



(L-R) Attorney Gustavo Garcia, Pete Hernandez, Attorney Johnny Herrera on courthouse steps ca. 1953

National Hispanic Heritage Month

A Civics in Real Life Series Honoring Hispanic American Representation Across America

Spotlight 6: Landmark Cases



Justice Sonia Sotomayor

National Hispanic Heritage Month recognizes the contributions of Hispanic and Latino Americans to the history, culture, and achievements of the United States. This spotlight focuses on two landmark legal cases that deserve the spotlight during Hispanic Heritage Month. Let's learn more about how Hispanic-Americans fought for their rights, challenged precedents, and paved the way for a wave of civil rights movements.



Mendez v. Westminster (1947)

- **Core Issue:** Five Orange County, California families sued their local school district after their children were denied entry to white neighborhood schools.
- **Legal/Constitutional Argument:** The Mendez attorney argued that segregating children based on their Mexican ancestry, skin color, and English language skills violated the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.
- **Ruling:** The U.S. District Court ruled that forced segregation of Mexican-American students into separate "Mexican schools" was unconstitutional. The Ninth Circuit Court affirmed the decision.
- **Significance:** California went on to become the first state to desegregate public schools and the case would serve as the launching point for *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

Hernandez v. Texas (1954)



- **Core Issue:** Hernandez was a Mexican-American agricultural worker who was convicted of murder by an all-white jury in Texas. His conviction was appealed on grounds that Mexican Americans were being excluded from serving on local juries.
- **Legal/Constitutional Argument:** The Hernandez lawyers argued that this purposeful exclusion of Mexican-Americans from juries violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The defense argued that Mexican-Americans were legally classified as "white" and their absence from juries was not intentional.
- **Ruling:** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of Hernandez, stating that the 14th Amendment protects those beyond the two classes of white and Black.
- **Significance:** This was the first time Mexican-American lawyers argued a case before the U.S. Supreme Court and laid the foundation for the Latino/Hispanic Civil Rights Movement.



U.S. Supreme Court Representation

- The first and only Latino/Hispanic American to be represented in the U.S. Supreme Court is Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Justice Sotomayor was born in the Bronx, New York to Puerto-Rican-born parents. She was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Obama in 2009 and currently still serves as of 2026.

Civics Challenge: Search & Learn:

Using this [Library of Congress Research Guide](#), learn more about *Hernandez v. Texas*. Research further about the parties involved, the constitutional issues, and/or the outcome.