

League of Women Voters Nonpartisan Voters Guide Guide to General Election—November 3, 2009

JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT

(Vote for One)

Term: 10 years

Salary: \$186,450

JOB DESCRIPTION: The Pennsylvania Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority in the Commonwealth. In addition to being the final court of appeals, it serves as administrator of the unified court system and is responsible for ensuring that all Pennsylvania courts perform their duties properly. The Court hears decisions of the Superior and Commonwealth Courts and in certain cases, including those involving the death penalty, from the Courts of Common Pleas. It may also assume jurisdiction over any case pending before a lower court that involves an issue of immediate public importance. There are seven Supreme Court justices, the Chief Justice being the one having the longest continuous service on the Court.

Question: The Judicial Conduct Board handles complaints about sitting judges filed by the general public. The Board reviews the complaints and if necessary, action can be taken by the Court of Judicial Discipline. How do you think this system of judicial oversight is working? Does it meet the public's need for assurance that justice is being served?

DEMOCRATIC

JACK PANELLA, 56, Bethlehem

EDUCATION: 1977, St. John's University, B.S.; 1980, Columbus School of Law, CUA, J.D.

OCCUPATION: Superior Court Judge

QUALIFICATIONS: County Solicitor, 4 years; Court of Common Pleas Judge, 12 years; Superior Court Judge, 5 years; Chair, Judicial Auditing Agency, 4 years; Administrative Judge, Wiretap Applications, 5 years; President, Court of Judicial Discipline, 1 year.

ANSWER: As a former Chair of the Judicial Conduct Board and President Judge of the Court of Judicial Discipline, I know that, under the current system, allegations of judicial misconduct are thoroughly investigated and judges are held accountable for their misdeeds. Unfortunately, the public is largely unaware that this system of oversight even exists. We need to do more to educate the public, while balancing the rights of the accused with the need for greater transparency.

REPUBLICAN

JOAN ORIE MELVIN, 53, Pittsburgh

EDUCATION: 1978, Notre Dame, B.A. 1981, Duquesne Law, J.D.

OCCUPATION: Superior Court Judge

QUALIFICATIONS: 23 years judicial experience; Superior Court Judge, 11 years, 8000 appeals; Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge, 7 ½ years, (served Criminal, Family, Civil Divisions); Chief Magistrate, Pittsburgh Municipal Courts, 5 years, established Pennsylvania's first Domestic Violence Court; private practice, corporate counsel.

ANSWER: Judicial accountability is necessary to prevent abuses of power and corruption. The public trust in justice mandates that judges' decisions are accountable to the Constitution and the rule of law and the judiciary as a whole must be accountable to the citizens in its operations. The public must be protected, and rigorous standards of judicial ethics must be strictly enforced. The public must have confidence in the integrity and independence of the judicial system.