



**Kentucky Candidate  
Information Survey**

**JUDICIAL SURVEY  
2020**

# KY Supreme Court 7th District

**1.**

Each judicial candidate pledges to keep an open mind and carry out their adjudicative duties faithfully and impartially if elected.

**2.**

Each candidate also recognizes their overarching obligation to apply and uphold the law, without regard to his or her personal views.

**3.**

No statement should be interpreted as a pledge, promise, or commitment in connection with any case, controversy, or issue likely to come before the court.

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**Robert "Bob" Conley**  
*ConleyForSupremeCourt.com*



**Chris Harris**  
*www.chrisharrisky.com*



**Sam Wright**  
*SamWrightforJustice.com*

<b>Education</b>	Bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky in 1981 before graduating Salmon P. Chase College of Law at Northern Kentucky University in 1984.	University of Kentucky (1993) – B.S. Accounting, Northern Kentucky University, Chase College of Law (1996) – Juris Doctor	After graduating from Hazard Community College with an associate degree in 1975, I went to the University of Kentucky, where I earned both my bachelor's degree and Juris Doctor.
<b>Current Occupation</b>	Circuit Judge – 20th Circuit (Greenup & Lewis Counties)	I have been a practicing attorney for the past 24 years and currently serve as State Representative for the 93rd District, representing Pike and Martin Counties in the Kentucky House of Representatives	Justice of the Supreme Court of Kentucky (District 7)
<b>Family</b>	Married to the late Melanie Stephens Conley for 28 years and father of Katie and Brian.	I have been married to my wife Leslie for 24 years and together we have 3 children, Corbin (age 21), Wilson (age 19) and Emma (age 15).	My family and my Christian faith are the cornerstones of my life. I'm married to my college sweetheart, Jennifer, and we have two sons, Samuel Tilden IV and John Alexander. I also have one sister, Tammie, and a nephew.
<b>Legal Background / Experience</b>	Ten years of practicing law followed by 25 years as a trail Judge (District Judge for 12 years and Circuit Judge for the past 13 years).	I'm a former prosecutor who has been practicing law for nearly 25 years. I've fought for justice in court rooms across Kentucky at every level and I'm the only candidate in this race to have successfully argued a case before the Kentucky Supreme Court. I have more courtroom experience as a practicing attorney than both of my opponents combined.	After graduating from law school, I joined the law firm of Cook and Wright, where I worked from 1982-1989. I went on to open my own practice, Wright Law Offices, and worked there until 1992 when I was elected Letcher District Court Judge. While sitting as district judge, I was elected Letcher Circuit Court Judge in 1993. I was re-elected circuit judge in 1999, 2006, and 2014. After serving Letcher County as a trial judge for more than 23 years, I was elected Justice of the Supreme Court of Kentucky in 2015.



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**What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of your legal career? Why?**  
(50 words or less)

My greatest accomplishment has been serving as a Circuit and District Court Judge for the people of Greenup and Lewis Counties. The confidence that my community has placed in me through these positions is humbling.

One of the legal accomplishments of which I am most proud is representing my community, pro-bono, before the Ky PSC, to compel a local utility to provide waste water service to homes and businesses in need. I have also worked pro-bono, behind the scenes, on a number of cases involving Kentucky's Open Records Act.

As Circuit Judge, I formed a Drug Court with one of Kentucky's best graduation and lowest recidivism rates. God's grace and second chances are central to my firmly-held Christian convictions. Drug Court extends grace and second chances to people willing to work for them—all while making our communities safer.

**To what extent have you practiced in the area of criminal law? Family law? Complex civil litigation?**  
(50 words or less)

Prior to joining the bench, I served as a civil defense attorney in the private sector.

I have more experience practicing a wide variety of law, including complex civil litigation, at every level, in both state and federal court than both of my opponents combined. It is this perspective and legal experience that uniquely prepares me to serve as a Justice on the Kentucky Supreme Court.

Before becoming a judge, I had a general practice in all areas. My main concentration was on minerals, schools, and complex civil law. I also assisted Commonwealth's Attorney in criminal prosecution. As a judge, I have worked in all areas of the law for the last 28 years.

**What forms of voluntary professional and community service have you been involved with in the past?**  
(50 words or less)

Longtime member of Bridges Christian Church in Russell where I've served in many roles including Elder, Deacon, Sunday School Teacher, and Bible Study Leader. I've been active in youth sports as a coach in baseball, softball, football, and soccer in the Ashland area.

In addition to the pro-bono work I mentioned above, I have served as President of my local Kiwanis Club and provided additional miscellaneous pro-bono legal representation for the poor, and working poor, over the course of my legal career. I have donated my time, services and resources to numerous charitable and religious organizations.

Appalachian Pregnancy Care Center, clothes for Grace's Closet, raised money for home for abused women and children, appeared on Judi's Place for Kids telethon, worked phones for Cardinal Hill telethon, board member of volunteer fire department, Rotary President (received Paul Harris Fellow award), Mason, Shriner, helped build local park.

**What are the major influences in your life? Why?**  
(50 words or less)

Major influences in my life have been leaders of faith in my church and community who have helped shaped me into the person I am today.

In addition to my faith, I consider my family and community as my greatest influences. Growing up in a small town with close family and friends, I value my reputation and focus in being a good example for others.

Family, Church – My grandfather was a preacher and I was raised in the First Baptist Church of Whitesburg. I've been a member of the church since high school and my family has always been involved and served in the church's groups and organizations. Family and Christian values give me a purpose.



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**Are there any specific types of cases in which you know now you would find it necessary to recuse yourself?**

(50 words or less)

No.

NO

No specific type. I would have to recuse from cases that I previously ruled on as a trial judge or those involving my family members within the third degree of relationship.

**In the last 10 years, which of the following organizations have you been a member, contributed money, volunteered time, been employed by, been endorsed by for a campaign, received money from for a campaign, or had any other affiliation?**

(50 words or less)

Kentucky Right to Life

AFL-CIO  
NRA – National Rifle Association  
Appalachian Pregnancy Care Center  
Places of Worship – multiple

Answer is marked on the original form and attached hereto. The organizations I could mark on the list were: Chamber of Commerce; Kentucky Right to Life; and Place of Worship, 1st Baptist Church of Whitesburg.

**Some judges practice a philosophy of restraint, believing that judges must interpret the law strictly rather than seek to make new laws. Others develop a philosophy of activism, using the bench to enact social and political change. Please explain your approach.**

(50 words or less)

As I've done on the Circuit and District Court Levels, my rulings will always focus on the law and upholding our Constitution and Bill of Rights. I don't believe in legislating from the bench.

The constitution is my guiding principle. The people of the 7th District can trust me to defend the constitution and apply the law fairly and equally. And, I will always conduct myself with integrity and in a manner that brings honor to the Court and the people I serve.

We have three branches of government. New laws are made by the legislature—not the courts. The courts' role is to interpret laws and constitutions according to their text. In interpreting, a judge must give the fairest reading set forth by the public's representatives to attain justice.



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Some judges believe that courts should read the Constitution expansively and should not limit themselves to what is explicitly stated. Others believe the courts should not reinterpret the Constitution. Please explain your approach.

(50 words or less)

The Constitution should not be reinterpreted.

I believe the constitution should be the guiding cornerstone for every judge.

The Constitution is a complete and comprehensive system of government. Under that system of government, the judicial branch was not given the power to legislate. If a judge adds to or takes away from the text, it could damage the whole system. Judges must follow the text—not change it.

Some judges believe that courts should interpret the Constitution as the framers intended. Others believe that the Constitution must grow and adapt to new circumstances. Please explain your approach.

(50 words or less)

The Constitution should only be interpreted as the framers intended.

I believe a judge should always interpret the Constitution as the framers intended to the best of his or her ability.

The United States Constitution created a new system of government. The Federalist Papers display our nation's Founding Fathers' breadth and depth of knowledge and debate. The Constitution describes the only method by which it can be amended. Absent amendment, the Constitution should not "grow."

What is your general judicial philosophy? (75 words or less)

My philosophy will always be on following the law, Constitution, and Bill of Rights.

Unfortunately, judges with conservative judicial philosophies as well as those with liberal philosophies, have interpreted the Constitution to further their own personal beliefs. That is wrong. I have a moderate judicial philosophy. I believe a judge should apply the law fairly and leave their personal beliefs outside the courtroom.

Judges should interpret laws according to their clear text. If the meaning of a word or concept must be interpreted by the courts, then historic context and meaning are vital and must be followed. In the oath I took as a judge, I swore I would "support the Constitution . . . and faithfully execute . . . the office according to law." A sacred oath is something you live by. The courts are the safeguard of our rights and freedoms.



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<p><b>Which of the current/recent Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court MOST reflects your judicial philosophy and why? Which LEAST reflects it and why?</b> (50 words or less)</p>	<p>Candidate chose not to respond.</p>	<p>I don't know that there is <u>one</u> justice who most or least reflects my judicial philosophy. I find agreement with some of former Justice Antonie Scalia's opinions as I also find disagreement with some of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's opinions and vice-versa.</p>	<p>Antonin Scalia most reflects my philosophy because he followed the text in a reasonable manner. If, instead of the text, courts base interpretations on the "spirit" of the law, they can say almost anything. Ruth Bader Ginsburg least reflects my philosophy since she seems to vote according to her agenda.</p>
<p><b>What do you see as the most important issue facing Kentucky's judiciary?</b> (50 words or less)</p>	<p>The biggest issue facing our nation's judiciary is the balancing of Constitutional rights and social well-being.</p>	<p>Judicial integrity. The people of Kentucky deserve a Supreme Court Justice with INTEGRITY! They deserve a Justice who treats people without money and influence the same as he treats the special corporate interests and campaign donors who have pending business before the court.</p>	<p>The courts are an essential foundation of our society. Our government is based on the consent of the governed. If people lose faith in courts, then our country will fail. People must understand the courts' role in our country and have faith that judges will follow that role fairly.</p>
<p><b>What do you perceive as the greatest obstacles to justice, if any?</b> (50 words or less)</p>	<p>Public opinion. The right decision under the law doesn't always agree with the public's opinion.</p>	<p>The greatest obstacles to justice in Kentucky are special interest money's influence on public opinion and elections. I would also include the public's lack of access to the courts as a significant obstacle to justice in Kentucky.</p>	<p>We need to recruit high-quality individuals to serve as judges.</p>
<p><b>What steps will you take as a judge to ensure that the rule of law is uniformly applied without passion or prejudice?</b> (50 words or less)</p>	<p>Regardless of the parties involved in a case, the judge's rulings should be fair, consistent, and based upon the law and prior case law on point. It is the legislature that makes law changes in accordance with social ideals, as long as they don't conflict with the Constitution.</p>	<p>I will be a Justice who fairly and compassionately applies the law to every person, group or entity that comes before the Court. I will listen to every side of every issue and make my rulings based upon an informed, fair and just interpretation of the law.</p>	<p>Review and correction of errors in the cases by the Court of Appeals and Supreme Court is the regulating force. Continuing judicial education for judges which clearly explains how cases are to be decided and helps judges develop the correct approach and mindset.</p>



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While serving on the bench, do you believe you have a role in bringing important legal or judicial issues before the public or the legislature? Why or why not? What should your role be? (50 words or less)

While Judicial Leadership can express problems to the legislature, the legislature is ultimately responsible for determining new law (per our separations of powers).

Other than issues relating to judicial integrity, accountability and administration, I do not believe it to be the role of a Supreme Court Justice to bring issues before the public or the legislature. A Supreme Court Justice's role should be to interpret and apply the law and constitution as they are written.

If a case involves inconsistencies between statutes, the court should fully explain the conflict. When this happens, the legislature can review the case and amend any statutes as it believes appropriate. It is not a judge's role to advocate for laws—only interpret them according to their text.

What makes you the best qualified candidate for this position? (50 words or less)

Given that I have served at the District and Circuit Levels, I have extensive experience as a trial judge, something critical for our appellate court systems.

I have devoted my legal career to fighting, in courtrooms across Kentucky, at every level, including the Supreme Court, for justice on behalf of working people. No other candidate has that experience or record. A Supreme Court Justice should hold himself, and be held by others, to the highest ethical standards.

Experience as a trial judge is crucial. In rendering opinions, it is imperative to understand the real-life mechanics of a trial court. I bring invaluable experience to the job. Judges also need to be well-rounded. My life-long experiences as a family man and Christian make me the best candidate.

Is there anything else you would like the voter to know? (50 words or less)

I believe that every life has value and every person matters. I would appreciate the supports of voters in the 7th Supreme Court District in the June 23rd Primary Election.

Throughout my career, I have fought for justice and to make government more accountable and transparent to the people it serves. As a Supreme Court Justice, I will continue that legacy and always conduct myself in a manner that brings honor to the Court and the people I serve.

Kentucky Right to Life recommends me. In 2015, Commonwealth's Attorneys and various Fraternal Order of Police chapters endorsed me. As Circuit Judge, I started the first Parent Education Clinic in the district to reduce the harm children suffer in divorces. The Fiscal Court passed a resolution my Drug Court was "Amazingly Successful."

By sharing how each candidate describes themselves, their qualifications, and judicial philosophy, the KCIS Judicial Survey is bringing light to the area voters are often least informed about. Thus, improving 1) voter knowledge; 2) voter participation; and 3) the quality of the democratic process.

KCIS is a non-partisan project of the Family Trust Foundation of Kentucky.



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**Survey responses for additional judicial  
and legislative races are available at**

[www.votekentucky.us](http://www.votekentucky.us)

## Overview of Kentucky's Court System

### Supreme Court

**Basic Info:** The Supreme Court is the state court of last resort and the final interpreter of Kentucky law. Seven justices sit on the Supreme Court and all seven justices rule on appeals before the court.

**Cases Handled:** Appeals involving the death penalty, life imprisonment or imprisonment for 20 years or more go directly from Circuit Court to the Supreme Court. All other appeals must first be heard by the Court of Appeals, except those so exceptional that the Supreme Court will grant a request to bypass the Court of Appeals.

**Term:** Supreme Court justices serve eight-year terms.



### Court of Appeals

**Basic Info:** Fourteen judges, two elected from each of the seven appellate districts, serve on the Court of Appeals and are divided into panels of three to review and decide cases, with the majority deciding the outcome.

**Cases Handled:** With a few exceptions, most cases appealed from Circuit Court go to the Court of Appeals. The case is not retried at the appeals level. Instead, the original trial record is reviewed, with attorneys presenting the legal issues to the court for a decision.

**Term:** Court of Appeals judges serve eight-year terms.



### Circuit Courts

**Note: Family Court is a division of Circuit Court that hears only cases involving families and children.**

**Cases Handled:** Can hear all types of cases unless the General Assembly has given exclusive jurisdiction of particular kinds of cases to another court to handle, such as District Court. Circuit Court hears civil matters involving more than \$5,000, capital offenses and felonies, divorces, adoptions, termination of parental rights, land dispute title problems and contested probates of will. It also has the power to issue injunctions and writs of prohibition and mandamus to compel or prohibit acts, and to hear appeals from District Court and administrative agencies.

**Term:** Circuit judges serve eight-year terms.



### District Courts

**Cases Handled:** Hears juvenile matters, city and county ordinances, traffic offenses, probates of will, felony preliminary hearings, civil cases involving \$5,000 or less, guardianship, conservatorship, voluntary or involuntary commitment, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence.

**Term:** District judges serve four-year terms.