

Florida's Court System

The Supreme Court of Florida

The highest court in Florida is the Supreme Court, which is composed of seven Justices. At least five Justices must participate in every case and at least four must agree for a decision to be reached. The Court's official headquarters is the Supreme Court Building in Tallahassee.

To be eligible for the office of Justice, a person must be a qualified elector who resides in Florida and must have been admitted to the practice of law in Florida for the preceding 10 years.

For most of Florida's history, all judges were chosen by direct election of the people. The only exception was when a vacancy occurred on a court between elections. In that case, the Governor appointed a replacement to serve until the next election was held.

This election of Judges led to many problems. Judges had to raise campaign money, which often was donated by the same attorneys who practiced before the Court. By the mid-1970s, the problem became even more serious after several Florida Judges were charged with violations of ethics.

In 1971, Governor Reubin Askew took the first step toward reforming the system. That year he instituted a system called "merit selection." Under this system, the Governor referred a Court vacancy to an impartial panel, which suggested names of possible appointees. The Governor then selected a name from the list. In 1974, Justice Ben F. Overton became the first Supreme Court Justice chosen by this method.

Leaders knew, however, a more complete change was still needed, because judges still faced periodic elections after appointment. The effort to do this was spearheaded by Governor Reubin Askew, Chief Justice Overton, and State Rep. Sandy D'Alemberte (now President of Florida State University), among others.

As a result, Florida voters amended the Constitution in 1976 to create a "merit retention" system for Florida's Appellate Judges. This system was meant to eliminate the many problems caused by judges running for office in an election.

When there is a vacancy on the Court today, this system means the Governor chooses the next Justice from a list of three qualified persons recommended by the Judicial Nominating Commission. When Justices' terms expire, their names will appear on the general election ballot for a merit retention vote, if they wish to remain in office.

Under this system, the voters have eliminated contested elections in which Appellate Justices and judges campaign against other candidates. Instead, the question on the ballot is: "Shall Justice _____ be retained in office?"

If a majority of the votes cast are not in favor of retaining the incumbent Justice, the Governor appoints another person to fill the vacancy. This person is chosen from a list of individuals whose applications have been reviewed and who have been found qualified by the Judicial Nominating Commission.

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DOB: 11/6/70
Ht.: 5' 5"
Wt.: 225
Violation: FTA — Poss of Cocaine



WILLIAM CARY SCHEIDER

Race: White
Sex: Male
DOB: 9/15/80
Ht.: 6' 0"
Wt.: 140
Violation: Grand Theft Auto — FTA



ARTADON JONA RASH

Race: Black
Sex: Male
DOB: 4/8/80
Ht.: 6' 2"
Wt.: 265
Violation: VOP — Grand Theft Auto



GLADYS IVETTE SAIZ

Race: Black
Sex: Female
DOB: 2/26/82
Ht.: 5' 4"
Wt.: 124
Violation: FTA — Uttering

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