

*****FOR RELEASE ON TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2000*****
Wisconsin Public Radio/St. Norbert College Survey Center
The Wisconsin Survey
Spring 2000

TOPIC: 2000 Wisconsin Supreme Court Race

RELEASE DATE: April 4, 2000

SAMPLE: 574

MARGIN OF ERROR: +/-4.1%

Knowledge of Supreme Court Race

"On April 4th, there will also be an election to select a justice to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Which of the following statements best describes your awareness of this election?"

I know of the election occurring and the candidates' names	16%
I know of the election occurring but do not know the candidates' names	49
I do not know of the election occurring or the candidates' names	35
Not Sure	<1

Supreme Court Election

"If the election for the Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice was held today, would you vote for Diane S. Sykes or Louis B. Butler?" (Asked only of individuals who could identify candidate's names. 16% of the sample)

Diane S. Sykes	57%
Louis B. Butler	25
Neither (Volunteered)	2
Not Sure	17

Preferred Method of Supreme Court Selection

"Which of the following do you think is the best way to select justices to the State Supreme Court?"

General Election by the Public	58%
Appointment by Governor with Legislative Approval	18
Appointment by a State Commission with Legislative Approval	21

Not Sure

4

Qualities of a Supreme Court Justice

“Next, I would like to ask about the most important qualities in selecting a Supreme Court Justice. For each quality that I read, please tell me if the quality is very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important in selecting a justice. Let us begin with the candidate’s legal experience, is it. . .[Read List]?”

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not at all Important	Not Sure
Candidate's Legal Experience	80%	17%	2%	<1%	<1%
Candidate's Political Beliefs	31	37	19	13	1
Candidate's Personal Character	67	24	5	3	<1
Candidate's View of the Law	83	15	<1	<1	1

Summary

The April 4, 2000 election will find Wisconsinites selecting a justice to sit on the state’s Supreme Court. The results from the latest Wisconsin Public Radio/St. Norbert College Survey Center “Wisconsin Survey” indicate that the state’s electorate has not been closely following the race between current Supreme Court Justice Diane Sykes and Milwaukee County Judge Louis Butler, but wishes to maintain public control over the selection of justices to Wisconsin’s highest court.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUPREME COURT RACE

A vast majority (84%) of state residents indicated that they were unaware of the candidates for the upcoming Supreme Court election. Additionally, over one in three Wisconsinites did not know the election was occurring at all. The survey results indicate that only 16% of state residents were aware of both the occurrence of the election to the Supreme Court, and the names of the two candidates seeking this office. Among those in this category Diane Sykes holds a 57% to 25% lead over Louis Butler, but the margin of error for this group is too large to make any statistically relevant inferences about the election outcome.

PREFERRED METHOD OF SUPREME COURT JUSTICE SELECTION

Ironically, while most Wisconsinites could not identify the major candidates for the Supreme Court, a majority maintain that the best way to select justices is through a general election by the public. Just under 6 in 10 state residents identified public elections as their preference for selecting Supreme Court justices, with approximately 2 in 10 preferring appointment by the governor with legislative approval, and 2 in 10 supporting appointment by a state commission with legislative approval. Interestingly, individuals that did not know about the election or candidates were most likely to support an alternative other than elections, with 47% of those individuals preferring the various forms of appointment with legislative approval. Conversely, 64% of individuals who were aware of the election prefer maintaining public control over this process.

MOST PREFERRED QUALITIES IN SELECTING JUSTICES

Wisconsin residents indicate that a candidate's legal experience and views on the law are more important factors than personal character and beliefs when selecting a Supreme Court Justice. An overwhelming majority of state residents indicated that a candidate's legal experience (80%) and views on the law (83%) were very important in selecting a justice. Conversely, only 31% of respondents found a candidate's political beliefs to be a very important selection criteria, with 67% maintaining that view regarding the candidate's personal character.

CONCLUSION

The race for the Supreme Court appears to be drawing little interest among the residents of Wisconsin, with only a small percentage following the race closely enough to identify candidates names. Nevertheless, a majority of residents seek to maintain the current system of allowing the public to decide who sits on the state's highest court.

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