

Landmark Decisions of the Supreme Court

The table below lists key Supreme Court cases, issues, and decisions that have had a lasting impact on the course of the nation's history. Following the table, you will find a more detailed summary of each of these landmark Supreme Court cases.

The Case	The Issues	The Supreme Court's Decision
<i>Marbury v. Madison</i> (1803)	Judicial Review, Checks and Balances	First decision to assert judicial review: the power of the Court to interpret the constitutionality of a law.
<i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> (1819)	Federalism, States' Rights	Upheld the power of the national government and denied the right of a state to tax a federal agency.
<i>Gibbons v. Ogden</i> (1824)	Federalism, States' Rights, Interstate Commerce	Upheld broad congressional power to legislate and regulate commerce between states.
<i>Worcester v. Georgia</i> (1832)	Federalism, States' Rights; Native American Sovereignty	Ruled that Georgia had no power to pass laws affecting the Cherokees because federal jurisdiction over the Cherokees was exclusive.
<i>Dred Scott v. Sanford</i> (1857)	Slavery, 5th Amendment, Citizens' Rights	Ruled that slaves were property, not citizens and, therefore, Dred Scott was not entitled to use the courts.
<i>Munn v. Illinois</i> (1876)	5th Amendment, Public Interest; States' Rights	Upheld an Illinois law regulating railroad rates because the movement of grain was closely related to public interest.
<i>Civil Rights Cases</i> (1883)	14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause, racial discrimination	Stated that the 14th Amendment only applied to discriminatory action taken by states, not discriminatory actions taken by individuals.
<i>Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific R.R. v. Illinois</i> (1886)	Federalism, Interstate Commerce	Struck down an Illinois law regulating interstate railroad rates, ruling that it infringed on the federal government's exclusive control over interstate commerce.
<i>United States v. E.C. Knight Co.</i> (1895)	Sherman Anti-Trust Act, Federalism, States' Rights	The Sherman Anti-Trust Act does not apply to manufacturers located within a single state, because under the 10th Amendment, states have the right to regulate "local activities."
<i>In Re Debs</i> (1895)	Labor strikes, interstate commerce	Ruled that the federal government had the authority to halt a railroad strike because it interfered with interstate commerce and delivery of the mail.
<i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> (1896)	Segregation, 14th Amendment equal protection	Permitted segregated public facilities, arguing that separate but equal accommodations did not violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment.
<i>United States v. Wong Kim Ark</i> (1898)	Immigration, citizenship, 14th amendment	Affirmed that under the 14th Amendment, all persons born in the United States are citizens of the United States.
<i>Northern Securities Co. v. United States</i> (1904)	Sherman Anti-Trust Act, Interstate Commerce	Sherman Anti-Trust Act could apply to any company which sought to eliminate competition in interstate commerce, including companies chartered within a single state.
<i>Lochner v. New York</i> (1905)	Labor conditions, property rights, 14th Amendment	Struck down a state law setting a 10-hour day for employees because the law interfered with an employee's right to contract with an employer and violated the protection of liberty guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.
<i>Muller v. Oregon</i> (1908)	Women's rights, labor conditions, 14th amendment	In a departure from the <i>Lochner</i> case, the Court upheld a state law limiting women's work hours, viewing women as a special class needing special protections.
<i>Standard Oil of New Jersey v. United States</i> (1911)	Antitrust	Ruled that Standard Oil was an illegal monopoly and ordered that it be dissolved into smaller, competing companies.
<i>American Tobacco v. United States</i> (1911)	Antitrust	Ruled that American Tobacco was an illegal monopoly and ordered that it be dissolved into smaller, competing companies.
<i>Schenck v. United States</i> (1919)	1st Amendment freedom of speech, national security	The Court limited free speech in time of war, reasoning that freedom of speech can be limited if the words present a "clear and present danger" to the country.
<i>Abrams v. United States</i> (1919)	1st Amendment freedom of speech, national security	Upheld the convictions of persons who distributed anti-government literature in violation of the Espionage Act. But Justices Holmes and Brandeis dissented, urging more stringent protection of the 1st Amendment.
<i>Gitlow v. New York</i> (1925)	1st Amendment freedoms of speech and press, 14th Amendment	Ruled that the freedoms of speech and press were "incorporated" and protected from impairment by the states by the due process clause of the 14th Amendment.
<i>Stromberg v. California</i> (1931)	1st Amendment freedom of speech, 14th Amendment	Overturned an anticommunist law that banned the public display of a red flag. This was the first time the Supreme Court struck down a state law under the 1st Amendment as applied to the states by the 14th Amendment.
<i>Near v. Minnesota</i> (1931)	1st Amendment freedom of speech, 14th Amendment	The Supreme Court struck down a Minnesota state law, ruling that it infringed upon freedom of the press, guaranteed by the due process clause of the 14th Amendment.

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<i>Schechter Poultry Corporation v. United States</i> (1935)	New Deal, separation of powers, interstate commerce	The Court held that Congress, not the President, has the power to regulate interstate commerce. The National Industrial Recovery Act was declared unconstitutional for exceeding the commerce power that the Constitution had given to Congress.
<i>West Coast Hotel v. Parrish</i> (1937)	Minimum wage laws, 5th Amendment	Ruled that the Constitution allowed the restriction of liberty of contract by state law where such restriction protected the community, health, safety, or vulnerable groups.
<i>West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette</i> (1943)	Pledge of allegiance, 1st Amendment	The Court found that a state law requiring students to pledge allegiance to the flag violated freedom of speech and freedom of religion.
<i>Hirabayashi v. United States</i> (1943)	5th Amendment, civil liberties, national security	The Supreme Court upheld the legitimacy of travel restrictions imposed on Japanese Americans during World War II.
<i>Korematsu v. United States</i> (1944)	5th Amendment, civil liberties, national security	Ruled that the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II did not violate the Constitution.
<i>Dennis v. United States</i> (1951)	1st Amendment, civil liberties, national security	The Court ruled that the Smith Act, which prohibited advocacy of the overthrow of the U.S. government by force and violence, did not violate the 1st Amendment.
<i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i> (1954)	School segregation, 14th Amendment	The Court found that segregation itself was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause, commenting that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place."
<i>Watkins v. United States</i> (1957)	Rights of the accused, 5th Amendment	The Bill of Rights is applicable to congressional investigations, as it is to all forms of governmental action.
<i>Yates v. United States</i> (1957)	1st Amendment freedom of speech, national security	Ruled that the Smith Act did not forbid persons from advocating forcible overthrow of the government; it only forbade actions to achieve that goal.
<i>Cooper v. Aaron</i> (1958)	School segregation, 14th Amendment	The Court ruled unanimously against the Little Rock School Board's efforts to not comply with the Brown decision.
<i>Mapp v. Ohio</i> (1961)	Search and seizure 4th and 14th amendments	Ruled that evidence obtained by searches and seizures in violation of the Constitution is inadmissible.
<i>Baker v. Carr</i> (1962)	Legislative reapportionment, 14th Amendment	Ruled that federal Courts could direct that election-district boundaries be redrawn to ensure citizens' political rights.
<i>Engle v. Vitale</i> (1962)	1st Amendment establishment clause	Ruled that the recitation of a prayer in a public classroom was a violation of the establishment clause of the 1st Amendment.
<i>Gideon v. Wainwright</i> (1963)	Rights of the accused, 6th and 14th amendments	The Court said that all states must provide an attorney in all felony and capital cases for people who cannot afford one themselves.
<i>Reynolds v. Simms</i> (1964)	Legislative reapportionment, 14th Amendment	Extended the one-person, one-vote principle of <i>Wesberry v. Sanders</i> (1964) to states, ruling that state legislative districts should be roughly equal in population so that every voter has an equally weighted vote.
<i>Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States</i> (1964)	Racial segregation, interstate commerce	Racial segregation of private facilities engaged in interstate commerce was found unconstitutional.
<i>Miranda v. Arizona</i> (1966)	Rights of the accused, 5th, 6th, and 14th amendments,	Before questioning suspects held in custody, police must inform suspects that they have the right to remain silent, that anything they say may be used against them, and that they have the right to counsel.
<i>Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education</i> (1971)	School desegregation; busing	Ruled that busing students to various schools is an acceptable way to integrate segregated school systems. The Court said school districts had broad powers to find solutions to the problem of segregation.
<i>Tinker v. Des Moines</i> (1969)	Students' rights, 1st Amendment freedom of speech	Students in school may exercise freedom of speech as long as they do not disrupt classwork, create substantial disorder, or interfere with the rights of others.
<i>The New York Times v. United States</i> (1971)	1st Amendment freedom of the press	The Court limited censorship through "prior restraint" of the press, noting that it is the obligation of the government to prove that actual harm to the nation's security would be caused by the publication.
<i>Roe v. Wade</i> (1973)	Abortion, 9th Amendment, "right to privacy"	Decided that states could regulate abortions only in certain circumstances but otherwise a woman's right to an abortion was protected by her right to privacy.
<i>United States v. Nixon</i> (1974)	Executive privilege, separation of powers	Executive privilege was subordinate to "the fundamental demands of due process of law in the fair administration of criminal justice." President Nixon had to surrender audiotapes to a special prosecutor.
<i>Regents of the University of CA v. Bakke</i> (1978)	Affirmative action, 14th Amendment,	The Court held that a university could consider an applicant's race in making admissions decisions, but the use of strict racial quotas in affirmative action programs was not permissible.
<i>New Jersey v. TLO</i> (1985)	Students' rights, 4th and 14th amendments	School officials, unlike the police, need only "reasonable suspicion" to search students when they believe illegal activity is occurring.
<i>Texas v. Johnson</i> (1989)	1st Amendment freedom of speech	Ruled that desecrating the flag as an act of protest is an act of expression protected by the 1st Amendment.
<i>Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health</i> (1990)	"Right to die," 9th Amendment, 14th Amendment	Individuals have the right to refuse medical treatment, but the State can preserve life unless there is "clear and convincing" evidence that the patient desires the withdrawal of medical treatment.