



American Government

SUPREME COURT

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Introduction

“Equal justice under law.” What does it mean? The words are written on a building. The building is in Washington, D.C. It’s the Supreme Court. Judges work there. They make decisions about the law. The court says if a law is legal. It looks at the Constitution. The court’s **rulings** have changed history. Decisions can last a lifetime.

The court has nine **justices**. The most senior is the chief justice. Four women and 108 men have been justices. This includes 17 chief justices. The president gives them their jobs. Justices have their jobs for life. Some retire. Most don’t. William O. Douglas worked for 36 years. He retired in 1975.

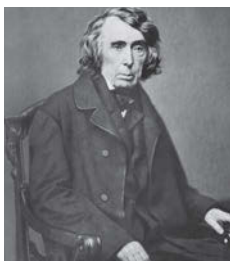
Some justices stood out. Others didn't have much to say. Can you name a Supreme Court justice? Most Americans can't.



John Marshall


How about past justices? Like John Marshall. He was the fourth chief justice. Marshall worked for 34 years. (1801–1835) He served the longest as chief justice.

Marshall started an idea. It's called **judicial review**. The court can say laws are not legal. Unconstitutional. It is a way to balance power.



Roger B. Taney

Roger B. Taney was a chief justice too. It was in 1857. Not everyone was treated fairly. The court made a bad ruling. It said slaves were not citizens. Nor could they ever be citizens. But the laws changed. How? There was the Civil War. And later two amendments were passed.



Earl Warren was the 14th chief justice. (1953–1969) Warren said, “Separate educational facilities are **inherently** unequal.” All people had to be treated the same. **Racism** was not legal.

Today three women are justices. There are six men. Five of the current justices went to Harvard Law School. Three went to Yale Law School. And one went to Columbia Law School. There are few skills needed for the job. But everyone who has served has been a lawyer.



*Presidents come and go, but the
Supreme Court goes on forever.*

—William Howard Taft





Chapter 1

THE SUPREMES ROCK

William Howard Taft knew about service. Taft was a U.S. president. He was also a Supreme Court justice. Taft was the only president to serve on the court. He liked being a judge. “I love judges, and I love courts. They are my ideals, that typify on earth what we shall meet hereafter in heaven under a just God,” he said.

It was 1921. Warren G. Harding was president. He made Taft chief justice of the United States. Taft improved the court. He organized it. Taft worked to pass a law. It was the Judiciary Act of 1925. The court could now decide which cases to hear. Taft wrote over 200 opinions. He also swore in two presidents. Taft gave the oath of office. First was Calvin Coolidge. Next was Herbert Hoover.



William Howard Taft

Becoming chief justice was Taft's dream. He loved the Supreme Court. It is the highest court in the land. The court is part of the third branch of government. It is called the judiciary.



Makes Laws




Carries Out Laws



Interprets Laws

The judiciary shares power with Congress. It also



shares power with the president. The framers wrote the rules. They wrote the Constitution. It's a great document. It spells out how the government should work. But not much is written about the courts. There are less than 400 words. The courts were the weakest part of government.

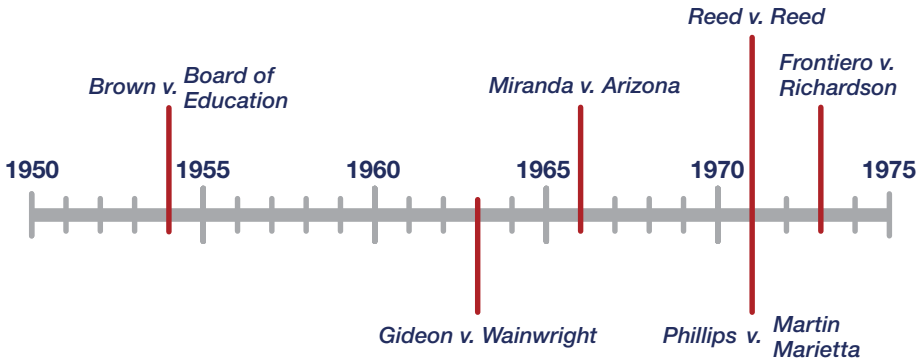
The courts needed to run themselves. Judges should not be controlled. Not by the public. And not by lawmakers. Their job is to decide cases. It's not about making people happy or being popular. That's why all federal judges have their jobs for life.

Think About It: *Should federal judges have their jobs for life?*

[FINAL SAY]

The Supreme Court has the final say on the law. The judges don't all have to agree. The majority decides the law. Everyone must follow it. Congress. And the president too.

MAJOR CIVIL RIGHTS CASES



The court has changed millions of lives with its rulings.

- Separate but equal schools was not legal. (*Brown v. Board of Education*)
- States must provide a lawyer to anyone facing trial. (*Gideon v. Wainwright*)
- If arrested, people must be told their rights. This happens before police can question them. (*Miranda v. Arizona*)

There have been changes in women's rights too.

- Laws that treat women unfairly are not legal. (*Reed v. Reed*)

- Employers cannot refuse to hire mothers with young children. (*Phillips v. Martin Marietta*)
- The military gives out benefits to families of its members. Those benefits cannot be awarded differently because of sex. (*Frontiero v. Richardson*)

[STATE COURTS]

The U.S. government is a federal system. Power is divided. It is shared. The national government has power. But it shares power with the states. The same is true for the courts. Power is shared. There are federal courts and state courts. They hear different kinds of cases. State courts hear cases about everyday laws. They can be about crimes. Broken traffic laws. Family law.

CASES FOR STATE COURTS



STATE COURTS

- Family law issues
- Criminal matters
- Wills and trusts
- Property disputes