

# 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.<sup>1</sup> Yet, for far too long, those selecting and confirming federal judges have not made this a priority.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

## Lifetime Judicial Nominations in the Biden Administration: By the Numbers<sup>5</sup>

**205** confirmed judges - **1** Supreme Court, **43** circuit court, **159** district court, **2** Court of International Trade

→ Includes **131** women, **128** people of color including Native Americans

→ **88** have significant experience protecting civil and human rights, including **42** public defenders

**36** pending nominees - **6** circuit court, **30** district court

→ Includes **24** women, **14** people of color including Native Americans

→ **15** have significant experience protecting civil and human rights, including **7** public defenders

## Exceptional Pending Nominees: Circuit Courts

**KARLA CAMPBELL**, nominated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, has an impressive legal career that includes a steadfast commitment to advancing equal justice for all. She has worked on numerous cases across many different areas of labor and employment law, including workplace safety, fair wages, and access to benefits, as well as advising labor organizations on best practices. An expert in the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA), she has worked tirelessly to defend the contributions and benefits owed to employees. Ms. Campbell has also worked to defend the rights of incarcerated people, as part of a team that brought a class action lawsuit on behalf of incarcerated people in Tennessee who were denied proper medical care.

<sup>1</sup> Sen. Maya. "[Diversity, Qualifications, and Ideology: How Female and Minority Judges Have Changed, or Not Changed, Over Time](#)." 2017 Wis. L. Rev. 367 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. "[Damage to the Federal Judiciary During the Trump Administration](#)." December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. "[Transition Priorities](#)." November 24, 2020. Pg. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Remus, Dana. "[Letter to U.S. Senate](#)." December 22, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Data as of August 28, 2024.

Nominee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit **ADEEL MANGI** possesses a strong commitment to equal justice for all. He has extensive civil rights pro bono experience protecting religious freedom and fighting discrimination against Muslim communities. When confirmed, he will be the first Muslim federal appellate court judge in our nation's history and the first Asian American man to serve on the Third Circuit.

### Exceptional Pending Nominees: District Courts

Nominee to the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia **AMIR ALI**'s impressive experience in pursuit of equal justice makes him extremely well qualified to serve on the federal bench. Much of his extensive legal career has been dedicated to protecting the rights of people involved in the criminal-legal system, including successfully representing a client who had been wrongfully convicted of murder. He has also held law enforcement accountable for wrongdoing by successfully challenging overbroad applications of qualified immunity for police officers who used excessive force. If confirmed, Mr. Ali would be the first Arab-American judge and the first Muslim judge to serve a lifetime appointment on this court.

Judge **MICHELLE WILLIAMS COURT**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, is a fair-minded jurist with experience protecting and defending the rights of all people. Since 2012, she has served on the Los Angeles Superior Court, where she is currently the supervising judge of the civil division. Before becoming a judge, she worked extensively on fair housing issues, protecting the rights of homeowners and tenants to be free from discrimination and violence in their homes. As general counsel of Bet Tzedek Legal Services, which provides free legal services to low-income people, Judge Court oversaw litigation and policy efforts.

Judge **MUSTAFA KASUBHAI**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon, has significant experience protecting and defending the rights of working people. While in private practice, he represented injured workers before the Oregon Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) and was eventually nominated and confirmed to serve on the WCB where he reviewed workers' compensation claims. Before becoming a magistrate judge for the District of Oregon, Judge Kasubhai spent 11 years serving as a fair-minded state circuit court judge with the Oregon Judicial Department. When confirmed, he will be only the third Muslim judge ever confirmed by the Senate, and the first in Oregon. He will also be the first Asian American lifetime judge on this court.

Judge **REBECCA PENNELL**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Washington, has devoted her exceptional career to protecting the rights of all people. Since 2016, she has served as a fair-minded judge on the Washington State Court of Appeals. Before becoming a judge, she spent most of her legal career with the Federal Defenders of Eastern Washington and Idaho, representing clients who could not afford an attorney and ensuring they had access to justice. While serving as a public defender, Judge Pennell helped create two reentry drug court programs that provided support services to formerly incarcerated people with a history of substance abuse as they transitioned out of prison. When confirmed, she will be only the second former public defender to ever serve as a lifetime judge on this court.

**SARAH RUSSELL**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, has shown a strong commitment to public service and equal justice throughout her career. As the director of the legal clinic at Quinnipiac University, she trains future attorneys and leads the clinic's work representing low-income people and its juvenile sentencing project. She previously served as the director of the public interest program at Yale Law School, overseeing their criminal defense, prison legal services, and Supreme Court clinics, and she has experience as a former assistant federal defender with the Office of the Federal Defender.



**[SPARKLE SOOKNANAN](#)**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, has demonstrated her commitment to equal justice throughout her impressive career. She currently serves as the principal deputy assistant attorney general in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). Ms. Sooknanan's work at the DOJ has included protecting access to the ballot box, ensuring fairness in housing and employment, and defending the rights of people with disabilities. During her time in private practice, her robust pro bono work included criminal defense for those unable to afford an attorney, legal counsel to children in need, and legal services for individuals in immigration proceedings. Ms. Sooknanan immigrated to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago and, when confirmed, she will join the extremely small number of Indo-Caribbean lifetime federal judges.

Judge **[CYNTHIA VALENZUELA DIXON](#)**, nominated to the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, has dedicated much of her impressive career to defending civil and human rights. Currently, she is the supervising judge of the State Bar Court of California, an administrative court that hears all attorney discipline cases. She previously served as the national vice president and director of litigation for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), where she worked on cases and briefs supporting educational equity, workers' rights, voting rights, immigrants' rights, and marriage equality. Judge Valenzuela also specialized in voting rights as a trial attorney with the civil rights division of the U.S. Department of Justice and served as special assistant to the vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

### 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. Her impeccable qualifications include nearly 10 years of experience as a fair-minded jurist and service on the U.S. Sentencing Commission. Judge **[NANCY ABUDU](#)** (Eleventh Circuit) spent years as a civil rights litigator at the ACLU's Voting Rights Project and the ACLU of Florida, and she established the Southern Poverty Law Center's Voting Rights Practice Group. She is the first Black woman on the Eleventh Circuit and the first person of color ever to serve in a Georgia seat on this court. Judge **[NICOLE BERNER](#)** (Fourth Circuit) advanced equal justice for working people as general counsel for SEIU and worked to protect people's access to abortion as a litigator at Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She is the first openly LGBTQ judge on the Fourth Circuit and only the third openly lesbian woman ever to serve on any federal appellate court. Judge **[JULIE RIKELMAN](#)** (First Circuit) possesses exceptional experience defending our right to bodily autonomy, including our right to access abortion, as the litigation director at the Center for Reproductive Rights. She is the first Jewish woman and first immigrant woman to serve on the First Circuit.

Judge **[MÓNICA RAMÍREZ ALMADANI](#)** (Central District of California) has steadfastly defended the rights of vulnerable communities through her work at the ACLU, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, the University of California Irvine School of Law's Immigrant Rights Clinic, and pro bono legal services organization Public Counsel. She is the only Latina currently serving as a lifetime judge on this court. Judge **[NUSRAT CHOUDHURY](#)** (Eastern District of New York) has worked tirelessly challenging discriminatory policies that specifically target communities of color, including leading the ACLU's litigation strategy and efforts to end the practice of keeping those unable to pay court-imposed fines or fees imprisoned. She is the first Muslim woman ever to serve as a lifetime federal judge. Judge **[SARA HILL](#)** (Northern District of Oklahoma) served as attorney general for the Cherokee Nation, where she oversaw all litigation to which the Cherokee Nation was a party, including several important Indian law cases that went to the U.S. Supreme Court. A Cherokee citizen, she is the first Native American woman ever to serve a lifetime appointment on any federal district court in Oklahoma and only the eighth Native American ever to serve as a lifetime federal judge in our nation's history.

As director of the Voting Rights Project at the ACLU, Judge [DALE HO](#) (Southern District of New York) has protected civil rights by defending the freedom to vote. He also successfully challenged the Trump administration's misguided efforts to add a citizenship question to the census. Judge [NATASHA MERLE](#) (Eastern District of New York) has critical civil rights experience as deputy director of litigation at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. She has also fought bias in our criminal-legal system as a federal public defender. Judge [SHANLYN PARK](#) (District of Hawaii) spent 20 years in the federal public defender's office for the District of Hawaii, first as an assistant federal public defender and then as a senior litigator, representing clients who could not afford an attorney to ensure they had access to justice. She is the first Native Hawaiian woman ever to serve as a lifetime federal judge and the second former public defender to serve as a lifetime judge on this court. Judge [CASEY PITTS](#) (Northern District of California) has dedicated his career to protecting and defending the rights of working people by successfully challenging unfair labor practices across the country. He is the first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge at the time of his confirmation on this court. Judge [HERNÁN VERA](#) (Central District of California) brings to the court outstanding experience pursuing equal justice, including spending 12 years at Public Counsel, the largest pro bono law firm in the nation, where he created an impact litigation department for economic justice. Judge [JAMAL WHITEHEAD](#) (Western District of Washington) has spent his career defending and protecting the rights of all people, litigating numerous complex cases on behalf of working people on issues such as workplace harassment and discrimination. He is the first nominee from the Biden administration, and one of an extremely small number of federal judges, known to be living with a disability.

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

### Confirmed Judges: Milestones and Historic Firsts

#### U.S. Supreme Court

- Justice [KETANJI BROWN JACKSON](#) (U.S. Supreme Court; elevated from D.C. Circuit), first Black woman and first former public defender on U.S. Supreme Court

#### U.S. Circuit Courts of Appeals

- Judge [NANCY ABUDU](#) (Eleventh Circuit), first Black woman and first Black judge from Georgia on Eleventh Circuit
- Judge [DEANDREA BENJAMIN](#) (Fourth Circuit), first Black woman from South Carolina on Fourth Circuit
- Judge [NICOLE BERNER](#) (Fourth Circuit), first LGBTQ woman on Fourth Circuit
- Judge [CINDY CHUNG](#) (Third Circuit), first Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (AANHPI) judge on Third Circuit
- 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 [ROOPALI DESAI](#) (Ninth Circuit), first South Asian judge on Ninth Circuit
- Judge [DANA DOUGLAS](#) (Fifth Circuit), first woman of color on Fifth Circuit
- Judge [ARIANNA FREEMAN](#) (Third Circuit), first woman of color on Third Circuit
- Judge [BRAD GARCIA](#) (D.C. Circuit), first Latino/a judge on D.C. Circuit
- Judge [GUSTAVO GELPÍ](#) (First Circuit), first former public defender on First Circuit
- Judge [CANDACE JACKSON-AKIWUMI](#) (Seventh Circuit), first former public defender and second judge of color on Seventh Circuit
- Judge [LUCY KOH](#) (Ninth Circuit), first Korean American woman on any federal appellate court
- Judge [JOHN LEE](#) (Seventh Circuit), first AANHPI judge on Seventh Circuit



- Judge **ANDRE MATHIS** (Sixth Circuit), first Black man from Tennessee on Sixth Circuit
- Judge **NANCY MALDONADO** (Seventh Circuit; elevated from Northern District of Illinois), first Latina lifetime judge on Northern District of Illinois and first Latino/a judge on Seventh Circuit
- Judge **SALVADOR MENDOZA** (Ninth Circuit), first Latino/a judge from Washington on Ninth Circuit
- Judge **TAMIKA MONTGOMERY-REEVES** (Third Circuit), first woman of color from Delaware on Third Circuit
- Judge **ALISON NATHAN** (Second Circuit), second openly LGBTQ woman on any federal appellate court
- Judge **FLORENCE PAN** (D.C. Circuit; elevated from District of D.C.), first AANHPI woman to serve as lifetime judge on D.C. district court and first Taiwanese American to serve on D.C. Circuit
- Judge **DORIS PRYOR** (Seventh Circuit), first Black judge from Indiana on Seventh Circuit
- Judge **IRMA RAMIREZ** (Fifth Circuit), first Latina judge on Fifth Circuit
- Judge **JULIE RIKELMAN** (First Circuit), first Jewish woman and first immigrant woman on First Circuit
- Judge **BETH ROBINSON** (Second Circuit), first openly LGBTQ woman on any federal appellate court
- Judge **JENNIFER SUNG** (Ninth Circuit), first AANHPI judge from Oregon on Ninth Circuit
- Judge **HOLLY THOMAS** (Ninth Circuit), first Black woman from California on Ninth Circuit

### U.S. District Courts

- Judge **LOREN ALIKHAN** (District of D.C.), first South Asian woman to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **AMANDA BRAILSFORD** (District of Idaho), first woman to serve as lifetime judge in Idaho
- Judge **CRISTAL BRISCO** (Northern District of Indiana), first woman of color and first Black person to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **JEFFREY BRYAN** (District of Minnesota), first Latino/a to serve as lifetime judge on District of Minnesota
- Judge **DANIEL CALABRETTA** (Eastern District of California), first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **VICTORIA CALVERT** (Northern District of Georgia), first former public defender to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **NUSRAT CHOUDHURY** (Eastern District of New York), first Muslim woman and first Bangladeshi American to serve as lifetime judge on any federal court
- Judge **JOHN CHUN** (Western District of Washington), first AANHPI man to serve as lifetime judge in Washington state
- Judge **DENA COGGINS** (Eastern District of California), first Black woman to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **ANA DE ALBA** (Ninth Circuit, elevated from Eastern District of California), first Latina to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **SUSAN DECLERCQ** (Eastern District of Michigan), first East Asian lifetime judge in Michigan
- Judge **MELISSA DUBOSE** (District of Rhode Island), first person of color and first LGBTQ person to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **JERRY EDWARDS** (Western District of Louisiana), first person of color to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **LYDIA GRIGGSBY** (District of Maryland), first woman of color to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **MARGARET GUZMAN** (District of Massachusetts), first Latina to serve as lifetime judge on this court

- Judge **SARA HILL** (Northern District of Oklahoma), first Native American woman to serve as lifetime judge in Oklahoma
- Judge **DALE HO** (Southern District of New York), first Filipino American man to serve as a lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **MYOUNG JOUN** (District of Massachusetts), first AANHPI man to serve as lifetime judge on any federal court in First Circuit
- Judge **KENLY KATO** (Central District of California), first Japanese American woman to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **ANGEL KELLEY** (District of Massachusetts), first Japanese American person to serve as lifetime judge in Massachusetts
- Judge **LAUREN KING** (Western District of Washington), first Native American to serve as lifetime judge in Washington
- Judge **SHALINA KUMAR** (Eastern District of Michigan), first AANHPI person to serve as lifetime judge in Michigan
- Judge **RITA LIN** (Northern District of California), first Chinese American woman to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **TANA LIN** (Western District of Washington), first AANHPI person to serve as lifetime judge in Washington
- Judge **GINA MÉNDEZ-MIRÓ** (District of Puerto Rico), first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge on any federal court in First Circuit
- Judge **SARALA NAGALA** (District of Connecticut), first AANHPI person to serve as lifetime judge in Connecticut
- Judge **ADRIENNE NELSON** (District of Oregon), first woman of color to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **JINSOOK OHTA** (Southern District of California), first AANHPI woman to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **SHANLYN PARK** (District of Hawaii), first Native Hawaiian woman to serve as a lifetime judge on any federal court
- Judge **MIA PEREZ** (Eastern District of Pennsylvania), first AANHPI person to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **CASEY PITTS** (Northern District of California), first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge at time of confirmation on this court
- Judge **ZAHID QURAISHI** (District of New Jersey), first Muslim to serve as lifetime judge on any federal court and first AANHPI person to serve as lifetime judge in New Jersey
- Judge **ANA REYES** (District of D.C.), first Latina and first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **REGINA RODRIGUEZ** (District of Colorado), first AANHPI to serve as lifetime judge in Colorado
- Judge **DAVID RUIZ** (Northern District of Ohio), first Latino to serve as lifetime judge on any Ohio district court
- Judge **ARUN SUBRAMANIAN** (Southern District of New York), first South Asian to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **CHARLOTTE SWEENEY** (District of Colorado), first openly LGBTQ woman to serve as lifetime judge on any federal court west of the Mississippi River
- Judge **SUNSHINE SYKES** (Central District of California), first Native American to serve as lifetime judge on any California district court



- Judge **MEREDITH VACCA** (Western District of New York), first lifetime judge of color on this court
- Judge **JAMAR WALKER** (Eastern District of Virginia), first openly LGBTQ lifetime judge on any court in the Fourth Circuit
- Judge **NINA WANG** (District of Colorado), first Taiwanese American person to serve as lifetime judge on this court
- Judge **JASMINE YOON** (Western District of Virginia), first lifetime judge of color on this court and first AANHPI lifetime judge in the state of Virginia

## 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 who are pending. We also call on the Senate and the Biden administration to make diversity a continued priority and support additional diverse nominees, including more Latino and Latina nominees, Native American nominees, LGBTQ nominees, and nominees with disabilities. Additionally, we urge senators and the White House to select nominees who have significant experience in civil rights law, such as economic justice, reproductive rights, LGBTQ equality, disability rights, and voting rights.

There is much work to be done: To date, there are **37** known current or future lifetime judicial vacancies without nominees — **1** on circuit courts and **36** on district courts. Many of these vacancies are in states like Alabama, Texas, Florida, and Missouri where a significant number of civil and human rights cases are heard. Additionally, we may see more vacancies in the near future. Currently, **127** active judges (**37** circuit court judges, **90** district court judges) are eligible or will be eligible by December 31, 2024 to take senior status but have not yet announced plans to do so.<sup>6</sup> Of these judges, **50** were appointed by Democratic presidents (**12** circuit court judges, **38** district court judges) and **78** were appointed by Republican presidents (**26** circuit court judges, **52** district court judges).<sup>7</sup> 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 effectively administer justice. Congress must pass legislation that modernizes and reforms our courts, including legislation on ethics reforms, such as extension of the Code of Conduct for United States Judges to apply to Supreme Court justices, and further transparency measures and court structure reforms such as expanding the number of authorized judgeships for circuit and district courts. 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. In addition, we urge Congress to consider other structural reforms to the Supreme Court.

For more information, please visit [civilrights.org/courts](https://civilrights.org/courts) or contact Samantha Cyrulnik-Dercher at [cyrulnikdercher@civilrights.org](mailto:cyrulnikdercher@civilrights.org).

<sup>6</sup> Senior status is a form of semi-retirement that creates a vacancy on the court and allows the senior judge to hear a smaller caseload. These numbers are extrapolated from publicly available data provided by the [Federal Judicial Center](https://www.federaljudicialcenter.org/).

<sup>7</sup> Judge Roger Gregory (4th Cir., Virginia) is counted as nominated by both parties. He was first nominated via recess appointment by President Bill Clinton (D) and then renominated by President George W. Bush (R).