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No Way to Pick a Judge

Talk about cozy. As a member of the New York State Assembly, George Friedman sponsored a bill this summer creating a new state Supreme Court judgeship in the Bronx. Wearing a second hat as chairman of the regular Bronx Democratic Party organization, Mr. Friedman helped orchestrate the party's judicial convention, which met last week to nominate candidates for that new judgeship and two others at stake in the Bronx this November.

Now, guess who is going to be a judge? None other than Mr. Friedman. The convention, controlled by party leaders, chose him for one of the three coveted openings, virtually insuring his election in the overwhelmingly Democratic borough.

In terms of experience, temperament and political independence, there might well be better choices for the state's highest trial court than Mr. Friedman. As is often the case under New York's system of judicial elections, however, his ascension

to the bench is part of a larger political deal. This one cleared the way for Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer to install his own hand-picked candidate, Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez, as the new party chairman, succeeding Mr. Friedman.

Mr. Friedman, not incidentally, conveniently kept his judicial ambitions in check until after his name was already on the ballot for re-election to the Assembly. The timing means that party insiders — not voters — will now get to choose his replacement, in effect choosing the next assemblyman.

Like Representative José Serrano, who waged a losing race for the party chairmanship, Mr. Ferrer and Mr. Ramirez now pledge to democratize the party and introduce a merit screening process that would, presumably, place a higher value on important judgeships, which are too often treated as golden parachutes for party loyalists. Too bad they did not think of that sooner.