



## Web site offers help deciding which judges to vote for

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As if voters didn't have enough candidates to consider in the Nov. 4 general election, here come the judges.

With more than 100 judges up for retention in Cook County this cycle, making an informed decision is challenging for even the most enterprising voter. Bar organizations do the heavy lifting, evaluating judges on knowledge of the law, temperament, courtroom management and other criteria, and then compiling their recommendations.

But they need help getting the word out. That's where a nonpartisan voter education organization, the Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice, comes in. In 2004, the group helped launch [VoteForJudges.org](http://VoteForJudges.org) to inform the electorate.

"One judge can affect 10,000 people's lives every year," said executive director Malcolm Rich.

"This is such an important decision and we don't have enough information," he said. "We saw bar associations spending thousands of hours evaluating judges and no one was paying attention."

Rich points to a study of judicial elections from 1988 to 2000 that indicated surname and gender played a role in voters' judicial selections. While he acknowledges voters have a right to use what criteria they like, surnames and gender don't have much to do with expertise. Moreover, uninformed voters may elect "a bench that is simply not qualified," he said.

"We decided that at least we should publicize the evaluations of these judges and judicial candidates in a way that's easy to use."

To that end, [VoteForJudges.org](http://VoteForJudges.org) compiles ratings from 13 Chicago area bar associations including the Suburban Bar Coalition and the Northwest Suburban Bar Association. They're available online now along with links to the bar associations' Web sites, which also indicate how the organizations determine the ratings.

Standards vary. For some associations, 50 percent membership approval earns a judge a qualified rating. In other cases, a 25 percent disapproval results in a not qualified.

Besides enlightening voters, these evaluations on [VoteForJudges.org](http://VoteForJudges.org) alert judges who need to improve.

Word about the site is spreading. [VoteForJudges.org](http://VoteForJudges.org) received 1 million hits each in 2004 and 2006.

"We're hoping for more this year," said Rich, who hopes to broaden the Web site to include other counties by 2010. "It says to us is that if people know the information is available about judges they'll go to it."