



Plessy v. Ferguson

Supreme Court Case Summary

Petitioner

Homer Adolph Plessy

Location

Old Louisiana State
Capitol

Docket No.

210

Argued

April 13, 1896

Respondent

John Ferguson

Citation

163 US 537 (1896)

Decided

May 18, 1896

Facts of the Case

Louisiana enacted the Separate Car Act, which required separate railway cars for blacks and whites. In 1892, Homer Plessy – who was seven-eighths Caucasian – agreed to participate in a test to challenge the Act. He was solicited by the Comite des Citoyens (Committee of Citizens), a group of New Orleans residents who sought to repeal the Act. They asked Plessy, who was technically black under Louisiana law, to sit in a "whites only" car of a Louisiana train.

The railroad cooperated because it thought the Act imposed unnecessary costs via the purchase of additional railroad cars. When Plessy was told to vacate the whites-only car, he refused and was arrested.

At trial, Plessy's lawyers argued that the Separate Car Act violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. The judge found that Louisiana could enforce this law insofar as it affected railroads within its boundaries. Plessy was convicted.

Question

Does the Separate Car Act violate the Fourteenth Amendment?

The above summary is taken from Oyez.org. All content there and on other sites and projects maintained by Oyez is released under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). You can listen to oral arguments and read the final decision on their website:

"Plessy v. Ferguson." Oyez. Accessed August 24, 2023. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537>.

Conclusion



Justices ordered
by seniority,
from left to right.

7-1 Decision for Ferguson • Majority Opinion by Henry B. Brown

The Court held that the state law was constitutional. In an opinion authored by Justice Henry Billings Brown, the majority upheld state-imposed racial segregation. Justice Brown conceded that the 14th Amendment intended to establish absolute equality for the races before the law, but held that separate treatment did not imply the inferiority of African Americans.

In short, segregation did not in itself constitute unlawful discrimination.

In dissent, John Marshall Harlan argued that the Constitution was color-blind and that the United States had no class system. Accordingly, all citizens should have equal access to civil rights.