

## **JUDGES ON THE BALLOT**

By Sarah Berel-Harrop

When you look at your sample ballot, most of the races are usually judicial. These are extremely important positions. A judicial candidate once told me, "most people will never meet their congressperson, but they will be in front of a judge at some point in their lives." Indeed, all of us will be the subject of a probate matter after we pass.

Judicial races include races for district court judges and justices of the peace (JP). District courts specialize. Depending on the size of the county, they could handle civil, criminal, probate, family law, and juvenile issues (with smaller counties having more consolidation of types of matter). JP's handle small claims, evictions, and marriages. So you can see that the matters that they handle can have profound effects on everyday people's lives and justice work (e.g. sentencing, use of diversion and restorative justice programs, treatment of LGBT families, treatment of people being evicted).

We also elect the justices on the appellate courts (the Court of Criminal Appeals (CCA) and the Texas Supreme Court). Parties turn to appellate courts when they believe there have been errors at the trial court level. Examples include convicted individuals who have claims of actual innocence or unfair treatment at trial and the ongoing litigation over voting rights in Texas. The appellate courts should check bias and errors at the lower levels and thus also have a profound effect on each of us.

How to get information about judicial races? You can use the League of Women Voters (LWV) tool at <https://www.vote411.org/> to generate a sample ballot with the responses of candidates to the LWV questionnaires. If you know individuals who practice in the area (e.g. criminal, civil, family law), they usually know the courts and candidates. Also, many large county bar associations poll their members about candidates, and the bar poll scores the candidates along various criteria ([Dallas County](#), [Tarrant County](#)). Finally, there is no substitute for candidate forums, where you can see and question the candidates themselves.