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Nomination of Roberts as Chief Justice Shrewd Political Move, Says Illinois Wesleyan Political Scientist

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. -- President Bush's decision to nominate John Roberts to replace the late William Rehnquist as chief justice of the Supreme Court was a shrewd political move, according to Illinois Wesleyan political scientist Tari Renner.

Bush announced Monday that Roberts, who was about to begin Congressional hearings as the replacement for Sandra Day O'Connor as an associate justice, would be his choice to succeed Rehnquist who died on Saturday (Sept. 3).

"The president's popularity has been falling steadily and his political capital is declining," said Renner, who is chair of the political science department at Illinois Wesleyan. "This move will be an effort to avoid a huge fight for the chief justice. He just doesn't have any political capital to expend on a bitter fight at this moment."

Renner believes that all signs have been pointing to a comparatively easy confirmation for Roberts as an associate justice.

"Roberts will still be grilled by Democrats on the committee, but it's been pretty clear that he was seen as acceptable by a large number of people inside the Washington beltway," said Renner. "Although they may disagree with him, there was clearly the recognition that he has a very, very good legal mind,"

Renner thinks a nomination for O'Connor's successor may not come until late in the fall, perhaps not even until December. O'Connor has said that she will remain until her successor is named.

"Given how low the president's popularity is at the moment, if he were to follow immediately with an explosive nominee for O'Connor's spot, there would not only be a heated debate but some chance the nominee would be defeated," said Renner.

The decision to alter the Roberts' nomination to fill Rehnquist's position gives the Bush White House "some breathing room" amid the crises confronting the president, said Renner.

"The White House is in trouble, and they know it," Renner said. "Even before Hurricane Katrina, the polls were showing steadily declining popularity for the past six months. We were also beginning to get some stepped-up criticism, some quiet and some not so quiet, from within the Republican Party over the situation in Iraq."

"Except in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the Bush White House has not felt this kind of heat, and they don't have a lot of experience figuring out how to rebound."

To discuss the Roberts nomination with Renner, contact either Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.



Tari Renner