

Jury Selection: A Primer on Voir Dire
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“The great value of the trial by jury certainly consists in its fairness and impartiality. Those who most prize the institution, prize it because it furnishes a tribunal which may be expected to be uninfluenced by undue bias of the mind. I have always conceived, and still conceive, an impartial jury as required by the common law, and as secured by the constitution, must be composed of men who will fairly hear the testimony which may be offered to them, and bring in their verdict according to that testimony, and according to the law arising on it.”ⁱ

Chief Justice John Marshall, 1807

I. Introduction

Jury bias is a problem for the defendant as well as the plaintiff. Just as a significant minority of jurors demonstrates a great deal of suspicion towards plaintiffs, many people are biased against tobacco companies, asbestos manufacturers, HMOs, and CEOs.ⁱⁱ Suspicion of corporate management runs especially high after Enron and the recent rash of corporate scandals. But since plaintiffs have the burden of proof, they’re naturally more worried about unfair juries than defendants are. One or two strong-willed jurors with deep-seated biases practically guarantee an unfair verdict or a hung jury no matter what the evidence is and no matter how good a job the attorney does proving the client’s case.

And don’t count on the courts of appeal to grant relief based on juror dishonesty in voir dire, even in the most grievous circumstances.ⁱⁱⁱ It is therefore imperative that the jury selection process ferret out verdict-changing biases even when potential jurors try to hide them.

II. Procedural Considerations

Unlike criminal defendants in Louisiana, who have a constitutional right to conduct voir dire through their attorneys, civil litigants have a statutory right to examine jurors. The court “shall examine prospective jurors as to their qualifications and may conduct such further examination as it deems appropriate.”^{iv} “[A]ttorneys shall individually conduct such examination of prospective jurors as each party deems necessary, but the court may control the scope of the examination to be conducted by the parties or their attorneys.”^v

Know your judge. The court can control voir dire by limiting the amount of time counsel has to ask questions and to prevent what it considers to be unfair or prejudicial questioning.^{vi}

In a typical state court trial by a jury of twelve, each side is allowed six peremptory challenges. “If there is more than one party on any side, the court may allow each side additional peremptory challenges, not to exceed four.”^{vii}

There are five grounds upon which a potential juror may be challenged for cause:

- (1) When the juror lacks a qualification required by law.
- (2) When the juror has formed an opinion in the case or is not otherwise impartial, the cause of his bias being immaterial;

(3) When the relations whether by blood, marriage, employment, friendship, or enmity between the juror and any party or his attorney are such that it must be reasonably believed that they would influence the juror in coming to a verdict;

(4) When the juror served on a previous jury, which tried the same case or one arising out of the same facts;

(5) When the juror refuses to answer a question on the voir dire examination on the grounds that his answer might tend to incriminate him.^{viii}

Challenges for cause should be granted “even when a prospective juror declares his ability to remain impartial, if the juror’s responses as a whole reveal facts from which bias, prejudice, or inability to render judgment accordingly may be reasonably implied.”^{ix} A prospective juror who would be “substantially impaired” from following the law should be excused for cause.^x

The standard is **not** “can you follow the law?” Who’s going to admit he can’t? The standard is whether the juror’s views would “prevent or substantially impair the performance of his duties as a juror in accordance with his instructions and his oath.”^{xi}

If the court does not excuse a juror for cause, either party may challenge the juror for cause.^{xii} If a juror has not been excused for cause, the court shall inquire whether either party wishes to exercise a peremptory challenge as to that juror by alternating between the sides.^{xiii} No peremptory challenge is allowed after the jury has been accepted and sworn. Peremptory challenges shall be exercised by communicating to the court in a side bar conference of the judge and the attorneys conducting the examination and selection of the jurors. “The side bar conference shall be conducted on the record and out of the presence of the prospective jurors.”^{xiv}

The court may seat alternate jurors to replace jurors who prior to the time the jury retires to consider its verdict become unable to perform their duties. The court must allow each side an equal amount of additional peremptory challenges for the seating of the alternate jurors.^{xv}

III. Constitutional Considerations

Peremptory challenges may not be exercised for reasons of race^{xvi} or gender.^{xvii} If they are, a “*Batson*” (or “*Batson/Edmonson*”) challenge may be made by the opponent of the peremptory strike. A *Batson* challenge may be made any time before the jury is empaneled and sworn. The opponent must first make a prima facie showing of racial or gender discrimination, i.e. that a prospective juror has been struck because of race, or because of gender. This showing can be made even if the struck juror is of the same race or the same gender as the litigant opposing the strike. There is no magic proof requirement for the prima facie showing; in theory there is a multi-factor, totality-of-the-circumstances approach^{xviii}- but in practice a prima facie showing is fairly easy to make. What is required is that (1) the peremptory challenge was directed at a member of a “cognizable group” (which is everybody, since we are all members of some racial group and of one gender or another), (2) the challenge was peremptory rather than

for cause, and (3) there are circumstances sufficient to raise an inference that the juror was struck on account of being a member of the cognizable group.^{xix}

Once a prima facie showing is made, the burden shifts to the other party to offer a racially-neutral explanation for challenging the juror. The explanation does not have to be persuasive or even plausible; it just needs to articulate some reason - good, bad, or nonsensical - that has nothing to do with race or gender.^{xx} Once the race-neutral explanation is given, the trial court must then decide whether the *Batson* challenger has proved purposeful discrimination. This is where the rubber meets the road. “Whether there has been intentional racial discrimination is a question of fact. . . . The decisive question in the analysis is whether the race-neutral reason should be believed.^{xxi} The trial court’s ruling on a *Batson* challenge is afforded great deference, and will not be reversed unless clearly erroneous.^{xxii}

IV. Purpose of Voir Dire

Simply put, you must identify and strike the potential jurors who will, no matter what the evidence, decide the case based on their prejudices which are inconsistent with your client’s interests. To do so, you must accept that the fundamental purpose of voir dire is to learn all the trial court will allow you to learn about potential jurors within the time frame and scope of questioning you are allowed. In sum, you want to know all you can about prospective jurors’ opinions, biases, and their approaches to making decisions.

This presentation will discuss ways to gather information from potential jurors, help you in identifying deliberation leaders, show you how to ask about important biases that could cause you to lose the case, and execute challenges for cause. The use of open-ended questions in obtaining information and the limited use of closed questions will be presented in detail.

V. Sample Voir Dire In A Product Liability Case

A. Get Them Talking

Introduce client

Who here has been through jury selection before

Tell me about your job

What is your workday like

What kind of safety rules are there

What do you like about your work

What do you dislike about your work

Tell me about the work your husband or wife does

What is a normal workday like for him/her

Tell me about your children

Tell me about your spare time

Tell me about your favorite TV shows

Tell me about what you regularly read

B. Liability and Causation Topics

Who here has--or knows anyone who has--been involved in the following fields?

Safety

Safety investigation

Engineering

Mechanical

Medical

Doctor

Therapist

Nurse

Operator

Chemical loader

Truck driver

Manufacturing

Chemical plant

C. Tort Reform

Some people think there are too many frivolous lawsuits. Other people think the amount of lawsuits is about right. How many of you are closer - even a little - to the people who think there are too many frivolous lawsuits?

Tell me about it

What else

D. Pain and Suffering

Many people would have a little trouble giving money for pain and suffering because it doesn't make the pain and suffering go away. Other people think money for pain and suffering is okay.

How many of you are closer to people who think money for pain and suffering is okay

How many of you are closer to the people who would have trouble - even a little - giving money for pain and suffering because it can't make the pain and suffering go away?

Please tell me about that

E. Burden of Proof

Part 1

In this kind of case you decide based on whether we are more likely right than wrong

More likely right than wrong

You can have doubts on both sides. As many doubts as you want. As long as after you weigh all the doubts you believe we are more likely right than wrong. If we just tip the scales just a little.

Now, we expect to show far more than tipping the scales a little.

But all we have to do is tip the scales just a little.

Since that's all we have to do some folks think it's not enough because it makes it too hard on the other side, the defense. Maybe even a little unfair. Other folks think it's okay.

Mr. Potential Juror, are you closer to thinking it might be a little unfair? Or are you closer to the folks who think it's okay?

Where do you come between the two?

Tell me about that

Who thinks it's okay?

Part 2

Anyone else with any problems with more likely than not? It's the way we all hope you make your decision. The defense attorneys agree you should decide the case on that basis no matter how many doubts you have and the judge will tell you it's the law. So just to be sure, anyone else with even a small problem with that?

F. Base Money Only On Harm

One of the questions on your verdict form will be how much money the plaintiff should get. When figuring this out, some folks feel you should consider only the amount of harm. Other folks feel it's important to consider other things, such as how sorry they might feel for the plaintiff, or the fact that money cannot make the pain go away, or the fact that enough money to equal the harm might make prices go up for things or services we have to buy, or how much you like the plaintiff, or whether enough money to equal the harm would be too much money for one person, or seem like a windfall--or other considerations other than the amount of harm.

Mr. Potential Juror, are you a little closer to folks who'd base their verdict amount only on the amount of harm? Or a little closer to folks who think it's important to take those other things into account at least a little?

G. Surveillance

What if a company follows someone or observes someone for ten hours a day. How do you think the company would go about deciding what to film?

What if the company chooses to film some activities but not others.

What if the company films one minute out of the ten hour day?

Who here thinks that what the company decides not to film is as important as what the company chooses to film?

H. Harms Lists Questions

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever fallen because something broke?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had part of their body caught in a machine of any kind?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had a permanent whole body impairment?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had chronic pain caused by trauma?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had depression from chronic pain?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had a lumbar fusion caused by trauma?

Please tell me about it

Who here has -- or knows anyone who has -- ever had a worsening of a pre-existing condition caused by trauma?

Please tell me about it

I. The Last Questions

Given the kind of person you are, your attitudes, life experiences, opinions, everything about you, what is there about you that might help you, even a little, in being a juror on this kind of case? Other than your ability to be fair and listen to both sides?

Given the kind of person you are, your attitudes, life experiences, opinions, everything about you, what is there about you that you think might make it just a little bit *harder* for you to be a juror on this kind of case?

Responsibility means paying enough money compensation to fully equal the losses and the level of the harm -- without putting anything into the scale except those losses and harms. That's the law. Who here thinks they might have trouble -- even a little -- keeping things off the scale that don't belong there?

What else is there -- anything at all -- that you would want to know about you, if you were me standing up here and trying to decide who will be on the jury? Anything? Even if you're not sure it makes any difference?

You have rights as a juror -- one of the rights is to hear all of the evidence. So if a witness says something you don't hear, will you be comfortable raising your hand and telling the judge?

You have a second right -- to understand the law. Every so often during deliberations, jurors disagree over what the law is. Sometimes a discussion will start. Will you be comfortable asking the judge to read the instructions again instead of trying to decide it among yourselves.

VI. Seating Chart

Potential Juror Name						
Juror Number						

VII. Suggested Reading On Voir Dire

1. David Ball, *Theater Tips and Strategies For Jury Trials*, Third Edition (NITA 2003).
2. *Blue's Guide to Jury Selection* , (West & ATLA 2003).

3. David Ball on Damages, *A Plaintiff's Attorney's Guide For Personal Injury and Wrongful Death Cases*, Second Edition (NITA 2005).

VIII. Endnotes:

- i *United States v. Burr*, 25 F. Cas. 49, 50 (C.C.D. Va. 1807).
- ii Valerie P. Hans & Alayna Jehle, *Avoid Bald Men and People With Green Socks? Other Ways to Improve the Voir Dire Process in Jury Selection*, 78 CHICAGO-KENT LAW REVIEW 1179, 1181-1182 (2003).
- iii *Brown v. Hudson*, 96-2087 (La.App. 1 Cir. 9/19/97), 700 So. 2d 932, writ denied, 1997-2623 (La. 1/9/98), 705 So. 2d 1103.
- iv La. Code Civ. P. art. 1763 A.
- v La. Code Civ. P. art 1763 B.
- vi *Morgan v. Liberty Mutual Ins. Co.*, 323 So.2d 855 (4th Cir.1975) and *Trahan v. Odell Vinson Oil Field Contractors*, 295 Sol 2d 224 (3rd Cir.1974).
- vii La. Code Civ. P. art. 1764 B.
- viii La. Code Civ.P. art. 1765.
- ix *Scott v. The American Tobacco Company*, 2001-2498 (La. 9/25/01), 795 So. 2d 1176, 1182 (citing *State v. Hallal*, 557 So. 2d 1388, 1390 (La. 1990) (emphasis added).
- x *Wainwright v. Witt*, 496 U.S. 412, 1985.
- xi *Wainwright v. Witt*, 469 U.S. 412, 424, 105 S. Ct. 844, 852 (1985); *State v. Tate*, 2001-1658 (La. 5/20/03), 851 So. 2d 921, 931 (emphasis added).
- xii
La. Code Civ. P. art 1766 A.
- xiii La. Code Civ.P. art 1766 B.
- xiv La. Code Civ.P. art 1766 D.
- xv La. Code Civ.P. art 1769.
- xvi *Batson v. Kentucky*, 476 U.S. 79, 106 S. Ct. 1712 (1986) (criminal), *Edmonson v. Leesville Concrete Co., Inc.*, 500 U.S. 614, 111 S. Ct. 2077 (1991) (civil),
- xvii *J.E.B. v. Alabama*, 511 U.S. 127, 114 S. Ct. 1419.
- xviii *State v. Green*, 94-0887 (La. 5/22/95), 655 So. 2d 272.
- xix *Batson*, 476 U.S. at 96, 106 S. Ct. at 1712; *State v. Allen*, 2003-2418 (La. 6/29/05), 913 So. 2d 788, 798.
- xx *Purkett v. Elem*, 514 U.S. 765, 115 S. Ct. 1769 (1995).
- xxi *State v. Scott*, 2004-1312 (La. 1/19/06), 921 So. 2d 904, 937.
- xxii *Scott*, 921 So. 2d at 937, citing *Hernandez v. New York*, 500 U.S. 352, 364, 111 S. Ct. 1859, 1868 (1991).