

**IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE
STATE OF FLORIDA**

INQUIRY CONCERNING A JUDGE,

SC23-

THE HONORABLE CASEY L. WOOLSEY,
JQC Number: 2023-029

_____ /

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION OF DISCIPLINE

I. PROCEDURAL HISTORY

In July 2023, the Florida Judicial Qualifications Commission (“Commission”) served a Notice of Investigation upon the Honorable Casey L. Woolsey, St. Johns County Court Judge, pursuant to Rule 6(b) of the Commission Rules (“Rules”). On November 3, 2023, Judge Woolsey appeared with counsel before the Commission’s Investigative Panel (“Panel”) and testified under oath in response to questioning. During that hearing, Judge Woolsey admitted to committing misconduct during her 2022 campaign for St. Johns County Court Judge. At the conclusion of the hearing, the Panel voted to find probable cause and proceed with the institution of formal charges, pursuant to Rule 6(f).

II. THE CHARGES

The Panel found probable cause that in two different instances while campaigning for judicial office Judge Woolsey violated Canon 7A(3) of the Code of Judicial Conduct.. The first instance was when Judge Woolsey improperly introduced partisan politics into the non-partisan judicial campaign. The second instance was when Judge Woolsey allowed her campaign to post misleading information about the amount of money her campaign raised.

III. SUMMARY OF RELEVANT FACTS FOR EACH CHARGE

A. Improperly Inserting Partisan Politics into a Non-Partisan Judicial Race

Judge Woolsey made telephone calls to super voters and used a ring-to-voicemail campaign to reach other voters. In at least one call, captured on a recorded voicemail message, Judge Woolsey described herself as a “conservative.” In the message, Judge Woolsey states in relevant part, “Hey, sorry I missed you. My name is Casey Woolsey and I am calling because I’m running for County Court Judge here in St. Johns County. So, I just wanted to introduce myself and ask if you would consider voting for me when you’re filling in your mail in ballots. **I am a conservative**, and my website is www.caseywoolseyforjudge.com and that is spelled w-o-o-l-s-e-y...” [emphasis added]. The recording is included as JQC Exhibit 1.

Judge Woolsey was unable to tell the Commission if the recording was one she individually made or the pre-recorded ring-to-voicemail she used during her campaign.

B. Improper Statements About Funds Raised

The Facebook page for Casey Woolsey for Judge posted messages that Judge Woolsey approved. In a post about campaign finances, misleading statements about the amount of money the campaign had raised were made. Specifically, this post was made on October 9, 2020:



Casey Woolsey for Judge

October 9, 2020 · 🌐

Casey Woolsey's Campaign for Judge is proud to announce the Campaign posted over \$100,000 in its first month. It appears this is the most ever raised in the first month for a St. Johns County Court judicial race. Casey appreciates the support of her friends, colleagues, family and supporters who have already donated or offered to volunteer on the Campaign.

For those that are interested in helping, please visit the website at caseywoolseyforjudge.com/volunteer or email info@caseywoolseyforjudge.com.

From an accounting perspective, it is correct to note the entire amount in the account was “posted.” Generally, the term “posted” refers to totaling a general ledger or account, regardless of its source. However, the second sentence in the post makes it appear that the \$100,000 was raised from people who believed in Judge Woolsey’s candidacy. Campaign reports note that Casey Woolsey loaned herself \$50,000 during September 2020, which was omitted from the October post about the September fundraising.

#109 9/30/2020	Casey Woolsey ***Protected Voter***	Candidate to Themselves	Attorney	Loan	\$50,000.00
Total Contributions					\$103,250.00

IV. APPLICABLE LAW

A. Judicial Candidates are Prohibited from Inserting Partisan Politics into Judicial Elections

It is beyond question that elections for judicial office in Florida are nonpartisan. *See* Generally §105.011(2) F.S. Florida law also strictly prohibits candidates for judicial office from campaigning as a member of any political party, or publicly representing or advertising himself or herself as a member of any political party. *See* §105.071(2)-(3) F.S. Canon 7A(3)(a) likewise prohibits a candidate from being “swayed by partisan interests, public clamor, or fear of criticism,”

and requires that candidates for judicial office remain “faithful to the law...”. Further, Canon 7A(3)(b) commands judicial candidates to “maintain the dignity appropriate to judicial office and act in a manner consistent with the impartiality, integrity, and independence of the judiciary...”

When Judge Woolsey asserted that she was a “conservative,” she inserted partisan politics into a judicial election in a county where its residents are overwhelmingly registered as Republican and voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates in 2022.¹ As the Supreme Court of the United States noted in *Williams-Yulee v. Florida Bar*:

Judges are not politicians, even when they come to the bench by way of the ballot. And a State’s decision to elect its judiciary does not compel it to treat judicial candidates like campaigners for political office. A State may assure its people that judges will apply the law without fear or favor...

Williams-Yulee v. Fla. Bar, 575 U.S. 433, 437–38 (2015).

Significantly, addressing another case where a candidate campaigned for judicial office by aligning or appearing to affiliate himself with a political party, the Supreme Court of Florida stated that “the purpose of the applicable canons is to protect the integrity of non-partisan judicial elections,” and that “[u]nder the Code, it is incumbent upon judges and judicial candidates to refrain from prohibited political activity. Failures to do so require appropriate discipline.” *Inquiry Concerning a Judge (Kollra)*, 268 So. 3d 677 (Fla. 2019).

B. Misrepresenting Campaign Fund Raising

Canon 7A(3)(e)(ii) prohibits a candidate from misrepresenting facts about the candidate. Further, Canon 7A(3)(b), requires a candidate to “maintain the dignity appropriate to judicial office and act in a manner consistent with the impartiality, integrity, and independence of the judiciary, and shall encourage members of the candidate’s family to adhere to the same standards of political conduct in support of the candidate as apply to the candidate[.]”

¹ <https://www.votesjc.gov/>

Judge Woolsey, who earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Writing and Linguistics from Georgia Southern University, admitted the post, which she approved, would mislead a reader as to the amount of financial support the Casey Woolsey for Judge campaign had received.

V. FACTUAL FINDINGS

By her written response to the Notice of Investigation, her sworn testimony before the Panel, and by the execution of a Stipulation, filed concurrently with these Findings and Recommendations, Judge Woolsey has agreed to and admitted the facts and circumstances described in the Notice of Formal Charges, and in these Findings, and she has agreed that her actions constitute violations of Canons 7A(3)(a), (b), and (e)(ii). Finally, she has agreed that these charges are supported by clear and convincing evidence, and that she should receive the recommended discipline. In cases where a judge admits to wrongdoing and the JQC's findings are undisputed the Court will ordinarily conclude that the JQC's findings are supported by clear and convincing evidence. *Kollra*, 268 So. 3d 677 at 680.

VI. MITIGATION

Judge Woolsey is a relatively new judge, having first taken the bench in 2023, and this was her first election. She has no prior disciplinary record with the Commission. She was admitted to the Florida Bar in 2013, and had an unblemished record as a licensed attorney.

Further, Judge Woolsey admitted to her misconduct, and has cooperated with the Commission in all respects during this inquiry. She deeply regrets that her conduct could have degraded the public's perception of the impartiality and nonpartisan nature of judicial elections and impugned the trustworthiness of the judiciary. She hopes to rectify this, in part, by taking responsibility for her misconduct, and accepting the sanction. Further, Judge Woolsey adequately

explained to the Commission where she could have done better and promises that no similar conduct would take place in the future.

VII. RECOMMENDATION AS TO DISCIPLINE

The Commission believes that it is useful to note how similar misconduct has been treated in the past. In 2019, this Court publicly reprimanded a judge who improperly inserted partisan politics into a judicial campaign and violated Canons 7C(3) and 7D, Code of Judicial Conduct. *Inquiry Concerning a Judge (Kollra)*, 268 So. 3d 677 (Fla. 2019). During his first judicial campaign for election, Judge Kollra boasted that a partisan political party had endorsed him and identified himself as being a member of a political party. Judge Kollra cooperated with the Commission and accepted responsibility for his actions.

The Commission believes a public reprimand is appropriate in Judge Woolsey's case because the Commission did not find a systemic pattern of misconduct warranting harsher discipline or removal from office. *E.g., Inquiry Concerning a Judge (Decker)*, 212 So. 3d 291, 293 (Fla. 2017) and *Inquiry Concerning a Judge (Santino)*, 257 So. 3d 25 (Fla. 2018).

Distilled down, Judge Woolsey made representations about her candidacy that were improper and misleading. Judge Woolsey admitted these violations should not have happened and addressed how she would handle campaigns differently in the future. Judge Woolsey admitted that it was incumbent upon her to know the Canons and follow the Canons, and that being in her first campaign was not an excuse for the failures at issue. The Commission believes that a public reprimand of Judge Woolsey will be sufficient to deter similar misconduct by Judge Woolsey in the future and will also serve as a reminder to future candidates for judicial office that they must protect the integrity of non-partisan judicial elections by refraining from using, advertising, or implying partisan endorsements.

Accordingly, the Commission finds and recommends that the interests of justice, the public welfare, and sound judicial administration will be well served by a public reprimand of Judge Casey L. Woolsey.

Dated this 11th day of December 2023.

**THE FLORIDA JUDICIAL
QUALIFICATIONS COMMISSION**

By: /s/ Gregory W. Coleman
GREGORY W. COLEMAN, CHAIR
Judicial Qualifications Commission
Post Office Box 14106
Tallahassee, Florida 32317