NEW ORLEANS - Bernette Johnson, whose white runoff opponent for a seat on the state Supreme Court bowed out rather than run a racially divisive campaign, was sworn in Wednesday as the first black woman elected to Louisiana's highest court.

Johnson, who spent 10 years as a judge on the Orleans Parish Civil District Court, replaced retired Supreme Court Justice Revis Ortique Jr., who became the first black elected to sit on the high court in 1992.

Ortique reached the mandatory retirement age of 70 last June, but he remained on the court by special appointment until his vacant seat was filled temporarily on Sept. 1 by state appellate court Judge Felicia Toney-Williams of Shreveport.

Johnson is not the first woman elected to serve on the high court. That distinction belongs to Justice Catherine "Kitty" Kimball of New Roads, who has sat on the court since January 1993.

"We've come so far in such a short period of time," state Attorney General Richardейoub, who has attended the inductions of Johnson, Kimball and Ortique, said during Johnson's swearing-in ceremony at the Supreme Court.

Johnson received 42 percent of the vote in the Oct. 1 primary and trailed state 4th Circuit Court of Appeal Judge Miriam Waltzer by seven percentage points heading into the scheduled Nov. 8 runoff.

Waltzer, who would have won the primary outright if she had received 889 more votes, withdrew from the race Oct. 7, saying race had become too much of an issue in the campaign.

A total of 83,840 votes were cast for the three candidates in the primary.

Johnson, Waltzer and 4th Circuit Court of Appeal Judge Charles R. Jones were running for a seat in a black-majority district.

The district was created in response to a 1986 lawsuit which challenged the practice of electing two Supreme Court justices from a white-majority district that combined Orleans Parish with the predominantly white parishes of Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines.

Johnson also defended her record and said she earned a spot on the high court.

"I'm not a new judge. I have a track record," she said. "A lot of people don't know me. They don't know what I've done in the community."

Orleans Civil District Judge Louis DiRosa called Johnson "a very special, eminent and outstanding jurist."

"You are indeed a beacon of hope for us all," said Clyde Ramirez, past president of the Hispanic Lawyers Association.

LSU Law School Chancellor Winston Day said that in January 1969 Johnson and another student became the first black women to graduate from the school.

"We are moving in the right direction," Day said of Johnson's election to the high court.

Ortique called Johnson "an advocate of the poor."

"Thank you for being a role model," she told Ortique.