

# MEASURING MAXIMIZING JUDGES: EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUDIES, PUBLIC CHOICE THEORY, AND JUDICIAL BEHAVIOR

*Joanna Shepherd\**

*In this brief Article, I explore the growing empirical evidence in support of the public choice model of judicial decisionmaking. Although legal scholars have traditionally been reluctant to engage in a critical inquiry into the role of judicial self-interest on judicial behavior, recent empirical studies confirm many of the predictions of the model. As a result, the public choice model has gained broad acceptance across a range of disciplines, courts, and even the U.S. public.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

One area of legal scholarship that has particularly benefitted from empirical research is the judicial decisionmaking literature. Several scholars have identified empirical advances in this field. For example, writing for a symposium on empirical and experimental methods in legal scholarship hosted by the University of Illinois College of Law in 2001, my current copanelist, Michael Heise, extensively documented empirical support for the two dominant models of judicial decisionmaking: behavioralism and attitudinalism.<sup>1</sup> He also identified the three most prominent emerging models of judicial behavior at the time: the legal model,<sup>2</sup> the public choice model, and the institutional model.<sup>3</sup>

In this short Article, I will focus on recent advances in the public choice model of judicial decisionmaking. I contend that the public choice theory of judicial behavior has gone from an “emerging” model to a model with broad acceptance across a range of disciplines. Although the

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\* Associate Professor of Law, Emory University School of Law.

1. See Michael Heise, *The Past, Present, and Future of Empirical Legal Scholarship: Judicial Decision Making and the New Empiricism*, 2002 U. ILL. L. REV. 819, 833–39.

2. See *id.* at 839–40. For an excellent review of empirical analyses of the legal model, see FRANK B. CROSS, DECISION MAKING IN THE U.S. COURTS OF APPEALS 39–68 (2007).

3. See Heise, *supra* note 1, at 841–43.

model was originally advanced by only law and economics and public choice scholars, it has since gained widespread acceptance by political scientists, legal scholars, many courts, and even the U.S. public. This is largely due to the impressive body of empirical legal scholarship that confirms many of the predictions and assumptions of the public choice model.<sup>4</sup>

## II. THE PUBLIC CHOICE MODEL OF JUDICIAL DECISIONMAKING

The basic assumption of public choice theory is that “self interest rules behavior in public as well as private transactions.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the public choice model of judicial decisionmaking takes a “[c]andid [l]ook at [j]udicial [m]otivation”<sup>6</sup> and assumes that judges may be influenced by the “day-to-day pressures and temptations”<sup>7</sup> of their positions.

Legal scholars have traditionally been reluctant to engage in a critical inquiry into the role of judicial self-interest on judicial behavior.<sup>8</sup> The judiciary is more insulated from the political process than any other branch of government and, as a result, judges seem less likely than legislators, executives, and bureaucrats to insert their own self-interest into the decisionmaking process. As Richard Epstein argues:

The structure of the “independent” judiciary is designed to remove judges from the day-to-day pressures and temptations of ordinary political office, and with some qualifications it achieves that end. It is a strategy that recognizes the forces of self-interest, regards them as potentially destructive, and then takes *successful* institutional steps to counteract certain known and obvious risks.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of this perceived protection from the influences of judicial self-interest, both legal scholars and public choice scholars have traditionally had a strong preference for more active judicial involvement in lawmaking. Despite the general preference for litigation over legislation, judicial self-interest has been shown to be an important determinant of judicial behavior. Moreover, like legislatures, executives, and bureau-

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4. In this brief review, I discuss “the subset of empirical legal scholarship that uses statistical techniques and analyses,” that is, “studies that employ data (including systematically coded judicial opinions) that facilitate descriptions of or inferences to a larger sample or population as well as replication by other scholars.” Michael Heise, *The Importance of Being Empirical*, 26 PEPP. L. REV. 807, 810 (1999). For other views on what constitutes “empirical” scholarship, see Lee Epstein & Gary King, *The Rules of Inference*, 69 U. CHI. L. REV. 1, 2–3 (2002).

5. Richard A. Epstein, *The Independence of Judges: The Uses and Limitations of Public Choice Theory*, 1990 BYU L. REV. 827, 827.

6. Frederick Schauer, *Incentives, Reputation, and the Inglorious Determinants of Judicial Behavior*, 68 U. CIN. L. REV. 615, 625 (2000).

7. Epstein, *supra* note 5, at 832.

8. See, e.g., Andrew P. Morrise et al., *Signaling and Precedent in Federal District Court Opinions*, 13 SUP. CT. ECON. REV. 63, 64 (2005) (“That judges’ self-interest might influence judicial opinions often has been neglected in the research literature.”); Schauer, *supra* note 6, at 615 (“Unexpectedly, the reluctance to engage in critical inquiry into judicial motivation exists even outside of the precincts in which sympathy with the judiciary is the normal order of things.”)

9. Epstein, *supra* note 5, at 831–32.

crats, the judiciary is also susceptible to inappropriate rent seeking. The courts simply represent another opportunity for interest groups to shape the law.

Explanations for the absence of attention to judicial self-interest include legal scholars' myopic focus on federal courts and especially the U.S. Supreme Court judges' reluctance to talk about career ambitions and the idealized notion of judges among legal scholars.<sup>10</sup> I briefly discuss each of these explanations below.

First, the overwhelming majority of both legal scholarship and teaching in law schools examines the federal court system. For instance, one state court judge recently noted sarcastically that, as a student, “[he] did not know that state courts existed.”<sup>11</sup> The reason for this myopic focus is itself an interesting question, but it is certainly fair to say that most law professors perceive a “yawning chasm of fabulousness [that] separates state court judges and federal judicial celebrities.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever the explanation, this fascination with federal courts is surprising given that “state courts process over ninety-nine percent of the nation’s litigation (or about 100 million cases per year).”<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to most state judges, federal judges serve with life tenure. Thus, the traditional self-interested motivations that public choice scholars commonly attribute to legislators and bureaucrats—the desire for reelection and the need to raise campaign funds—do not apply to federal judges. As a result, many legal scholars never consider the possibility that other forms of judicial self-interest might determine the behavior of federal judges.<sup>14</sup>

Even more myopic than the scholarly focus on federal courts is the focus on the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>15</sup> Inferences about the behavior of Justices on the Supreme Court certainly do not generalize to most other judges in both the federal and state court systems. In contrast to all other courts, the majority of the Supreme Court’s docket involves cases with politically salient issues. As a result, the policy preferences of the Justic-

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10. For a more thorough discussion of these explanations, see Schauer, *supra* note 6, at 622–24.

11. Rick Haselton, *A Look at a State Appellate Court*, 26 JUST. SYS. J. 98, 98 (2005).

12. As stated by David Lat, founder and managing editor of the blog *Above the Law*, under the pseudonym Article III Groupie on the judicial gossip blog *Underneath Their Robes*. Article III Groupie, *State Court Judges Are Icky*, UNDERNEATH THEIR ROBES (July 28, 2004, 1:32 AM), [http://underneaththeirrobes.blogs.com/main/2004/07/state\\_.html](http://underneaththeirrobes.blogs.com/main/2004/07/state_.html).

13. Paul Brace et al., *Placing State Supreme Courts in State Politics*, 1 ST. POL. & POL’Y Q. 81, 85 (2001).

14. “Justices may have goals other than policy, but no serious scholar of the Court would claim that policy is not prime among them. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the few things over which most social scientists agree.” Lee Epstein & Jack Knight, *The New Institutionalism, Part II*, L. & CTS. (Am. Pol. Sci. Ass’n, Wash. D.C.), Spring 1997, at 4, 5.

15. Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *Reconsidering the Frankfurterian Paradigm: Reflections on Histories of Lower Federal Courts*, 24 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 679, 680–81 (1999).

es are likely to be the biggest influence on their decisionmaking.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as there is no higher court to which Supreme Court Justices can hope to be promoted, promotion desires likely have little influence on their behavior.

Another explanation for the lack of inquiry into self-interested judicial motivation is that judges rarely discuss their own career ambitions: “Most judges would sooner admit to grand larceny than confess a political interest or motivation.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to legislators and executives that speak publicly about their ambitions to be reelected or to attain a higher office,<sup>18</sup> judges are generally silent on these same ambitions. Consequently, judicial self-interest is certainly a less apparent motivation for judicial behavior than the self-interest of most politicians.

Finally, legal scholars may have traditionally been reticent to examine judicial self-interest because those same scholars have an idealized notion of the judge. Judges are typically revered as noble protectors of our fundamental rights, not ordinary people trying to advance their careers or establish their legacy. This romantic ideal of judges among both legal scholars and the public may account for the dearth of cynical explanations for judicial behavior.<sup>19</sup>

### III. EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF JUDICIAL SELF-INTEREST

In his provocative 1993 article, Judge Posner attempted to challenge this romantic ideal of judges by asking (and answering), *What Do Judges and Justices Maximize? (The Same Thing Everybody Else Does)*.<sup>20</sup> Judge Posner argues that “[j]udges are rational, and they pursue instrumental and consumption goals of the same general kind and in the same general way that private persons do.”<sup>21</sup> Although Judge Posner was not the first legal scholar to apply public choice theory to the judiciary,<sup>22</sup> his provocative article incited a new empirical interest into both the components of judicial self-interest and the effects of this self-interest on case outcomes. Numerous empirical studies have identified a relationship between judicial self-interest and judicial decisionmaking. The specific institutional structure of the judiciary dictates the types of self-interest concerns that might influence judges. For example, while retention concerns might be

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16. See generally JEFFREY A. SEGAL & HAROLD J. SPAETH, THE SUPREME COURT AND THE ATTITUDINAL MODEL 231–34 (1993) (concluding that the evidence suggests a strong relationship between policy preferences and judicial behavior).

17. DONALD DALE JACKSON, JUDGES 18 (1974).

18. See DAVID R. MAYHEW, CONGRESS: THE ELECTORAL CONNECTION 73 (1974).

19. Schauer, *supra* note 6, at 624.

20. Richard A. Posner, *What Do Judges Maximize? (The Same Thing Everybody Else Does)*, 3 SUP. CT. ECON. REV. 1 (1993).

21. *Id.* at 39.

22. See, e.g., WALTER F. MURPHY, ELEMENTS OF JUDICIAL STRATEGY (1964); William M. Landes & Richard A. Posner, *Legal Precedent: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis*, 19 J.L. & ECON. 249 (1976).

a significant influence on judges without permanent tenure, judges with permanent tenure might consider factors such as promotion potential, reputation, and leisure. In the next two sections, I briefly discuss the empirical evidence supporting the possible self-interest influences on judicial decisionmaking among judges that serve with and without permanent tenure.

#### A. Judges with Permanent Tenure

Many judges serve with permanent tenure. For example, although U.S. federal judges are appointed through a process that is oftentimes political, they enjoy life tenure. Similarly, state supreme court justices in Rhode Island are granted life tenure,<sup>23</sup> and in both Massachusetts and New Hampshire, judges serve until age seventy.<sup>24</sup>

Although judges with permanent tenure need not fear losing their jobs, other self-interest concerns may influence their judicial decisions. For example, Judge Posner speculates that judges' utility functions might include variables such as the utility derived from the acts of judging, leisure, reputation, and avoiding reversal.<sup>25</sup> Numerous empirical studies have found results consistent with Judge Posner's conjecture.

For example, several scholars have explored the relationship between judges' promotion desires and their decisionmaking. In one of the earliest empirical studies on the influence of promotion desires, Cohen explores voting on the constitutionality of the U.S. Sentencing Commission in 1988 and finds that judges who have higher probabilities of being promoted to an appeals court position are more likely to rule that the Commission was constitutional.<sup>26</sup> He interprets the results as suggesting that judges are more likely to follow the governing administration's wishes when facing the prospect of a promotion to an appellate court position.<sup>27</sup> In another study of all federal antitrust sentences from 1955 to 1981, Cohen finds that promotion potential exerts a significant influence on corporate criminal antitrust penalties.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in two separate studies, Morriss, Heise, and Sisk also explore the relationship between promotion potential and judicial decisionmaking in challenges to the constitutionality of the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines. The authors find that the district court judges with the greatest potential for promotion are most likely to approve the constitutionality of the guidelines.<sup>29</sup> They also find

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23. See *infra* note 49.

24. See *infra* notes 45, 50.

25. See MURPHY, *supra* note 22, at 31–34.

26. Mark A. Cohen, *Explaining Judicial Behavior or What's "Unconstitutional" About the Sentencing Commission?*, 7 J.L. ECON. & ORG. 183, 188–90 (1991).

27. *Id.* at 193.

28. Mark A. Cohen, *The Motives of Judges: Empirical Evidence from Antitrust Sentencing*, 12 INT'L REV. L. & ECON. 13, 14 (1992).

29. See Gregory C. Sisk, Michael Heise & Andrew P. Morriss, *Charting the Influences on the Judicial Mind: An Empirical Study of Judicial Reasoning*, 73 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1377, 1487–93 (1998).

that the judges with the greatest potential for promotion to the circuit courts of appeal are more likely to communicate their rulings through written opinions, which signal their qualifications for promotion as well as their political views.<sup>30</sup> Using the Morris, Heise, and Sisk dataset, Taha finds that the potential for promotion is an important influence on district judges' decisions to publish an opinion.<sup>31</sup> In another recent study, BarNiv and Lachman find that judges allocate more time to writing opinions when they believe that lengthy opinions contribute to their personal reputation and promotion potential.<sup>32</sup>

Other scholars have explored whether judges' aversion to having their rulings reversed affects judicial decisionmaking. These studies indirectly test the influence of promotion potential on judicial rulings because lower reversal rates may increase the chances for promotion. For example, Smith explores civil rights cases in the District of Columbia Circuit and finds that reversal aversion influences the rulings of trial court judges; upon reversal by the appellate court, the trial court judges adjust their rulings to be more in line with the preferences of the appellate court to avoid future reversals.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Randazzo examines a sample of district court cases decided between 1925 and 1996 and finds that, in many cases, if the federal trial judges anticipate a negative response on appeal, they curtail their ideological influences and adjust their rulings to reduce the chances of reversal.<sup>34</sup> In another recent study, Choi, Gulati, and Posner find that fear of reversal influences federal district judges' opinion-writing practices.<sup>35</sup> District judges are more likely to publish opinions in politically uniform circuits where they can predict which opinions will get reversed; alternatively, in politically diverse circuits where reversal is less predictable, the district judges publish fewer but higher-quality opinions in order to reduce their chances of reversal.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, other studies find no evidence that reversal aversion influences judicial decisionmaking. Higgins and Rubin hypothesize that if reversals matter to judges, they should matter less as judges grow older

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30. See Andrew P. Morris, Michael Heise & Gregory C. Sisk, *Signaling and Precedent in Federal District Court Opinions*, 13 SUP. CT. ECON. REV. 63, 64–65 (2005).

31. See Ahmed E. Taha, *Publish or Paris? Evidence of How Judges Allocate Their Time*, 6 AM. L. & ECON. REV. 1, 21–23 (2004).

32. See Moshe BarNiv (Burnovski) & Ran Lachman, *Self-interest in Judges' Time Allocation to Writing Judgments* 14–17 (July 16, 2010) (unpublished manuscript), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1641376>.

33. See Joseph L. Smith, *Patterns and Consequences of Judicial Reversals: Theoretical Considerations and Data from a District Court*, 27 JUST. SYS. J. 28, 41 (2006).

34. See Kirk A. Randazzo, *Strategic Anticipation and the Hierarchy of Justice in U.S. District Courts*, 36 AM. POL. RES. 669, 686 (2008).

35. See Stephen J. Choi, G. Mitu Gulati & Eric A. Posner, *What Do Federal District Judges Want? An Analysis of Publications, Citations, and Reversals* 24 (Univ. of Chi. John M. Olin Law & Econ., Working Paper Series, Paper No. 508; N.Y. Univ. Law & Econ. Research Paper Series, Paper No. 10-06, 2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1536723>.

36. See *id.* at 25.

and gain seniority.<sup>37</sup> As a result, reversal rates should increase with age and seniority.<sup>38</sup> Their empirical analysis of U.S. district court judges in the Eighth Circuit, however, finds no relationship between reversal rates, age, and seniority.<sup>39</sup> Klein and Hume analyze search and seizure cases decided in the U.S. courts of appeals between 1961 and 1990 and find no evidence that fear of reversal influences circuit judges to align their preferences with the Supreme Court in cases that are more likely to be reviewed by the Court.<sup>40</sup> Boyd and Spriggs predict that trial judges, because of their aversion to reversal, will adjust their citation patterns to cite Supreme Court cases based on the ideological preferences of the intermediate appellate courts.<sup>41</sup> Their analysis, however, finds no evidence that trial judges' reversal aversion influences citation patterns.<sup>42</sup>

In sum, although the empirical evidence is somewhat mixed, the majority of recent studies find that self-interest concerns, such as promotion desires and reversal aversion, influence the decisionmaking of judges with permanent tenure. Similar studies of judges in other countries also suggest that self-interest concerns influence judicial decisionmaking.<sup>43</sup>

#### B. Judges Without Permanent Tenure

In contrast to federal judges, the majority of state court judges serve without permanent tenure. In order for these judges to retain their office, they must either face voters in partisan, nonpartisan, or unopposed retention elections or be reappointed by either the governor or legislature. Table 1 details each state's current method of selection and retention.

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37. See Richard S. Higgins & Paul H. Rubin, *Judicial Discretion*, 9 J. LEGAL STUD. 129, 130 (1980).

38. *Id.*

39. See *id.* at 133–35.

40. See David E. Klein & Robert J. Hume, *Fear of Reversal As an Explanation of Lower Court Compliance*, 37 LAW & SOC'Y REV. 579, 585, 597 (2003).

41. See Christina L. Boyd & James F. Spriggs II, *An Examination of Strategic Anticipation of Appellate Court Preferences by Federal District Court Judges*, 29 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 37, 50 (2009).

42. *Id.*

43. For a discussion, see Nuno Garoupa, *Empirical Legal Studies and Constitutional Courts* 29 (Ill. Law & Econ. Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. LE10-015, 2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1635963>.

**TABLE 1: METHODS OF SELECTION AND RETENTION  
FOR THE HIGHEST COURT BY STATE<sup>44</sup>**

State	Selection Method for Full Term	Method of Retention	State	Selection Method for Full Term	Method of Retention
Alabama	P	P	Montana	N	N
Alaska	M	R	Nebraska	M	R
Arizona	M	R	Nevada	N	N
Arkansas	P	P	New Hampshire <sup>45</sup>	G	-
California	G	R	New Jersey <sup>46</sup>	G	G
Colorado	M	R	New Mexico	P	R
Connecticut <sup>47</sup>	LA	LA	New York	M	G
Delaware	M	G	North Carolina	P	P
Florida	M	R	North Dakota	N	N
Georgia	N	N	Ohio <sup>48</sup>	N	N
Hawaii	M	J	Oklahoma	M	R
Idaho	N	N	Oregon	N	N
Illinois	P	R	Pennsylvania	P	R
Indiana	M	R	Rhode Island <sup>49</sup>	M	-
Iowa	M	R	South Carolina	LE	LE
Kansas	M	R	South Dakota	M	R
Kentucky	N	N	Tennessee	M	R
Louisiana	P	P	Texas	P	P
Maine	G	G	Utah	M	R
Maryland	M	R	Vermont	M	LE
Massachusetts <sup>50</sup>	M	-	Virginia	LE	LE
Michigan <sup>51</sup>	N	N	Washington	N	N
Minnesota	N	N	West Virginia	P	P
Mississippi	N	N	Wisconsin	N	N
Missouri	M	R	Wyoming	M	R

44. DAVID B. ROTTMAN ET AL., U.S. DEPT' OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS: STATE COURT ORGANIZATION: 1998, at 21–25 tbl.4 (2000), <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/sco98.pdf>; *Methods of Judicial Selection*, AM. JUDICATURE SOC'Y, [http://www.judicialselection.us/judicial-selection/methods/selection\\_of\\_judges.cfm?state=](http://www.judicialselection.us/judicial-selection/methods/selection_of_judges.cfm?state=); (last visited July 31, 2011). G=gubernatorial appointment or reappointment, P=partisan election or reelection, N=nonpartisan election or reelection, LA=legislative appointment or reappointment, LE=legislative election or reelection, M=merit plan, R=retention election, and J=reappointment by a judicial nominating commission.

45. In New Hampshire, judges serve until age seventy. ROTTMAN ET AL., *supra* note 44, at 28.

46. In New Jersey, after an initial gubernatorial reappointment, judges serve until age seventy. N.J. CONST. art. VI, § 6, ¶ 3.

47. In Connecticut, the governor nominates and the legislature appoints. ROTTMAN ET AL., *supra* note 44, at 21 tbl.4, 25 n.2.

48. In Ohio, political parties nominate candidates to run in nonpartisan elections. AM. JUDICATURE SOC'Y, *supra* note 49.

49. In Rhode Island, judges have life tenure. ROTTMAN ET AL., *supra* note 44, at 28 tbl.5.

50. In Massachusetts, judges serve until age seventy. *Id.* at 27 tbl.5.

51. In Michigan, political parties nominate candidates to run in nonpartisan elections. AM. JUDICATURE SOC'Y, *supra* note 44.

Judges without permanent tenure have the incentive to vote strategically if they believe it will help them get reappointed, reelection, or otherwise retained.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the judges may decide cases in ways that benefit specific litigants or establish precedents that are favored by the people responsible for retaining judges. This is true whether it is a politician who decides whether to reappoint the judge or the voters decide whether to reelect the judge.

For example, it may be in the best interest of judges seeking reappointment by the governor or legislature to vote in a way that favors the executive or legislative branches. The power over judicial retention held by the governor or legislature offers the political branches of government direct opportunities to sanction judges for unpopular rulings. Judges who consistently vote against the interests of the other branches of government may hurt their chances for reappointment. As a result, in the types of cases in which state governments have a stake, the decisionmaking of judges seeking reappointment may be influenced by retention concerns.

Empirical studies have found results consistent with this hypothesis. Brace, Hall, and Langer find that judges seeking gubernatorial or legislative reappointment are less likely to hear abortion cases.<sup>53</sup> The authors conclude that the judges resist voting against the interests of the other government branches.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Shepherd finds that judges facing gubernatorial or legislative reappointment are more likely to vote for litigants from the other government branches.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, judges seeking reelection have the incentive to issue judicial decisions that will help them to attract both votes and campaign contributions. The increasing competitiveness of elections has likely heightened the pressure on judges to decide cases strategically and help them win support among voters.

Numerous empirical studies have found a relationship between elections and judicial decisionmaking. For example, some of the initial studies in this area by Hall find that judges deviate from expected voting patterns when their terms are nearing an end and electoral pressures intensify.<sup>56</sup> Hanssen finds that litigation rates are lower in states where judges are elected and argues that elected judges' strategic voting reduces un-

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52. See PHILIP L. DUBOIS, FROM BALLOT TO BENCH: JUDICIAL ELECTIONS AND THE QUEST FOR ACCOUNTABILITY (1980); Lawrence Baum, *State Supreme Courts: Activism and Accountability*, in THE STATE OF THE STATES 103, 126 (Carl E. Van Horn ed., 1989).

53. Paul Brace, Melinda Gann Hall & Laura Langer, *Judicial Choice and the Politics of Abortion: Institutions, Context, and the Autonomy of Courts*, 62 ALA. L. REV. 1265, 1291 (1999) ("Judges subject to retention by state political elites are dramatically less likely to hear abortion cases.").

54. See *id.*

55. See Joanna M. Shepherd, *Are Appointed Judges Strategic Too?*, 58 DUKE L.J. 1589, 1607–08 (2009).

56. See Melinda Gann Hall, *Constituent Influence in State Supreme Courts: Conceptual Notes and a Case Study*, 49 J. POL. 1117, 1123 (1987); Melinda Gann Hall, *Electoral Politics and Strategic Voting in State Supreme Courts*, 54 J. POL. 427, 443 (1992).

certainty about court decisions so that more cases settle.<sup>57</sup> Besley and Payne find that states that elect judges have more antidiscrimination claims filed than states that appoint judges; they argue that elected judges have stronger proemployee preferences, inducing more employees to file claims.<sup>58</sup> Huber and Gordon find that elected judges impose longer sentences as their reelection approaches, arguing that voters care more about underpunishment than overpunishment of criminals.<sup>59</sup> Not all studies find such results; a recent study by Choi, Gulati, and Posner finds almost no evidence of elected judges responding to political pressure.<sup>60</sup>

Other recent studies have explored the role of self-interest on judicial decisionmaking when judges face different types of elections. Many studies have found instances of strategic voting among judges facing partisan elections. They find that, in their attempt to appeal to constituents and campaign donors, judges facing partisan elections are less likely to dissent on politically controversial issues,<sup>61</sup> less likely to rule for challengers to a regulatory status quo,<sup>62</sup> and more likely to redistribute wealth in torts cases from out-of-state businesses to in-state plaintiffs.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Shepherd finds evidence suggesting that the decisionmaking of judges facing partisan reelections is aligned with the political preferences of the majority of voters.<sup>64</sup>

Other studies have explored the role of self-interest on judicial decisionmaking among judges that face nonpartisan or retention elections. For example, Canes-Wrone and Clark find that public opinion about abortion policy has a stronger effect on judicial decisions in nonpartisan systems than in partisan systems.<sup>65</sup> The authors argue that, in contrast to partisan judges that have a party label to inform voters about their policy preferences, nonpartisan judges communicate their policy positions

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57. See F. Andrew Hanssen, *The Effect of Judicial Institutions on Uncertainty and the Rate of Litigation: The Election Versus Appointment of State Judges*, 28 J. LEGAL STUD. 205, 232 (1999).

58. See Timothy Besley & A. Abigail Payne, *Implementation of Anti-Discrimination Policy: Does Judicial Discretion Matter?* 20 (London Sch. Econ. & Political Sci., STICERD Research Paper No. PEPP04, 2005), available at [http://ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1158326##](http://ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1158326##).

59. See Gregory A. Huber & Sanford C. Gordon, *Accountability and Coercion: Is Justice Blind When It Runs for Office?*, 48 AM. J. POL. SCI. 247, 262 (2004).

60. See Stephen J. Choi, G. Mitu Gulati & Eric A. Posner, *Professionals or Politicians: The Uncertain Empirical Case for an Elected Rather Than Appointed Judiciary*, J.L. ECON. & ORG. 290, 328 (2008).

61. See, e.g., Melinda Gann Hall & Paul Brace, *Justices' Responses to Case Facts: An Interactive Model*, 24 AM. POL. Q. 237, 255 (1996).

62. See, e.g., F. Andrew Hanssen, *Independent Courts and Administrative Agencies: An Empirical Analysis of the States*, 16 J.L. ECON. & ORG. 534, 542 (2000).

63. See, e.g., Eric Helland & Alexander Tabarrok, *The Effect of Electoral Institutions on Tort Awards*, 4 AM. L. ECON. REV. 341, 368 (2002); Alexander Tabarrok & Eric Helland, *Court Politics: The Political Economy of Tort Awards*, 42 J.L. & ECON. 157, 180 (1999).

64. See Joanna M. Shepherd, *Money, Politics, and Impartial Justice*, 58 DUKE L.J. 623, 629 (2009).

65. See Brandice Canes-Wrone & Tom S. Clark, *Judicial Independence and Nonpartisan Elections*, 2009 WIS. L. REV. 21, 52, 63.

through their decisions on the bench.<sup>66</sup> They conclude that, because nonpartisan judicial candidates will be particularly sensitive to making decisions that run against public opinion, nonpartisan elections could give rise to greater political pressure on judges than partisan elections.<sup>67</sup> In a similar study, these authors find that retention elections also create pressure for judges to cater to public opinion on the abortion issue.<sup>68</sup>

Recent empirical studies have also examined the relationship between campaign contributions and judicial decisionmaking. With the costs of winning judicial elections increasing dramatically, it is in judges' self-interest to rule in ways that help them obtain campaign funds. Shepherd finds that contributions from various interest groups are associated with increases in the probability that judges will vote for the litigants whom those interest groups favor.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Kang and Shepherd find that judges facing partisan reelections are more likely to decide in favor of business interests as the amount of campaign contributions that they receive from those interests increases.<sup>70</sup> Other recent studies have examined the relationship between contributions from individual law firms and case outcomes when those law firms appear in court. Scholars have found a correlation between the sources of a judge's funding and the judge's rulings in arbitration decisions from the Alabama Supreme Court;<sup>71</sup> in tort cases before state supreme courts in Alabama, Kentucky, and Ohio;<sup>72</sup> in cases between two businesses in the Texas Supreme Court;<sup>73</sup> and in cases during the Georgia Supreme Court's 2003 term.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to empiricists studying the public choice model of judicial behavior, the public has also come to believe that judicial self-interest influences judicial decisionmaking. One national survey finds that three out of four voters believe that campaign contributions influence judges' decisions, while only five percent of those surveyed believe that campaign contributions have no influence on judges' decisions.<sup>75</sup>

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66. *Id.*

67. *Id.* at 63.

68. See Brandice Canes-Wrone, Tom S. Clark & Jee-Kwang Park, *Judicial Independence and Retention Elections*, 28 J.L. ECON. & ORG. 18–20 (forthcoming 2012).

69. See Shepherd, *supra* note 64, at 629–30.

70. See Michael S. Kang & Joanna Shepherd, *The Partisan Price of Justice: An Empirical Analysis of Campaign Contributions and Judicial Decisions*, 28 (Emory Univ. Sch. of Law, Pub. Law Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. 10-115; Law & Econ. Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. 10-74, 2010), available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1649402](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1649402).

71. See Stephen J. Ware, *Money, Politics and Judicial Decisions: A Case Study of Arbitration Law in Alabama*, 15 J.L. & POL. 645, 661 (1999).

72. See Eric N. Waltenburg & Charles S. Lopeman, *Tort Decisions and Campaign Dollars*, 28 SOUTHEASTERN POL. REV. 241, 242 (2000).

73. See Madhavi McCall, *The Politics of Judicial Elections: The Influence of Campaign Contributions on the Voting Patterns of Texas Supreme Court Justices, 1994–1997*, 31 POL. & POL'Y 314, 314–315 (2003).

74. See Damon M. Cann, *Justice for Sale? Campaign Contributions and Judicial Decision Making*, 7 ST. POL. & POL'Y Q. 281, 283 (2007).

75. See GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER RESEARCH INC., JUSTICE AT STAKE: FREQUENCY QUESTIONNAIRE 4 (2001), [http://www.greenbergresearch.com/articles/1617/1412\\_JAS\\_ntlsurvey.pdf](http://www.greenbergresearch.com/articles/1617/1412_JAS_ntlsurvey.pdf).

Similarly, fifty-five percent of voters believe that judges are “[b]eholden to campaign donors,” and fifty-two percent of voters believe that judges are “[c]ontrolled by special interests.”<sup>76</sup> The public concern is not surprising given that incumbent state supreme court justices in judicial elections are more likely to be defeated than incumbents in both the U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, and state legislatures.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the political pressure on judges to appeal to constituents, campaign donors, and special interest groups may be even stronger than the pressure that legislators confront.

Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court have also recently indicated their concern that judicial self-interest plays a role in the decisionmaking of elected judges. In 2008, Justice Kennedy expressed concern in *New York State Board of Elections v. Lopez Torres* about whether “elections [that] require candidates to conduct campaigns and to raise funds in a system designed to allow for competition among interest groups and political parties . . . is consistent with the perception and the reality of judicial independence and judicial excellence.”<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Justices Stevens and Souter agreed with “the broader proposition that the very practice of electing judges is unwise.”<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, in a 2009 decision, *Caperton v. A.T. Massey Coal Co.*, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized for the first time the possibility of a due process violation caused by judicial bias involving a major campaign contributor.<sup>80</sup> This case involved Don Blankenship, the CEO of Massey Coal Company, who contributed three million dollars in 2004 to help elect Brent Benjamin to the West Virginia Supreme Court.<sup>81</sup> Benjamin won the election, and when Massey appealed a fifty million dollar verdict to the West Virginia Supreme Court, Justice Benjamin denied motions to recuse himself and voted to reverse the verdict against Massey.<sup>82</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court reversed the decision of the West Virginia Supreme Court and ruled that the due process clause requires judges to recuse themselves when there is a serious and objective risk of actual bias in cases like *Caperton*.<sup>83</sup> Justice Kennedy, writing for the majority, concluded that “there is a serious risk of actual bias—based on objective and reasonable perceptions—when a person with a personal stake in a particular case had a significant and disproportionate influence in placing

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76. *Id.* at 5.

77. See Melinda Gann Hall, *State Supreme Courts in American Democracy: Probing the Myths of Judicial Reform*, 95 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 315, 319 (2001). From 1990 through 2000, reelection rates were approximately 94.1% in the U.S. House of Representatives, 89.3% in the U.S. Senate, 85.1% in state houses, and 84.1% in state supreme courts. Melinda Gann Hall & Chris W. Bonneau, *Does Quality Matter? Challengers in State Supreme Court Elections*, 50 AM. J. POL. SCI. 20, 21 (2006).

78. 552 U.S. 196, 212 (2008) (Kennedy, J., concurring).

79. *Id.* at 209 (Stevens, J., concurring).

80. See 129 S.Ct. 2252, 2265 (2009).

81. *Id.* at 2254.

82. *Id.* at 2257–58.

83. *Id.* at 2265–67.

the judge on the case by raising funds or directing the judge's election campaign . . . ”<sup>84</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Empirical scholars have made great progress in the study of judicial decisionmaking. Political scientists, economists, and empirically trained legal scholars have made important contributions to the growing body of empirical work which establishes that many of the predictions of the public choice model of judicial behavior are true.

To be sure, any existing model of judicial decisionmaking, including both the public choice model and the well-established attitudinal and behavioral models, has only limited applicability to the study of judicial behavior. The importance of the law cannot be dismissed from theories of judicial behavior. Presumably, all judges are imbued to some extent with “rule of law” values, and, as a result, the law is the dominant factor in many decisions that they make. As Judge Posner himself has explained, many judges enjoy the practice of judging and would no more consider maximizing policy or personal preferences than a chess player would consider his own background or self-interest when moving his pieces.<sup>85</sup> Even in instances when judges’ personal preferences might take precedence over their pleasure in judging, much of our judicial system has been created to minimize the opportunity for judges to act out of self-interest.<sup>86</sup>

As a result, empirical studies have yet to demonstrate that any one extralegal factor, including ideology, self-interest, background, or institutions, has a significant influence on a large number of cases.<sup>87</sup> Thus, although empirical studies of judicial behavior are a “sobering splash in the face with cold reality”<sup>88</sup> for scholars that believe in principled judging, the influence of extralegal factors cannot be overstated.

Even the particular influences on judicial behavior will vary greatly among judges. It would be naïve to assert that influences “should be the same with respect to every judge in a particular judicial system, or indeed that it is or it should be the same even for judges on the same court in every type of case.”<sup>89</sup> Hence, we should talk about “judicial behaviors” rather than just “judicial behavior.” Thus, adherents of the public choice

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84. *Id.* at 2263–64.

85. The point belongs to Posner, and the examples belong to Schauer. See Richard A. Posner, *Social Norms and the Law: An Economic Approach*, 87 AM. ECON. REV. 365, 365 (1997); Frederick Schauer, *Incentives, Reputation, and the Inglorious Determinants of Judicial Behavior*, 68 U. CIN. L. REV. 615, 634 (2000).

86. See Epstein, *supra* note 5, at 831–32.

87. See CROSS, *supra* note 2, at 229.

88. Gregory C. Sisk, *Judges Are Human, Too*, 83 JUDICATURE 178, 211 (2000).

89. Stephen B. Burbank, *On the Study of Judicial Behaviors: Of Law, Politics, Science and Humanity* 13 (Univ. Pa. Law Sch., Pub. Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. 09-11) (2009) (emphasis omitted), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1393362>.

model, or any other model of judicial decisionmaking, must avoid wielding their hammers at everything that could be a nail.

Nevertheless, empirical legal studies into the role of judicial self-interest have made important strides in explaining some judicial behaviors. Hopefully, these empiricists have brought to light important examples of judicial self-interest affecting case outcomes. As a result, the findings of these empiricists and the implications for fair and impartial justice cannot be ignored.