

Recent Ethical Lapses by Supreme Court Justices

These are listed by the justice's seniority, then in chronological order; lapses are mostly those that have occurred since Fix the Court's Nov. 2014 founding. Need a source or citation? E-mail info@fixthecourt.com.

Chief Justice John Roberts

- Failed to recuse in 14-972, *ABB Inc., et al. v. Arizona Board of Regents, et al.* (cert. denied), despite owning shares in Texas Instruments stock, a party on the ABB side. (2015)
- Initially failed to recuse in a merits case, 14-1538, *Life Technologies Corp. v. Promega Corp.*, despite owning shares in Thermo Fisher Scientific, which owns Life Technologies; did recuse after the error was brought to his attention after oral argument. (2016)
- Failed to recuse in 17-1287, *Marcus Roberts et al. v. AT&T Mobility* (cert. denied), despite owning shares in Time-Warner, which had merged with AT&T. (2018)

Justice Clarence Thomas

- Accepted private plane rides and gifts, including a bible once owned by Frederick Douglass valued at \$19,000, from financier Harlan Crowe. Crowe also donated \$500,000 to help Ginni Thomas establish Liberty Consulting, a platform she used to lobby against laws like Obamacare that were before the Court; gave \$175,000 to a library in Savannah to name a wing after Thomas; and raised millions to build a museum in Thomas' hometown of Pin Point, Ga. (multiple years)
- Attended a Koch Industries-backed retreat in Palm Springs, Calif., at a time in which Koch was bankrolling several litigants with cases before the Supreme Court. (2008)
- Name was used in promotional materials for the nonprofit NRA Foundation, which stated its 2009 National Youth Education Summit included "exciting question and answer discussions with [the] wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas." (2009)
- Was found to have omitted data on five years of Ginni's employment (2003-07), where she earned \$686,589 from the Heritage Foundation, from his annual financial disclosures. (2011)
- Attended the annual Eagle Forum conference, which, at up to \$350 a head, may have been a fundraiser. Ginni Thomas used the justice's appearance as a fig to increase attendance, urging in promotional materials that prospective attendees come to hear "my amazing husband." (2017)
- Participated in 17-965, *Trump v. Hawaii*, though Ginni earned more than \$235,000 total in 2017 and 2018 from the Center for Security Policy, whose founder Frank Gaffney signed an amicus brief in the case. (2017-18)
- Prominently displays in his Court chambers a photo of Vice President Mike Pence's swearing-in, which Thomas presided over, that's signed by Pence. (2017-present)
- Omitted from his financial disclosure report the reimbursements for transportation, food and lodging he received from Creighton University School of Law, where he taught that year. After FTC's report on justices' lavish trips was released in 2020, amended his report, though the amendment wasn't made public until 2022. (2017-22)
- Omitted from his financial disclosure report the reimbursements for transportation, food and lodging he received from the law schools of the University of Kansas and the University of Georgia, where he taught that year. After FTC's report on justices' lavish trips was released in 2020, amended his report, though the amendment wasn't made public until 2022. (2018-22)
- Documentary about his life financed by several groups, including the Koch Foundation, Judicial Education Project and Scaife Foundation, that were funding Supreme Court litigants and amici around the time the film was produced and released. (2019-2020)
- Failed to recuse in any of the 2020 election petitions that reached the Supreme Court, even though it is likely Ginni had an "interest," cf., 28 U.S.C. §455(b)(5)(iii), in the outcome of the election, seeing as how her publicly released text messages and social media and listserv posts show she was actively working with high-level Trump administration officials to subvert and overturn its results. (2020-2021)

- May have been in contact with Fla. Gov. Ron DeSantis possibly around the time in which Florida was a respondent in 21A247, *Ohio v. OSHA, et al.*, over the federal test-or-vax mandate. (2021)
- Failed to recuse in the petition 21A272, *Trump v. Thompson*, over the Jan. 6 Committee’s access to documents related to the insurrection, even though Ginni signed a letter in December denouncing Committee’s very existence, and it’s likely documents that indicate her involvement to invalidate the election results will be turned over to the Committee. (2022)
- Is participating in 20-1199, *Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College*, even though Ginni sits on the board of the National Association of Scholars, which filed an amicus brief in the case. (2022)
- Name is being used on third-party website, JusticeThomas.com, at the bottom of which is written “© 2022 · Justice Clarence Thomas.” Though the domain name was purchased by Domains By Proxy, LLC, it is unlikely that Thomas himself maintains it, and it encourages visitors to purchase his memoir. (2022)
- Posed for a photo in a Supreme Court alcove with Herschel Walker, a Senate candidate in Georgia, seven weeks before Walker’s primary election; photo was tweeted out by Walker’s campaign communications director. (2022)

Justice Stephen Breyer

- Failed to recuse in merits case 14-840, *FERC v. EPSA*, despite owning shares in Johnson Controls, a party on the EPSA side. Breyer learned about the conflict the day after oral argument and sold the stock. (2015)
- Attended a \$500-per-plate dinner at the University of Texas at Arlington with finance, legal and oil executives ahead of his talk at the school. The high price suggests the event was a fundraiser. (2016)
- Along with Alito, failed to recuse in 18-6644, *Feng v. Komenda and Rockwell Collins, Inc.* (cert. denied), though he owns shares in Rockwell’s parent company, United Technologies Corp. Said he had “no way of knowing” about the conflict since Rockwell didn’t file a response, which is spurious reasoning. (2019)
- While asking a question during oral argument in a public charge case, apparently gave away the result in 20-601, *Cameron v. EMW Surgical Center*, where Ky. Attorney General Daniel Cameron asked to intervene to defend a state law when no other governmental representative would defend it. (2022)
- Nothing wrong with justices voting but as of April 10, 2022, was a registered Democrat. (2022)

Justice Samuel Alito

- Failed to recuse in merits case 07-582, *FCC, et al., v. Fox Television, et al.*, despite holding 2,000 shares of Disney stock on behalf of his minor children. ABC, which Disney owns, was a party on the respondents’ side. (2008)
- Failed to recuse in merits case 17-290, *Merck Sharp & Dohme Corp. v. Albrecht*, despite owning shares in Merck. Eventually sold shares and unrecused. (2017-2018)
- Along with Kavanaugh, met with the head of the National Organization for Marriage at the Supreme Court. NOM submitted an amicus brief in the merits cases 17-1618, *Bostock v. Clayton Co.*; 17-1623, *Altitude Express v. Zarda*; and 18-107, *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC* that were unresolved at the time. (2019)
- Attended Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s taxpayer-funded Madison Dinner with other politicians and GOP donors. (2019)
- Along with Breyer, failed to recuse in 18-6644, *Feng v. Komenda and Rockwell Collins, Inc.* (cert. denied), though he owns shares in Rockwell’s parent company, United Technologies Corp. (2019)
- Speech to Federalist Society annual convention included discussion on COVID’s impact on religious exercise at a time when cases concerning the topic remained active at the Court. (2020)
- Failed to recuse in 20-6256, *Valentine v. PNC Financial Services, et al.* (cert. denied), where one of the respondents was PNC Bank, whose shares Alito owns. (2021)
- Chillingly, given power imbalance between a justice and a journalist, quoted directly from a journalist’s article on the “shadow docket” in speech attempting to rebut the justices’ increasing use of emergency orders to make impactful rulings. (2021)

Justice Sonia Sotomayor

- Failed to recuse in 12-965, *Greenspan, v. Random House* (cert. denied), even though the respondent, her book publisher, had months before spent tens of thousands of dollars sending her around the country to promote her autobiography. (2013)
- Initially omitted from her 2016 financial disclosure report six free or reimbursed trips she took that year, including one to the University of Rhode Island where the school paid for up to 11 rooms in one of the state’s fanciest hotels for her, her security

detail and possibly some family friends; paid more than \$1,000 for her round-trip flight; gave her a five-car motorcade from the airport; and ordered 125 copies of her autobiography to sell in the school bookstore. The five other free-trip omissions were to the law schools of the University of Illinois, University of Minnesota and University of Wisconsin and to Rutgers University and the University of Alaska. The report was amended in 2021 and made public in 2022. (2016-2022)

– Failed to recuse in 19-560, *Nicassio v. Viacom, et al.* (cert. denied), where Penguin Random House was a party on the side of the respondents. By this point, Sotomayor had earned more than \$3 million from her book contracts with PRH since becoming a justice. (2019-20)

– Initially failed to recuse from merits case 19-518, *Colorado Department of State v. Michael Baca, et al.*, despite her close friendship with Polly Baca, one of the respondents. After some months, she did recuse. (2020)

Justice Elena Kagan

– Failed to recuse from several Obamacare merits cases – including 11-393, *NFIB v. Sebelius*; 14-114, *King v. Burwell*; 19-840, *California v. Texas* – even though she was the U.S. solicitor general at the time the White House and her office were crafting the legal defense of the law. (2011, 2014 and 2020)

– Initially failed to recuse in the (argued and reargued) merits case 15-1204, *Jennings v. Rodriguez*, despite her previous work on the case when U.S. solicitor general. Stepped aside when the error was brought to her attention. (2016-2017)

– A speech she gave at the University of Wisconsin Law School was part of its Dean’s Summit, which is an annual gathering for those who pledge at least \$1,000 per year to the school. (2017)

– Failed to recuse in 19-720, *U.S. v. Briones, Jr.*, a case that was remanded to the Ninth Circuit, even though she had previously participated in an earlier version of this case. (2021)

– Nothing wrong with justices voting but as of April 10, 2022, was a registered Democrat. (2022)

Justice Neil Gorsuch

– Gave a talk at Trump International Hotel in Washington to The Fund for American Studies. TFAS is an associate member of the State Policy Network, whose Illinois-based partner organization was at the time representing Mark Janus in a major union dues case, 16-1466, *Janus v. AFSCME*, that was argued the following year. (2017)

– Failed to recuse in 19-560, *Nicassio v. Viacom, et al.* (cert. denied), where Penguin Random House was a party on the side of the respondents. Gorsuch has earned more than \$650,000 from his PRH book contract since becoming a justice. (2019-20)

– Nothing wrong with justices voting but as of 2020 was a registered Republican. (2020)

– Spoke at a Florida Federalist Society event that was closed to the press and included appearances by Gov. Ron DeSantis and former Vice President Mike Pence. (2022)

Justice Brett Kavanaugh

– Told the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearing, “As we all know, in the United States political system of the early 2000s, what goes around comes around,” among other musings. Unclear what this was in reference to. (2018)

– Along with Alito, met with the head of the National Organization for Marriage at the Supreme Court. NOM submitted an amicus brief in the merits cases 17-1618, *Bostock v. Clayton Co.*; 17-1623, *Altitude Express v. Zarda*; and 18-107, *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC* that were unresolved at the time. (2019)

Justice Amy Barrett

– Americans for Prosperity spent more than \$1 million to help get Barrett confirmed, and she did not recuse from the merits case 19-251, *Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta*. (2021)

– Gave a speech at the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville, standing next to Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, during which she exhorted the public not to view the Court as political. The speech, for which video streaming and video recording were prohibited, was preceded by dinner with Barrett, McConnell and 12 to 15 of the senator’s friends. (2021)

Future justices

Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson

- Nothing wrong with future justices voting but as of April 10, 2022, was a registered Democrat. (2022)

Former justices

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

- Likened a Sen. Grassley proposal to create a judiciary inspector general’s office to Stalinism, saying that such oversight “is a really scary idea” that “sounds to me very much like [how] the Soviet Union was.” (2006)
- Was a featured presenter at the 100th anniversary gala of liberal magazine *The New Republic*. Worse, the event was underwritten by Credit Suisse, which earlier in the year was a party in a Court petition. (2014)
- Gave an interview to *The New Republic* in which she offered a dim view of a Texas anti-abortion law, HB2. The law was eventually challenged all the way to the Supreme Court, and Ginsburg did not recuse from the case. (2014-16).
- Performed a same-sex marriage while 14-556, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, was still under consideration by the court. (2015)
- Called then-candidate Donald Trump a “faker” with “an ego” in an interview with CNN. Said she couldn’t “imagine what the country would be [like] with Donald Trump as our president” in an interview with the *New York Times*. Later apologized, saying, “My recent remarks [...] were ill-advised, and I regret making them. Judges should avoid commenting on a candidate for public office.” Ginsburg never recused from a case in which President Trump was a litigant. (2016; 2017-2020)
- Accepted a lifetime achievement award from the Genesis Prize Foundation, which came with a \$1 million in prize money that she later donated, though judicial gift regulations cap the value of what may be accepted at \$2,000. (2017)
- Following her Genesis Prize acceptance, was the guest of businessman Morris Kahn on a tour of the Middle East; Kahn had business before the Court the previous year – 17-136, *Openet Telecom, Inc. v. Amdocs* (cert. denied) – which preserved a lower court victory for Kahn’s company (Amdocs) and from which Ginsburg did not recuse. (2017-18)
- Accepted the \$1 million Berggruen Institute prize for philosophy and culture (also donated the money). (2019)
- Nothing wrong with justices voting but as of 2020 was a registered Democrat. (2020)

Justice Anthony Kennedy

- Press reports indicate he spoke to the Trump presidential campaign as the campaign was compiling a list of prospective Supreme Court nominees. (2016)
- Initially failed to recuse in merits case 17-269, *Washington v. U.S.*, despite his previous work on it as a lower court judge. Stepped aside once the error was identified. (2018)

Justice Antonin Scalia

- Voiced his opposition to tribunals for Guantanamo detainees weeks before the Court heard a case on that issue (from which he did not recuse, despite public outcry), saying, “We are in a war. We are capturing these people on the battlefield. [...] War is war, and it has never been the case that when you capture a combatant, you have to give them a jury trial in your civil courts. It’s a crazy idea to me.” (2006)
- Attended Koch Industries-backed retreat in Palm Springs, Calif., at time in which Koch was bankrolling several litigants with cases before the Supreme Court. (2007)
- Addressed a closed-door, closed-press event, called a “Conservative Constitutional Seminar,” hosted by the Tea Party Caucus. (2011)
- During a speech in Brooklyn, and as he and his colleagues were weighing the very issue, said it’s “truly stupid” the Court would have the “last word” on whether an NSA surveillance program oversteps the bounds of the Fourth Amendment. (2014)
- Flew on a private plane, furnished by John Poindexter, from Houston to Marfa, Tex., to stay for free in a \$700-per-night room on Poindexter’s ranch, where Scalia sadly passed away. Poindexter was a 2015 Supreme Court litigant in 15-150, *Hinga v. MIC Group*, cert. denied; Poindexter’s company, J.B. Poindexter & Co., owns MIC Group. (2015-16)