

# AMERICAN VIEWPOINT

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To: Interested Parties  
From: Randall Gutermuth  
Re: Key Survey Findings  
Date: May 9, 2002

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## ***Methodology***

The North Carolina Center for Voter Education commissioned American Viewpoint to conduct a survey of 600 likely North Carolina voters. Interviews were conducted via telephone April 29 through May 2, 2002. The margin of error for the entire sample is +/- 4.0% at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error among sub-groups is greater.

## ***Key Findings***

There is a significant lack of information available to voters on judicial candidates and campaigns.

- A majority (57%) of voters had just a little or no information at all about judicial candidates last election.
  - Younger, more educated voters were the least informed. Those age 18-29 (69%) and college graduates (66%) had just a little or no information.
- The primary reason voters were not more interested in judicial elections was that they didn't know enough about the candidates (43%).
- Nine-in-ten (90%) voters are concerned that because voters have little information, judges are sometimes selected for reasons other than reasons other than their qualifications (67% are concerned a lot).

The lack of information is not due to a lack of interest from voters.

- Seventy seven percent (77%) of voters were interested in the last judicial election, with 27% very interested. Seniors (40%) and high propensity voters (41%) are significantly more likely than voters as a whole to have been very interested in the last judicial elections.

There is a general concern that there are two tiers of justice in North Carolina's court system.

- While a plurality of voters (23%) feel that the most important responsibility of courts and judges is to provide equal justice for the rich and poor, 58% of voters agree with the statement "there are two systems of justice in North Carolina, one for the rich and powerful, and one for everyone else" (42% strongly agree).
  - The concern of two tiers of justice is even greater among black voters (72%) and those with household incomes under \$30,000 (65%).

There is also great concern about the influence campaign contributions made to judges have on their decisions.

- Eighty four percent (84%) of voters are concerned that lawyers are some of the biggest campaign contributors to judicial candidates, often appearing in court before judges they've given money to (64% are concerned a lot).
- Moreover, 78% feel campaign contributions to judges have some (40%) or a great deal (38%) of influence over decisions.
  - Black voters are even more skeptical, with 50% feeling contributions influence decisions a great deal.

Many voters feel money is playing too large a role in judicial elections.

- Eighty five percent (85%) of voters are concerned that because the cost of running for judge in North Carolina can cost over \$1 million, some people who would make good judges don't run for office (60% are concerned a lot).
- In fact, if the only difference between two candidates running for judicial office was that one used tax payer money to run a campaign and one used special interest money, voters favor the publicly funded candidate 58%-25% (22% definitely).

Voters both understand the need for and desire judicial reform to be addressed.

- Voters are split on whether or not North Carolina's judicial elections reflect the will of the average person (46% agree, 47% disagree). Those most likely to feel the outcome doesn't reflect the will of the average person include:
  - Independents (57%);
  - Liberals (56%);
  - Black voters (54%); and
  - Those with post graduate education (63%).
- More than three quarters (77%) of voters agree that regardless of other important issues facing the state, the Governor and legislature need to address judicial reform before the next elections (54% strongly agree).

- More than seven-in-ten (72%) voters, including 76% of black voters feel North Carolina should adopt judicial campaign reform to avoid corruption and scandals that have occurred in other states (54% strongly should adopt).

Nearly all voters feel judges should be elected, that elections should be non-partisan, and that voter guides should be provided to help inform voters.

- Eight-in-ten (81%) voters feel judges should be elected, not appointed (75% strongly).
- Eighty nine percent (89%) of voters agree that judges should run in non-partisan elections (79% strongly).
- Ninety one percent (91%) agree that North Carolina should provide voter guides to help inform voters about judicial candidates (80% strongly).

The judicial reform proposal currently in the legislature is favored by 71% of voters (37% strongly favor).

- Interestingly, there is no variance in support between Republicans (70%) and Democrats (71%), or white (72%) and black (71%) voters. In fact, there is little variance among any key voting blocs.

While voters see the need for judicial reform, it does not greatly hurt their faith in the court system.

- Seventy nine percent (79%) of voters have a great deal (24%) or some (55%) trust and confidence in the North Carolina court system.
  - Trust and confidence in the courts is lowest among black voters, with only 14% having a great deal of trust and confidence.

## Conclusions

Across the state there is great support for judicial campaign reform. Voters care about the issue and want the legislature to address it immediately. While it is unlikely they give it the same weight as issues such as education and taxes, they see no reason it shouldn't be addressed.

Voters are not apathetic when it comes to judicial elections. They know they are not receiving enough information about the candidates and will take the time to learn more, as seen in the nearly universal support for voter guides.

While past research has shown judicial reform is not a "top of mind" issue with voters, these findings show that when they learn about the current judicial election climate, their concern grows greatly.

The impression voters have that there are two tiers of justice has the potential to damage the overall reputation of the system in the future. The legislature needs to address these concerns in order to protect the reputation of North Carolina's courts.

Probably the most positive sign for advocates of judicial reform is that there is almost no strong opposition by voters against reform. As is being seen in other states, judicial reform will have to be addressed in the legislature. When considering the reform proposal it should be noted by elected officials that there is virtually no political backlash for supporting the reform as long as appointments are not part of the plan.