

US Supreme Court packed with millionaires

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Recently released figures document the fact that the US Supreme Court, an unelected body that rules on issues affecting the lives of millions of Americans, is comprised of representatives of the wealthiest layers of society.

According to financial disclosure reports for 2001, five of the nine Supreme Court justices are millionaires, and the other four are not far behind. These reports actually underestimate the wealth of the justices, since they exclude primary residences. Were the homes of the justices included in the financial reports, it is likely that all nine would top one million dollars in net worth.

The justices, who are appointed to life-time positions by the US president, subject to confirmation by the Senate, are all richer than the vast majority of Americans. Figures on their wealth were released May 31 and reported by the Associated Press.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg is the wealthiest, worth between \$7.7 million and \$33.7 million, excluding her home in Washington and some other holdings. She also has retirement accounts worth at least \$4 million. Ginsburg has ranked as the richest justice in past years as well.

Stephen Breyer comes in second, reporting a net worth of between \$4.2 million and \$15.2 million. This estimate does not include Breyer's home in the posh Georgetown neighborhood in the nation's capital, although he did list rental property in the West Indies and real estate holdings in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Sandra Day O'Connor is worth \$2.8 million to \$6.4 million. She holds a long list of telecommunications and medical stocks and, like the other justices, often recuses herself from cases that might impact her portfolio. O'Connor is reportedly the most frequently absent for such conflicts of interest.

John Paul Stevens and David Souter are also millionaires, with Stevens worth \$1.3 million to \$2.7 million, and Souter worth \$1 million to 5.1 million.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist is worth somewhere between \$510,000 and \$1.2 million, not counting his home. Antonin Scalia has a reported net worth of \$500,000 to \$1.3 million.

Only Clarence Thomas and Anthony M. Kennedy came in well below \$1 million—at least on paper. Thomas reported holdings of between \$150,000 and \$410,000, not counting his home in suburban northern Virginia. Kennedy reported cash holdings and life insurance worth \$45,005 to \$180,000. He has reportedly divested major assets over the past several years.

From the standpoint of compensation, all of the justices are in the top 5 percent of US households. The chief justice takes home \$192,000 annually, and the other justices make \$184,000.

Supreme Court justices, like other high-level government employees, are required to account publicly for income beyond their salaries, and disclose stock or other holdings that could potentially influence their performance on the job. But the reports on the justices' holdings are vague, listed only in general categories, such as those worth up to \$15,000 or those worth between \$1 million and \$5 million. While the justices are required to report these holdings, they are under no obligation to divest them.

The justices are also required to list non-paid, out-of-town speaking engagements at law schools and other law-related functions. While they receive no monetary compensation, their hosts foot the bill for travel expenses, hotel accommodation, food and other perks.

The Supreme Court in recent years has consistently handed down decisions in favor of corporations and against the rights of workers and the poor. These have included—among many others—a June 1998 ruling attacking funding for legal assistance for the poor and a March 2001 ruling upholding a court order for the Allied Pilots Association to pay \$45.5 million in

compensatory damages to American Airlines for refusing to halt a sickout. In February of this year, the Court issued a ruling that effectively lifted limitations on the drive by giant corporations to monopolize broadcasting and cable television.

Of a piece with its rulings in favor of corporations and against workers' rights, this same high court has routinely handed down decisions attacking democratic rights. These have included rulings upholding the execution of the mentally ill and juveniles, and rulings curtailing the rights of criminal defendants—weakening Miranda rights and allowing for expanded powers of search and seizure by police agencies.

In its most infamous decision, the right-wing majority on the Court voted 5-4 in December 2000 to halt the Florida vote recount and install George W. Bush as president.



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