

Analysis | **Litigators**

What It Takes to Make Partner as a Litigator in a Second Hundred Firm

With the release of the Second Hundred of the 2026 Am Law 200 rankings, we check in with newly minted litigation partners at those firms who participated in the Law.com's "How I Made It" series.

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(l-r) Fleming Ware, litigation shareholder at Vedder Price, Julie Simeone, litigation partner at Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, and Elisabeth Arko, appellate and legal issues partner at Tucker Ellis.

With this week's release of the full 2026 Am Law 200 rankings, attention is once again on the Second Hundred—that group of firms sitting just outside the industry's largest and most profitable tier. My Law.com colleague Brenda Sapino Jeffreys observes that those firms—[ranked 101 to 200](#) by gross revenue—[continue to grow](#), even as the financial and strategic gap between them and the Am Law 100 widens. In that environment, partnership decisions carry weight, both for firms

managing compensation pressure and for litigators navigating what advancement looks like when the economics project to get even tighter.

Each year around this time, I dig into [Law.com's "How I Made It" series](#) to get a window into how that partnership path is actually playing out. Over the past year, three litigators who recently made partner or shareholder at Second Hundred firms shared candid reflections on what mattered most in their advancement: **Fleming Ware**, [a litigation shareholder](#) in New York at **Vedder** (#123 on this year's list, which recently dropped "Price" from its name); **Julie Simeone**, [a litigation partner](#) in New York at **Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler** (#150); and **Elisabeth Arko**, an [appellate and legal issues partner](#) in Cleveland at Tucker Ellis (#194).

Taken together, their answers don't point to a single formula. But they do surface some consistent themes about how partnership is earned in this slice of the Am Law 200—particularly when it comes to internal visibility, adaptability and the confidence required to step into bigger roles.

Partnership as a Coalition-Building Exercise

One of the clearest through lines across the responses from these three was that making partner wasn't the product of a single champion or one defining case. Instead, each of these litigators emphasized the importance of building credibility with many people inside their firms.

Vedder's Ware described partnership as requiring a shift in how others see you on a day-to-day basis inside the firm. Beyond "doing the work well," she said, "making connections and being a real presence in the firm, such that junior attorneys can look to you for mentorship and guidance, is important to move from an associate role to partner." She traced her own path back to senior lawyers who pushed her to think expansively about relationships, crediting one partner with "giving me opportunities to handle legal tasks beyond my year, to pushing me to network, to ensuring that I connect with the right people at Vedder Price."

Arko framed internal support as a decisive factor in her making partner at Tucker Ellis. She said the firm takes "a holistic approach" to partnership decisions, looking at individual accomplishments, strengths, potential and goals. For her, that included deliberately expanding her internal footprint. "I spent a considerable amount of time ensuring that I diversified my practice and worked with partners in different offices and practice groups," Arko said. "Developing these relationships internally was instrumental when becoming partner as it allowed me to have many advocates and champions in the room."

At Patterson Belknap, Simeone also described internal sponsorship as a necessity. "You really can't do this alone," she said, reflecting on how trust and support from multiple partners shaped

both her work and her candidacy for partnership. “It is a privilege to have grown up at this firm and now be able to call these remarkable people my partners.”

All three consistently portrayed partnership not as a solitary achievement, but as a collective decision—one that depends on whether a lawyer has developed a broad base of trust inside firms that are large enough to require cross-office buy-in, but not so large that partner candidates can fly under the radar.

Deliberate Flexibility and Raising Your Hand

Another theme running through these conversations is flexibility—both in the type of work the litigators took on and in their willingness to step into unfamiliar roles.

Simeone tied her own advancement at Patterson Belknap to resisting early specialization and staying open to work across the firm. “Flexibility in taking on projects across a range of practice groups has been a crucial factor in my trajectory at the firm,” she said, noting that in a recent six-month stretch alone, her matters included law firm defense work, a qui tam action under the False Claims Act, product labeling litigation and an art law arbitration.

“People want to work with individuals who raise their hand and are willing to venture beyond their comfort zone,” she said. “That’s true for associates, counsel, partners and in most areas of life.”

Arko offered a cautionary counterpoint, warning that advancement can stall when lawyers become overly narrow, too early. “Many people allow themselves to become boxed in, either with the work that they are doing or the people they are working with, which I think stunts your growth and development,” she said. She added that internal relationships—especially early in a career—are “just as important as business development connections with clients.”

Rather than mapping out fixed practice identities, these partners described advancement as flowing from responsiveness—being useful where the firm needed them most and willing to stretch beyond initial expectations.

Confidence as a Learned Skill

A third notable thread was how openly these litigators discussed confidence not as an inherent trait, but as something developed over time.

Ware was candid about uncertainty playing a role in advancement. “There is certainly luck involved,” she said, advising associates to focus on becoming a “go-to” attorney while recognizing that internal reputation and client relationships take time to build.

For Simeone, confidence grew from learning not to let seniority dictate opportunities. Reflecting on an early chance at a prior firm to help out at trial that sat well beyond what her experience level might have suggested, she said, “I learned early on that my ‘class year’ did not have to dictate my opportunities if I was willing to put in the work.”

Arko, who balanced her legal career with parenting responsibilities, framed confidence as closely tied to intention. “My time is my greatest commodity,” she said. “I try not to spend it without intention.”

None of the three described a straight-line ascent fueled by certainty. Instead, they framed partnership as something earned by steadily stepping into discomfort, building trust inside the firm and letting confidence grow alongside responsibility.

As Second Hundred firms continue to expand—financially and structurally—the responses from these three suggest that partnership remains intensely firm-specific. But taken together, they also reveal a shared reality: Advancement increasingly depends on coalition-building, strategic flexibility and the willingness to grow. In a segment of the Am Law 200 where partnership economics are under constant pressure, those traits appear to be what firms are betting on in the micro and macro.

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