

Power player: Female judge makes history

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During Tulane Law School's intersession boot camp for law students, Chief Judge Sarah Vance of U.S. District Court in New Orleans listens as a student argues a motion. Vance is the first woman to chair the powerful U.S. Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation. (Photo by Digital Roux Photography)

The hearings that U.S. District Judge Sarah Vance of New Orleans presides over on Dec. 4 will focus on some of the testiest legal disputes in the country.

They involve suits over the antidepressant Cymbalta filed against manufacturer Eli Lilly in 15 states; litigation stemming from a security breach of Home Depot's

customer data; complaints about Whole Foods' marketing of Greek yogurt; and a fight embroiling major telephone carriers MCI, AT&T, Sprint and QWEST that spans 19 states.

Vance, who earned her law degree from Tulane University in 1978, holds one of the most powerful positions in the judiciary as chair of the [U.S. Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation](#).

Vioxx. Faulty Ford ignition switches. Chinese drywall. Pelvic mesh implants. Facebook's IPO. Even Family Dollar Stores' employment practices. Most of the country's big suits, involving thousands of claims filed in multiple states, land in the MDL.

Its seven judges determine whether to consolidate cases before a single federal judge for pretrial proceedings. The key considerations are whether the claims have enough common ground and would be unmanageable if left in separate courts all over the country.

"It's a very interesting process, and it's become integral to how complex litigation is handled" in the United States, said Vance, the first woman to head the panel.

The panel doesn't decide the merits of any of the cases, but its rulings influence how litigation plays out and how much of courts' and litigants' resources are consumed.

"Some of the most important cases in the country have been centralized by the panel," Vance said. The goal is to allow sprawling legal proceedings to be conducted in a way that is more convenient and efficient for the litigants.

She has received several assignments from the MDL; most recently she's been overseeing all the pretrial work in a major antitrust case involving more than 30 class actions.

Linda P. Campbell is director of communications for the Tulane Law School.

“Some of the most important cases in the country have been centralized by the U.S. Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation.”—Judge Sarah Vance, chair of the panel