

* * *

NEW JUDGESHIPS, measure to streamline civil suits approved by Congress.

In votes largely overlooked as lawmakers scrambled to pass a budget, Congress late Saturday voted to send 85 additional judges to areas with heavy drug-related caseloads. Of the 74 new trial-bench seats, 11 will go to Texas, eight to California and five each to New York and Pennsylvania. Eleven appellate judgeships were authorized. The additions will increase the total number of federal judges to 820 from 735, not counting the nine justices of the Supreme Court.

The new judicial posts will give President Bush an unusual opportunity to put conservatives on the federal bench in addition to those he nominates to replace judges who quit or die. But most Democrats backed the legislation because of concern about steadily increasing caseloads in many parts of the country.

The Civil Justice Reform Act of 1990 is designed to address courtroom logjams. It would force all federal trial courts to adopt a plan to reduce delays and expenses in civil suits, which are backed up for years in many jurisdictions.

Bowing to the federal judiciary, which had resisted what was seen as congressional intrusion into court management, lawmakers left the actual content of the reform plans up to the judges, with some exceptions.

In a pilot project, 10 jurisdictions around the country will have to base their plans on congressionally mandated principles, such as limiting pretrial investigative proceedings and setting early, firm trial dates shortly after suits are brought. The results of the pilot project will be assessed after three years.

The reforms will make the civil-justice system "less expensive, more efficient and more accessible for . . . middle-class Americans as well as Fortune 500 companies," said Sen. Joseph Biden (D., Del.), a leading sponsor.

* * *