



The Appointment of Hispanic U.S. Circuit and District Court Judges: Historical Overview and Analysis

September 29, 2023

This Insight provides historical and statistical information related to the appointment of Hispanic U.S. circuit and district court judges. For the purposes of this Insight, the term *Hispanic* refers to individuals of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. The data provided below are current through September 15, 2023, and also include biracial or multiracial appointees who identify, in part, as Hispanic.

The first Hispanic district court judge was [Reynaldo Garza](#), appointed by President Kennedy in 1961 to the Southern District of Texas (comprised of Houston, Corpus Christi, and other areas in southern and southeastern Texas). Judge Garza was also the first Hispanic circuit court judge, appointed by President Carter in 1979 to the [Fifth Circuit](#) (which at the time was comprised of Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas).

The first Hispanic woman appointed as a district court judge was [Carmen Consuelo Cerezo](#), appointed by President Carter in 1980 to the [District of Puerto Rico](#). The first Hispanic woman appointed as a circuit court judge was [Kim McLane Wardlaw](#), appointed by President Clinton in 1998 to the [Ninth Circuit](#) (comprised of California, eight other western states, and two U.S. territories).

U.S. Circuit Court Judges

From Judge Garza's appointment in 1979 through September 15, 2023, there have been a total of 26 Hispanic appointees to circuit court judgeships. Of the 26, 19 (73%) have been men and 7 (27%) have been women.

As of September 15, 2023, 14 (8%) of 172 active circuit court judges are Hispanic (of whom 8 are men and 6 are women). As of the same date, of the 19 Hispanic men ever appointed as a circuit court judge, 8 (42%) were serving as an active judge; in contrast, of the 7 Hispanic women ever appointed as a circuit court judge, 6 (86%) were serving as an active judge.

Figure 1 shows the total number of Hispanic circuit court judges appointed by presidency, as well as a breakdown by gender of Hispanic circuit court appointees during each presidency. Overall, Presidents

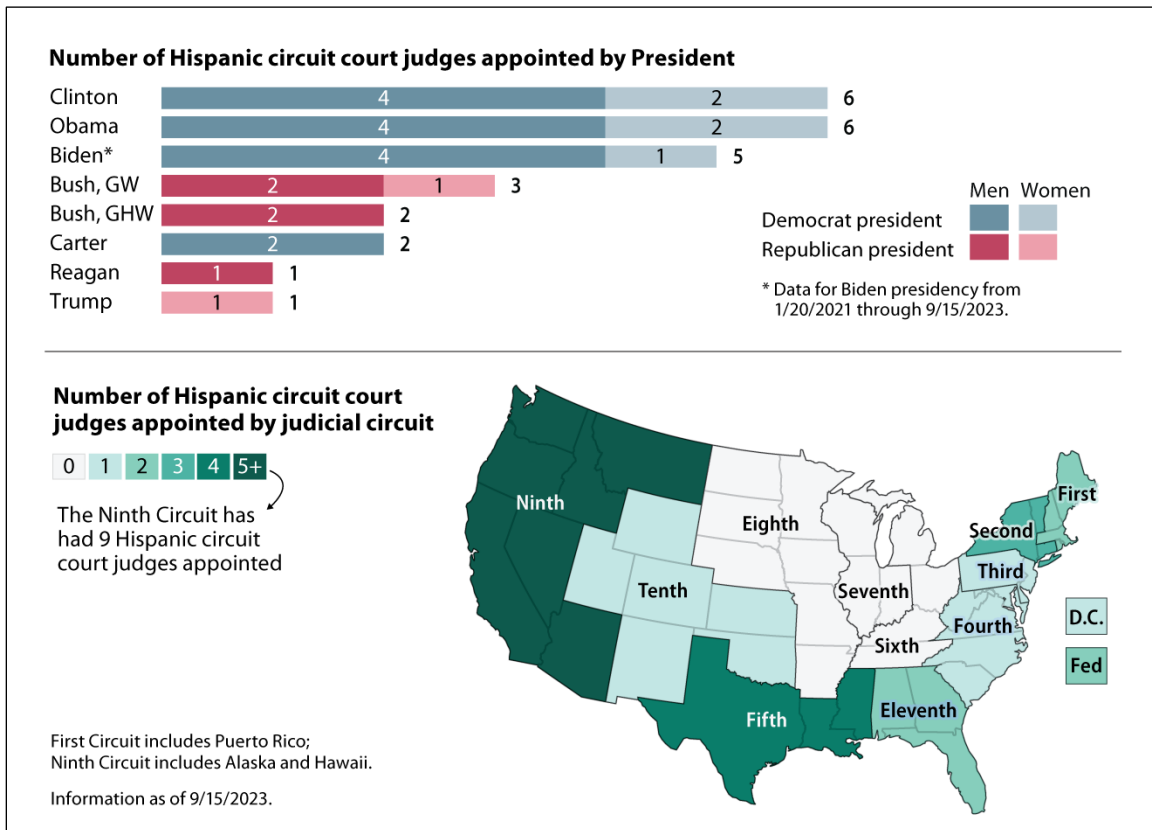
Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12261

Clinton and Obama appointed the greatest number of Hispanic circuit court judges (each appointing six). Presidents Clinton and Obama also appointed the greatest number of Hispanic female judges (each with two). As of September 15, 2023, President Biden has appointed five Hispanic circuit court judges—including [Bradley Garcia](#), the first Hispanic appointee to the D.C. Circuit.

Figure 1. Appointment of Hispanic U.S. Circuit Court Judges
7/13/1979 to 9/15/2023



Source: Compilation of publicly available data by the Congressional Research Service.

Among Republican administrations, President Reagan appointed the first Hispanic circuit court judge ([Juan Torruella](#) to the [First Circuit](#)). Overall, among Republican administrations, President George W. Bush appointed the greatest number of Hispanic circuit court judges (three)—including the first Hispanic female appointee by a Republican president ([Consuelo Maria Callahan](#) to the Ninth Circuit).

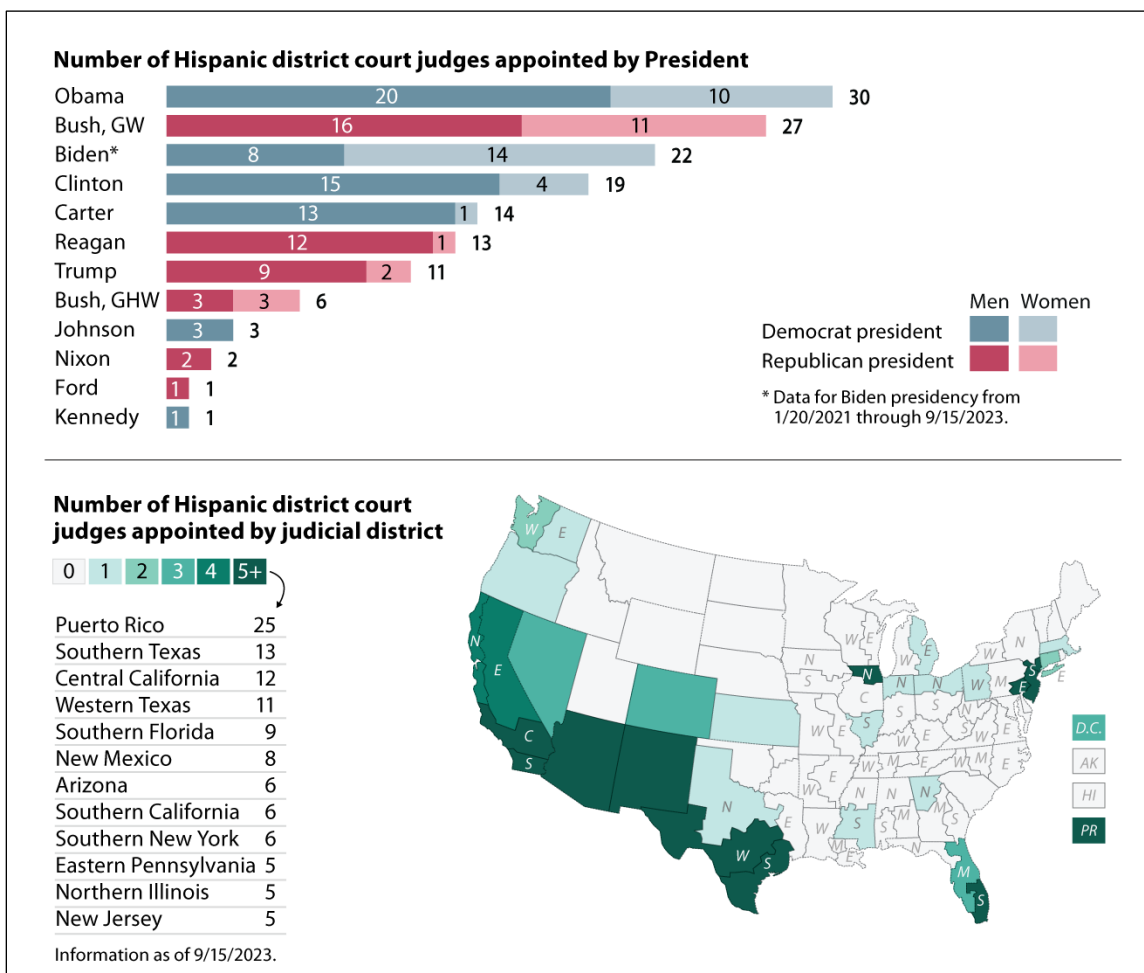
Figure 1 also shows the total number of Hispanic circuit court judges appointed, from 1979 through September 15, 2023, to each judicial circuit. The greatest number of Hispanic circuit court judges have been confirmed to the Ninth Circuit (nine appointees). The second-greatest number of Hispanic judges have been confirmed to the Fifth Circuit. No Hispanic judges have been appointed to the [Sixth](#), [Seventh](#), or [Eighth Circuits](#).

U.S. District Court Judges

From Judge Garza’s appointment in 1961 through September 15, 2023, there have been a total of 149 Hispanic appointees to district court judgeships. Of the 149, 103 (69%) have been men and 46 (31%) have been women.

As of September 15, 2023, 69 (11%) of 615 active district court judges are Hispanic (of whom 38 are men and 31 are women). As of the same date, of the 103 Hispanic men ever appointed as a district court judge, 38 (37%) were serving as an active judge; in contrast, of the 46 Hispanic women ever appointed as a district court judge, 31 (67%) were serving as an active judge.

Figure 2. Appointment of Hispanic U.S. District Court Judges
4/14/1961 to 9/15/2023



Source: Compilation of publicly available data by the Congressional Research Service.

Figure 2 shows the total number of Hispanic district court judges appointed by presidency, as well as a breakdown by gender of Hispanic district court appointees during each presidency. Overall, President Obama appointed the greatest number of Hispanic district court judges (30), while President George W. Bush appointed the second-greatest number (27). Of the 11 past presidencies included in the figure, President George W. Bush also appointed the greatest number of Hispanic women to district court judgeships (11).

As of September 15, 2023, President Biden has appointed the third-greatest number of Hispanic district court judges (with a total of 22). Of all the presidencies included in **Table 2**, President Biden is the only President for whom more than half of his Hispanic district court appointees have been women—specifically, 14 (64%) of 22 appointees.

Among Republican administrations, President Nixon appointed the first Hispanic district court judge ([Jose Toledo](#) to the District of Puerto Rico) and President Reagan appointed the first Hispanic female district court judge ([Lenore Carrero Nesbitt](#) to the [Southern District of Florida](#)).

Figure 2 also shows the total number of Hispanic district court judges appointed, from 1961 through September 15, 2023, to each judicial district. The greatest number of Hispanic district court judges have been confirmed to the District of Puerto Rico (25 appointees), followed by the [Southern District of Texas](#) (13).

At present, 58 (64%) of 91 district courts (excluding [territorial courts](#)) have never had an Hispanic person appointed to a judgeship—including none of the district courts located within the Fourth and Eighth Circuits. Of the 12 regional circuits, the Eighth Circuit is the sole circuit that, as of this writing, has not had at least one Hispanic circuit or district court appointee.

Author Information

Barry J. McMillion
Analyst in American National Government

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.