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Research Spotlight

U.S. Supreme Court Justices Database

Lee Epstein, Thomas G. Walker, Nancy Staudt, Scott A. Hendrickson and Jason M. Roberts

John R. Schmidhauser was a revolutionary. After publishing his landmark series of studies on the backgrounds of Supreme Court justices (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962), he archived his data with the ICPSR. Of course, it is now commonplace for judicial specialists to make their data publicly available. But not so back in the 1960s and 1970s.

With little doubt, Schmidhauser's selflessness had salutary effects for the study of judicial behavior. It was not only his pioneering work that encouraged others to explore the justices' backgrounds and attributes (an on-going project, we might add); it was the availability of his dataset as well. Among countless other scholars, Greg Caldeira (1988) put it to good use in his interesting article, "In the Mirror of the Justices," as did Neal Tate (1981) in "Personal Attribute Models..."—still a mainstay on graduate-level syllabi.

But some four decades later Schmidhauser's product is showing its age. Potter Stewart, who was appointed to the Court in 1959, is the last justice included in his database. Since Stewart's ascension to the bench, presidents have transmitted 26 nominations to the Senate, with the Senate confirming 19.

New nominees, though, aren't the only problem. Our research interests have changed, or actually broadened, as well. Perhaps because few nominations of the 1950s were contentious, scholars of the day paid them relatively scant attention. That area of study has burgeoned—especially since the failed nomination of Robert Bork. Likewise, modern-day theories of judging beg for reliable and valid measures of policy preferences. Contemporary judicial specialists have answered the call, exploiting statistical tools unavailable to their predecessors.

We could go on but by now readers get the drift: However valuable the Schmidhauser database, an overhaul was in order. With support from the National Science Foundation we undertook the task. The result is the **U.S. Supreme Court Justices Database**, available in a variety of forms at: <http://epstein.law.northwestern.edu/research/justicesdata.html>.

To provide but the briefest of overviews, the database contains information on all persons officially nominated to serve on the Court. It is not limited to those who successfully attained appointment, but it excludes persons whose nominations were not officially transmitted to the Senate for confirmation. E.g., Douglas Ginsburg, nominated by Ronald Reagan in 1987, is not included because his nomination was withdrawn before its official submission to the Senate.

For each nominee, we provide 263 pieces of information, falling roughly into five categories.

1. Identifiers. The unit of analysis in the database is the nominee or appointee (in the case of a recess appointment). Accordingly, the same person could appear more than once. E.g., William Rehnquist who was nominated in 1971 (associate justice) and in 1986 (chief justice). To help users select the set of nominees most appropriate for their analyses, we have incorporated a series of identification variables. E.g., whether the candidate was nominated for Chief or Associate Justice, whether it was a recess appointment, whether the Senate confirmed the nominee, and so on.
2. Background characteristics and personal attributes. The largest number of variables falls into this category—roughly 170. Data range from information about the nominees' family to their own educational background to pre-Court career experiences.
3. Nomination and confirmation. This portion of the database houses a wealth of information about the appointments process. We include a comprehensive set of variables on the candidates' positions at the time of nomination, as well as data

on the key participants: the president, the Judiciary Committee, the full Senate, and interest groups. E.g., for the president and the Senate, indicators of their ideology and partisanship. Finally, the database incorporates information about the process itself, such as votes at various stages and relevant dates.

4. Service on the Court. Developed primarily from Spaeth's U.S. Supreme Court Database, these variables house information about the justices' votes and opinions. E.g., the number of dissenting opinions they wrote, the number of liberal votes cast in criminal procedure cases.

5. Departures from the Court. Nine variables capture information about retirements, resignations, and deaths, including the justices' age, reason, and replacement.

Of course we hope that you and your students make use of the database, whether for current projects or those it might inspire. Should you find any errors, please report them to Lee Epstein (lee-epstein@northwestern.edu). Almost needless to write, we'd also appreciate any leads in tracking down information (primarily background data on some of the early, unsuccessful nominees) that we have been unable to locate. Finally, we encourage users to periodically check the project's web site. We'll list any changes we make, including updates for new nominees.

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