



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After nearly two years of study and discussion, Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor on Law Day 2014 proposed a three-point plan for strengthening judicial elections in Ohio. The plan starts with the premise that judicial elections should be retained because the people of Ohio have made clear that they want to elect their judges. The three proposals taken together will elevate judicial elections, empower voters, and ensure that decisions about who will serve on the bench are made by large numbers of informed voters.

Polls show that even though Ohioans want to continue to elect judges, they believe that judges are influenced by politics, by contributions, and by other factors. In addition, the numbers are clear that at least one quarter of the electorate does not participate in judicial races. Additionally, the level of knowledge and understanding about the judiciary among the general public is inadequate, and voters do not have easy access to quality information about the candidates.

“Ohio Judicial Reform 2014: A Plan to Elevate Judicial Elections” offers three reforms that will improve judicial elections and strengthen our system of justice:

- **ACTION 1: Move All Judicial Contests to Odd-Numbered Years & Move Judicial Contests to the Top of the Ballot**
- **ACTION 2: Implement a Comprehensive, Robust, and Non-partisan Voter Information and Education Plan**
- **ACTION 3: Increase Judicial Qualifications**

ACTION 1: Move All Judicial Contests to Odd-Numbered Years & Move Judicial Contests to the Top of the Ballot

Research shows judicial elections often take a back seat to high-profile executive and legislative races. On average, 25 percent of the time when voters show up at the polls, they do not bother to cast a vote for judges down the ticket. In one recent race in Cuyahoga County the roll-off was 40 percent. When often half of all eligible voters aren't going to the polls at all, this judicial roll-off means that, in some cases, judges are being selected by one quarter of eligible voters.

To remedy this, the O'Connor plan proposes that Ohio amend the state Constitution to move all judicial races to odd-numbered years, while at the same time making some modest changes in the Ohio Revised Code to place these races at the top of the ballot.

Moving all judicial elections to odd-numbered years will eliminate the competition of judicial candidates for air time or for public awareness, when they often are overshadowed by races for president or governor, which contributes to under voting in judicial races. This will make the odd years in Ohio not the “off-year elections” as they are so often called. Instead, these years would come to be known as the *judicial years*, the years when we go about the important business of electing the men and women who serve on the bench in Ohio at every level.

ACTION 2: Implement a Comprehensive, Robust and Non-partisan Voter Information and Education Plan

It is not enough that we simply highlight judicial elections in the hopes that more voters go to the polls and cast a ballot for their judges. We must also take active measures to encourage voter participation *and* give voters the information they need to make informed choices.

The second part of the O’Connor plan is the development of a comprehensive voter engagement and information program. The program will for the first time provide voters statewide with a website that will be a one-stop-shop for quality information about judicial candidates at every level. The program also will use traditional media, social media, and other methods throughout the year to educate voters about the responsibility they have to participate in judicial elections and to actively encourage them to meet this responsibility.

When taken together with the proposal to move judicial elections to separate years and up to the top of every ballot, the result will be *more* citizens voting for judge and doing so in an *informed* way. Ohio will have the maximum number of citizens casting their votes based on quality, substantive information about the candidates and their qualifications for office.

This program will be launched in 2015 without the appropriation of tax dollars by combining the existing resources of three critical partners: The Ohio State Bar Association, the League of Women Voters of Ohio, and the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, which will serve as the official home of the state’s first comprehensive, ongoing, judicial voter education and engagement program.

ACTION 3: Increase Judicial Qualifications

Increasing the number of years of practice required to run for or be appointed to a judgeship will further elevate judicial elections by giving voters even more experienced candidates to choose from. Currently, an attorney needs only six years of experience before assuming the bench at all levels. The O’Connor plan adopts the recommendation of a bi-partisan panel that examined judicial elections in 2003 and that has been included in at least three recent legislative proposals: longer years of practice requirements for the common pleas bench (8 years), the appellate bench (10 years), and Supreme Court justices (12 years).

Read the Complete Plan and Learn More about Ohio’s Judicial Election System by
Visiting www.OhioJudicialReform.org