



## **FOX CHAPEL DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE 2025 JUDICIAL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

### **PART 1: INTRODUCTION**

As you know, there are a large number of candidates for an unusually high number of judicial vacancies within the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas in 2025. The Fox Chapel Democratic Committee (FCDC) believes that citizens of Fox Chapel and those of surrounding communities as well voters within Allegheny County in general would benefit from learning more about the candidates, so that their choices in upcoming elections can be as informed as possible. Therefore, FCDC has developed a Judicial Candidate Questionnaire and is asking each judicial candidate to complete and return it, so that your responses can be distributed as widely as possible.

FCDC intends to:

- Share your responses with Democratic committees of other communities in our region;
- Share your responses with the citizens of Fox Chapel and to individuals within Fox Chapel School District, and encourage other area committees to do so;
- Publish your responses on FCDC's website and seek to have them published on the Allegheny County Democratic Committee's website as well;
- Publish them on FCDC's social media pages.

### **PART 2: INSTRUCTIONS**

Please respond to the questions on the following page and return your written responses to *foxchapedems@gmail.com* on or before **Friday, February 14, 2025**.

This form is in Word format, so responses may be typed directly under each question.

Please answer each question, including subparts, as completely as possible; however, please keep responses clear and reasonably concise so they are understandable and useful to individuals who may not have a background in law.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

**CANDIDATE NAME:** Ilan Zur

**DATE:** 02/13/2025

### **1. Judicial Philosophy and Temperament**

**Judges make decisions in high-stakes and emotional situations. How do you stay fair and calm under pressure? Share an example from your career.**

Remaining fair and calm as a prosecutor is crucial. Many times I have been faced with a defense attorney who is acting unprofessionally and keeping my composure is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the case and the courtroom. It's also essential to maintain objectivity. In these situations, I focus on the facts and evidence of the case rather than getting drawn into personal disputes. Another tactic I often use is to take a moment to breathe and collect my thoughts before responding. This helps prevent an emotional reaction.

One example of maintaining composure and objectivity was a situation in which a defense attorney accused me, during a trial, of failing to turn over a police report despite my assertion that I did. When my integrity is called into question it certainly evokes emotion because I pride myself in being honest and forthright in all aspects of my personal and professional life. Rather than snapping back, I took a breath. Then, I calmly presented the judge with the email I had sent counsel with the police report in question attached.

### **2. Commitment to Judicial Ethics**

**Judges must avoid conflicts of interest and undue influence. How would you handle a situation where a friend or campaign donor asks for special treatment in your courtroom?**

I would explain that it's inappropriate to provide them special treatment and that it was inappropriate to ask in the first place. I would then make all parties involved aware of what had transpired and ask them if they want me to recuse. To avoid the appearance of impropriety is of the utmost importance in the court system. The public needs to be able to count on the fact that the judges they elect can be fair and impartial.

**a. Have you had this experience, and what was your response?**

I have not had this experience.

**b. Did you disclose it to an ethics body or to law enforcement? Why or why not?**

N/A

**3. Accessibility and Fairness**

**a. Judges must ensure everyone can participate in the legal process. How will you make your courtroom accessible to people without lawyers?**

Everyone deserves a fair shot in the eyes of the law. As a judge, I will always work to make my courtroom accessible to those who can't afford or lack access to an attorney. I will work to ensure that clear, easy-to-understand information about the court processes and procedures are available. Additionally, I will always offer my own personal guidance— I will be clear and patient throughout every step of the process. For those who require translation or other language resources, I will ensure that interpreter services are available. Lastly, I am a proponent of establishing a feedback mechanism for individuals who have navigated the court system without a lawyer, to identify areas for improvement and increased accessibility.

**b. Every person has conscious and/or unconscious biases. How do you recognize and suppress those biases in yourself, so that you can deal with all parties fairly and dispassionately? Give examples of how you've dealt with this issue.**

One of the best ways a judge can recognize and check their implicit bias is by surrounding themselves with people with different identities, lived experiences, and backgrounds to support a culture of diversity in the courtroom. As a straight white male, I understand that I have benefitted from certain advantages. As someone who is Jewish, I have also been subjected to discrimination and antisemitism which informs my ability to relate and empathize with others who are discriminated against. In my role as a Deputy District Attorney, I strive to ensure our office reflects the community it serves when making staffing decisions. This helps to ensure that we have varied perspectives to help inform decisions but also it is important for the victims we serve to relate and have trust in us. I will always treat every person in the courtroom with dignity and respect to ensure that they have a fair day in court and feel like they were properly heard. Based on my experiences, I have learned to never prejudge a situation or person. That is the same perspective and approach that I will bring to the bench to ensure every person feels welcome, supported, and heard in my courtroom.

**4. Describe the types of cases you've tried/presided over**

**List 3-5 examples of cases (anonymously) in which you've been involved as counsel or judge, and that you believe inform or enhance your ability to serve as a judge. Include why/how these experiences influenced you.**

There are 3 cases that I often share on the campaign trail that illustrate my approach to the bench and inform my ability to serve as a judge:

1. I represented the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania at a preliminary hearing in which the defendant was facing aggravated assault charges for assaulting someone in the parking lot of a Walmart in 2019. I reference this case to highlight a critical part of my role as a prosecutor. After the preliminary hearing, I spoke with the defense counsel who provided me with additional background information. He explained that his client was being harassed and was intentionally targeted by the individuals who pressed charges. He claimed his client was acting in self-defense and offered to bring his client in to give a statement as to what happened. The defendant was 22 years old at the time of the incident, had never been arrested before, and was actively employed. I do not take my responsibility as a prosecutor lightly and I realize the decisions I make can have lifelong consequences on a person's life. I implored the detectives to investigate the harassment claims. After the follow up investigation, I made the decision to withdraw the charges as it was clear to me that this individual was acting in self-defense. This case is a reminder to me as to the level of discretion I have as a prosecutor and that my job is to solely do the right thing. Sometimes the right thing to do is drop charges or not charge at all. I will take this experience and apply the same level of discretion to every case I preside over as a judge.
2. I tried a case around 20 years ago in which a mother comes home from work to find her son and his friend murdered. It was my second or third homicide trial so I was still pretty green. I had about 20 witnesses that I had to call to prove my case. We had resumed court after the lunch recess and I was getting ready to call my next witness but was informed by my case officer that the witness was running 15 minutes late. The Judge had taken the bench and instructed me to call my next witness. When I explained that the witness was running late, the judge became enraged and told me to call my next witness or rest my case. This was done in a courtroom full of people to include the jury and the family of the deceased. I'll never forget this judge's conduct and how it made me feel. No matter how bad a day I may be having personally, I will never treat someone like that. I would never want someone who appears before me to feel the way I did that day. I will always treat people with dignity and respect.
3. I was the chief prosecuting attorney on a case involving the robbery and murder of a cab driver. In this case, the assailants called for a cab with the sole purpose of robbing the driver. When the cab arrived, the lead assailant and his friends proceeded to repeatedly

assault the victim to the point of unconsciousness. In the 24 hours following the assault, the lead assailant bragged on social media about robbing a cab driver and posted a video of himself hanging out with his friends, listening to music, and dancing. Ultimately, the victim succumbed to the injuries and passed away a few days later. Of significance to me in this case, as in all homicide cases, is the loss of life. The victim was a refugee providing for his wife and children with the money he earned from his job. The suffering he endured is horrifying and his death is a tragedy. The loss of life also extends to those convicted of this crime. At age 20, the defendant was sentenced to life in prison; and that is not lost on me. As I watched him receive his sentence, I felt immense sadness. Despite his actions, I saw a vulnerable kid. I was left thinking about what experiences led him to the point where he could be so angry and disconnected. It's crucial as a prosecutor to see the humanity in everyone. The same holds true for someone who is a judge and sits in judgement of others and this case reinforced that understanding.

## 5. **Improvements to the courts**

Courts are in the business of serving the public by providing fair, efficient, and prompt administration of justice.

### **a. Do you perceive shortcomings in our current court system? Please provide examples.**

I have been working in the criminal justice system in Allegheny County as a prosecutor for the past 26 years. At the Common Pleas level, one of the problems I have identified is an overloaded criminal court docket. The problem of an overwhelming number of cases in criminal court is a significant issue that affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the judicial system not only defendants but also judges.

High caseloads can lead to delays in court proceedings which can result in prolonged pretrial detention for defendants, and overall inefficiency. Additionally, prolonged delays can also affect the prosecution of cases in that victims and witnesses often get frustrated when time after time their case is postponed. Ultimately, a victim or witness may fail to appear for court because of these issues.

Judges facing heavy caseloads may have less time to dedicate to each case, which can hinder their ability to consider all evidence thoroughly and make well-informed decisions.

### **b. If elected, how would you go about correcting these problems? What specific steps would you take to improve the quality and delivery of results to litigants and the public?**

In order to alleviate overcrowded court dockets at the Court of Common Pleas level, courts can introduce alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation or restorative justice programs, to handle certain types of cases outside the traditional court setting. By diverting less serious offenses or first-time offenders to these programs, courts can alleviate some of the pressure on their dockets. Another strategy would be to allow non-violent misdemeanor offenses to be resolved at the magistrate level. By doing so, the number of cases that are handled at the Common Pleas level would be reduced dramatically. This would allow attorneys and judges to focus on the more serious cases that come through the system. As a judge, I would advocate for and work to implement these types of reforms.

**6. Judicial selection process**

**a. Do you believe state judges should be elected? Why/why not?**

I do not have a strong opinion as it relates to electing versus appointing judges. I believe both processes have pros and cons.

**b. If not, what system do you believe should be used instead, and why?**

I believe that both electoral and appointment processes for judges present their own unique issues. When looking at the three branches of government, the judiciary is intended to be an apolitical check on the legislative and executive branches. Elected judges means that the judiciary is forced to operate in the political landscape. Oftentimes, voters may not have sufficient knowledge about judicial candidates or their qualifications, leading to decisions based on name recognition, geographic voting blocs, or party affiliation rather than merit. The significant fundraising and campaigning can lead to conflicts of interest. The appointment process on the other hand removes the power from the people to be involved in selecting the judiciary. This also comes with its own political pitfalls resulting from the politics at play in the executive and legislative branch. With the electoral process, the people get to use their voice in shaping the judiciary. All in all, I am content with the system that we have but I am also open to other processes.