Iowa’s 2010 Judicial Election: Appropriate Accountability or Rampant Passion?

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The 2010 Iowa judicial elections were, as former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee said soon after, of an “historic nature,” likely “one that . . . will give legs to a larger movement over the next few years.” The election he referred to, in which Iowans voted against retention of three justices who had participated in their Supreme Court’s unanimous decision to uphold gay marriage, surely is one of the most significant judicial elections ever. It also was the highest-visibility judicial election since 1986, when Californians voted down the retention of Chief Justice Rose Bird and two of her colleagues.

Even before election day, the 2010 judicial election cycle was unique: never before had so many states had organized opposition to a justice up for retention—this time, six states. Although only in Iowa was the opposition intense and ultimately successful, the widespread efforts and the result in Iowa may well open a new era of heat in judicial elections of all types—retention-only as well as partisan and nonpartisan.

Notably, though, in the five states other than Iowa with opposition to judges in 2010, there was less support for retention, on average, than had been the case from 1998 to 2008. Support also declined even in states without organized opposition to retention.

Unlike the impact of the 1986 California event, which had occurred because of Bird’s consistent reversal of scores of capital cases and had little if any ripple effects, this time several specific reasons point toward more challenges to incumbent judges. Not only are more contests likely, but well-informed observers fear that judges’ actions on the bench may reflect increased concern with possible public reactions to decisions.

In the remainder of this article, I will place the Iowa retention-election contests into context regarding how judges are selected, focusing on recent changes. I will then review what happened during the Iowa election itself. With that background in place, I will offer some personal opinions—first, regarding the Iowa campaign itself; next, regarding the likely impact of the Iowa election and its result; and last, regarding steps that might be taken to reduce the likelihood of more attacks on judges.

SOME CONTEXT ON JUDICIAL ELECTIONS

Of all state appellate judges and general-jurisdiction trial judges, 89% face some type of election. Facing retention-only elections are 42% of appellate judges and 19% of general-jurisdiction trial judges; facing nonpartisan elections, 20% of appro-
late judges and 41% of general-jurisdiction trial judges; and facing partisan elections for initial terms, 33% of appellate judges and 38% of general-jurisdiction trial judges. Unlike the system of appointing federal judges, unchanged since 1789, judicial selection in the states is not only varied but also has been subject to frequent controversy and change since the early 19th century. The states started with appointment systems, but in the early 19th century many replaced appointments with partisan elections; then during several decades around 1900 many states went to nonpartisan elections; and from 1940 to the end of the 1980s many turned to “merit” systems, with screening committees sending nominations to the appointers and the appointed judges subsequently facing the voters for retention or rejection.7

For present purposes, we must pay special attention to developments beginning in the 1970s. Judicial elections, whatever the system, for generations were almost always as unexciting as “checkers by mail.”8 The first notable change occurred in 1978 in Los Angeles County: because of rulings by some trial judges appointed by then-Governor Jerry Brown, the deputy district attorneys early in that election year literally ran an ad in the daily legal newspaper offering to support anyone who would challenge an unchallenged incumbent judge. That effort produced elections lively enough that some changes followed: e.g., judges increased their appearances at community affairs, issued “state of the court” reports, and invited jurors to visit chambers after a case.9

Over the next decade in Texas, unprecedented campaign spending occurred as part of the battle between plaintiffs and defense lawyers over the conduct of tort litigation. After several Texas elections, the defense side had won that contest and spending shrunk to minor sums there. But similar big-spending contests occurred in several other states, peaking in 2000 when the national total spent by high-court candidates rose 61% over 1998; in addition, interest groups’ “independent spending” hit at least $16 million that year, far more than ever before.10 Since 2000, although the total sums spent nationally have fallen, in inflation-adjusted terms, from the peak spending in 2000, more and more individual states have set new records for judicial campaign spending. Obviously, the era of quiet judicial elections has ended, replaced by contests that were “nastier, noisier, and costlier.”11

But significant additional change started in 2004 in Missouri, which has been famous since 1940 for being the first state to adopt a “merit” system. In 2004, for the first time in decades, a Missouri justice faced organized opposition to his retention. Several groups were active against the justice, using methods like robocalls with a message from Phyllis Schlafly.12 The justice won but the lesson was rich, though it drew almost no attention: while the opposition’s grassroots believed the contest was all about that justice and/or sending a message to judges generally, savvy observers believed that the opposition leaders’ actual aim was to increase total turnout of anti-judge

lost after attacks on her having joined a decision that overturned a capital sentence, an attack that was a façade in order to open a vacancy for a new appointment. After she was denied retention, the state’s governor was asked, “Should a judge look over his shoulder [when making decisions] about whether they’re going to be thrown out of office?” “I hope so,” he answered. See David B. Frohnmayer, Who’s to Judge?, 58 OR. ST. B. BULL. 9 (1997). See ABA Task Force Report, note 2 supra, at 6 (1998); on the Tennessee events, see also Bert Brandenburg & Roy A. Schotland, Justice in Peril: The Endangered Balance Between Impartial Courts and Judicial Election Campaigns, 21 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 1229, 1240 n. 48 (2008).

As for the five states other than Iowa with organized opposition in 2010:

Alaska Justice Dana Fabe won retention with 55% of the votes despite the opposition of the Alaska “political arm of the anti-abortion, pro-traditional marriage Alaska Family Council,” with funding mainly from the “national Christian group Focus on the Family.” Voters Retain Fabe as Alaska Supreme Court Justice, ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS, Nov. 3, 2010 (available on Westlaw at 2010 WLNR 21953342).

Three Colorado justices were opposed by Clear the Bench Colorado “for [partisan] rulings on taxes and fees, congressional redistricting and eminent domain.” Felisa Cardona, The Colorado Vote: Judges Retention: Three on Supreme Court Face Effort to Remove Them, DENVER POST, Nov. 3, 2010 (available on Westlaw at 2010 WLNR 21986437). The Colorado Attorney General, a Republican, had spoken against the three to a Republican club, see Lynn Bartels, AG Regrets Court Remark: A Blog Says Suthers Told a GOP Club He Won’t Vote for Three State Justices, DENVER POST, Jan. 19, 2010 (available on Westlaw at 2010 WLNR 1152505). They won with 59%, 60%, and 62%. These percentages and the others in this footnote are from William Raftery, National Center for State Courts, NOV. 2 JUDICIAL ELECTIONS ROUNDUP, available at http://www.ncsc.org/Conferences-and-Events/Nov-2-Judicial-Elections-Roundup.aspx.

In Florida, Justices Jorge Labarga and James E.C. Perry were opposed but both won, Labarga by “the lowest approval in state history although that was still 38.9%” and Perry by 61.7%. “With little or no funding, several single-issue activist groups influenced a statewide election that normally attracts little interest—and that’s troubling to those who believe it marks the beginning of a movement that could shake the foundation of the judiciary...” The opposition to the Florida justices “focused on one issue”: they had joined three other justices in keeping off the ballot a GOP-backed “measure designed to derail federal health care legislation”; the court had found the ballot language confusing. A 29-second video posted on YouTube.com, using photos of the justices, said, “Vote out the Obamacare supporters. They voted against us. Now we can vote against them.” The ad was made by a doctor and the executive director of Florida’s chapter of Ron Paul’s Campaign for Liberty. Another ad similarly posted, by the Florida Tenth Amendment Center, urged defeating the two who had denied voters “the right to vote on health care freedom.” Jane Musgrave, Florida Judges May Be on Political Hotseat, PALM BEACH POST, Nov. 13, 2010, available at http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/state/florida-judges-may-be-on-political-hot-seat-1045961.html?printArticle=y.
people, hoping their votes would help win several nonjudicial races. And in 2006, again in Missouri, the voters defeated a trial judge in Cole County (home of the state capital, Jefferson City—about two-thirds of Missouri’s trial judges face contestable partisan elections); the judge had been challenged because a campaign consultant deemed that judge the most vulnerable of several up for reelection; the consultant had found funding from an out-of-state deep-pocket judge-hater.13

While 2010 campaigns were particularly difficult for incumbents generally, not merely judges, for years hostility to courts has been active and rising. The 2010 judicial elections took us to a new stage, described with unusual clarity, depth, and conciseness by South Dakota’s Chief Justice David Gilbertson:

"I think events have taken an ominous turn for the worse. For several years expensive and sometimes nasty judicial elections have gone on. However they appear to me to be mostly...the trial lawyers and unions vs. the chamber of commerce and insurance companies. They were wallet driven. Now the issue has changed to issues concerning personal beliefs and lifestyles. [T]he recent results in Iowa show a new anti-judicial force which is...able to portray itself as the defender of values and rights instead of the judiciary.14"

WHAT HAPPENED IN IOWA

We turn now to the 2010 Iowa election. For starters, a blog posting shortly after the election by a Dr. Richard G. Lee provides a must-read account about the opposition’s start with seed money from Newt Gingrich, the opposition’s organization, and its activities (plus discussion of several alleged missteps by supporters of the justices).15 Several knowledgeable Iowans, though not all agreed on every alleged fact in that posting, do agree that it is generally a full and fascinating picture.

In April 2009, a unanimous Iowa Supreme Court decision had struck down Iowa’s 1998 Defense of Marriage Act in a suit brought in 2005 by six gay couples who had been denied marriage licenses.16 (The trial judge, who also had ruled for the plaintiffs, won retention in the 2010 election.) Turnout was Iowa’s highest in any non-presidential year, and the votes cast on retention set a record for Iowa and were near the highest in any state ever. Normally only a bit more than 60% of Iowa voters would cast a ballot on whether to retain a justice, but 88% did so in 2010.17 The justices won only 46% for retention. In Iowa’s prior 1,322 retention votes, four trial judges had lost (otherwise, trial judges had won with majorities ranging from about 55% to about 75%) but no appellate judges had lost; appellate judges had averaged more than 70% voting for retention in all but two elections: 2000 and 2006.

The campaign spending against the justices totaled almost...
$1 million, including more than $900,000 from three out-of-state organizations: the National Organization for Marriage based in Washington, D.C.; the American Family Association’s AFA Action, Inc. of Tupelo, Mississippi; and the Campaign for Working Families PAC of Arlington, Virginia. The main in-state sum spent against the justices was $101,788, by the Iowa Family Policy Center ACTION.¹⁸

A similar retention contest occurred in Nebraska in 1996, when out-of-state funds flooded in to defeat one justice who had written the opinion in a unanimous decision striking down Nebraska’s term-limits statute.¹⁹

Opposition to the justices was led by Bob Vander Plaats, who had lost two Republican gubernatorial primaries and one for lieutenant governor. After losing in a 2010 primary, he put his full-time effort into the anti-retention campaign. Although the opposition funding was almost all from outside Iowa, unquestionably there was a great deal of active local support; for example, one of Iowa’s congressmen led a bus tour around the state.²⁰ One other important aspect of the Iowa opposition was that “more than 200 churches” actively participated in the opposition.²¹

For the justices, $423,767 raised entirely in Iowa was spent by the Iowa-based Fair Courts for Us Committee.²² That was one of three groups supporting retention, but “Justice Not Politics” and “Iowans for Fair Courts” did not spend on direct advocacy but only on educational efforts. The group called Justice Not Politics also spent about $8,000 on such efforts. The one radio spot supporting the justices is worth noting:

“[Background noise of sports officials’ whistle and stadium crowd stirring:]”¹⁷

[Voice 1:] And the flags are flying! Looks like a questionable call. I think we are going to see some fans calling for these referees’ jobs.

[Voice 2:] Listen, we will never agree to every call, but you should not fire the good referees on just one call. The same is true of the Iowa Supreme Court. I am Bob Ray, Republican and former Iowa Governor. The Iowa Supreme Court has been making solid judgments over the years. The Court protected Iowa families by requiring convicted sex offenders to live at least 2,000 ft. away from a school or child care center; protected Iowa seniors and protected our individual property rights. Please join me, Bob Ray, in turning over the ballot and voting yes, yes, yes, to retain the Iowa Supreme Court. “Paid for by Fair Courts for Us.”²³

Views of that ad’s effectiveness were divided both before it ran and after . . . .

From outside Iowa, the justices got no help except for a visit of a lobbyist. The campaign was just that, an attempt to have a voice in the process. The Iowa Supreme Court has been making solid judgments over the years. The Iowa Supreme Court has been making solid judgments over the years.
Strikingly absent or severely limited were efforts by national organizations with the mission of supporting judicial independence. and talk by former United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. In September, she addressed “more than 200 elected officials and guests of the Iowa Bar Association . . . .” Praising Iowa’s judicial-selection system, she also made this powerful statement:

Justice [David] Souter and I both look at the Court as the one safe place where a person can have a fair and impartial hearing . . . and we have to keep that. [We] have to address the pressures being applied to that one safe place . . . to have it where judges are not subject to outright retaliation. 25

It’s not clear, though, that Justice O’Connor’s effort had any lasting impact.

Strikingly absent or severely limited were efforts by national organizations with the mission of supporting judicial independence. Four are relevant, the largest by far being the American Bar Association, but the ABA understandably leaves local action to state and local bar associations. And what any state or local bar will do depends on who happens to be the leadership at the time and whether anyone can be recruited who has time available and the relevant experience. The Iowa Bar was alert to the situation, did come into action, and their action was substantial, but not more; it aimed entirely at explaining voting in a retention election.

Three other national organizations focus fully or largely on judicial selection systems. Newest is the Colorado-based Institute to Advance the American Legal System, started in 2006 and working with Justice O’Connor. In 2010, it gave its attention to a Nevada ballot proposition to replace their contestable election system with a “merit” appointment and retention system. Nevada twice before had defeated similar proposals, and 2010 saw it defeated a third time, this time with 58% voting against the proposal. 26

The oldest of these three national organizations, the American Judicature Society, founded in 1913 and by coincidence based in Iowa, is legally barred (as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt entity) from election activity, but its regular education programs included efforts and events in Iowa; how much, if at all, those programs affected the election seems impossible to say. Last, the most active of these entities, networked and well funded (mainly by George Soros’s Open Society Institute), is Justice at Stake, which has “partnered” with an array of other organizations such as the ABA, the National Center for State Courts, the League of Women Voters, the American Judges Association, and many reform groups. Like the American Judicature Society, Justice at Stake is barred from election activity; its president wrote an op-ed about voting in retention elections, published online in the Denver Post. 27

Would the justices and judicial independence have been aided if more visitors like Justice O’Connor had come to Iowa,

12. See Margaret Ebrahim, The Bible Bench, MOTHER JONES, May-June 2006, at 54-57, 81-83. “Many on the religious right felt that the third branch of government should be accountable to the public as the legislative branch was . . . . ‘There’s nothing the matter with [judgeships] being political,’ Schally told the Kansas City Star.” Id. at 57.
13. The political consultant said, at a gathering of lawyers and business leaders in Kansas City shortly after the election, that “some of these [anti-judiciary] groups just want a scalp to hang on the wall.” Scott Lauck, Missouri’s Non-Partisan Court Plan May Be Best for Cole County, MISSOURI LAWYERS WEEKLY, Nov. 20, 2006 (available on LexisNexis). See also John DeMoor, Debate Reveals Rock ‘Em, Sock ‘Em Future of Judicial Politics, MISSOURI LAWYERS WEEKLY, May 28, 2007 (available on Westlaw at 2007 WLNR 26581789). The source of funding was a New York real estate figure chairing the campaign. ‘Newt provided strategic advice and arranged the initial seed money . . . which is what got everything started.’ The money came from an anonymous donor whose contribution was arranged by Gingrich, Lane said. Robert L. Vander Plaats, chief spokesperson for the judicial campaign, said the former speaker provided key strategic advice.” Tom Hamburger & Matea Gold, Gingrich Courts the Religious Right, L.A. TIMES, p. 1 (available on Westlaw at 2011 WLNR 4124524).
14. Email to author, November 17, 2010.
such as former chief justices from other states who might have drawn upon experience from judicial elections in various selection systems? Such speakers might produce press coverage and meet with many groups in many locations—should that be tried in a coming election? Experienced observers in several states say that judges cannot be effective supporters of other judges; voters are likely to view the effort as self-protection. The most effective supporters are likely to be respected former high officials or other persons who enjoy strong public regard, like some media stars and the voters’ local members of the state legislature. (But former chief justices or justices with campaign experience might be invaluable sounding boards for candidates in contests.)

Many state bar associations and others do have “rapid response” plans and people ready to defend courts when judges are under inappropriate attack. Looking backward, ought responses to have been launched in Iowa shortly after the Varnum decision came under attack? More to the point, ought the next similar situation draw more early-response attention than this one did?

Two post-election gatherings in Iowa have looked back on the election usefully. In December, two focus groups met to discuss the election. According to one observer’s report:

We heard a lot of “It may have been the ‘right’ decision based on the Constitution, but I just don’t like it. So I voted them out.” Repeatedly we saw voters unable to understand the differences between what judges do and what non-judicial elective officials do. This basic civics gap as it relates to the difference between the three branches of government . . . was cavernous.

Another observer said this:

[What] may be most important for us going forward—several expressed a frustration with the fact that they didn’t know who the justices were, how they became justices, how they arrived at their decision, what gave them the right to make the decision, etc. There appears to be a great desire for more information and more education. . . .

A third observer said that one focus group participant commented along these lines:

Much as I oppose the court’s decision, I know so little about judges that I shouldn’t be allowed to vote on them.

And in February, at a University of Iowa Law School panel discussion about the election, Justice Michael Streit, one of the three denied retention, said that “politicians demanded judges follow the popular vote, instead of ruling on the law. . . . They kept saying it was the ‘will of the people’ but who are these people?”

Very differently, Vanderbilt Law School Professor Brian Fitzpatrick said that “the only question is whose politics

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For a thorough and learned analysis of the decision, see Todd Pettys, Letter from Iowa: Same-Sex Marriage and the Ouster of Three Justices, 59 U. KAN. L. REV. (forthcoming May 2011); see also Chase D. Anderson, A Quest for Fair and Balanced: The Supreme Court, State Courts, and the Future of Same-Sex Marriage Review after Perry, 60 DUKE L.J. 1413, 1431-39 (Of the four states’ supreme court cases, “Only the Iowa court had a developed evidentiary record on which to base its conclusions. . . . The Iowa court’s opinion contained the strongest reasoning.”).

17. The extremely high participation in voting on retention was attributable in part to the fact that the races for Governor and for U.S. Senator were not at all close, so attention in media coverage and otherwise focused on the retention contest.


19. See note 3 supra.


22. After the National Institute report (see note 18 supra) on the Iowa spending, a late contribution raised the Fair Courts total by $6,500. See email to author from Linda Casey of National Institute, Feb. 15, 2011.

23. Almost no funds were raised before mid-October. The State Bar contributed $50,000 (10/18); Iowa Academy of Trial Lawyers $50,000 (mostly 10/20); Folk County Bar Assocs. $13,124 (10/29); American Bd. of Trial Advocates $5,000 (10/18); Iowa Defense Counsel Assoc. $5,000 (10/27); AFSCME $25,000 (10/18); Human Rights Campaign Equality Votes $25,000 (10/25); Fairness Fund $25,000 (10/13); Midwest Capital Group Inc. $20,000 (10/18); also, one individual contributed $50,000 (10/12). Information provided author by Fair Courts for Us Committee; and see Fair Courts’ filings on Independent Expenditure by an Organization, Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board.

Iowa's campaign finance disclosure, administered by the Ethics and Campaign Finance Board, seems a case study in how to frustrate any use of such information. For example, the “Independent Expenditure” reports filed by the Fair Courts committee have cover pages with total sums that differ substantially from the accompanying detailed pages; the columns of donors’ names are mostly unmatchable with the columns of contribution amounts; many donors are listed without contribution amounts, etc.

24. The ad was produced hastily because funds became available only very shortly before the election. In my view, the ad would have

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"We heard a lot of ‘It may have been the ‘right’ decision based on the Constitution, but I just don’t like it. So I voted them out.’"
Judicial elections . . . are fundamentally different from other elections because the judge’s job is so different from nonjudicial elective officials.

Des Moines Register: “[T]he campaign on one side was about education of merit selection process and about the courts, and the other side was politics. The politics won. But the conversation needs to keep going forward. . . .”

SOME OPINIONS BASED ON THE 2010 IOWA ELECTION

THE ELECTION ITSELF

Let’s begin with some thoughts directly about the Iowa election itself.

First, should the justices have campaigned? They did not, and most knowledgeable observers have faulted them for this. But I do not, for two reasons: implying absolutely no view of these justices, I stress (as I wrote several years ago) that many fine judges are not political in any sense—no surprise—and many of them do not fit comfortably into a political role.

Of course, voters, if empowered to vote on judges either in contestable elections or on retention, obviously can vote on whatever grounds they wish. But power doesn’t equal rightness. Judicial elections, whatever the type, are fundamentally different from other elections because the judge’s job is so different from nonjudicial elective officials. The differences are clear first from the array of state constitutional provisions about judges—e.g., all elective states give judges terms that are stunningly longer than any other elected officials’ terms. But Study of the “judicial personality” shows, as one would expect, how different it is from the “political personality.” Also, campaigning may have undermined, at least somewhat, the fundamental position at stake: that the judges’ job is different from the jobs of other elected officials.

Second (and entirely separate) is the question whether it is appropriate to vote against a retention candidate because of one decision. The raison d’etre of retention elections is to reduce politics in judicial selection or retention. Whatever the system of selecting and/or retaining judges, they are accountable for their neutrality and professionalism; if they are to carry out the rule of law, they are not to be removed from office for a decision that is unpopular but, in their view, is called for by the facts and law as they understand it.

Never is there more potential for judicial accountability being distorted and judicial independence being jeopardized than when a judge is campaigned against because of a stand on a single issue or even in a single case.

Of course, voters, if empowered to vote on judges either in contestable elections or on retention, obviously can vote on whatever grounds they wish. But power doesn’t equal rightness. Judicial elections, whatever the type, are fundamentally different from other elections because the judge’s job is so different from nonjudicial elective officials. The differences are clear first from the array of state constitutional provisions about judges—e.g., all elective states give judges terms that are stunningly longer than any other elected officials’ terms. But

been beyond criticism if only one sentence were changed, replacing “you should not fire the good referees on just one call,” with something like this: “We all know that some calls look bad to some people and look good to other people, but we know we need referees who are neutral; we can’t rely on any other kind.”


26. Valerie Miller, Ballot Measures Die on Election Day, LAW VEGAS BUSINESS PRESS, Nov. 15, 2010. The State Bar president, who had supported the measure, said, “A lot of work went into this. But this was such a negative election. Voters said ‘no’ to everything.” The final result did show support had continued rising: a July poll found 27%, an October poll found 37%. Doug McMurdo, Question 1, LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL, Oct. 30, 2010.

Nevada voters had rejected the change in 1972 and 1988. AM. JUDICATURE SOC’y, Chronology, note 7 supra. In fact, Nevada’s final result in 2010 showed more support for changing the selection system than the last generation had won in other states. Such changes have been consistently defeated for the last generation.

South Dakota voters in 2004 defeated, two to one, a proposal to have their trial judges selected in the same “merit/retention system as their appellate judges, instead of continuing to run in contestable nonpartisan elections. (However, since 1982 only 21 of 109 judgeships had been contested.) The trial judges themselves had earlier been sharply divided about their selection system, but for 2004 were unanimous in favoring the change, and the legislature was only one vote from unanimity in putting the proposal on the ballot. The opposition was summed up by one city official: “This proposal is against Motherhood and Apple Pie, it’s un-American.” Despite an active campaign supporting the change, it lost after being opposed in a major speech by James Dobson, whom the New York Times called “the nation’s most influential evangelical leader.” Russell Shorto, What’s Their Real Problem with Gay Marriage, N.Y. TIMES SUNDAY MAGAZINE, 34, 41 Jun. 19, 2005. Dobson was in South Dakota campaigning against Senator Daschle. A few years earlier, Dobson had discovered at an Alabama rally for their Chief Justice Roy Moore (active advocate of the Ten Commandments), what Dobson called “the depth of popular resentment of liberal court decisions.” As several supporters of the change said after losing, “the people won't give up their vote.”

As in South Dakota, Florida’s appellate judges are in a “merit/retention system and here too the trial judges face contestable (but rarely contested) nonpartisan elections. In 2000, Floridians (yes, Virginia, there were other races on the Florida ballot that year), defeated a proposal to put their trial judges in the same system as their appellate judges. The change was defeated in every circuit with the affirmative vote averaging 32%, and in every county with the affirmative averaging 26% (the most favorable was 39%). The change had been supported by the Florida Bar, which like the ABA and most state bar associations had been urging such a system for decades.
retention elections are not only different, they are unique.\textsuperscript{35} To say that it is appropriate for voters in retention elections to toss out a judge because of a decision, defies the history of the retention system’s adoption and its design to avoid the advocacy, heat, and range of choice that can come with competing candidates.\textsuperscript{36}

Let me be explicit that despite my deep disagreement with those who opposed the Iowa justices’ retention, I respect their honesty. They disagreed with one decision that the court had made, their disagreement was the undeniably clear basis of their opposition, and they took advantage of an opportunity to make the justices account for what they had done.

One cannot deny that voters can use their opportunity to vote any way they wish. Nor do I fault advocates and activists who say that even for judges, elections are a proper method of accountability. But it is entirely different for academics or other supposedly detached observers to endorse that view. To ignore the differences between what judges do and what nonjudicial elective officials do is unthinking or hyper-simplistic.

Nonjudicial elective officials thrive or lose by their reading of the support they can secure by adopting positions and promising to promote them, then by how well they perform in implementing the promises. For any judge—even United States Supreme Court justices—“hot-button” issues are rare (even at the Supreme Court, only a minute fraction of their decisions). For most trial judges, such issues are non-existent. But decades of experience show that when there is organized opposition to a judge, it is rarely honest. Last year, for example, Illinois Supreme Court Justice Thomas L. Kilbride was opposed by pro-business interests unhappy with his voting to overturn a statute capping medical malpractice damages; but the opposition’s TV ads focused on his record in criminal cases to portray him as “soft on crime.”\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, a recent West Virginia case ended in the United States Supreme Court because of the extraordinarily large independent spending against an incumbent by the president of a company with major litigation coming before that court; that opposition had focused entirely on the incumbent’s role in a case about a child-abuser.\textsuperscript{38} In cases like those, it may well be that most voters in fact agreed with the decisions that actually led to the incumbent’s being opposed, but were misled by sophisticated campaigning that relied on selling what was easy to sell. One of our wisest judges summarized the reality of judicial elections:

Every judge’s campaign slogan, in advertisements and on billboards, is some variation of “tough on crime.” The liberal candidate is the one who advertises: “Tough but fair.” Television campaigns have featured judges in their robes slamming shut a prison cell door.\textsuperscript{39}

To oppose a judge because of her or his decisions and then measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn. In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens, in order to check the misguided career and to suspend the blow mediated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind? What bitter anguish would not the people of Athens have often escaped if their government had contained so provident a safeguard against the tyranny of their own passions? Popular liberty might then have escaped the indelible reproach of decreeing to the same citizens the hemlock on one day and statues on the next. No. 63 (Madison), ABA Classics Series (2009), at 362-63.

28. Justice Streit’s “who are these people[?]” goes right to the difference between election voting on one hand, law on the other. Our constitutional republic is founded on and functions through three branches and a specified process of enactment and enforcement of laws. If the prescribed deliberative, representative, and accountable process is not followed, we risk replacing law with some people’s passions—perhaps widely shared and perhaps not, perhaps long-lasting and perhaps not.

One of the Federalist Papers’ most memorable statements addresses precisely this difference:

As the cool and deliberate sense of the community ought, in all governments, and actually will, in all free governments, ultimately prevail over the views of its rulers; so there are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for
The Iowa event has several different impacts: one . . . is a likely chilling effect on future decisions in many states . . . .

The new justices appointed in 2011 to fill the three vacancies will campaign in 2012. Jens Manuel Krogstad, New Justices Will Campaign When Facing Retention Vote, Des Moines Register, Mar. 24, 2011. “The justices said that they prefer not to campaign . . . but that they learned a lesson from last fall’s successful campaign that ousted three justices. . . . [Justice] Waterman said he didn’t like seeing the retention vote and selection process become politicized with outside money. However, he said the events provided a good springboard to discuss the importance of the judiciary.”

One distinguished professor of constitutional law has suggested that this Iowa experience may have no lasting negative impact on the rule of law:

What happened in Iowa cannot help but give a temporary chill to other courts when faced with such a highly charged political issue as gay marriage. . . . But this sort of thing happens episodically, creates a stir and then dies down. Some accountability is not a bad idea.

The rule of law is not in danger because of this one election.

That is an optimistic view, but with all respect, it is misleadingly superficial. First, it fails to note that the Iowa event has several different impacts: one, as noted, is a likely chilling effect on future decisions in many states; another is the probability, as I note below, of a significant increase in challenges to judges in many states and in all kinds of elections; and last is this: At least until the Iowa event’s impacts do “die down,” we will suffer from some indeterminate number of fine lawyers who would make fine judges, and fine judges who are coming up for reelection or retention, who decide against being on the bench because of the job’s newly increased insecurity. Second, while of course “[t]he rule of law is not in danger because of this one election,” neither did one presidential assassination put American politics in danger. But even if some disasters die down after brief stirs, several reasons suggest that the Iowa event is likely to have lasting impact. One cannot predict just how much, but it will be enough to matter, enough to cause substantial concern.

Because:

1. Judicial elections (until a few in recent years) were always either completely quiet or, even if lively, had no impact on other elections. Starting with Missouri’s 2004 challenge to a justice’s retention, where much of the motivation was to increase turnout in nonjudicial elections, the tail has begun to wag the dog. That is, judicial elections become lively because they can be used as a tool to affect nonjudi-
cial races. That seems bound to recur.

2. A second incentive to challenge judges emerged in Missouri’s 2006 challenge to a trial judge: the combination of a consultant eager for a client, with even a single deep-pocket individual ready to crusade against judges. Some combination of a consultant and a deep pocket seems bound to recur.

3. Iowa brings a new incentive: any politician who is either anti-judiciary, or willing to be, can secure enough support that if the effort wins or almost wins, she or he gains. Vander Plaats’ having led the Iowa effort to such success has made him a major figure, probably the state’s number three Republican after Governor Terry E. Branstad and Senator Chuck Grassley. There are bound to be copyists, even if Vander Plaats fails in his current effort to sell a book about Iowa’s 2010 event.

WHAT TO DO? STEPS TO TAKE TO REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF MORE ATTACKS ON JUDGES

What to do? Here, I merely list a few key possibilities worth consideration:

- Outreach, which should be year-in, year-out and should include “audience multipliers” like Access TV, local radio, and local newspaper coverage.
- Bench/Bar/Media meetings at least annually, as well as columns in local newspapers by chief justices and/or other justices.
- Campaign Conduct Committees—unofficial and with members who are representative, diverse, and distinguished.

From this list of general possibilities, I would single out outreach as raised by the Iowa re-election. The Iowa of May 2010 put all Iowa judges on the line for reelection, which they won over a week later. The idea was perceptive as the exception, not the rule.” Benton, Comments on the White, Caufield & Tarr Articles, 74 Mo. L. Rev. 667, 669 (2009).

37. “Kilbride was portrayed as soft on crime in visceral radio ads that featured actors portraying rapists and murderers. . . . [T]he acknowledged aim of the Illinois Civic Justice League was to dump a judge it sees as unwilling to stop large jury awards given to plaintiffs in malpractice and other negligence lawsuits.” Monique Garcia, State Supreme Court Justice Wins Retention Battle, Chi. Trib., Nov. 2, 2010.


The facile “Some accountability is not a bad idea” is foolish. “Accountability” on a lightning-rod issue arises only if the judge voted against the preference of people able to organize and secure funding. This turns justice into gambling with one side holding a marked deck. Consider, e.g., West Virginia State Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette, 319 U.S. 624 (1943) (upholding a public school pupils right to refuse, on religious grounds, to salute the flag and overruling a contrary 1940 decision); Gideon v. Wainwright, 372 U.S. 335 (1963) (upholding a right to counsel in felony trials and overruling a contrary 1942 decision).

42. Whether popular reactions against a few highly visible decisions will remain episodic, or instead will fuel long-standing efforts to politicize judicial elections, I cannot predict. Examples of such efforts in recent years: Colorado voters rejected an effort to impose term limits on judges. And in Kansas, local voters rejected efforts to return to contestable elections by replacing “merit/retention systems, and the legislature has rejected efforts to change the statewide “merit/retention system for appellate judges.

As of March 8, 2011, “legislation has been introduced in at least eight states to radically restructure or eliminate long-standing merit selection systems.” Interestingly, in Iowa “a host” of bills ended in committee, “thanks in part to the vocal opposition of a broadly-based bipartisan coalition of legal and non-legal organizations.” American Judicature Society press release, Mar. 8, 2011.

43. This does not mean that people like Vander Plaats are taking over the state party. In fact, Governor Branstad’s appointments to fill the three vacancies created by the election are traditional for Iowa: two experienced judges and one notable practitioner, all with reputations for ability and neutrality. See Jerry Krosgstad, Branstad’s Supreme Court Choices, DES MOINES REGISTER, Feb. 23, 2011.

44. For a full-page profile of Vander Plaats, see Kerry Howley, The Pizza and the Power, NYTIMES MAGAZINE, Mar. 3, 2011. He is now a full-time executive of the FAMILY LEADER (“they’ve consigned the ‘I’ to lowercase to emphasize the individual’s submission before God,” id.), “a social conservative advocacy group started this week in Iowa,” which is sponsoring presidential candidate
job.49 And though insecurity will not worry many of the best people, they will be worse than worried by the likelihood that their colleagues will be unduly concerned about possible public reactions to high-visibility decisions. One chief justice said this of the Iowa election impact: “[T]his may be the most significant and long term damage from the election. There is no way to gauge how many attorneys decide to ‘pass’ on the judicial career because of this.”

3. Courts will be less able to serve in the indispensable manner in which they have served since we adopted our constitutions—as the bodies that are as insulated from public passions as we can make them, to review the acts by officials in other branches in order to assure protection of individual rights and the rule of law. 50

Although I do predict that the Iowa election is likely to mean more trouble in judicial elections, this is not predicting more defeats. Just as in California after the 1978 challenges to justices, judges, and their supporters will be more ready to meet (and head off) challenges. A hallmark of judicial excellence is deliberativeness, but that doesn’t include unresponsiveness.

48. We cannot overemphasize that the entire point of work on judicial selection is to protect and promote the suitability of the lawyers who will enter and stay on the bench. There will never be a shortage of lawyers eager to be judges, but the size and caliber of the pool changes. To go on the bench already involves a greater—and steadily increasing—loss of income. “Judges’ Pay: A Chasm Far Worse Than Realized, and Worsening,” the title of my 2007 article, 82 IND. L.J. 1273, has been downloaded incomparably more than any other product of my 26 years’ work on judicial elections and selection.

49. In my view, whether the worst impact of the Iowa event will be what it does to affect who seeks judgeships, or what it does to reduce judges’ protection of constitutional rights in unpopular matters, is hard to predict. But what is worst doesn’t matter: both are destructive departures from our constitutional order.

50. I must confess error in being focused on the election and failing to think about other developments now doing severe damage to our justice system. Iowa’s new Chief Justice Mark Cady, in his State of the Judiciary Address in January, discussed two topics: the recent election and the role of courts in constitutional review, and the Iowa courts’ recent budget cuts. On the latter, he included this: “In addition, our work has grown in the past few years as a direct result of cuts in services for treating abused and neglected children and troubled youths. The following observations of Juvenile Court Officer Paul Thompson of Marshall County best describe this situation: “The front end kids are no longer being served, or if they are, not as well. We . . . get these kids later when their problems are more firmly entrenched. . . . The schools and the police look to us for help and we are unable to provide much assistance due to the lack of manpower and funds. Due to funding problems, kids sit in detention or shelter too long while waiting for appropriate residential treatment. . . . [I]t seems like we are having less success when they come back from placement. The system is certainly broken . . . [and] the long term effects will show up years down the road.” (Jan. 12, 2011), at 5.

51. Text at note 9 supra.