



ICYMI: ROI-NJ – Latino groups rally around nomination of Noriega to N.J. Supreme Court

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Latino Action Network: 'Not only is he immensely qualified, but he has walked the walk. He has been in the trenches for the people who need help the most'

ROI-NJ – Like hosts of others, Matthew Adams was quick to praise Gov. Phil Murphy's nomination of Michael Noriega to the New Jersey Supreme Court because of Noriega's decorated career as a highly accomplished immigration and criminal defense lawyer and public defender.

Noriega clearly is someone who has tirelessly served underserved communities.

But Adams, the president of the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers of New Jersey – an organization for which Noriega is the president-elect – went one step further. He said his support for Noriega was personal.

"Michael Noriega's rare combination of intellect and humility make him uniquely qualified to serve as an associate justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court," Adams said. "His professional accolades are matched only by the unanimous consensus of his peers that he is a terrific person.

"His career has been dedicated to ensuring that everyone, no matter their station in life, is afforded the full due process protections that our legal system provides. As a Supreme Court justice, he will no doubt continue to do so. The governor could not have selected a more even-handed, compassionate, empathetic and talented individual to serve on the court."

On Tuesday, a day after the nomination, a number of political, legal and Hispanic organizations offered their support for Noriega.

If confirmed, as widely expected, Noriega would be the lone Hispanic on the court – and just the third Hispanic to ever serve on the court.

The Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey called him "extraordinarily qualified" to serve.

"We expect him to proudly promote and serve justice for all New Jerseyans," the group said in a statement. "As part of his practice, Michael represents core members of New Jersey's underrepresented communities, including immigrants fighting for their right to stay in this country. He previously worked as a public defender. He has devoted his career to ensuring that everyone has a voice, irrespective of their race, color, religion or socioeconomic status.

"And we are confident that, if confirmed, he will bring that same ideology to the court and advance the HBA-NJ's mission of a more inclusive and diverse legal system."

Noriega's history certainly shows that passion. Currently a partner at the Scotch Plains firm of Bramnick, Rodriguez, Grabas, Arnold & Mangan, he has fought for the rights of both documented and undocumented residents living in New Jersey, helping them navigate the complex maze of federal immigration law and its interplay with state and municipal laws.

At the firm, he handles cases involving deportation defense, asylum, nonimmigrant visas, Green Card applications and Temporary Protected Status, as well as cases involving the intersection of immigration law with criminal, employment, business and family law.

Prior to joining the firm, Noriega ran his own law firm, Noriega & Associates, for six years, where he practiced immigration and criminal law. During that time, he served clients in cities such as Newark, Plainfield, Paterson, Elizabeth, Jersey City, Union City and Camden. He also provided pro bono counsel to Kids in Need of Defense, an organization that represents indigent, underage clients who have been subject to human trafficking and are facing removal proceedings.

Before starting his own law firm, Noriega served as an assistant deputy public defender in the Essex County Adult Trial Region from 2003 to 2008. During his time as a public defender, he handled hundreds of cases involving a range of criminal defense charges and tried more than 25 jury trials. Since leaving the Office of the Public Defender, Noriega has argued over half a dozen cases before the Appellate Division and two cases before the New Jersey Supreme Court.

Christian Estevez, a founding member and the immediate past president of the Latino Action Network, said that unique experience – Noriega would be the first former public defender to sit on the state's highest court – is a difference-maker in the community.

"Not only is he immensely qualified, but he has walked the walk," Estevez said. "He's done work as a public defender, working on behalf of immigrants. He has been in the trenches for the people who need help the most."

Noriega is all-Jersey, too.

Born in Weehawken to Peruvian immigrants and raised in Union City, he is a 1995 graduate of St. Peter's Prep, a 1999 graduate of Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Science in American studies and a 2002 graduate of Seton Hall University School of Law. Following law school, he served as a law clerk for Camille M. Kenny, judge of the Superior Court, Civil Division, in Hudson County.

His connection to New Jersey – and his Peruvian heritage – was noted, too.

Maritza Davila, the first Peruvian councilwoman in Paterson, offered her support.

"I know what it's like to be the first Peruvian in important spaces," she said. "As the first Peruvian and potentially third Hispanic to ever serve on the court, I know Michael will provide a much-needed unique perspective to the court. Michael's track record highlights his immense compassion to the diverse communities in New Jersey, both documented and undocumented.

"If my father, a proud Peruvian himself, was still alive, he would have rejoiced knowing a qualified, well-prepared Peruvian prepares to sit on the highest court in New Jersey. I look forward to seeing the good work he will continue to carry out as a justice on our state's Supreme Court."

Like all Supreme Court nominations, the selection of Noriega met with some resistance. Some would have preferred someone from a different underserved community (perhaps Asian American/Pacific Islander or LGBTQ+). Others were hoping a Latina would be selected.

With Murphy on pace to get a fifth nomination before he leaves office, those desires still could be met. In a state where Hispanics make up approximately 25% of the population, having two seats on the Supreme Court certainly would fall in line with the idea of having a court look like the residents it represents.

That, however, is a discussion for another day. This week, it was about Noriega. Murphy couldn't praise the selection enough.

"In addition to his qualifications, Michael's character, integrity and commitment to serving the cause of justice make him ideally suited to serve on our state's highest court," he said.

Other comments:

- Jeralyn Lawrence, New Jersey State Bar Association president:** "Today's nomination of Michael Noriega offers a promise of relief in the historic vacancies that have faced our state's highest court for months. Restoring the Supreme Court to a full bench for the first time since December 2021 marks an important step in upholding the independence and integrity of our judiciary, as well as ensuring that our state's highest court better reflects the diversity of our great state. Mr. Noriega has been an active member of the New Jersey State Bar Association, serving as the 2018-2019 chair of the Immigration Law Section, and is a current member of the Judicial Administration Committee and Legislative Committee, and he was also a member of the association's Pandemic Task Force. We urge the Senate to provide an expeditious hearing for Michael Noriega. We also continue to be concerned about the nearly 60 vacancies facing our Superior Courts. We hope that efforts will remain focused on addressing those vacancies that have had a deep and lasting negative impact on the people and businesses that call our state home."
- New Jersey Public Defender Joseph Krakora:** "Today is a special day in the 56-year history of the New Jersey Office of the Public Defender. Gov. Murphy's nomination of Michael Noriega to the New Jersey Supreme Court represents the first time a public defender has been selected to serve on our state's highest court. Mr. Noriega worked for this office from 2003-2008 as a staff attorney in our Essex Trial Region before going into private practice. Since that time, he has represented our clients as designated counsel and served, on a volunteer basis, as an adviser to our attorneys on issues related to immigration consequences for noncitizen clients. He is a first-class attorney with integrity and a true commitment to social justice and equal protection under the law for all New Jersey residents. He will make a great addition to the court, and I am proud to call him a colleague. He is the perfect choice to become the first former public defender on the New Jersey Supreme Court."

- **Carlos Medina and Luis De La Hoz, co-leaders of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey:** "The executive committee at the SHCCNJ wholeheartedly supports this nomination. We feel that diversity on the New Jersey Supreme Court is crucial. A court made up of citizens that reflect their community is what the framers of the constitution envisioned and is of utmost importance to our state."
- **State Sen. Vin Gopal (D-Ocean Twp.):** "Michael Noriega is an outstanding choice to serve on the New Jersey Supreme Court. He brings an extensive career of trial practice and experience in many different areas of the law, including criminal defense, immigration and personal injury. And his commitment to his community through his volunteer efforts and work on behalf of victims of crime shows the type of character and integrity that will serve New Jersey well on our highest court."
- **Jeff Chiesa, partner at Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi and former U.S. senator and New Jersey attorney general:** "Mike Noriega is a first-rate lawyer of the highest integrity who cares deeply about his home state and the many issues impacting communities throughout the state. Mike's humility, sharp intellect and diverse experiences as a lawyer will make him an outstanding associate justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, and I commend Gov. Murphy for selecting such an excellent candidate."

This story was written by Tom Bergeron for ROI-NJ: <https://www.roi-nj.com/2023/05/17/law/latino-groups-rally-around-nomination-of-noriega-to-nj-supreme-court/>
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