

King County Democrats 2026 Endorsement Questionnaire

Candidate name

Ian Birk

Candidate pronouns

he/him

PDC Filer_name

Birk for Justice

Campaign phone

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Number we can text or call if we have questions about this form

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Instagram

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Link to candidate headshot

<https://ianbirk.com/>

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Jurisdiction of office sought

State Supreme Court

Specific office

Supreme Court, Justice Pos. 4

Does your campaign have a code of conduct for staff and volunteers?

Yes

Will you share a link to your code of conduct?

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jaXshg7BsPBVwFvHc4jpJ-lfNII4FAf-/edit?usp=sharing&oid=111214652686758270143&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Please describe your background (education, employment, community and civic activity, union affiliation and political activity).

I am a fifth-generation Washingtonian who has spent my career serving the people of our state—as a Supreme Court law clerk, a trial and appellate lawyer, a longtime pro bono volunteer, and now as an appellate judge trusted to decide complex cases from every corner of Washington.

I was appointed in 2022 by then-Governor Inslee to Division I of the State Court of Appeals where I have authored more than 200 opinions and participated in decisions across civil, criminal, family, administrative, and constitutional law.

Before joining the Court of Appeals, I spent two decades in private practice where I represented individuals, families, and small businesses—often against powerful corporate interests—in insurance claims, consumer protection, workplace discrimination, and complex civil litigation.

Throughout my career, I've worked to ensure that the courts remain open and fair to all—regardless of wealth, background, or circumstance. For more than a decade, I volunteered with the King County Bar Neighborhood Legal Clinics, providing free legal assistance to renters, consumers, and working families facing immediate financial or housing insecurity.

Please tell us about your proudest accomplishment either through your civic, public and/or community involvement?

I am most proud of the ways I have helped shape Washington law respecting the rights of the people who live and work in this state, both as a lawyer and as an appellate judge.

I've written opinions that are clear and fair on topics including:

A union's right to enforce benefit plans in court outside of arbitration (SEIU Healthcare 1199NW v. Snohomish County Public Hospital District No. 1,)

Consumer class action rights (Summers v. Sea Mar Community Health Centers)

The sovereign treaty rights of Native American tribes (Flying T Ranch, Inc. v. Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians)

A tenant's rights after a conclusion of illegal eviction (Skinner v. InCity Properties Holdings, Inc.)

The AG's authority to investigate sex abuse at religious organizations (In re the Enforcement of the Investigative Subpoena of the Complex Litigation Division,)

An understanding of how our decisions affect all Washingtonians is even more critical at the Supreme Court, which not only issues decisions having the force of law across Washington, but also decides what cases and issues it is going to hear.

What injustices have you perceived, either within or outside the courtroom, and what was your response to those events?

Throughout my career, I have seen how individuals and families are often treated unfairly by powerful institutions. When other attorneys declined to stand up for them, I took the case – often as a volunteer lawyer in my 10+ years of pro bono work. Those wins include taking on insurance companies denying valid claims, employers engaging in discrimination, landlords withholding deposits, and corporations putting profits ahead of people. These injustices disproportionately affect those with the fewest resources and the least access to legal help.

In each case, the injustice was clear, but the path to putting it right was not. Large or small, the cases I took on were complex, and required diligence, months of work, and a sophisticated understanding of the law. But they were also my client's last line of defense. I know how hard it is to right wrongs in our courts. But I also know that it can be done when the courts are a place where the truth comes out, where everyone is heard, and where the parties can count on a fair, principled decision.

I carry those experiences with me by ensuring every person is heard, treated with respect, and receives a fair, principled decision.

What will you do to restore faith in the integrity of the justice system?

When powerful actors behave as though they are unaccountable to judicial judgments, others notice. That is not just a public relations problem; it is a threat to the rule of law itself.

The response has to start with the judges. Scrupulous accuracy, rigorous and good faith reasoning, and transparent explanations of how and why decisions are reached are the foundation. People do not need to agree with every outcome, but they do need to be able to see that the process was honest and principled. That is something I have worked to deliver in every opinion I have authored, and it is the standard I will hold myself to on the Supreme Court.

I believe judges have a responsibility to remain connected to the communities our work affects. That means being accessible, engaging with the bar and the public, and not retreating behind institutional distance. It also means being willing to speak honestly about the ways the system has fallen short, particularly its disproportionate impact on communities of color and people of limited means. A court that acknowledges those realities and works seriously to address them is far more worthy of public trust than one that pretends they do not exist.

In cases involving “malicious harassment” or hate crimes, what are some of the issues in balancing free speech rights against the need to control offensive activity?

Washington's hate crime offense statute reflects that bias-motivated conduct causes distinct and serious harm, not just to individual victims but to the broader communities they belong to. That harm is real and well-documented, and a justice system that fails to take it seriously will not deserve the trust of the people it is meant to serve.

Hate crime offenses and enhancements do not criminalize beliefs or expression protected by the First Amendment; they treat bias motivation as an aggravating factor in conduct that is already criminal. This ensures that malicious and harmful behavior motivated against a protected status is appropriately criminalized while First Amendment protections are undisturbed. I wrote an opinion addressing hate crime offense in *State v. Wagner*,

When people are targeted because of their race or background, it sends a message to entire communities about whether the law will protect them. A system that fails to hold bias-motivated conduct accountable erodes trust in the courts and faith in the rule of law itself. That is the deeper stakes in these cases, and I will bring that awareness to every one of them.

New technologies like AI and advances in practice are continually changing. How would you approach cases involving novel legal issues or emerging technologies?

The law has always had to adapt to new technologies and changing circumstances, and artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making, and digital privacy are already generating legal questions that existing doctrine does not answer cleanly. That is not a reason for courts to hesitate, but rather it is a reason to engage carefully and thoughtfully.

My approach starts with disciplined methodology: careful attention to statutory text, constitutional principles, and precedent. The fact that a technology is new does not mean the legal framework has to be invented from scratch. Often the harder work is identifying which existing principles apply, which need to be extended, and where new interpretations must be developed carefully.

Judges have a responsibility to understand what they are actually deciding. That means being willing to learn, asking hard questions, and taking seriously the real-world consequences of a ruling. I have spent my career attending to the human impact of legal decisions, and that does not change when the subject matter is unfamiliar.

A 2021 Gender Justice Study of Washington Courts found evidence of many gender inequities. How would you support a criminal justice system that rectifies these historical

and systemic inequities?

Gender inequity in our courts is documented, persistent, and corrosive to the legitimacy of the system as a whole.

As a judge, the most direct contribution I can make is in how I run my courtroom and engage with my colleagues. I actively invite those around me to flag potential biases in my own reasoning, because none of us can fully see our own blind spots.

Judges also have a meaningful educational role to play in court. Implicit bias is difficult to confront precisely because many people are not comfortable with hard conversations about it. That discomfort cannot be an excuse for avoidance. I was recently attended a seminar at the National Judicial College focused on anti-racist courtroom practices and reducing disparity through nontraditional diversion, and I intend to bring that learning back to my work and my colleagues.

Systemic inequity requires systemic responses. Washington has led in developing procedural tools like GR 37 to address bias in jury selection, and careful, committed implementation of those rules by judges matters enormously. I will bring that commitment to the Supreme Court, along with the humility to recognize that this work is never finished.

Attestation

- The candidate hereby attests that, to the best of their knowledge, the provided information is true and accurate.

Created on March 19th, 2026.