

Code of Judicial Conduct

Canon 7

A Judge or Candidate for Judicial Office Shall Refrain From Inappropriate Political Activity

An Aid to Understanding Canon 7 (updated October 2018) - Download this free booklet explaining the ethical restrictions that apply to candidates in judicial elections.

A. All judges and Candidates.

(1) Except as authorized in Sections 7B(2), 7C(2) and 7C(3), a judge or a candidate for election or appointment to judicial office shall not:

(a) act as a leader or hold an office in a political organization;

(b) publicly endorse or publicly oppose another candidate for public office;

(c) make speeches on behalf of a political organization;

(d) attend political party functions; or

(e) solicit funds for, pay an assessment to or make a contribution to a political organization or candidate, or purchase tickets for political party dinners or other functions.

(2) A judge shall resign from judicial office upon becoming a candidate for a non-judicial office either in a primary or in a general election, except that the judge may continue to hold judicial office while being a candidate for election to or serving as a delegate in a state constitutional convention if the judge is otherwise permitted by law to do so.

(3) A candidate for a judicial office:

(a) shall be faithful to the law and maintain professional competence in it, and shall not be swayed by partisan interests, public clamor, or fear of criticism;

(b) shall maintain the dignity appropriate to judicial office and act in a manner consistent with the impartiality, integrity, and independence of the judiciary, and shall encourage members of the candidate's family to adhere to the same standards of political conduct in support of the candidate as apply to the candidate;

(c) shall prohibit employees and officials who serve at the pleasure of the candidate, and shall discourage other employees and officials subject to the candidate's direction and control from doing on the candidate's behalf what the candidate is prohibited from doing under the Sections of this Canon;

(d) except to the extent permitted by Section 7C(1), shall not authorize or knowingly permit any other person to do for the candidate what the candidate is prohibited from doing under the Sections of this Canon;

(e) shall not:

(i) with respect to parties or classes of parties, cases, controversies, or issues that are likely to come before the court, make pledges, promises, or commitments that are inconsistent with the impartial performance of the adjudicative duties of the office; or

(ii) knowingly misrepresent the identity, qualifications, present position or other fact concerning the candidate or an opponent;

(iii) while a proceeding is pending or impending in any court, make any public comment that might reasonably be expected to affect its outcome or impair its fairness or make any nonpublic comment that might substantially interfere with a fair trial or hearing. This section does not apply to proceedings in which the judicial candidate is a litigant in a personal capacity.

(iv) commend or criticize jurors for their verdict, other than in a court pleading, filing, or hearing in which the candidate represents a party in the proceeding in which the verdict was rendered.

(f) may respond to personal attacks or attacks on the candidate's record as long as the response does not violate Section 7A(3)(e).

B. Candidates Seeking Appointment to Judicial or Other Governmental Office.

(1) A candidate for appointment to judicial office or a judge seeking other governmental office shall not solicit or accept funds, personally or through a committee or otherwise, to support his or her candidacy.

(2) A candidate for appointment to judicial office or a judge seeking other governmental office shall not engage in any political activity to secure the appointment except that:

(a) such persons may:

(i) communicate with the appointing authority, including any selection or nominating commission or other agency designated to screen candidates;

(ii) seek support or endorsement for the appointment from organizations that regularly make recommendations for reappointment or appointment to the office, and from individuals; and

(iii) provide to those specified in Sections 7B(2)(a)(i) and 7B(2)(a)(ii) information as to his or her qualifications for the office;

(b) a non-judge candidate for appointment to judicial office may, in addition, unless otherwise prohibited by law:

(i) retain an office in a political organization,

(ii) attend political gatherings, and

(iii) continue to pay ordinary assessments and ordinary contributions to a political organization or candidate and purchase tickets for political party dinners or other functions.

C. Judges and Candidates Subject to Public Election.

(1) A candidate, including an incumbent judge, for a judicial office that is filled by public election between competing candidates shall not personally solicit campaign funds, or solicit attorneys for publicly stated support, but may establish committees of responsible persons to secure and manage the expenditure of funds for the candidate's campaign and to obtain public statements of support for his or her candidacy. Such committees are not prohibited from soliciting campaign contributions and public support from any person or corporation

authorized by law. A candidate shall not use or permit the use of campaign contributions for the private benefit of the candidate or members of the candidate's family.

(2) A candidate for merit retention in office may conduct only limited campaign activities until such time as the judge certifies that the judge's candidacy has drawn active opposition. Limited campaign activities shall only include the conduct authorized by subsection C(1), interviews with reporters and editors of the print, audio and visual media, and appearances and speaking engagements before public gatherings and organizations. Upon mailing a certificate in writing to the Secretary of State, Division of Elections, with a copy to the Judicial Qualifications Commission, that the judge's candidacy has drawn active opposition, and specifying the nature thereof, a judge may thereafter campaign in any manner authorized by law, subject to the restrictions of subsection A(3). This includes candidates facing active opposition in a merit retention election for the same judicial office campaigning together and conducting a joint campaign designed to educate the public on merit retention and each candidate's views as to why he or she should be retained in office, to the extent not otherwise prohibited by Florida law.

(3) A judicial candidate involved in an election or re-election, or a merit retention candidate who has certified that he or she has active opposition, may attend a political party function to speak in behalf of his or her candidacy or on a matter that relates to the law, the improvement of the legal system, or the administration of justice. The function must not be a fund raiser, and the invitation to speak must also include the other candidates, if any, for that office. The candidate should refrain from commenting on the candidate's affiliation with any political party or other candidate, and should avoid expressing a position on any political issue. A judicial candidate attending a political party function must avoid conduct that suggests or appears to suggest support of or opposition to a political party, a political issue, or another candidate. Conduct limited to that described above does not constitute participation in a partisan political party activity.

D. Incumbent Judges. A judge shall not engage in any political activity except (i) as authorized under any other Section of this Code, (ii) on behalf of measures to improve the law, the legal system or the administration of justice, or (iii) as expressly authorized by law.

E. Applicability. Canon 7 generally applies to all incumbent judges and judicial candidates. A successful candidate, whether or not an incumbent, is subject to judicial discipline for his or her campaign conduct; an unsuccessful candidate who is a lawyer is subject to lawyer discipline for his or her campaign conduct. A lawyer who is a candidate for judicial office is subject to Rule 4-8.2(b) of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar.

F. Statement of Candidate for Judicial Office. Each candidate for a judicial office, including an incumbent judge, shall file a statement with the qualifying officer within 10 days after filing the appointment of campaign treasurer and designation of campaign depository, stating that the candidate has read and understands the requirements of the Florida Code of Judicial Conduct. Such statement shall be in substantially the following form:

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE FOR JUDICIAL OFFICE

I, _____, the judicial candidate, have received, have read, and understand the requirements of the Florida Code of Judicial Conduct.

___ Signature of Candidate ___

___ Date ___

COMMENTARY

Canon 7A(1). A judge or candidate for judicial office retains the right to participate in the political process as a voter.

Where false information concerning a judicial candidate is made public, a judge or another judicial candidate having knowledge of the facts is not prohibited by Section 7A(1) from making the facts public.

Section 7A(1)(a) does not prohibit a candidate for elective judicial office from retaining during candidacy a public office such as county prosecutor, which is not "an office in a political organization."

Section 7A(1)(b) does not prohibit a judge or judicial candidate from privately expressing his or her views on judicial candidates or other candidates for public office.

A candidate does not publicly endorse another candidate for public office by having that candidate's name on the same ticket.

Section 7A(1)(b) prohibits judges and judicial candidates from publicly endorsing or opposing candidates for public office to prevent them from abusing the prestige of judicial office to advance the interests of others. Section 7C(2) authorizes candidates facing active opposition in a merit retention election for the same judicial office to campaign together and conduct a joint campaign designed to educate the public on merit retention and each candidate's views as to why he or she should be retained in office, to the extent not otherwise prohibited by Florida law. Joint campaigning by merit retention candidates, as authorized under Section 7C(2), is not a prohibited public endorsement of another candidate under Section 7A(1)(b).

Canon 7A(3)(b). Although a judicial candidate must encourage members of his or her family to adhere to the same standards of political conduct in support of the candidate that apply to the candidate, family members are free to participate in other political activity.

Canon 7A(3)(e). Section 7A(3)(e) prohibits a candidate for judicial office from making statements that commit the candidate regarding cases, controversies or issues likely to come before the court. As a corollary, a candidate should emphasize in any public statement the candidate's duty to uphold the law regardless of his or her personal views. Section 7A(3)(e) does not prohibit a candidate from making pledges or promises respecting improvements in court administration. Nor does this Section prohibit an incumbent judge from making private statements to other judges or court personnel in the performance of judicial duties. This Section applies to any statement made in the process of securing judicial office, such as statements to commissions charged with judicial selection and tenure and legislative bodies confirming appointment.

Canon 7B(2). Section 7B(2) provides a limited exception to the restrictions imposed by Sections 7A(1) and 7D. Under Section 7B(2), candidates seeking reappointment to the same judicial office or appointment to another judicial office or other governmental office may apply for the appointment and seek appropriate support.

Although under Section 7B(2) non-judge candidates seeking appointment to judicial office are permitted during candidacy to retain office in a political organization, attend political gatherings and pay ordinary dues and assessments, they remain subject to other provisions of this Code during candidacy. See Sections 7B(1), 7B(2)(a), 7E and Application Section.

Canon 7C. The term "limited campaign activities" is not intended to permit the use of common forms of campaign advertisement which include, but are not limited to, billboards, bumperstickers, media commercials, newspaper advertisements, signs, etc. Informational brochures about the merit retention system, the law, the legal system or the administration of justice, and neutral, factual biographical sketches of the candidates do not violate this provision.

Active opposition is difficult to define but is intended to include any form of organized public opposition or an unfavorable vote on a bar poll. Any political activity engaged in by members of a judge's family should be conducted in the name of the individual family member, entirely independent of the judge and without reference to the judge or to the judge's office.

Canon 7D. Neither Section 7D nor any other section of the Code prohibits a judge in the exercise of administrative functions from engaging in planning and other official activities with members of the executive and legislative branches of government. With respect to a judge's activity on behalf of measures to improve the law, the legal system and the administration of justice, see Commentary to Section 4B and Section 4C and its Commentary.