

from THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR STATE COURTS

# The state *of the* state courts

Public perception of the courts is generally positive compared to other institutions, but some downward trends are evident.

**OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS**, the National Center for State Courts has commissioned several national telephone surveys to collect public views on state courts and the judicial system. The latest iteration, released in December 2017 and based on telephone surveys of 1,000 registered voters,<sup>1</sup> shows a public that is both confident in and, in some respects, confused by their courts.

Among the key findings:

## **Courts remain the most trusted branch of state government.**

Seventy-one percent of respondents had a great deal or some confidence in their state court system, contrasted with their governor (61 percent) or state legislature (57 percent). This view is consistent with prior polls; in a four-year average, 70 percent of respondents reported a great deal or some confidence in the state courts.

## **State courts continue to be viewed in an overall positive light.**

Respondents believe courts are hard working (64 percent), are fair and impartial (58 percent), provide equal justice to all (54 percent), provide good customer service to people in the court system (52 percent), and are a good investment of taxpayer dollars (51 percent). Most of these ratings, however, are down from previous years (see chart at right).

## **People reported mixed views on how judges get to the bench and how they render their decisions.**

Fifty-three percent of respondents believed judges are on the bench because of personal connections or political influence; only 43 percent felt it was because of the judge's qualifications and experience. This dichotomy was also reflected in the questions on how judges make decisions. While 50 percent felt judges made decisions based on facts and the law, 47 percent felt decisions were based on a judge's own beliefs and political pressure.

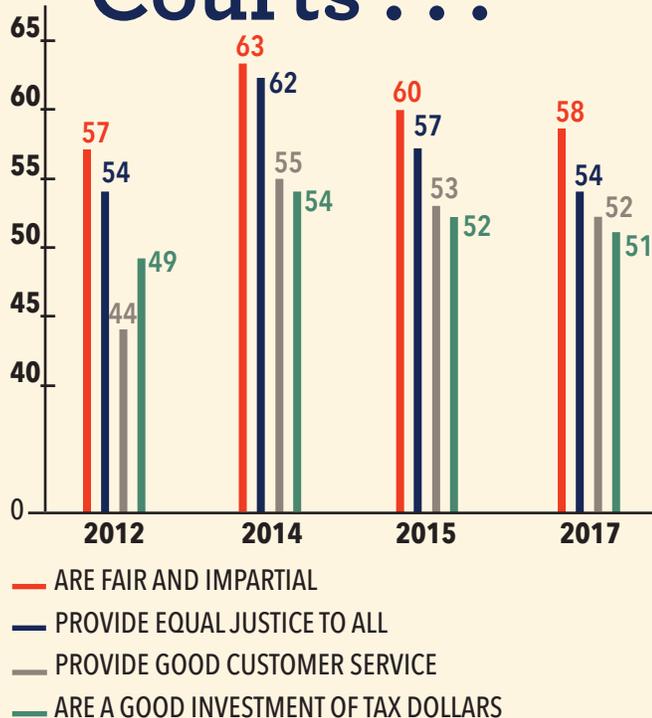
## **A desire for improved online court services appeared in responses to several questions.**

- Only 42 percent describe the courts as “innovative,” but that is up 3 percent from a year ago.
- When asked about access to justice in rural areas, 32 percent of respondents said they wanted to do all court business online or via video-conference. By comparison only 13 percent wanted more courthouses and staff.
- When asked their top customer service concerns where courts should focus their resources, 24 percent said addressing the inability to conduct business online.

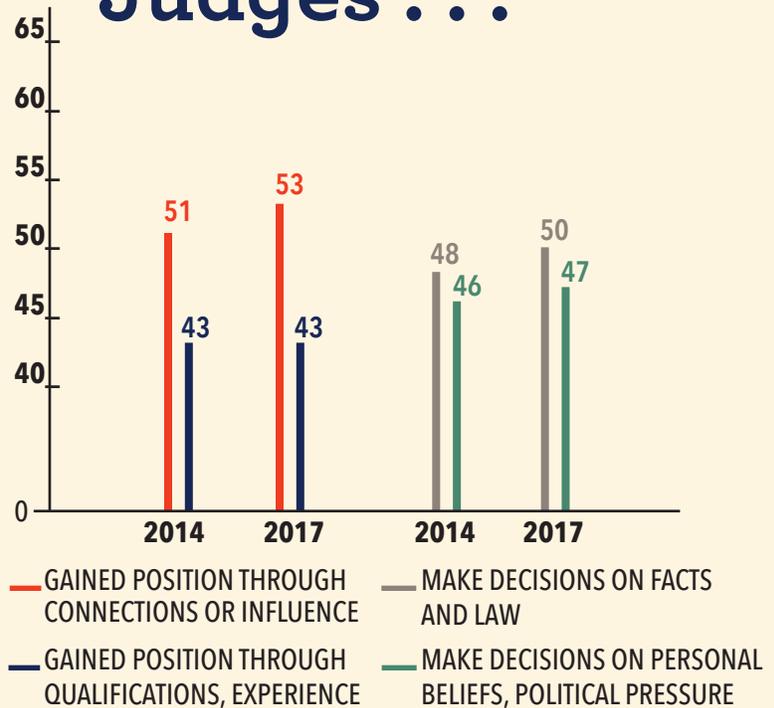
## **Courts are seen as distant, confusing, and intimidating.**

- Sixty percent of respondents (including 45 percent who “strongly” felt this) indicated that state judges don't understand their challenges and don't get out into the community and listen to people.

## Courts . . .



## Judges . . .



- When asked about their customer-service concerns with the courts, rude and intimidating staff came in second place (35 percent); not knowing where to turn for help with forms and procedures came in first (37 percent).
- Sixty-three percent somewhat or strongly felt the courts were too complicated to allow for self-representation.

**Three major customer-service policy prescriptions emerged from the survey and, consistent with the prior responses, two focused on online services.**

- Eighty-five percent want to have access to court staff online or by phone; 55 percent said this would significantly improve the customer-service experience.
- Eighty-five percent of respondents said plain-language legal forms would improve the customer-service experience; of these, 59 percent said it would significantly improve the customer experience.

- Eighty-two percent want online self-help services that allow users to file a form, pay a fine, or take other actions instead of coming to a courthouse; 52 percent said this would be a significant improvement.

More detailed analysis of the survey findings, along with presentation slides, can be found at <http://www.ncsc.org/2017survey>.

– WILLIAM RAFTERY blogs about state legislation affecting the courts at [gaveltogavel.us](http://gaveltogavel.us).

<sup>1</sup> GBA Strategies conducted the poll in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017, surveying 1,000 registered voters by telephone. The surveys focused on different topics each year, but some questions were asked over several years and are reflected in the charts above. The results are subject to a margin of error of +/-3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

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