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On Choosing Judges, Pataki Creates Problems

To the Editor:

Our citizens' organization shares your position that Gov. George E. Pataki should take the lead in protecting the public from processes of judicial selection that do not foster a quality and independent judiciary ("No Way to Choose Judges," editorial, Nov. 11). However, the Governor is the problem — not the solution.

A Sept. 14 news article described how Governor Pataki had politicized "merit selection" to New York's highest court by appointing his own counsel, Michael Finnegan, to the Commission on Judicial Nomination, the supposedly independent body that is to furnish him the names of "well qualified" candidates for that court.

More egregious is how Governor Pataki has handled judicial appointment to the state's lower courts. Over a year and a half ago, the Governor promulgated an executive order to establish screening commit-

tees to evaluate candidates for appointive judgeships. Not one of these committees has been established. Instead, the Governor — now almost halfway through his term — purports to use a temporary judicial screening committee. Virtually no information about that committee is publicly available.

Indeed, the Governor's temporary committee has no telephone number, and all inquiries about it must be directed to Mr. Finnegan, the Governor's counsel. Mr. Finnegan refuses to divulge any information about the temporary committee's membership, its procedures or even the qualifications of the judicial candidates Governor Pataki appoints, based on its recommendation to him that they are "highly qualified."

Six months ago we asked to meet with Governor Pataki to present him with petitions, signed by 1,500 New Yorkers, for an investigation and public hearings on "the political manipulation of judgeships in

the State of New York." Governor Pataki's response? We're still waiting.

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White Plains, Nov. 13, 1996