

Steve Burton: Only well-informed voters can rebalance the scales of justice

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Perhaps the most important election this May is for two positions on our West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

The Blind Lady of Justice statue we see in our courthouses is of a woman holding a set of scales and a sword while wearing a blindfold. The scales represent the impartiality with which justice is served, and the sword signifies the power held by those making the decision. The blindfold shows justice is not subject to influence.

Unfortunately, the confidence people have in our courts, especially our Supreme Court, to be fair and balanced has been shaken in recent years by the influence of corporate interests in our judicial elections. Enormous sums of money have been spent to secure the election of judges who are supposed to then make fair judgments in cases involving those same powerful contributors.

Judges are required to avoid the appearance of unfairness and disqualify themselves from any case where the judge's neutrality might reasonably be questioned.

Given what we know of events at the court, it is difficult to believe these rules are being followed.

There is no need to mention any names or corporations because in West Virginia we are well aware of who is involved in the tainted process, and now, thanks to network TV reports and a best-selling book, the whole world is watching.

Donating to a candidate is part of the election process, but the sums of money entering our elections have been so great that the very scales of justice have become unbalanced. It is time for citizens to rebalance those scales.

If people begin to believe they no longer have the ultimate legal protection offered by the highest courts, they will begin to lose respect for all government. Without respect for the law, there would be no law.

It is now up to us, the voters.

What we can do is participate in the system as well-informed voters. It seems so simple and uncomplicated, but maybe that's part of the genius of the people who founded our system of laws and courts.

We, as citizens, need only to exercise our rights in order to protect our rights. Our collective effort can restore balance to our courts and act to protect our constitutional democracy and our rights as free people.

Don't forget your right, and obligation, to vote in this upcoming primary election.

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