



Judicial Candidate Questionnaire
20th Judicial Circuit Judge
August 2026 Primary Election

Your name: Vera Bergermann
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Your age: 68 years
Today's date: May 31, 2026

Please limit each response to 150–200 words

1. Why do you want to serve as a judge as opposed to practicing law?

I wish to be a legal decision-maker as compared to a zealous advocate. I believe that a judicial position requires not just legal knowledge and experience in the practice of law, but also wisdom. There is much discretion given to judges in their decision-making, so wisdom gained from life experience is essential to doing the job properly. It was not until 2024 that I felt my levels of knowledge, practice, and “wisdom” were sufficient to apply for a judgeship. I have been Bar-licensed for more than 45 years, I have practiced law in southwest Florida for 30 years, and I have been a voter for over 50 years. I personally understand the challenges people face with operating a business, owning a home, parenting, divorcing, fielding lawsuits, and handling the death of loved ones. Back in 1215, the Magna Carta declared that free men had the right to a lawful judgment by their equals--what we now phrase as “a jury of one’s peers.” Your judges should have the same qualification. The judiciary can’t walk the proverbial mile in everyone’s shoes, but discretion in decision-making is best seasoned by life experiences—of which I am well-supplied!

2. Circuit court judges in Florida may be assigned to handle criminal, civil, family, probate, or juvenile matters. Which areas are your strongest, and how will you prepare to serve effectively across all of them?

Family law is my strongest area of law as I have spent the last 30 years in this practice. I am also familiar with juvenile law as I have had cases in dependency court as recently as this year. I began my legal journey as an intern in Juvenile Court with the homicide division in the Office of the State’s Attorney in Chicago, (mostly gang murders). My experience over the next 15 years was in the civil sector handling contracts, business and tax matters. I would need to study criminal and probate law, if I were to be assigned to those dockets. There is a period of several months between the election on August 18th and the start of the judicial position in January 2027. This would be used for continuing education courses as well as studying statutory and case law in the criminal and probate sectors. As I am a seasoned civil litigator, I am familiar with courtroom procedures.

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Spending time in the other courtrooms to observe the judges would be part of my preparation.

3. How do you ensure self-represented litigants receive a fair hearing without compromising your impartiality or the integrity of the proceedings?

All litigants should be treated equally whether they are self-represented or represented by counsel. Everyone should be fully heard. The judge also needs to show patience—with the uncertain *pro se* litigant as well as the long-winded attorney! The self-represented litigants may need more time allotted to their hearings and trials as they are less familiar with courtroom procedure and the rules of evidence. If they do not receive the extra time for their courtroom proceedings, then they might not receive a “fair” hearing. Under the law, the *pro se* litigant is held to the same standard of courtroom conduct as an attorney. Judges can be of great help by having detailed court websites with useful information for litigants. I would provide useful guides to allow litigants to meet the expectations of the court system—how to dress, how many copies of documents to provide and in what format, etc. If the expectations are clear and easy to find, then the whole process is improved for all participants.

4. Who are your judicial role models? Why?

My judicial role models are two retired Twentieth Judicial Circuit Court judges before whom I practiced, Hugh E. Starnes and R. Thomas Corbin. Attorneys knew what was expected of them and these judges were prompt in their rulings. Both tried to make the family law court system a better place for southwest Florida families. Judge Starnes created a Best Practices initiative in which I participated from 1998-2001. A volunteer group of professionals involved with family law examined weaknesses in the judicial system, researched solutions, proposed and then implemented changes. Judge Corbin was an active author in family law publications. He provided knowledge and insight to which we still refer today. He also founded a local program for people to have their child support cases heard in the evening, so they wouldn't have to miss work. Attorneys (of which I was one) volunteered their time as hearing officers. Some of these programs are no longer in existence due to changes in the law, but the idea that procedures *can* be changed and the system made more efficient is still the legacy left by Judges Starnes and Corbin. I would like to do the same.

5. How do or would you approach a case where the law as written produces an outcome that seems unfair or harsh? Where do you draw the line between interpreting the law and making policy?

How I would approach such a case is through discernment and wisdom. *Discernment* is the ability to see past the obvious and understand the true nature of a situation using the skill of separating truth from falsehood; and using careful observation to evaluate people, motives, and courses of action. *Wisdom* is the ability to use your knowledge, experience and understanding to make sound judgments. As I stated earlier, circuit court

judges have a great deal of discretion. The judge can ask the attorneys to prepare memoranda to address particular points of law. Frequently, there are trial experts, appellate court cases (generally, both *pro* and *con* to a particular outcome), and treatises to interpret statutes (i.e., “the law as written”). Using memoranda, documented trial evidence, testimony from the parties and experts, and carefully chosen case law, the judge can craft a fair decision even if the initial observation is that the statute *requires* a harsh outcome. I do not see this as “making policy.” I see it as using wisdom in the discretion given to trial court judges to “interpret the law.” Circuit court judges do not make policy. District appellate courts and Supreme Courts make the decisions that determine “policy.”

- 6. Have you ever been disciplined by the bar association or any other authority on attorney or judicial conduct, or been the subject of a Judicial Qualifications Commission inquiry? If yes, please describe the matter and its resolution. If no, please confirm that directly.**

No, I have not been disciplined by the bar association or any other authority on attorney conduct. I have never been a judge, so would never have been the subject of discipline on judicial conduct or the subject of a JQC inquiry.

- 7. What do you want Collier County voters to know about you that they are unlikely to find anywhere else?**

I do not accept endorsements. I believe that they cast doubt on the impartiality of the judicial candidate who accepts endorsements. If you appear in court on a traffic citation, would you feel prejudiced before the judge who was endorsed by law enforcement? Would you feel the same about the judge who didn't accept endorsements?

I believe in working hard, and that one is never too old to learn new things or pursue goals. I was 16 years old when I graduated from high school, and graduated with high honors and distinction from university in the month I turned 19. I began working full-time in my last year of law school and graduated at the age of 22. From criminal law prosecution in Chicago to working for international corporations in four states; earning a Master's degree in Taxation (while running a bed-and-breakfast and parenting a toddler), becoming a mediator, and then finding my calling as a family law attorney at 39, I believe that we never stop evolving in our life's work. My next calling is to finish my legal career as a judge. (Mandatory retirement would occur in the last month of the 6-year term.)

- 8. Most incumbent judges whose terms were up in 2026 are running unopposed and will be automatically re-elected for another six-year term. You chose to challenge a sitting judge rather than wait for an open seat. What led you to this decision, and what do you bring to this seat that you believe is not currently there?**

Waiting for an open seat is fruitless. There are *no open seats, nor have there been for many years.* Local judges have submitted their resignations/retirements months in advance making the timing such that their seat is filled by the Judicial Nominating Commission (JNC) and the governor. The JNC accepts applications and interviews attorneys. They send a “short list” to the governor whose own attorney then interviews these candidates. The governor makes a choice and that person then fills the judicial vacancy. This is how my opponent came to be a judge *just last year*. I also interviewed through the JNC process in 2024 and 2025. I do not fit the profile of the judges selected in this manner. I am of an older generation and, unlike the majority, do not come from public service. To become a judge now, my only choice is to run against an incumbent.

I don't “bring to this seat” something that “is not currently there,” but rather, I bring *more* of what is already there—wider base of knowledge (than criminal law and one year as a judge), longer legal practice (1980 versus 2007), and broader life experiences!