

Introducing the State of the Judiciary Archive

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After a long period of American history in which state judiciaries often fell into decline due to legislative neglect and a lack of centralized leadership, stewardship of the judicial branch gradually became a core responsibility of most chief justices and/or their supreme court colleagues (assisted by professional court administrators). Chief justices were tasked with identifying problems in the judiciary, developing reform programs, and using their formal powers and informal clout to improve justice systems. These duties, often overlooked by political scientists, occupy a substantial proportion of a chief justice's time and effort (Smith and Feldman 2001) and require chiefs to engage in political communication and strategic advocacy to promote their preferred reforms (Wilhelm, et al. 2019; Wilhelm, et al. 2020).

One challenge when evaluating extrajudicial leadership activities of chief justices is identifying a data source to facilitate observation of them. In addition, it is desirable to compare these activities across space and time. Fortunately, it has become a common practice for most state chief justices to deliver State of the Judiciary messages to state legislators, bar meetings, judicial conferences, or other audiences (Wilhelm, et al. 2019). The content of these messages provides a snapshot of a state judicial system's well-being in a given year. They typically provide a summary of recent accomplishments and an agenda for the year ahead. In this sense they function similar to a State of the Union message or a governor's State of the State speech. State of the Judiciary reports allow scholars to observe the behavior of court leaders acting without the constraints of precedent and intracourt dynamics that limit the topics and content of judicial opinions.

Our recently launched website, the State of the Judiciary Archive (SOJA; www.stateofthefudiciary.com), includes a searchable database of State of the Judiciary reports (or equivalent) delivered by state supreme court chief justices from the 1960s through the present day. The SOJA database facilitates the study of chief justices' leadership activities that have become very important in the past 50 years. We gathered these reports as part of the data collection effort for our recent book, *Administering Justice: Placing the Chief Justice in American State Politics* (2023, University of Michigan Press), as well as several published and forthcoming articles. At present, the archive includes over 1,000 reports ($N = 1,035$) from 49 states. It is our hope that the online release of these materials will foster additional studies of courts, judicial politics, chief justices, and interbranch relations in the American states. Beyond this, we encourage scholars to consider using these reports for pedagogical purposes, as we have done in our own classrooms. This archive will facilitate political science research and teaching, as well as provide an online home for primary sources that are useful to scholars, journalists, court administrators, and members of the legal community.

Document Search:

Search our database of 1,000+ judiciary reports.

Search by keywords

Refine Your Results:

By State - Select all that apply

Select a State

By Year - 1961 to Present

From Year

To Year

By Justice - Select all that apply

Chief Justice

By Venue - Select all that apply

Venue

Search Reports

Clear Filters

Search Tips:

Begin with a Keyword Search (put quotes around phrases), then use the filters for State, Years, Justice, or Venue to refine your results.

If no keywords are selected, then results will show all relevant reports based on your query.

We collected the original versions of these State of the Judiciary reports from numerous sources and have reformatted them, creating machine-readable PDF documents with a consistent format. Notably, these materials are well suited to textual analysis using LIWC or similar software. The search engine on the SOJA website allows visitors to search for reports using several criteria. These include the state, year, name of the chief justice, venue, or a keyword/phrase specified by the user. After searching, users are provided a list of relevant reports which can then be read online or downloaded. Users who wish to download multiple reports can do so in a compressed (.zip) format.

It is important to note that our database does not include the full universe of State of the Judiciary reports, as many have been discarded or remain beyond our grasp despite nearly a decade of efforts to collect them. We suspect that many of these materials have simply fallen down the memory hole, though we would love to be proven wrong. Reports we have not located tend to be

older and/or delivered to audiences other than legislators. Still, we believe that our archive provides a representative sample of the population.

Because we created the State of the Judiciary Archive with both research and pedagogy in mind, the website also includes background information and research prompts for students. These prompts require student engagement with the reports in the database in order to answer questions related to states' justice systems. These exercises facilitate learning about justice systems, policy agendas, and institutional development in the states. Dr. Vining used these prompts for instructional purposes recently and found that students responded well to them. Many chose to learn more about the justice systems of their home states. Several other students focused on the history and treatment of a policy issue. These students were exposed to information about chief justices and state courts that they were unlikely to learn in most circumstances, especially given the usual focus on federal courts on course syllabi. We welcome the use of the educational prompts in other instructors' courses and appreciate feedback regarding their usefulness. We hope the State of the Judiciary Archive proves to be a useful resource to teach students about state courts, judges, and the development of justice systems.

On a final note, we encourage colleagues who may have access to additional State of the Judiciary reports to contact us with any leads. While we have been in contact with numerous law librarians, court administrators, and former judges, we expect that members of the Law & Courts community may also have useful contacts. We intend to continue updating the SOJA as additional reports are located.

We hope this database is useful as a springboard for additional studies of state courts and the judges who lead them. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or comments regarding the website or these materials.

References

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