

The Erosion of the Judicial Independence of our Judiciary and the Politicization of Judicial Elections

Friday, October 18, 2024
12:00 – 1:30 PM



Nationwide both state and federal judges are encountering unprecedented threats of physical harm, unrelenting social media attacks, and the politicization of judicial election campaigns. Judges and justices throughout the country often confront well-funded opposition campaigns where their rulings are routinely distorted to the public. This plenary session features former Chief Justice Cheri Beasley of the North Carolina Supreme Court who faced a partisan and well-funded election challenge by a sitting male colleague. Washington State Supreme Court Justice Debra Stephens is also a panelist and a recognized national speaker on the importance of an independent judiciary. Joining them is Dr. Shirley Weber, California's Secretary of State, the first African American woman elected to the position, and whose many responsibilities include overseeing California's judicial elections. The panel will be moderated by Judge La Doris Cordell, (Ret.), Santa Clara County Superior Court & Author. Together, the panel will examine the budding erosion of judicial independence and the politicization of the judiciary.

Through this discussion, we hope to:

- Speak openly about the threats and attacks judicial officers have recently faced;
- Discuss ways to combat the politicization of judicial elections; and
- Explore strategies to preserve and protect the independence of our judicial system.

SPEAKERS:



Hon. Cheri Beasley, Chief Justice (Ret.), North Carolina Supreme Court

A former assistant public defender in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Chief Justice Beasley served as a jurist for 22 years. She served as a District Court Judge in Cumberland County before being elected to serve as Associate Judge on the North Carolina Court of Appeals in 2008. She joined the Supreme Court of North Carolina as an Associate Justice in 2012 and in 2019 and became the first African-American woman in the North Carolina Supreme Court's 200-year history to serve as Chief Justice.

In addition to leading the Supreme Court, she led through the devastation of local courts due to hurricanes, led the court system through the pandemic and through heightened racial tensions after

George Floyd’s murder. Through her leadership, North Carolina’s courts implemented 21st century technology, expanded access to drug recovery courts, domestic violence courts, mental health courts, addressed bail disparities and partnered with schools and faith leaders to solve critical challenges in our communities.

Chief Justice Beasley has always advocated for fair, independent, and accessible courts. She has mentored countless students and judges, lectured at area law schools, and traveled nationwide and abroad to promote the rule of law and the administration of justice. She has served on numerous committees with the American Bar Association and the North Carolina Bar Association to promote access to legal services for those who cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

Chief Justice Beasley is currently the Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Professor at Elon University School of Law in Greensboro, North Carolina and serves as a shareholder at the law firm of Haynsworth Sinkler Boyd, P.A.



Hon. LaDoris Cordell, Judge (Ret.), Superior Court of Santa Clara County and Author

LaDoris Hazzard Cordell, a 1974 graduate of Stanford Law School, was the first lawyer to open a law practice in East Palo Alto, a low-income community of color. In 1978, she was appointed Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at Stanford Law School, where she implemented a successful minority admissions program.

In 1982, Governor Jerry Brown appointed Ms. Cordell to the Municipal Court of Santa Clara County. In 1988, Judge Cordell won election to the Superior Court of Santa Clara County, making her the first African American woman to sit on the Superior Court in northern California.

In 2001, she retired from the bench to become Vice Provost & Special Counselor to the President for Campus Relations at Stanford University.

In 2003, accepting no monetary donations, Judge Cordell, ran a grassroots campaign and won a 4-year term on the Palo Alto City Council.

Judge Cordell was the Independent Police Auditor for the City of San Jose for five years (2010-2015). Under her leadership, the office gained national prominence.

In 2016, Judge Cordell chaired a Blue-Ribbon Commission in Santa Clara County that investigated the jails in the aftermath of the murder of an inmate by jail guards; she also served on a Blue Ribbon Panel that investigated the San Francisco Police Department after racist and sexist text messages surfaced.

Judge Cordell has been an on-camera legal analyst for CBS-5 television and a guest commentator on Court TV, MSNBC’s “The Weekend with Joshua Johnson,” and “The Mehdi Hasan Show.”

Her memoir *Her Honor*, a finalist for the 2021 California Book Award in nonfiction was released in Fall 2022 by Celadon, a division of Macmillan Publishing.



Hon. Debra Stephens, Justice, Washington Supreme Court

Justice Debra Stephens has served on the Washington Supreme Court since January 2008 and was the State’s 57th chief justice. She previously served on the Washington Court of Appeals, following a successful career as an appellate attorney in state and federal courts, including as counsel of record in the United States Supreme Court. She also taught federal and state constitutional law and appellate advocacy at Gonzaga University School of Law.

Justice Stephens co-chairs the National Association of Women Judges’ Judicial Independence Committee and works with USAID to train foreign judges on issues of judicial independence and the rule of law. She serves on the Washington Civic Learning Council, is a founding executive committee member of the National Courts and Sciences Institute (NCSI) and a convener for Dividing the Waters, a National Judicial College program supporting judicial education on water law. Most recently, Justice Stephens was named a Rodel Judicial Fellow, and throughout the coming year will work with fellow jurists to advance the role of courts in strengthening our democracy.

Justice Stephens and her husband have two grown children. They enjoy golf, tennis, pickleball, and spending time outdoors.



Dr. Shirley Weber, Secretary of State, State of California

Shirley Nash Weber, Ph.D. was nominated to serve as California Secretary of State by Governor Gavin Newsom on December 22, 2020 and sworn into office on January 29, 2021. Voters elected her for a full term on November 8, 2022. Weber is California’s first Black Secretary of State and only the fifth African American to serve as a state constitutional officer in California’s 173-year history.

Weber was born to sharecroppers in Hope, Arkansas during the segregationist Jim Crow era. Her father, who left Arkansas after being threatened by a lynch mob, did not have the opportunity to vote until he was in his 30s. Her grandfather never voted as custom and law in the South, before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, systemically suppressed voting by Blacks. Although her family moved to California when Weber was three years old, it was her family’s experience in the Jim Crow South that has driven her activism and legislative work. She has fought to secure and expand civil rights for all Californians, including restoring voting rights for individuals who have completed their prison term.

Weber attended the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she received her BA, MA and PhD by the age of 26. Prior to receiving her doctorate, she became a professor at San Diego State University (SDSU) at the age of 23. She also taught at California State University at Los Angeles (CSULA) and Los Angeles City College before coming to SDSU. She retired from the Department of Africana Studies after 40 years as a faculty member and serving several terms as department chair.

Before her appointment, Secretary Weber served four terms as an Assembly Member representing California's 79th Assembly District, which includes parts of the City of San Diego as well as several cities and communities in the San Diego region. Weber also served as a member and chair of the San Diego Unified School District and has twice served as a California Elector, including chairing the California College of Presidential Electors on December 14, 2020.

During her tenure in the Assembly, Weber chaired the Assembly Elections and Redistricting Committee, Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Public Safety, and Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Health. Weber was the first African American to serve as the chair of the Assembly Budget Committee. She also served as a member of the Standing Committees on Education, Higher Education, Elections, Budget, Banking and Finance.

In addition, Weber chaired the Select Committee on Campus Climate, which was created to examine and mitigate hate crimes on California's college and university campuses. The committee also explored student hunger, sexual assaults, homelessness, and freedom of expression. She formerly created and chaired the Select Committee on Higher Education in San Diego County, which explored the need for an additional higher education facility in San Diego and ways to improve the quality, affordability and equal access of higher education in the region.

From 2019 - 2020, she served as chair of the California Legislative Black Caucus (CLBC), which consists of the state's African American legislators and has the goal of promoting equal opportunity for California's African American community. Weber broke records during her tenure by garnering extraordinary support for CLBC's efforts and its projects.

Weber's genuine passion and tireless quest for equality and fairness in all sectors of life have resulted in her pursuit of reforms in education and criminal justice. Her equity-oriented legislation includes: school finance and accountability, classroom safety, ethnic studies, early learners, attendance and dropout rates, quality instruction, law enforcements' use-of-force and body camera practices, reparations, the CalGangs' database, Affirmative Action, inclusive jury selection and instruction, predatory lending, resources for exonerees, restorative justice, racial profiling, among others. Weber has also pursued public policy changes related to health, senior citizens, veterans and military families.

Secretary Weber is a mother of two adult children, three grandchildren and was married for 29 years to the late Honorable Daniel Weber. She is number six in a family of eight children. Her Parents, David and Mildred Nash, are deceased. Her hobbies are reading and traveling