



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW

April 2025

Above the imposing doors of the United States Supreme Court in our nation's capital appear the words "Equal Justice Under Law." These four words encapsulate the aspiration of the federal judiciary to do justice to all who come before its courts regardless of their personal circumstances. These four words serve as a cornerstone of the American judicial system.

Equal justice under law is a noble aspiration that depends on the efforts of imperfect people. It aims to give all who come before the courts the same fair treatment, legal protections, and rights, regardless of their wealth or poverty, their fame or obscurity, their power or vulnerability, and regardless of their race, gender, religion, or background. It is ambitious in its call to treat equally the most powerful and the penniless. All are to be given the same due-process rights under the Fourth and Fifth Amendments. Some of the most praiseworthy legal decisions in our country's history were decided under this principle.

The principle that the law must apply equally and fairly to all is impressed on federal judges at the very moment they take office. By law, federal judges must take the following oath: "*I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will administer justice without respect to persons, and do equal right to the poor and to the rich, and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all the duties incumbent upon me as [a Judge or Justice] under the Constitution and laws of the United States. So help me God.*" 28 U.S.C. § 453. By taking this oath, federal judges acknowledge their obligation to render equal justice under the law to all. They undertake to administer justice "without respect to persons"—in other words, with fairness and neutrality, and without being swayed by sympathy for or prejudice against the particulars of the parties before them.

This obligation of fairness by judges extends beyond deciding the merits of legal questions. It also entails treating lawyers and parties with respect, dignity, and civility, regardless of their personal circumstances. And it entails handling cases with diligence and thoroughness. A person's unfair experience with a judge, or even learning about an unnecessarily harsh occurrence in court, can poison that person's opinion of our court system for life. Without the public's confidence in the fairness of court procedures, the court system cannot fulfill its role—essential to our form of democracy—of resolving disputes among individuals, entities, and governments themselves.

While it is impossible for our court system to give all parties their desired outcomes, it can and must treat all parties respectfully. This means that equal justice under the law applies to how the judge conducts himself or herself in the courtroom and the language he or she uses in issuing decisions.

“Equal justice under law” appears on the Supreme Court building, but it is not just an admonition to our highest federal court. This principle sets a high standard for judges of all levels to follow, be they on trial courts, appellate courts, or the Supreme Court, and it applies to both state and federal courts, as well. By applying the law equally to all, and not making exceptions for some or bending the law to cater to others, judges live up to this high principle.

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