

Supreme Court Cases

Marbury v. Madison (1803)

Chief Justice John Marshall's court ruled that Marbury would not be granted a writ of mandamus, as the power to issue one was granted by a law the court now deemed unconstitutional.

Impact: This case established the power of judicial review, that is, the power of the judicial branch to rule federal or state laws and actions unconstitutional, as well as rule on the constitutionality of the actions of government and individuals.

McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)

The state of Maryland had sought to tax the branch of the National Bank within that state. Chief Justice John Marshall's court ruled that the power to tax is the power to destroy.

Impact: The impact was twofold. First, it affirmed that under the necessary and proper clause, Congress had the power to create a National Bank. It further showed that the states do not have power over federal institutions (federal supremacy).

Dartmouth College v. Woodward (1819)

The state of New Hampshire attempted to take control of Dartmouth College, a private institution whose charter had been granted by King George III. Chief Justice John Marshall's court ruled that the college's charter was protected by the Constitution, and New Hampshire could not interfere with it.

Impact: Affirmed that private contracts are protected by the Constitution, and further exerted federal supremacy.

Gibbons v. Ogden (1824)

New York State attempted to stop Gibbons from operating a ferry service that ran between New Jersey and New York City. John Marshall's court ruled that New York State did not have the authority to make such an injunction.

Impact: The case affirmed that the states do not have the power to regulate interstate trade, thereby also further exerting federal supremacy.

Worcester v. Georgia (1832)

The state of Georgia had arrested two white missionaries for living on Cherokee land without receiving permits from the state. The court ruled that states do not have the authority to pass laws pertaining to sovereign Indian Nations.

Impact: This case affirmed the ideas of tribal sovereignty and federal supremacy in dealing with foreign nations. President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the court's ruling.

Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)

Dred Scott, a slave, had been brought by his owner to a territory north of the line established by the Missouri Compromise. He sued, believing that he should have his freedom. Chief Justice Taney's court ruled that as a slave, Scott was property, not a citizen, and therefore was not entitled to the use of the courts.

Impact: Rather than dealing with the issue of slavery, Taney focused on the property rights of citizens under the 5th Amendment. His ruling that the government could not infringe on property rights effectively meant that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional.

Munn v. Illinois (1877)

Farmers felt they were being taken advantage of by railroad companies who charged high prices for the use of grain elevators. The state of Illinois passed a law regulating prices that could be charged. The railroad companies believed the state had no right to do so. The court upheld the Illinois law.

Impact: This case established the idea that government regulation of business is constitutional when it is in the public interest, as opposed to business that involved purely private contracts and did not impact the public good.

Civil Rights Cases (1883)

Several cases dealing with the civil rights of former slaves in the South were grouped together. Under the Civil Rights Act of 1875, meant to enforce the 14th Amendment, citizens could not be denied the use of public facilities based on race. Many southern businesses, such as hotels and theaters, routinely denied entry to African Americans. The court ruled that the 1875 law was unconstitutional.

Impact: The ruling meant that discrimination in the private sector did not violate the Constitution, and thus was not something the government could address.

Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific Railway Co. v. Illinois (1886)

The railroad companies sued the state of Illinois for passing a law which regulated long haul and short haul freight rates. The court ruled that the Illinois law was unconstitutional as the rails extended beyond that state's borders.

Impact: This case reaffirmed Congress's power to regulate interstate trade. It directly led to the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated the railroads.

In Re Debs (1895)

Eugene V. Debs, a union organizer, had led Pullman Railroad Car workers on a strike. A federal court ordered an injunction, which he refused to obey. He appealed his contempt conviction to the Supreme Court. The court ruled against Debs.

Impact: The federal government, due to its power to regulate interstate commerce, has the ability to block unions from striking when doing so interferes with the public good.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Plessy was arrested after being thrown off a train for sitting in a “whites only” car. He sued, arguing that the Louisiana Act of 1890, which allowed for facilities which were “separate but equal” was unconstitutional. The court ruled against Plessy.

Impact: This case legalized segregation in all public and private facilities.

Northern Securities Company v. the United States (1904)

Northern Securities was a holding company which was attempting to gain control of two competing railroad companies. As part of Teddy Roosevelt’s anti-trust work, the Sherman Anti-trust Act was brought to bear. The issue before the court was whether the federal government has the power to prevent companies from limiting competition.

Impact: The court affirmed the federal government’s power to regulate interstate commerce, and to prevent companies from limiting competition.

Schenck v. the United States (1919)

Schenck was charged with distributing a flyer to recently drafted men during World War I which were designed to cause them to disobey federal law. Citing the 13th Amendment, he said that drafted soldiers could not be forced into involuntary service. He appealed his arrest based on the 1st Amendment’s guarantee of free speech. The court ruled against him.

Impact: Individual liberties granted by the Constitution are not absolute. Rights may be taken away by the government when their exercise constitutes a “clear and present danger” to national security. This case broadens federal power in times of war and crisis.

Schechter Poultry Corp. v. the United States (1935)

FDR’s NRA attempted to allow the President to regulate certain aspects of industry. The Schechter Poultry Corporation purchased chickens from another state, so the issue became whether the New Deal program (operated by the Executive Branch) had the power to regulate such businesses. The court ruled with the Schechter Poultry Corporation.

Impact: The court’s ruling reaffirmed that the power to regulate commerce belongs to the Legislative Branch, not the Executive (separation of powers). FDR’s NRA was ruled unconstitutional.

Korematsu v. the United States (1944)

FDR had ordered the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II on the basis that to have them moving freely was a danger to the United States. Korematsu sued on the basis that this violated his rights under the 14th Amendment. The court ruled against Korematsu.

Impact: The court upheld the President’s Executive Orders on the basis that an entire race could be labeled as suspect when it was in the best interests of the entire nation. Again, civil liberties are not absolute, and executive power is extended during times of war and crisis.

Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954)

Linda Brown, an eleven year old African American, sought to be admitted to a white school. The suit charged that denial of entry to the school violated her 14th Amendment rights. The court sided with Brown.

Impact: This case effectively overturned the earlier *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In court felt that it was not possible to have separate, racially segregated, schools which were equal. This led to the beginning of desegregation.

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Mapp v. Ohio (1962)

Police had entered Mapp's home without a search warrant. A struggle ensued, and Mapp was arrested. During a subsequent search of her house, illegal obscene materials were found, and she was charged with their possession. The case before the court alleged that since it was a warrantless search, the materials were discovered illegally. Chief Justice Warren's court sided with Mapp.

Impact: The court reaffirmed the rights guaranteed under the 4th Amendment, which prevents unreasonable search and seizure. It also dealt with privacy rights.

Engel v. Vitale (1962)

The Board of Education in Hyde Park, NY had ordered that all students recite a non-denominational prayer each day. The case before the court focused on the establishment clause in the 1st Amendment. The court ruled that the school had violated the students' 1st Amendment rights.

Impact: The Warren Court reaffirmed the separation of church and state guaranteed under the Constitution.

Gideon v. Wainwright (1964)

Gideon had been tried and found guilty of breaking and entering despite the fact that he was too poor to hire an attorney to represent him. The issue before the Warren Court was whether the state of Florida had violated his 6th Amendment right by not providing him with legal counsel. The court sided with Gideon.

Impact: The court's ruling affirms the rights of the accused to have access to legal counsel, regardless of whether they are able to afford it themselves or not, as the 14th Amendment guarantees equal treatment.

Escobedo v. Illinois (1964)

While being questioned in connection with the murder of his brother-in-law, Escobedo asked to see his lawyer, but the police did not allow this. Eventually, Escobedo made an incriminating statement, which was used to convict him of the crime. The issue before the Warren Court was whether the police violated his 5th Amendment right to not incriminate himself, his 6th Amendment right to counsel, and his 14th Amendment protections. The court sided with Escobedo.

Impact: This ruling further strengthened the rights of the accused. Any incriminating statement made by someone before they are informed of their rights cannot be used against them.

Miranda v. Arizona (1966)

Miranda was convicted of rape and kidnapping based on statements made to the police during questioning. The police never informed him of his right to remain silent or his right to an attorney. The court ruled that his conviction must be overturned on this basis.

Impact: The Warren Court again affirmed the rights of the accused. This led to the use of Miranda rights by police departments when arresting a suspect.

The New York Times Co. v. the United States (1971)

The US government wanted to stop the NY Times from publishing a controversial report on the Vietnam War (commonly referred to as the Pentagon Papers). The Court ruled that since the report did not threaten national security, the government had no right to practice censorship.

Impact: The court upheld the 1st Amendment freedom of the press.

Roe v. Wade (1973)

A woman alleged that a Texas law that outlawed abortion violated her right to privacy. The court agreed.

Impact: The ruling stated that a woman's right to privacy is fundamental, and can only be violated when a compelling state interest exists. It went on to say that states may only absolutely forbid abortions during the third trimester.

The United States v. Nixon (1974)

US prosecutors wanted access to Nixon's Oval Office recordings as part of their investigation into Watergate. Nixon stated that executive privilege meant he did not have to turn over the tapes. The court ruled against Nixon.

Impact: The Constitution is the Supreme Law of the Land. No one, not even the President, is above the law.

Bush v. Gore (2000)

Voting irregularities in Florida during the presidential election of 2000 resulted in a question over the validity of results. Al Gore had called for certain counties to have their ballots recounted. Bush wanted the recounts stopped based on equal protection issues caused by a lack of consistent standards for recounting the ballots. The court ruled in favor of Bush.

Impact: Florida's 25 electoral votes went to Bush, and he won the election, despite the fact that he had lost the popular vote.