



**The Behavior of
FEDERAL JUDGES**

A Theoretical & Empirical Study
of Rational Choice

Lee Epstein

William M. Landes

Richard A. Posner

The Behavior of Federal Judges

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**A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL STUDY
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Contents

List of Figures *vii*

List of Tables *ix*

General Introduction 1

Technical Introduction 17

Linear Regression. Logistic Regression. Miscellaneous Points.

1. A Realistic Theory of Judicial Behavior 25

Three Concepts of Legal Realism. The Labor-Market Theory of Judicial Behavior. The Judicial Utility Function. The Legalist Countertheory of Judicial Behavior. Antirealism Personified: Judge Harry Edwards.

2. The Previous Empirical Literature 65

History. Ideology Measures. Previous Studies of Judicial Ideology. Other Influences. *Appendix: Empirical Studies of Judicial Behavior.*

3. The Supreme Court 101

Data. Ideological Voting by Justices. Changes in Justices' Ideology. Unanimous Decisions: The Role of Ideology. Non-unanimous Decisions: The Role of Ideology. Non-unanimous Decisions: Group Effects. *Appendix: The Corrected U.S. Supreme Court Database.*

4. The Courts of Appeals	153
Data. Explaining the Judges' Votes (1). Explaining the Judges' Votes (2). Group Influences in the Songer Data. Ideology, Conformity, and Panel Composition Effects in the Sunstein Data. <i>Appendix A: The Original and Corrected Songer Database. Appendix B: The Original and Expanded Sunstein Database. Appendix C: Measures of Ex Ante Ideology of Supreme Court Justices, 1937–2009.</i>	
5. The District Courts and the Selection Effect	207
District Court Decisions Derived from the Sunstein Database. Ideologi- cal Influence on District Judges. Reversals. Dismissals. Another Selection Effect. The Paradox of Discretion. Ideology in Sentencing.	
6. Dissents and Dissent Aversion	255
Costs and Benefits of Dissenting. The Effect of Panel Composition. A Formal Model of Deciding Whether to Dissent. Empirical Analysis. Effects of Senior Status and Age on Dissent Rates.	
7. The Questioning of Lawyers at Oral Argument	305
Empirical Analysis. Number of Questions or Number of Words? Explaining Variations in the Number of Questions and the Total Number of Words in Questions. Individual Justices.	
8. The Auditioners	337
Appointment and Promotion in the Federal Judiciary. Auditioning for the Supreme Court. Voting Behavior of Auditioners for the Supreme Court. Auditioning for the Courts of Appeals. Voting Behavior of Auditioners for the Courts of Appeals. <i>Appendix: Court of Appeals Judges in the Supreme Court Promotion Pool, 1930–2010.</i>	
Conclusion: The Way Forward	385
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	405
<i>Index</i>	407

Figures

Figure TI.1: Linear Regression	19
Figure 2.1: Fraction of U.S. Supreme Court Cases with at Least One Dissenting Opinion, 1801–2010 Terms	68
Figure 2.2: Pritchett’s Continuum of Liberal and Conservative Voting on the U.S. Supreme Court, 1939–1941 Terms	69
Figure 2.3: Relation between Ideology of U.S. Court of Appeals Judges and Their Votes	80
Figure 3.1: Unanimous Supreme Court Decisions, 1946–2009 Terms	125
Figure 4.1: Total Judicial Votes by Court of Appeals Judges, by Year Appointed	156
Figure 4.2: Fraction of Conservative Votes in Courts of Appeals, 1995–2008	190
Figure 4.3: Fraction of Reversals of Liberal versus Conservative District Court Decisions, Correlated with Fraction of <i>Rs</i> in Circuit, 1995–2008	195
Figure 6.1: Dissenting and Concurring Opinions in Supreme Court, 1950–2010 Terms	266
Figure 6.2: Ratio of Dissents to Cases Terminated on the Merits in the Fifth and Eleventh Circuits, 1971–2007	295
Figure 6.3: Caseload in the Fifth and Eleventh Circuits, 1971–2007	295
Figure 7.1: Questions and Words in Questions, 1979–2009 Terms	312
Figure 7.2: Distribution of Number of Questions to Petitioner and Respondent, 1979–2009 Terms	316
Figure 7.3: Distribution of Total Words in Questions to Petitioner and Respondent, 1979–2009 Terms	317

Figure 7.4: Mean Number of Words in Questions Asked Each Party, According to Which Party Wins, 1979–2009 Terms 318

Figure 7.5: Mean Number of Questions Asked Each Party, According to Which Party Wins, 1979–2009 Terms 318

Figure 7.6: Mean Number of Questions Asked Respondent and Petitioner, by Whether the Justice Voted for Respondent or Petitioner, 2004–2009 Terms 334

Figure 8.1: Mean Age of Federal Judges at Appointment, by Decade 344

Figure 8.2: Mean Age of Supreme Court Justices at Appointment, 1788–2010 345

Tables

Table 1.1: Average Annual Number of Public Nonjudicial Events, by Justice, 2002–2009	39
Table 1.2: Justices’ Total Public Events by Category, 2002–2009	40
Table 1.3: Justices’ Total Public Events by Year, 2002–2009	40
Table 3.1: Votes by Supreme Court Justices in Non-unanimous Cases, 1937–2009 Terms	106
Table 3.2: Fraction of Conservative Votes in Non-unanimous Cases for 44 Supreme Court Justices Ranked from Most to Least Conservative, 1937–2009 Terms	108
Table 3.3: Correlation Matrix of Ideology Measures	110
Table 3.4: Supreme Court Justices, 1937–2009 Terms, Ranked from Most to Least Conservative by Three Measures	111
Table 3.5: Fraction of Conservative Votes in Non-unanimous Cases by Subject Matter and by Political Party of Appointing President, 1937–2009 Terms	112
Table 3.6: Fraction of Conservative Votes in Non-unanimous Cases by Subject Matter and by Judge’s Ideology, 1937–2009 Terms	115
Table 3.7: Regression of Ideological Divergence in Supreme Court, 1953–2008 Terms	120
Table 3.8: Average Age of Court of Appeals Appointments, Eisenhower to Obama	122
Table 3.9: Formal Precedent Alteration by Supreme Court, 1946–2009 Terms	128
Table 3.10: Description of Variables in Regressions of Unanimous Decisions, 1946–2009 Terms	129

Table 3.11: Logit Analysis of the Probability of Unanimous Supreme Court Decision, 1946–2009 Terms	131
Table 3.12: Fraction of Unanimous Decisions across Fine Subject-Matter Classes	133
Table 3.13: Logit Analysis of the Ideological Direction of Unanimous Decisions, 1946–2009 Terms	135
Table 3.14: Votes by Recently Appointed Justices (Beginning with Souter and Excluding Kagan)	136
Table 3.15: Definition and Means of Variables in Regressions of Non-unanimous Supreme Court Decisions, 1946–2008 Terms	138
Table 3.16: Regression Analysis of Supreme Court Votes in Non-unanimous Cases, 1946–2009 Terms	140
Table 3.17: Regression Analysis of Group Effects in Supreme Court, Justice-Specific and Fixed-Effects Models, 1946–2009 Terms	148
Table 4.1: Votes by Court of Appeals Judges, 1925–2002	158
Table 4.2: Votes, by Subject Matter and Ideology, of 538 Court of Appeals Judges, 1925–2002	159
Table 4.3: Fraction of Mixed (<i>M</i>), Conservative (<i>C</i>), and Liberal (<i>L</i>) Votes by 538 U.S. Court of Appeals Judges, Classified by Party of Appointing President at Time of Appointment, 1925–2002	160
Table 4.4: Fraction of Mixed (<i>M</i>), Conservative (<i>C</i>), and Liberal (<i>L</i>) Votes Cast by 538 U.S. Court of Appeals Judges, Classified by President at Time of Appointment, 1925–2002	162
Table 4.5: Fraction of Conservative Votes by Subject Matter and by Judge’s Ideology Based on Senatorial Courtesy Scores, 1925–2002	165
Table 4.6: Description of Variables in Regressions of Court of Appeals Votes, and Means	166
Table 4.7: Regression Analysis of Court of Appeals Votes, 1925–2002	167
Table 4.8: Regression Analysis of Court of Appeals Votes, 1960–2002	171
Table 4.9: Circuit Effects on Judges’ Votes	173
Table 4.10: Court of Appeals Judges’ Votes by Senatorial Courtesy Scores and Panel Composition, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	174
Table 4.11: Yung’s Ex Post Ideology Rankings Correlated with Epstein-Landes-Posner Ex Ante Ideology Rankings	178

Table 4.12: Yung’s Ex Post Ideology Rankings and Epstein-Landes-Posner Ex Ante Ideology Rankings and Party of Appointing President	179
Table 4.13: Comparison of Ideological Voting in the Supreme Court and the Courts of Appeals	181
Table 4.14: Votes Correlated with Our Ex Ante Rankings, Showing Reversal and Panel Composition Effects for 142 Court of Appeals Judges, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	182
Table 4.15: Regression Analysis of Votes by Current Court of Appeals Judges	185
Table 4.16: Distribution of Votes and Cases by Subject-Matter Area, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	189
Table 4.17: Distribution of Panels in Cases by Circuit, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	191
Table 4.18: Court of Appeals Judge Votes by Panel Composition and District Court Decision, 1995–2008	192
Table 4.19: Logit Regression of Probability of Conservative Votes by Court of Appeals Judges, 1995–2008	197
Table 4.20: Effects of Changes in the Number of <i>Rs</i> and <i>Ds</i> in a Court of Appeals of 12 Judges	200
Table 5.1: District Court Decisions by Type of Disposition, Party of Appointing President, and Ideological Direction of Decision, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	212
Table 5.2: Votes of Court of Appeals Judges by Ideological Direction of District Court Decision, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	213
Table 5.3: Fraction of Conservative Votes in Selected Subject-Matter Areas by <i>R</i> and <i>D</i> District and Court of Appeals Judges, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	215
Table 5.4: Fraction of Conservative Votes by District Judges and Court of Appeals Judges, by Circuit, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	216
Table 5.5: Definitions and Means of Variables in District Judge Regression	217
Table 5.6: Logit Regressions of Probability of Conservative District Court Decisions, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	218
Table 5.7: Reversal Rate for <i>R</i> and <i>D</i> District Judges by Subject-Matter Area, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	220

Table 5.8: Reversal Rates for District Court Judges Appointed by Republican and Democratic Presidents, by Circuit	221
Table 5.9: Reversal Rates by Ideological Direction of District Court Decision and Party of President Who Appointed District Judge, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	222
Table 5.10: Logit Regressions of Reversal of District Court Decisions, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	223
Table 5.11: Logit Regressions of Decision by District Judges to Dismiss, May 2006–June 2010	229
Table 5.12: Logit Regressions of a Conservative Vote by Court of Appeals Judges on Mixed Panels Only	233
Table 5.13: Voting by <i>Rs</i> and <i>Ds</i> in the Same Cases, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	237
Table 5.14: Regression of Probability of Conservative Decision by an <i>R</i> versus a <i>D</i> District Judge on Levels of Appellate Court Deference to District Court Rulings	240
Table 5.15: Percentage of Below-Guideline and Above-Guideline Sentences, Fiscal Years 2000–2010	243
Table 5.16: Regression Analysis of Fraction of Criminal Sentences Below and Above Federal Sentencing Guidelines, 2000–2010	245
Table 5.17: Prison and Probation Sentences Imposed by District Judges Appointed by Republican and Democratic Presidents, Fiscal Years 2006–2011	249
Table 5.18: Prison Sentences Imposed by District Judges Appointed by Republican and Democratic Presidents in Cases That Went to Trial, Fiscal Years 2006–2011	250
Table 5.19: Prison and Probation Sentences Imposed by Northern and Southern District Judges Appointed by Republican and Democratic Presidents, Fiscal Years 2006–2011	251
Table 5.20: Regressions of Prison and Probation Sentences, Fiscal Years 2006–2011	252
Table 6.1: Dissenting Votes of Liberal (<i>L</i>), Moderate (<i>M</i>), and Conservative (<i>C</i>) Justices, 1953–2008	259
Table 6.2: Dissents and Panel Effects, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	260
Table 6.3: All-Opinion Dissent Rates in the Courts of Appeals and the Supreme Court, 1990–2007	265
Table 6.4: Probability of at Least One Dissent in a Panel of Size <i>n</i>	268

Table 6.5: Probability of at Least One Dissent in a Panel of Size n with Ideologically Divided Judges	269
Table 6.6: Dissents in En Banc Cases in Federal Courts of Appeals, 2005–2010	270
Table 6.7: Dissent as a Function of Willingness to Dissent, Ideological Differences, and Court Composition	277
Table 6.8: Ideological Voting	280
Table 6.9: Regression Analysis of Log of Dissent and Concurrence Rates in the Supreme Court, 1953–2008	282
Table 6.10: Average Number of Words in Majority Opinions in Supreme Court Cases in 1963, 1980, and 1990 Terms	284
Table 6.11: Regression Analysis of Words in Supreme Court Majority Opinions in 1963, 1980, and 1990 Terms	285
Table 6.12: Words in Majority Opinions in Court of Appeals Cases, 1989–1991	287
Table 6.13: Regression Analysis of Words in Majority Opinions in U.S. Court of Appeals Cases, 1989–1991	288
Table 6.14: Citations in Majority and Dissenting Opinions to 266 Supreme Court Opinions with Dissents, 1963, 1980, and 1990 Terms	289
Table 6.15: Regression Analysis of Citations in Supreme Court Majority Opinions to Dissenting Opinions in 1963, 1980, and 1990	290
Table 6.16: Citations to 82 Court of Appeals Opinions with Dissents, 1990	291
Table 6.17: Certiorari Petitions Denied and Granted in the 1986–1994 Terms Seeking Review of Federal Court of Appeals Decisions	291
Table 6.18: Regression Analysis of Log of Dissent Rates in Courts of Appeals, 1990–2006	293
Table 6.19: Dissents and Panel Effects for 72 Judges Who Took Senior Status between 1996 and 2007	297
Table 6.20: Dissents in Home and Other Circuits of 72 Judges Who Took Senior Status between 1996 and 2007	298
Table 6.21: Dissents and Age	298
Table 6.22: Dissent Rate Statistics for 24 Court of Appeals Judges	300
Table 7.1: Number of Questions Asked Petitioner and Respondent and Closeness of the Outcome, 1979–2009 Terms	320
Table 7.2: Summary of Variables in Regression Analysis of Petitioner Win Rate, 1979–2009 Terms	321

Table 7.3: Logit Regression of Probability of a Win for Petitioner, 1979–2009 Terms	322
Table 7.4: Logit Regression of Probability of a Win for Petitioner Given U.S. Government’s Participation in Case, 1979–2009 Terms	323
Table 7.5: Summary of Variables in Regression Analysis of Questions, 1979–2009 Terms	325
Table 7.6: Regression Analysis of Questions, 1979–2009 Terms	326
Table 7.7: Logistic Regressions of Votes of Each Justice on Number of Questions Asked by All Justices	328
Table 7.8: Number of Questions and Total Words in Questions by Individual Justices, 2004–2009 Terms	330
Table 7.9: Mean Number of Questions and Words to Petitioner and Respondent, 2004–2009 Terms	331
Table 7.10: Number of Questions by Ideology of Parties, 2004–2009 Terms	332
Table 7.11: Logistic Regressions of the Votes of Each Justice on the Number of Questions and Words, 2004–2009 Terms	335
Table 8.1: Promotions from Courts of Appeals to Supreme Court, by President	338
Table 8.2: Promotions from the District Courts to the Courts of Appeals, by President	340
Table 8.3: Appointments to Federal Courts	342
Table 8.4: Average Age of Appointment to Court of Appeals, by Appointing President	347
Table 8.5: Auditioners and Non-Auditioners among Active Court of Appeals Judges, 1930–2009	350
Table 8.6: Logit Regressions on Probability of Being an Auditor, 1930–2009	354
Table 8.7: Fraction of Votes against Defendant in Criminal Appeals, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	361
Table 8.8: Regression Analysis of Votes for Government in Criminal Appeals, Sunstein Data, 1995–2008	363
Table 8.9: Comparison of District Judges Promoted and Not Promoted to Courts of Appeals, 1981–2010	365

Table 8.10: Logit Regressions of Promotion to the Court of Appeals of District Judges Appointed between 1981 and 2010	368
Table 8.11: Predicted Probabilities of Promotion to Court of Appeals of Harsh, Moderate, and Lenient Sentencers	371
Table 8.12: Reversal Rates for Judges Promoted, Judges Not Promoted, Auditioners, and Non-Auditioners	372
Table 8.13: Prison Sentences Imposed by District Judges, Grouped by Length of Service, 2006–2011	374
Table 8.14: Regression of Prison Sentences Imposed by District Judges, Grouped by Length of Service, 2006–2011	377
Table 8.15: Prison Sentences Imposed by District Judges in and Not in Promotion Pool (i.e., Auditioners and Non-Auditioners), in the Same Districts, 2003–2011	378
Table C.1: Votes in Labor Cases in the Supreme Court between Business and Union, Employee, NLRB, or Other Government Agency, for Each Chief Justice from 1946 to 2009	400

I often say that when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind: it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the state of *science*, whatever the matter may be.

—Baron William Thomson Kelvin, “Electrical Units of Measurement” (May 3, 1883), in Kelvin, *Constitution of Matter* (vol. 1 of his *Popular Lectures and Addresses*), 73–74 (1889) (emphasis in original)

For the rational study of the law the black-letter man may be the man of the present, but the man of the future is the man of statistics and the master of economics.

—O. W. Holmes, “The Path of the Law,” 10 *Harvard Law Review* 457, 469 (1897)

General Introduction

In the continuing drama of American law the judge still holds the center of the stage, down in front of the footlights. . . . Much of our finest intelligence is engaged in studying what judges do and say and in guessing at their inmost sensations.

—John P. Dawson¹

JUDGES INDEED PLAY a central role in the American legal system—more so than in most others. But the behavior of American judges, and in particular the determinants of their decisions, are not well understood, including by lawyers, law professors, and even many judges (we’ll explain that paradox in due course). In part this is because judges in our system are permitted to be, and most are, quite secretive.² Indirect methods must be employed to understand their behavior. Beginning more than half a century ago but accelerating in recent decades, social scientists—political scientists in particular, but also economists and psychologists, and, increasingly, academic lawyers knowledgeable about social science—have used ever more sophisticated theoretical concepts and quantitative tools to penetrate self-serving judicial rhetoric, go beyond judges’ limited self-understanding, and place the study of judicial behavior on a scientific ba-

1. *The Oracles of the Law* xi (1968). Still true, almost half a century later.

2. With exceptions, of course. See, for example, William Domnarski, *Federal Judges Revealed* (2009), a study based on oral histories of a number of federal district and circuit judges. See also books based on the private papers of Supreme Court Justices, such as Lee Epstein and Jack Knight, *The Choices Justices Make* (1998); Forrest Malzman, James F. Spriggs II, and Paul J. Wahlbeck, *Crafting Law on the Supreme Court* (2000); and Walter F. Murphy, *Elements of Judicial Strategy* (1964).

sis. Yet this literature is not well known to the legal community,³ apart from the small sliver that without pretension to doing social science research takes an interest, whether sympathetic or critical, in what social scientists might have to say about judges.⁴ That separation is unfortunate, because many conventional legal scholars, abetted by judges, have promoted an unrealistic but influential theory of judicial behavior in which careerism and ideology play no role in judicial decisions, while some social scientists and some journalists have sponsored the opposite but also unrealistic conception of judges as merely politicians in robes.

The theory of judicial behavior in which careerism and ideology play no role in judicial decisions we call “legalism,” though the more common term is “formalism.”⁵ In its simplest form, judges are said merely to apply law that is given to them to the facts; their task is mechanical, at best a form of engineering (but not “social engineering”), and involves no exercise of discretion. In a more complex version, judges (especially Supreme Court Justices) apply to cases an intellectual system—a methodology—adopted on politically neutral grounds to generate objective decisions. These systems are called by such names as “originalism,” “textualism,” “the Constitution in exile,” “the Constitution as common law,” “the living Constitution,” “active liberty”—the list goes on and on.

Some academic lawyers have sponsored the opposite conception of judges—that their legalist pretensions are mere rhetoric, designed to conceal the political character of their rulings. About those systems these academic critics might say with Kierkegaard that “in relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who has built a vast palace while he himself lives nearby in a barn; they themselves do not live in the vast systematic edifice.”⁶ The skeptical theory of judicial behavior was taken

3. Frank B. Cross, “Political Science and the New Legal Realism: A Case of Unfortunate Interdisciplinary Ignorance,” 92 *Northwestern University Law Review* 251 (1997); Gerald Rosenberg, “Across the Great Divide (Between Law and Political Science),” 3 *Green Bag* (second series) 267 (2000).

4. For a recent, and very good, example, see Charles Gardner Geyh, “Can the Rules of Law Survive Judicial Politics?” 97 *Cornell Law Review* 191 (2012).

5. For an illuminating discussion of legalism (formalism), see Paul N. Cox, “An Interpretation and (Partial) Defense of Legal Formalism,” 36 *Indiana Law Review* 57 (2003).

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection* 212 (Alastair Hannay trans. 1996).

to an extreme by such “realists” as Fred Rodell of Yale and by the votaries of “critical legal studies,” a revival of Rodell-style extreme legal realism that flourished in the 1970s and is now defunct, although some of its avatars, such as feminist legal theory and critical race theory, continue to have a following among academic lawyers.

Properly understood, legal realism is an attempt to be realistic about judicial behavior, and an attempt with a distinguished pedigree (Jeremy Bentham, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Benjamin Cardozo, Learned Hand, moderate legal-realist scholars such as Karl Llewellyn, and other luminaries⁷). But the school of legal realism lacked both an articulated model of judicial behavior and the data and empirical methodology required to test such a model. These tools are now available and we build with them in this book, hoping to augment the existing social-scientific literature on judicial behavior.

There is an important difference between traditional legal realism and the concept of realism that shapes our analysis. The traditional realism was, like legalism, a jurisprudential theory—a theory about the legitimacy and character of particular judicial outcomes. It was not a theory of how judicial behavior is shaped by incentives and constraints. Legal realists, notably Jerome Frank, offered conjectures about judicial psychology, but realist analysis was largely limited to the influence of a judge’s ideology, or, what was believed to be correlated with it, social class, on judicial votes. There is more influencing a judge than class and ideology, and the “more” includes, but importantly is not exhausted in, legalist reasoning. This is brought out in a striking passage by Llewellyn, the foremost academic legal realist:

Those phases of human make-up which build habit in the individual and institutions in the group . . . [are] laziness as to the reworking of a problem once solved; the time and energy saved by routine, especially under any pressure of business; the values of routine as a curb on arbitrariness and as a prop of weakness, inexperience and instability; the social values of predictability; the power of whatever exists to produce expectations and the power of expectations to become norma-

7. Such as Ambrose Bierce, who in *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911) defined “lawful” as “compatible with the will of a judge having jurisdiction.”

tive. The force of precedent in the law is heightened by an additional factor: that curious, almost universal sense of justice which urges that all men are properly to be treated alike in like circumstances. As the social system varies we meet infinite variations as to what men or treatments or circumstances are to be classed as “like”; but the pressure to accept the views of the time and place remains.⁸

These are shrewd observations. They are paralleled from outside the legal profession by remarks to us (which we have edited slightly) by the economist Andrei Shleifer, in correspondence:

Consider common law judges who face few prospects of promotion, are not so high in the judicial hierarchy that they are making law, and cannot be fired or voted out. These judges face almost no incentives. They need to move cases through, and they need to be not so utterly random that they get overturned very much. But these are not enormously strict constraints. So what consequences follow? I think that in this context just about any external or internal motivation can prove decisive. Of course, one motivation might be to try to figure out what the law is and to apply it, but this is only one of them. Judicial politics is one that the legal literature focuses on; abuse of lawyers to humor oneself is another. But one needs to take a much broader view: that just about anything can move these judges when incentives are so weak.

Right/left politics is only one source of judicial bias. Other sources might be much more important. Judges can be pro-dog or anti-dog. More importantly, judges can be pro-government or anti-government. If many judges are former prosecutors or believe that “prosecutors don’t get names out of a phone book,” this might be a more significant bias than right/left politics. Judges may have their own philosophies on all kinds of matters, in other words. There may be a very important interaction between the judicial branch and the media. If judges are really not particularly constrained, presumably they will try to get at-

8. K. N. Llewellyn, “Case Law,” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 3, p. 249 (E. R. A. Seligman ed. 1930).

tention, be liked, be popular. Since media intermediates a lot of information, they might choose to do what the media want.

Building on such insights, we aim in this book to present a realistic model of judicial behavior that is sufficiently simple and definite to be testable empirically, and then to test it.

Chapter 1 presents the model. Using concepts from labor economics, it models the judge as a participant in a labor market—the judicial labor market—and defends the model against legalist objections. We explain that a judge conceived of as a participant in a labor market can be understood as being motivated and constrained, as other workers are, by costs and benefits both pecuniary and nonpecuniary, but mainly the latter: nonpecuniary costs such as effort, criticism, and workplace tensions, nonpecuniary benefits such as leisure, esteem, influence, self-expression, celebrity (that is, being a public figure), and opportunities for appointment to a higher court; and constrained also by professional and institutional rules and expectations and by a “production function”—the tools and methods that the worker uses in his job and how he uses them. We rebut the formidable challenge that Judge Harry Edwards of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has mounted to the realist approach to judicial behavior.

We call ours “the” realist approach, but other such approaches are possible and are found in the scholarly literature, approaches that emphasize the influence on judging of personal characteristics, such as race and sex, religious upbringing, temperament, cognitive limitations, education—even law-school grades.⁹ Those approaches are fruitful, but in order to make our analysis manageable we employ a simpler model, though we do from time to time touch on personal-identity characteristics, which influence ideology and through ideology judicial outcomes.

Ours is strictly a positive analysis. We do not ask how judges should decide cases but how they do decide them—more broadly, how they do

9. These approaches are discussed in Richard A. Posner, *How Judges Think*, ch. 1 (2008). See also Lawrence Baum, *The Puzzle of Judicial Behavior* (1997); Eileen Braman, *Law, Politics, and Perception* (2009); Frank B. Cross, *Decision Making in the U.S. Courts of Appeals* (2007).

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