

History Matters: The Supreme Court

The American Supreme Court is vital to the American system of government because it is the highest judicial authority in the country. In this role, it ensures our democracy's fairness and impartiality by serving as a critical check and balance to governmental power.

The principal duties of the Supreme Court are to: 1) uphold the Constitution, 2) ensure the rule of law, and 3) oversee and, when necessary, limit the powers of the other branches of government (i.e., the Congress and the President). It is tasked with interpreting the law, protecting individual rights, and resolving legal disputes when these arise. The Court helps maintain the democratic principles of justice, equality, and transparency. Its decisions have a profound impact on American society, determining the parameters of the legal landscape and influencing the character of public policy for succeeding generations.

Recognizing its important place in our social and political framework, the Founding Fathers took pains to ensure that the Court would be politically impartial. The Court's neutrality provides important protections for the people and helps prevent the other branches of government from using their powers to create political imbalances that would favor one party over the other.

Yet, in recent years, we've seen growing public concern about the Court and the impact of politics on its decisions. This worrying over partisanship and the Court undermines its ability to serve as an impartial arbiter of the law and protector of the public's interests. This doesn't just impact the legitimacy of the Court but erodes public trust in the judicial process in general, at all levels of the system.

Concerns about a possible lack of political independence on the Court underscore wider anxieties about political polarization in the nation. When the decisions of the Court seem to lend themselves to partisan interpretation, this can deepen divisions among the public, leading to more contentious and less cooperative government.

The citizens are right to be wary of a politicized Court. A partisan Court might overturn established legal precedents to produce decisions that do not align with the political opinions of the majority of citizens. Its rulings might impose the personal political views of the Justices rather than adhering to the Constitution and established legal norms. And this in turn might lead to significant shifts in legal interpretations and the potential dismantling of rights and protections previously upheld by the Court.

Justices have a sacred duty to decide cases based solely on the law and the Constitution upon which this nation was founded. Only then can the public have a well-founded faith in the Court's fairness and impartiality. Read on to learn more...

Beaumont, Thomas, *New poll shows majority of Americans believe Supreme Court justices put ideology over impartiality* Associated Press, June 27, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/new-poll-shows-majority-of-americans-believe-supreme-court-justices-put-ideology-over-impartiality>

The nine current U.S. Supreme Court justices as of 2024 were appointed by five different presidents.

Here is a list of the current justices, the presidents who appointed them, and the justices who preceded them.

1. Chief Justice John Roberts

- **Appointed by:** President George W. Bush
- **Year of Appointment:** 2005

Preceded by: Chief Justice William Rehnquist

- Died in Office: September 3, 2005
- Appointed by: President Richard Nixon

- Elevated to Chief Justice by President Ronald Reagan in 1986.
- Year of Appointment: 1972

2. Justice Clarence Thomas

- **Appointed by:** President George H.W. Bush
- **Year of Appointment:** 1991

Preceded by: Justice Thurgood Marshall

- Retired: October 1, 1991
- Appointed by: President Lyndon B. Johnson
- Year of Appointment: 1967
 - Marshall was the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court. He was a key figure in the civil rights movement and is best known for his work as a lawyer in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* before joining the Court.

3. Justice Samuel Alito

- **Appointed by:** President George W. Bush
- **Year of Appointment:** 2006

Preceded by: Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

- Retired: January 31, 2006
- Appointed by: President Ronald Reagan
- Year of Appointment: 1981

4. Justice Sonia Sotomayor

- **Appointed by:** President Barack Obama

- **Year of Appointment:** 2009

Preceded by: Justice David Souter

- Retired: June 29, 2009
- Appointed by: President George H.W. Bush
- Year of Appointment: 1990

5. Justice Elena Kagan

- **Appointed by:** President Barack Obama
- **Year of Appointment:** 2010

Preceded by: Justice John Paul Stevens

- Retired: June 29, 2010
- Appointed by: President Gerald Ford
- Year of Appointment: 1975

6. Justice Neil Gorsuch

- **Appointed by:** President Donald Trump
- **Year of Appointment:** 2017

Preceded by: Justice Antonin Scalia

- Died in Office: February 13, 2016
- Appointed by: President Ronald Reagan
- Year of Appointment: 1986

7. Justice Brett Kavanaugh

- **Appointed by:** President Donald Trump
- **Year of Appointment:** 2018

Preceded by: Justice Anthony Kennedy

- Retired: July 31, 2018
- Appointed by: President Ronald Reagan
- Year of Appointment: 1988

8. Justice Amy Coney Barrett

- **Appointed by:** President Donald Trump
- **Year of Appointment:** 2020

Preceded by: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg

- Died in Office: September 18, 2020
- Appointed by: President Bill Clinton
- Year of Appointment: 1993

9. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson

- **Appointed by:** President Joe Biden
- **Year of Appointment:** 2022

Preceded by: Justice Stephen Breyer

- Retired: July 30, 2022
- Appointed by: President Bill Clinton
- Year of Appointment: 1994