and customs disputes. After opening her own tax practice, she relocated to Fort Myers in 1992. She was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1994 and became a family law mediator in 1996. She founded Bergermann Law Firm in 1996 and has since practiced family law across Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry, and DeSoto counties. Her extensive trial experience is entirely before judges, as jury trials are not allowed under Florida family law. She has been a member of the Illinois Bar since 1980. ([website](#))

Her professional affiliations include serving as president of the Lee County Association for Women Lawyers and the Association of Family Law Professionals, and as a member of the Florida Bar Grievance Committee. ([website](#))

Her campaign website states: “Vera Bergermann believes a judge must be fair, prepared, and guided by the law — not personal agendas. With decades of experience as both an advocate and a family law mediator, she understands the profound impact judicial decisions have on families, businesses, and the broader community.” ([website](#))

Candidate Questionnaire

- [Ms. Bergermann’s Questionnaire](#)

Website and Social Media

- **Website:** [veraforjudge.com](#)
- **Facebook:** [facebook.com/veraforjudge](#)
- **Instagram:** [instagram.com/veraforjudge](#)

Endorsements

Ms. Bergermann has stated that she does not accept endorsements and that this is a principle of her judicial campaign.

Campaign Finance

Both candidates combined personal loans with outside fundraising. Bergermann’s total funds of \$161,025 include a net personal loan of \$150,000 and \$11,025 in outside contributions from 32 donors. Stewart’s total funds of \$141,009 include a \$75,936 personal loan, \$59,203 in monetary contributions, and \$5,870 in in-kind contributions from a combined 190 donors.

Geographically, Stewart’s outside contributions came primarily from Collier County (57 percent) and Lee County (18 percent), with 14 percent from elsewhere in Florida and 6 percent from out of state.

Bergermann’s outside contributions came primarily from Lee County (60 percent) and elsewhere in Florida (30 percent), with 6 percent from Charlotte County, 2 percent from Collier County, and 1 percent from out of state. Neither candidate received contributions from Hendry or Glades counties.

Both candidates drew primarily from legal-industry sources. Stewart received \$4,500 in PAC contributions from five political committees, including Friends of Carmine Marceno (Lee County Sheriff) and Friends of Amira Fox (State Attorney, 20th Circuit); Bergermann received no PAC contributions.

Group 27: Amanda Levy-Reis vs. Ryan Kuhl

Amanda Levy-Reis

Background

Amanda Levy-Reis, 45, is a lifelong Southwest Florida resident who grew up in Bonita Springs, attending Spring Creek Elementary School and Bonita Springs Middle School before graduating near the top of her class from Estero High School. She majored in Sociology at Stetson University, graduating with honors, and earned her law degree cum laude from Stetson College of Law. Her legal career spans more than 20 years and includes more than a decade as a staff attorney for the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Fort Myers Division, where she drafted thousands of judicial orders. She later served in the Eastern District of California, helping establish a new magistrate judge's chambers. She also practiced commercial civil litigation at a mid-size, local law firm, served as a traffic court hearing officer in Lee and Hendry counties, and, immediately before her judicial appointment, worked at Florida Rural Legal Services as a legal aid attorney representing the underserved in family law cases and recruiting attorneys in private practice to assist legal aid clients in pro bono cases. Governor Ron DeSantis appointed her to the 20th Circuit bench; her service began Apr. 21, 2025. She currently presides over Unified Family Court, domestic relations, civil domestic violence, and probate cases in Collier County. ([website](#); [20th Circuit profile](#))

Her professional affiliations include serving as president of the Southwest Florida Federal Court Bar Association, a Master of the Calusa Inn of Court, and a board member of the Lee County Chapter of Young Life. ([website](#); [20th Circuit profile](#))

Her campaign website describes her as “known for her strong commitment to the Constitution and her belief in limited judicial power,” adding that “a judge’s role is not to create policy but to faithfully interpret the law and uphold the Constitution’s clear boundaries.” ([website](#))

Candidate Questionnaire

- [Ms. Levy-Reis's Questionnaire](#)

Website and Social Media

- **Website:** judgelevyreis.com
- **Facebook:** facebook.com/Judgelevyreis
- **LinkedIn:** linkedin.com/in/amanda-levy-reis-a1bb7412

Endorsements

Judge Levy-Reis's endorsers include Collier County Sheriff Kevin Rambosk, Hendry County Sheriff Steve Whidden, Lee County Sheriff Carmine Marceno, retired Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott, Charlotte County Sheriff Bill Prummell, Glades County Sheriff David Hardin, and retired Judge Hugh Hayes, along with additional attorneys and community members listed on her campaign website. ([website](#))

Ryan Kuhl

Background

Ryan Kuhl, 53, earned a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Delaware in 1995 and a Juris Doctor cum laude from the University of Miami School of Law in 1999. He was admitted to the Arizona Bar in 1999, the Florida Bar in 2000, and the New York Bar in 2014. Early in his career, he served as a prosecuting attorney in Phoenix, Arizona, and later in Fort Myers, Florida. He subsequently became a partner in a multi-state law firm specializing in personal injury litigation, and has also practiced in insurance defense and FINRA arbitration. He has lived and practiced in Southwest Florida since 2003. Since 2012, he has been recognized by the Florida Bar as a Board Certified Civil Trial Attorney — an achievement held by a small percentage of attorneys statewide. In 2015, the Florida Supreme Court certified him as a Circuit Court Mediator. He holds an AV Preeminent peer-review rating from Martindale-Hubbell and is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA). ([website](#))

His campaign describes his approach as “a principled and even-handed approach to the bench” with “commitment to integrity, responsibility, and faithful application of the law — ensuring every case is decided fairly and on its merits.” ([website](#))

Website and Social Media

- **Website:** kuhlforjudge.com
- **Facebook:** facebook.com/kuhlforjudge
- **Instagram:** instagram.com/kuhlforjudge

Endorsements

No endorsements were listed on his campaign website as of May 24, 2026.

Candidate Questionnaire

- [Mr. Kuhl's Questionnaire](#)

Campaign Finance

Both candidates combined personal loans with outside fundraising. Levy-Reis's total funds of \$179,964 include a \$100,000 personal loan, \$78,334 in monetary contributions, and \$1,630 in in-kind contributions from a combined 171 donors. Kuhl's total funds of \$94,663 include a \$50,000 personal loan and \$44,663 in outside contributions from 65 donors.

Geographically, Levy-Reis's outside contributions came primarily from Collier County (57 percent) and Lee County (25 percent), with nine percent from out of state and seven percent from elsewhere in Florida. Kuhl's outside contributions came primarily from elsewhere in Florida (61 percent) and from out of state (16 percent), with 10 percent each from Lee County and Collier County. Neither candidate received contributions from Hendry or Glades counties.

Both candidates drew primarily from legal-industry sources. Seventy percent of Kuhl's outside contributions came from legal sources, 20 percent from other occupations, and six percent from retired individuals. Forty-three percent of Levy-Reis's came from legal sources, 30 percent from other occupations, 15 percent from retired individuals, and six percent from medical professionals. Levy-Reis received \$5,000 in PAC contributions from five political committees, including Friends of Amira Fox (State Attorney, 20th Circuit) and Southwest Florida Jobs Alliance; Kuhl received no PAC contributions.

In the News

- **Gov. DeSantis appoints Amanda Levy-Reis, James Stewart to 20th Circuit Court bench** ([Florida Politics](#), 3/14/25)
- **FRLS Attorney and Pro Bono Coordinator, Amanda Levy-Reis, appointed to serve as judge** ([Florida Rural Legal Services](#), 3/28/25)
- **Dozens of trial court races set for August primary** ([The Florida Bar News](#), 04/28/26)
- **Behind the bench: Meet the candidates running for judge in SW FL** (Fort Myers News-Press and [Naples Daily News](#), 6/12/26)