Building an Equal Justice Judiciary: Progress During the Biden Administration

To build a federal judiciary that delivers equal justice, we need judges who will protect the rights of all people, no matter their race or background. This requires federal judges with different perspectives on the law — judges who have worked as civil rights attorneys, public defenders, and public interest lawyers. Our diverse nation also needs judges who reflect and represent all of us. Research shows that demographic and professional diversity on our courts increases public trust in the judiciary and improves judicial decisionmaking.¹ Yet, for far too long, those selecting and confirming federal judges have not made this a priority.²

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and its Fair Courts Task Force have long advocated for the White House and the Senate to prioritize this diversity and to set the expectation that all judicial nominees possess a demonstrated commitment to civil and human rights.³ At the start of the Biden administration, the White House Counsel’s office joined this effort, requesting that senators recommend diverse nominees with experience as public defenders and civil rights lawyers.⁴ Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) have prioritized the consideration of nominees in committee and the confirmation of nominees on the Senate floor. And on April 7, 2022, the Senate confirmed Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to be an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court — the first Black woman and first former public defender ever to serve on our nation’s highest court. We must build upon this progress in order to make our courts live up to the promise of equal justice for all.

**Article III Judicial Nominations in the Biden Administration: By the Numbers⁵**

- 70 confirmed judges - 1 Supreme Court, 16 circuit court, 53 district court
  - Includes 53 women, 32 women of color including Native American women
  - Includes 18 public defenders, 15 civil rights lawyers

- 51 pending nominees - 16 circuit court, 35 district court
  - Includes 34 women, 26 women of color including Native American women
  - Includes 12 public defenders, 11 civil rights lawyers

**Pending Nominees: Highlights**

**LARA MONTECALVO** has spent her career pursuing equal justice for all people and is now a nominee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. Throughout her 18 years in the Rhode Island Public Defender’s Office, where she serves as the Rhode Island Public Defender, Ms. Montecalvo has worked to ensure people’s access to qualified counsel and to root out disparities within the criminal-legal system.

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⁵ Data as of July 14, 2022.
Nominated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, Judge SARAH MERRIAM has shown a dedication to public service and the protection of people's rights throughout her career. Since 2021, Judge Merriam has served on the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, where she previously served for more than six years as a magistrate judge. Prior to becoming a judge, she spent eight years as an assistant federal defender, representing clients who could not afford an attorney and ensuring they had access to justice.

Former public defender ARIANNA FREEMAN, nominee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, has shown a strong commitment to equal justice throughout her impressive career. At the Federal Community Defender Office of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, she has handled hundreds of cases on behalf of clients who could not afford counsel, helping to defend and protect the rights of many people. Ms. Freeman will be the first woman of color and first Black woman to ever serve on this court.

NANCY ABUDU, nominee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, has dedicated her impressive career to defending and protecting our civil rights, including our freedom to vote. After spending years as a civil rights litigator at the ACLU's Voting Rights Project and the ACLU of Florida, Ms. Abudu joined the Southern Poverty Law Center to help establish its Voting Rights Practice Group. She will be the first Black woman on the Eleventh Circuit and the first Black person ever to serve in a Georgia seat on this court.

Nominated to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York, NUSRAT CHOUDHURY has worked tirelessly challenging discriminatory policies that target communities of color. Throughout her impressive career at the ACLU, Ms. Choudhury has challenged modern-day debtors’ prisons, racially discriminatory policies, and unlawful surveillance of religious minorities. She will be the first Muslim woman and first Bangladeshi American ever to serve as a lifetime federal judge.

NATASHA MERLE, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York, has demonstrated her deep commitment to equal justice throughout her notable career. As the deputy director of litigation at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., she has led critical civil rights lawsuits on the freedom to vote and discriminatory sentencing practices. Ms. Merle has also served as a federal public defender, fighting bias in our criminal-legal system and defending clients who could not afford an attorney.

JESSICA CLARKE, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, has spent her career working to protect and defend the civil and human rights of all of us. She has served as chief of the Civil Rights Bureau of the New York State Office of the Attorney General since 2019, and has experience investigating and litigating housing discrimination cases as a trial attorney in the Housing and Civil Enforcement Section of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

As director of the voting rights project at the ACLU, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York DALE HO has protected civil rights by defending the freedom to vote. Mr. Ho has successfully challenged the Trump administration’s efforts to add a citizenship question to the census and opposed its efforts to exclude unauthorized immigrants from calculations used to determine representation in Congress.

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NANCY MALDONADO, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, has spent her career defending the rights of working people. As a partner at Miner, Barnhill & Galland, P.C., she specializes in employment discrimination, especially protecting the rights of migrant farmworkers. Ms. Maldonado will be the first Latina to ever serve as a lifetime federal judge in Illinois.

Judge HERNÁN VERA, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, has dedicated his career to equal justice. Before serving as a judge on the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Judge Vera served for 12 years at Public Counsel, the largest pro bono law firm in the nation, where he created an impact litigation department for economic injustice. Judge Vera also served as an attorney at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

TIFFANY CARTWRIGHT, nominee to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington, possesses an impressive background as a civil rights attorney. Since 2014, she has specialized in civil rights litigation at MacDonald Hoague & Bayless, where she has defended the rights of people who were wrongly convicted of crimes and held police officers accountable for their misconduct. Ms. Cartwright also has an extensive background defending the rights of working people.

**Confirmed Judges: Milestones and Historic Firsts**

- Judge VICTORIA CALVERT (Northern District of Georgia), first former public defender on Northern District of Georgia
- Judge TIFFANY CUNNINGHAM (Federal Circuit), first Black judge on Federal Circuit
- Judge STEPHANIE DAVIS (Sixth Circuit), first Black woman from Michigan on Sixth Circuit
- Judge ANA DE ALBA (Eastern District of California), first Latina judge on Eastern District of California
- Judge GUSTAVO GELPÍ (First Circuit), first former public defender on First Circuit
- Judge LYDIA GRIGGSBY (District of Maryland), first woman of color judge on Maryland district court
- Judge CANDACE JACKSON-AKIWUMI (Seventh Circuit), first former public defender and second judge of color on Seventh Circuit
- Judge LAUREN KING (Western District of Washington), first Native American federal judge in Washington state
- Judge SHALINA KUMAR (Eastern District of Michigan), first South Asian judge on any Michigan district court
- Judge SARALA NAGALA (District of Connecticut), first South Asian judge on Connecticut district court
- Judge ALISON NATHAN (Second Circuit), second openly LGBTQ woman on any federal appellate court
- Judge JINSOOK OHTA (Southern District of California), first AAPI woman judge on Southern District of California
- Judge FLORENCE PAN (District of D.C.), first AAPI woman to serve on D.C. district court
- Judge ZAHID QURAISHI (District of New Jersey), first Muslim Article III judge
- Judge REGINA RODRIGUEZ (District of Colorado), first AAPI judge on Colorado district court
- Judge DAVID RUIZ (Northern District of Ohio), first Latino judge on any Ohio district court
- Judge SUNSHINE SYKES (Central District of California), first Native American judge on any California district court

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Confirmed Judges: Highlights

President Biden has nominated exceptional lawyers from diverse backgrounds who are now serving on the bench. For example, Justice KETANJI BROWN JACKSON (U.S. Supreme Court) is the first Black woman and first former public defender to serve on our nation’s highest court. She comes to the Supreme Court with impeccable qualifications, including nearly ten years of experience as a fair-minded jurist and service on the U.S. Sentencing Commission. Judge MYRNA PéREZ (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit) is a daughter of Mexican immigrants who spent her career at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, defending our freedom to vote. Judge JENNIFER SUNG (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit) fought for fair wages and safe working conditions and is the first Asian American from Oregon to serve on this court. Judge BETH ROBINSON (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit) has served with distinction on the Vermont Supreme Court and devoted her career to protecting the rights of all people. She is the first openly lesbian judge on any federal appellate court. Judge HOLLY THOMAS (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit) was a civil rights lawyer at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. and the U.S. Department of Justice, and is the first Black woman from California to serve on this court. Judge CHARLOTTE SWEENEY (District of Colorado) has spent her career representing working people who were discriminated against because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status. She is the first openly lesbian federal judge in any state west of the Mississippi River.

These are just a few of the many exceptional judges confirmed by the Senate during the Biden administration.

Opportunities Ahead

In order to build a judiciary dedicated to equal justice, we must ensure that all federal judicial vacancies are filled with qualified nominees committed to civil and human rights. The Senate must confirm the exceptional nominees that are pending. We also call on the Senate and the Biden administration to make diversity a continued priority and support more diverse nominees, including more Latino and Latina nominees, Native American nominees, LGBTQ nominees, and nominees with disabilities. Appellate courts like the 4th Circuit, 5th Circuit, and 11th Circuit frequently hear cases that impact civil rights, including the freedom to vote and reproductive freedom. We need fair-minded judges on every court — especially on courts making decisions that threaten our rights.

Additionally, we need to work to modernize our courts so that our federal judiciary can fairly and more efficiently administer justice. The last time Congress significantly increased lower court judgeships to keep up with population increases was more than 30 years ago. With many courts burdened by exceptionally high caseloads, delays are compromising access to justice for people across the country. It is necessary for Congress to authorize new circuit court and district court judgeships to meet our current needs.

For more information, please visit civilrights.org/courts or contact Samantha Cyrlunik-Dercher at cyrlunikdercher@civilrights.org.