

Judicial Candidate Questions

Local judges play an important role in the criminal legal system. They have tremendous discretion regarding who gets held in jail prior to a trial, how well (or poorly) the rights of defendants are protected in the courtroom, and how long people convicted of a crime serve in prison.

For all their power, judicial races rarely get much media attention, and once on the bench judges rarely face opposition.

You can make a real difference! By reaching out to judicial candidates before the election, you can both inform yourself as a voter and help shape how they see their role. What's more, if you share what you've learned with others you can help educate other voters on key issues.

How to use this guide

Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration along with the [AFSC Michigan Criminal Justice Program](#) and [MI CURE](#) developed the questions below to help voters and community organizations learn about candidates for judicial races.

Here are a few ways you can use the questions:

Individually

- **Reach out to the candidates personally:** Using this guide can be as simple as finding out who is running for judicial office in your area and emailing these questions to the candidates.
- **Ask the questions at a candidate forum:** Local organizations such as local political parties, League of Women Voters chapters, religious congregations, and others often organize candidate forums. Some of these forums allow audience members to ask questions. If so, you can attend and ask what's on your mind!
- **Suggest the questions to forum organizers:** The organizations putting on candidate forums are often looking for questions to ask candidates. By sharing these questions with the organizers you make their job easier and help educate other voters.
- **Share what you've learned:** Let others know what you learn from these questions. Share a social media post, email your friends, or talk about it when you're with people.

Organizationally

If you are part of a community organization, you can have an even wider impact. Here are some ideas:

- **Host a candidate forum:** Judicial candidates don't get much coverage in the media, so they are often looking for opportunities to meet with voters. You can organize an in-person or video conference candidate forum.
- **Publish a candidate questionnaire:** You can also ask candidate to respond to these questions and publish the results.
- **Share the questions with your members:** Include this resource in your social media, email newsletter, or other communications so that your constituents are empowered to learn more about judicial candidates themselves.

Please note, if you are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, you are prohibited from supporting or opposing candidates for public office. Please see the [MI-CEMI Voter Engagement Toolkit](#) or [Bolder Advocacy](#) for more information

Candidate Questions

These questions will help you explore how judicial candidates approach their role.

- **Intro: Tell us about your background:** How will your prior professional experience impact your service as a judge?
- **Pretrial Detention:** As a judge, what will you do to avoid people being held inappropriately in pretrial detention? How will you ensure that an individual is not held in pretrial detention simply because of their economic status?
- **Defendants' Rights:** As a judge, how will you ensure defendants' rights are protected? For example, what will you do to ensure that someone does not receive a longer sentence just because they demanded the constitutional right to a trial? How would you ensure that implicit bias does not affect the treatment of defendants through jury selection, jury behavior, or judicial behavior?
- **Mitigating Circumstances:** How do you look at mitigating circumstances such as past experiences of human trafficking, domestic violence, child abuse, PTSD, or other forms trauma when making sentencing decisions? Would you support legislative changes that give people who have served long prison sentences the chance to petition for a reduction in their prison sentence?
- **Truth in Sentencing:** How do Michigan's "Truth in Sentencing" laws affect how you approach sentencing? When you sentence someone to a term of years, how much of that sentence do you expect them to serve?
- **Understanding of prison:** Have you visited a prison, communicated with an incarcerated person, or conversed with someone who has been incarcerated? How does that impact your approach to your duties as a judge?

Let us know how it goes, or if we can help!

If you use these questions please let us know how it goes! Or, if you want a bit of help, we're here for you. Reach out to us at mail@mi-cemi.org.