



DISTRICT COURT ELECTIONS IN NEVADA – LOTS OF CANDIDATES BUT LITTLE CANDIDATE INFORMATION

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SINCE NEVADA BECAME A STATE IN 1864, THE NEVADA CONSTITUTION HAS

mandated the election of judges. All judges serve six-year terms. While elections for justices of the seven-justice Nevada Supreme Court and the three-judge Court of Appeals are staggered, the terms of all district court judges in Nevada are synchronized, and 2020 is the year in which Nevada voters will see their district court judicial candidates on the ballot.

Statewide, 179 district court candidates have filed for office. Voters in Clark County will be presented with 121 candidates for 58 departments, while voters in Washoe County will be presented with 20 candidates for 16 departments.

In Clark County, 19 of the departments do not have an incumbent as a candidate, either because the incumbent did not run or because the department is newly created. Judicial candidates are better known in smaller communities and consequently judicial

elections work well.

In larger counties, the sheer volume of candidates can be overwhelming for voters.

Consider some of these facts. In 1952, there were 101,248 registered voters and eleven district court judges in the entire state. As of February 2020, there are 1,314,101 registered voters just in Clark County, selecting 58 district court judges. The judicial ballot is getting very big in Nevada's more populated counties.

Nevada voters have previously rejected efforts to reform judicial elections by moving to judicial appointments with retention elections.

As recently as 2019, the Nevada Legislature failed to advance proposals to move towards the appointment of judges. Proponents of judicial election reform point to the outsize influence of money in judicial campaigns. Judicial candidates often must solicit campaign funds from the very lawyers who will argue cases in their court. Perhaps more importantly, money flows to independent expenditure

efforts that can receive and spend unlimited amounts to influence judicial elections. Regardless, judicial elections are part of the electoral landscape in Nevada for 2020. Keeping track of qualified judicial candidates is a difficult task, even for lawyers who regularly appear in the district courts.

On top of the sheer volume of candidates, judicial candidates are nonpartisan and cannot make any kind of commitment as to how they might rule on issues if elected to office. As a result, most voters are often left with only minimal information when deciding who to select to these important positions.

The Las-Vegas Review Journal surveys practicing attorneys on sitting judges in the year before judicial elections, and the Washoe County Bar Association does something similar. While these surveys can provide some useful trends and information, they are also subject to criticism as "popularity contests" among lawyers. Further, the surveys are only applicable to sitting judges, and there are no comparable



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surveys of judicial candidates who might be challenging an incumbent or running for an open seat.

Business associations like RAN help play an important role in judicial elections by reviewing judicial candidates and providing information to membership to help navigate the judicial ballot, particularly in large counties where the number of candidates makes it challenging to obtain even basic information about the qualifications of individual candidates.

As the primary and general elections get closer, look for additional information from RAN on the state of play in judicial races. ■