

## Are We Losing Independent Courts?



---

“If citizens have respect for the work of the courts, then the law will survive the shortcomings of every other branch of government, but if they lose respect for the work of the courts, their respect for law and order will vanish with it.” – Arthur T. Vanderbilt, former Chief Justice, New Jersey Supreme Court; Judicial reformer.

Judicial independence is an essential component of a healthy democracy. What happens in countries that lose judicial independence? Is the United States heading down the same path? With declining trust and confidence in our judicial branch and increased politicization of the judiciary, this session will explore the factors contributing to the current status and address why judges must get involved.

Justice Robin Hudson, retired, North Carolina Supreme Court; and Justice Debra Stephens, Washington State Supreme Court; will address the pillars of judicial independence and explore current challenges including declining public trust and confidence, politically-biased judicial selection processes and structures, ethics and judicial conduct, accountability systems, and the failure to follow well established precedent. How do these elements impact the increased politicization of the judiciary and the decline in judicial independence? In this interactive session, participants will explore specific, present-day issues and engage in problem-solving discussions.

**Speakers:**



**Hon. Robin Hudson**, Justice (Retired), Supreme Court of North Carolina

Robin E. Hudson is a Georgia native, but has lived in North Carolina since her early teens. She served on the Supreme Court of North Carolina from January 2007 until her current term ended December 31, 2022. Previously, she served on the North Carolina Court of Appeals from January 2001 through December 2006. She is the first woman in North Carolina elected to either appellate court without having been appointed first.

Justice Hudson graduated from Yale University in 1973, as a member of the first class with women as freshman; she then graduated from the Law School at UNC-Chapel Hill, in 1976. She practiced law out of Raleigh and Durham until her election to the Court of Appeals. Her practice concentrated on workers' compensation and civil and criminal litigation, and included numerous appeals.

Over the years she has served on numerous committees and organizations of lawyers and judges. She has been a member of the NAWJ since 2003; since 2015 she has served as co-chair of its Judicial Independence Committee, which oversees the award-winning "Informed Voters Project (IVP)".



**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 in the outdoors.