

**HERE COMES THE JUDGE:
WOMEN JUDGES IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION REALITY COURT SHOWS**

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Abstract

In the 2000 television reality court shows like *Judge Judy* replaced soap operas as the top daytime viewing genre. A majority of reality court show judges are women, yet in *real* reality women comprise less than ten percent of the nation's judiciary. Non-whites, similarly under-represented in the real world, also constitute a majority of the judges on these television shows. In one sense the over-representation of women and non-white judges, male and female, simply reflects the make-up of the daytime television viewing audience. Like any commercial television show reality court shows are ratings driven. The evolution of these shows over the past seven years reflects the influence of audience and advertiser demands. But it is the blurring of reality and fiction in these shows that raises concern.

TV reality court shows are a primary source of information about the real judicial system for the least educated and often most isolated Americans. They are the people who have almost no real life experience with the courts. Therefore it is important to examine the message about the judicial system and its judges these shows convey. This essay looks at images about the legal system and women judges conveyed in reality court programs aired on daytime television with particular focus on non-white women judges. It asks whether the gender, race and/or ethnicity of reality court judges reinforces or diminishes traditional negative stereotypes about women, especially non-white women. This is an important question because public perceptions of law and legal institutions influence the practice of law and societal perceptions about the legitimacy of law and legal institutions and the appointment or election of women to the judiciary. More importantly, the image of women, especially non-white women, judges portrayed on these shows may influence public perceptions about the competence and judicial temperament of real life women judges.