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Perry v. Schwarzenegger

United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

January 4, 2011, Filed

No. 10-16696

Reporter

630 F.3d 909 *, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 73 **

KRISTIN M. PERRY; SANDRA B. STIER; PAUL T. KATAMI; JEFFREY J. ZARRILLO, Plaintiffs - Appellees, CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO, Plaintiff - Intervenor - Appellee, v. ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, in his official capacity as Governor of California; EDMUND G. BROWN, Jr., in his official capacity as Attorney General of California; MARK B. HORTON, in his official capacity as Director of the California Department of Public Health & State Registrar of Vital Statistics; LINETTE SCOTT, in her official capacity as Deputy Director of Health Information & Strategic Planning for the California Department of Public Health; PATRICK O'CONNELL, in his official capacity as Clerk-Recorder for the County of Alameda; DEAN C. LOGAN, in his official capacity as Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk for the County of Los Angeles, Defendants, and DENNIS HOLLINGSWORTH; GAIL J. KNIGHT; MARTIN F. GUTIERREZ; HAK-SHING WILLIAM TAM; MARK A. JANSSON; PROTECTMARRIAGE.COM - YES ON 8, A PROJECT OF CALIFORNIA RENEWAL, as official proponents of Proposition 8, Defendants - Intervenors - Appellants.

Subsequent History: Question certified by Perry v. Schwarzenegger, 628 F.3d 1191, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 153 (9th Cir. Cal., 2011)

Motion denied by Perry v. Brown, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 7311 (9th Cir. Cal., Mar. 23, 2011)

Prior History: [**1] D.C. No. 3:09-cv-02292-VRW. Northern District of California, San Francisco.

Perry v. Schwarzenegger, 630 F.3d 898, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 74 (9th Cir. Cal., 2011)

Core Terms

recusal, views, impartiality, cases, district court, questioned, filings, spouse, proceedings, marriage, heads

Case Summary

Procedural Posture

In appellee same-sex couples' challenge to the constitutionality of California's Proposition 8, in an appeal from the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, appellant Proponents of Proposition 8 moved for one appellate judge recuse himself under 28 U.S.C.S. § 455(a), (b)(5)(iii), based on his wife being Executive Director of a local American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the wife's views on the issues.

Overview

The wife's views were not an "interest" under § 455(b)(5)(iii), which did not require recusal whenever a judge's relative played a prominent role in a public interest organization that took a position on a subject at issue in a case, or on a case itself. While the local ACLU was active in prior state court cases on same-sex marriage, those legal questions were distinct from the one on appeal, those cases ended before the current appeal, provided no basis to question the judge's impartiality, and created no "interest" of his wife's that could be substantially affected by the current appeal. The ACLU was not a party in the appeal and its limited participation below did not endow the wife or the local ACLU with any interest that could be substantially affected by the outcome of the appeal under § 455(b)(5)(iii). The wife was not a party, § 455(b)(5)(i), or a lawyer in the case, § 455(b)(5)(ii), and had no interest that could be substantially affected, § 455(b)(5)(iii). A reasonable person familiar with the judge's judicial record would not reasonably believe that either his wife's beliefs or the ACLU's filings below would play any role in his handling of the appeal under § 455(a).

Outcome

The motion to recuse was denied.

LexisNexis® Headnotes

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Appearance of Partiality

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Financial Interests

HN1 **Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal, Appearance of Partiality**

Under 28 U.S.C.S. § 455(a), a judge must recuse himself or herself if a reasonable person with knowledge of all the facts would conclude that the judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned. Under § 455(b)(5)(iii), the judge's recusal is required if his or her spouse had an "interest" that could be "substantially affected" by the outcome of the proceeding.

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Financial Interests

HN2 **Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal, Financial Interests**

28 U.S.C.S. § 455(b)(5)(iii) requires recusal whenever a relative is known by the judge to have an interest that could be substantially affected by the outcome of the proceeding.

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Appearance of Partiality

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Financial Interests

HN3 **Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal, Appearance of Partiality**

Recusal is not required merely because a relative was or is involved in other litigation concerning the same general subject matter that is before the court.

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Financial Interests

HN4 **Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal, Financial Interests**

Under 28 U.S.C.S. § 455(b)(5)(iii), no recusal is required where a relative's participation in a lower court proceeding had no substantial effect on any interest held by that relative.

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Appearance of Partiality

Civil Procedure > ... > Disqualification & Recusal > Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal > Financial Interests

HN5 **Grounds for Disqualification & Recusal, Appearance of Partiality**

It is unreasonable to interpret 28 U.S.C.S. § 455(a) (unless the language requires it) as implicitly eliminating a limitation explicitly set forth in § 455(b). It would obviously be wrong, for example, to hold that "impartiality could reasonably be questioned" simply because one of the parties is in the fourth degree of relationship to the judge. Section 455(b)(5), which addresses the matter of relationship specifically, ends the disability at the third degree of relationship, and that should obviously govern for purposes of § 455(a) as well.

Counsel: For KRISTIN M. PERR, Plaintiff - Appellee: David Boies, Attorney, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore Olson, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Ethan Douglas Dettmer, Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Christopher D. Dusseault, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Jeremy Michael Goldman, Esquire, Attorney, Boies, Schiller & Flenxer, LLP, Oakland, CA; Theane Evangelis Kapur, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Matthew McGill, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Enrique Antonio Monagas, Sarah E. Piepmeier, Esquire, Attorneys, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA;

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Amir C. Tayrani, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore H. Uno, Attorney, BOIS SCHILLER & FLEXNER [**2] LLP, Hollywood, FL.

For SANDRA B. STIER, Plaintiff - Appellee: David Boies, Attorney, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore Olson, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Ethan Douglas Dettmer, Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Christopher D. Dusseault, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Jeremy Michael Goldman, Esquire, Attorney, Boies, Schiller & Flenxer, LLP, Oakland, CA; Theane Evangelis Kapur, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Matthew McGill, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Enrique Antonio Monagas, Sarah E. Piepmeier, Esquire, Attorneys, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Joshua Irwin Schiller, BOIES SCHILLER & FLEXNER LLP, New York, NY; Amir C. Tayrani, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore H. Uno, Attorney, BOIS SCHILLER [**3] & FLEXNER LLP, Hollywood, FL.

For PAUL T. KATAMI, Plaintiff - Appellee: David Boies, Attorney, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore Olson, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Richard Jason Bettan, Attorney, BOIES SCHILLER & FLEXNER LLP, New York, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Ethan Douglas Dettmer, Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Christopher D. Dusseault, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Jeremy Michael Goldman, Esquire, Attorney, Boies, Schiller & Flenxer, LLP, Oakland, CA; Theane Evangelis Kapur, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Matthew McGill, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Enrique Antonio Monagas, Sarah E. Piepmeier, Esquire, Attorneys, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Amir C. Tayrani, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore H. Uno, Attorney, BOIS SCHILLER & FLEXNER LLP, Hollywood, FL.

For JEFFREY J. ZARRILLO, [**4] Plaintiff - Appellee: David Boies, Attorney, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Theodore Olson, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore Olson, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Rosanne C. Baxter, Esquire, Counsel, BOIES, SCHILLER & FLEXNER, Armonk, NY; Richard Jason Bettan, Attorney, BOIES SCHILLER & FLEXNER LLP, New York, NY; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Ethan Douglas Dettmer, Esquire, Attorney, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Christopher D. Dusseault, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Jeremy Michael Goldman, Esquire, Attorney, Boies, Schiller & Flenxer, LLP, Oakland, CA; Theane Evangelis Kapur, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Los Angeles, CA; Matthew McGill, Attorney, GIBSON DUNN & CRUTCHER, LLP, Washington, DC; Enrique Antonio Monagas, Sarah E. Piepmeier, Esquire, Attorneys, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, San Francisco, CA; Joshua Irwin Schiller, BOIES SCHILLER & FLEXNER LLP, New York, NY; Amir C. Tayrani, GIBSON, DUNN & CRUTCHER LLP, Washington, DC.

For CITY AND COUNTY [**5] OF SAN FRANCISCO, Intervenor-Plaintiff - Appellee: Ronald P. Flynn, Therese Stewart, Chief Deputy City Attorney, Christine Van Aken, Deputy City Attorney, Erin Bernstein, Deputy City Attorney, Mollie Mindes Lee, Deputy City Attorney, SAN FRANCISCO CITY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, San Francisco, CA; Vince Chhabria, Esquire, Dennis J. Herrera, City Attorney, OFFICE OF THE CITY ATTORNEY, San Francisco, CA; Danny Chou, San Francisco, CA.

For ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, in his official capacity as Governor of California, Defendant: Tamar Pachter, Deputy Attorney General, CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, San Francisco, CA; Andrew W. Stroud, Attorney, Mennemeier, Glassman & Stroud LLP, Sacramento, CA.

For EDMUND G. BROWN, Jr., in his official capacity as Attorney General of California, Defendant: Tamar Pachter, Deputy Attorney General, Daniel Powell, Deputy Attorney General, CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, San Francisco, CA.

For MARK B. HORTON, in his official capacity as Director of the California Department of Public Health & State Registrar of Vital Statistics, Defendant: Kenneth C. Mennemeier, Jr., Attorney, Mennemeier, Glassman & Stroud LLP, Sacramento, CA.

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For LINETTE SCOTT, in her official capacity [**6] as Deputy Director of Health Information & Strategic Planning for the California Department of Public Health, Defendant: Kenneth C. Mennemeier, Jr., Attorney, Andrew W. Stroud, Attorney, Mennemeier, Glassman & Stroud LLP, Sacramento, CA.

For PATRICK O'CONNELL, in his official capacity as Clerk-Recorder for the County of Alameda, Defendant: Claude Franklin Kolm, Esquire, Attorney, OFFICE OF COUNTY COUNSEL, Oakland, CA.

For DEAN C. LOGAN, in his official capacity as Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk for the County of Los Angeles, Defendant: Judy W. Whitehurst, Principal Deputy County Counsel, LOS ANGELES COUNTY COUNSEL, Los Angeles, CA.

For DENNIS HOLLINGSWORTH, GAIL J. KNIGHT, MARTIN F. GUTIERREZ, MARK A. JANSSON, PROTECTMARRIAGE.COM - YES ON 8, A PROJECT OF CALIFORNIA RENEWAL, as official proponents of Proposition 8, Intervenor-Defendants - Appellants: Jesse Panuccio, David Thompson, Charles J. Cooper, Nicole Jo Moss, Attorney, Peter A. Patterson, COOPER & KIRK, PLLC, Washington, DC; James Andrew Campbell, Litigation Staff Counsel, Brian William Raum, Senior Counsel, ALLIANCE DEFENSE FUND, Scottsdale, AZ; Andrew P. Pugno, Attorney, Law Offices of Andrew P. Pugno, Folsom, CA.

For HAK-SHING [**7] WILLIAM TAM, Intervenor-Defendant - Appellant: Terry L. Thompson, Attorney, Law Office of Terry L. Thompson, Alamo, CA.

For MARGIE REILLY, Amicus Curiae: James Joseph Lynch, Jr., Attorney, Sacramento, CA.

For JUSTICE DONALD B. KING, (RET.), THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER), Amici Curiae - Pending: Diana E. Richmond, Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL, Amicus Curiae: Paul Benjamin Linton, Northbrook, IL; Thomas Brejcha, Thomas More Society, Chicago, IL.

For LIBERTY INSTITUTE, ASSOCIATION OF MARYLAND FAMILIES, CALIFORNIA FAMILY COUNCIL, CENTER FOR ARIZONA POLICY, CITIZENS FOR COMMUNITY VALUES, CORNERSTONE ACTION, CORNERSTONE FAMILY COUNCIL, DELAWARE FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, FAMILY ACTION COUNCIL OF TENNESSEE, THE FAMILY FOUNDATION, THE FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL OF WEST VIRGINIA, FAMILY POLICY INSTITUTE OF

WASHINGTON, FLORIDA FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, GEORGIA FAMILY COUNCIL, ILLINOIS FAMILY INSTITUTE, INDEPENDENCE LAW CENTER, IOWA FAMILY POLICY CENTER, LOUISIANA FAMILY FORUM ACTION, MASSACHUSETTS FAMILY INSTITUTE, MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM, MINNESOTA FAMILY COUNCIL, MISSOURI FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, MONTANA FAMILY FOUNDATION, [**8] NEW JERSEY FAMILY FIRST, NEW JERSEY FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, NORTH CAROLINA FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, OKLAHOMA FAMILY POLICY COUNCIL, OREGON FAMILY COUNCIL, PALMETTO FAMILY COUNCIL, PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY INSTITUTE, WISCONSIN FAMILY ACTION, WYWATCH FAMILY ACTION, Amici Curiae: Kelly J. Shackelford, Chief Counsel, Jeffrey Mateer, Hiram S. Sasser, Liberty Institute, Plano, TX.

For ERWIN CHERMERINSKY, Esquire, PAMELA S. KARLAN, ARTHUR MILLER, JUDITH RESNIK, Esquire, BRYAN ADAMSON, JANET C. ALEXANDER, BARBARA A. ATWOOD, JOSHUA P. DAVIS, DAVID L. FAIGMAN, TONI M. MASSARO, DAVID OPPENHEIMER, FRED SMITH, LARRY YACKLE, Amici Curiae - Pending: Elizabeth J. Cabraser, LIEFF CABRASER HEIMANN & BERNSTEIN, LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER, Amicus Curiae - Pending: Scott Wm. Davenport, Attorney, MANNING & MARDER, Irvine, CA; Darin L. Wessel, MANNING & MARDER KASS ELLROD RAMIREZ LLP, Los Angeles, CA.

For ASIAN AMERICAN JUSTICE CENTER, ET AL., Amicus Curiae - Pending: Peter Obstler, Esquire, BINGHAM MCCUTCHEN, LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For HIGH IMPACT LEADERSHIP COALITION, THE CENTER FOR URBAN RENEWAL AND EDUCATION, THE FREDERICK DOUGLASS FOUNDATION, Amici Curiae: Stephen Kent Ehat, Esquire, [**9] Attorney, California Legal Research, Inc., Lindon, UT; Lincoln C. Oliphant, Columbus School of Law, Washington, DC; Lynn Dennis Wardle, Attorney, Provo, UT.

For PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF EX-GAYS, DESERT STREAM MINISTRIES, Amici Curiae: Dean Robert Broyles, Esquire, Chief Counsel, James Matthew Griffiths, Esquire, Attorney, Western Center for Law & Policy, Escondido, CA.

For THE ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY CENTER, Amicus Curiae: M. Edward Whelan, III, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, DC.

For LIBERTY COUNSEL, CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, JONAH, INC., Amici Curiae: Rena

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Lindevaldsen, Stephen M. Crampton, Esquire, General Counsel, Mary Elizabeth McAlister, LIBERTY COUNSEL, Lynchburg, VA; Anita L. Staver, Liberty Counsel, Orlando, FL; Mathew D. Staver, Esquire, Attorney, LIBERTY COUNSEL, Maitland, FL.

For THE AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE, Amicus Curiae: Walter Martin Weber, Stuart J. Roth, Attorney, Jay Sekulow, AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE, Washington, DC.

For THE HAUSVATER PROJECT, Amicus Curiae: Donald MacPherson, Attorney, The MacPherson Group, Phoenix, AZ.

For UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, ET AL, Amicus Curiae: Alexander Dushku, Attorney, Von G. [**10] Keetch, Attorney, Jeffrey Hunter Moon, Esquire, Solicitor, KIRTON & McCONKIE, PC, Salt Lake City, UT; Jeffrey Hunter Moon, Esquire, Solicitor, Michael F. Moses, Esquire, Anthony R. Picarello, Jr., Esquire, Attorney, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC; James Francis Sweeney, Attorney, Sweeney & Greene LLP, Elk Grove, CA.

For ROBERT P. GEORGE, ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Steven Thomas O'Ban, Kristen K. Waggoner, Attorney, Ellis, Li & McKinstry, PLLC, Seattle, WA.

For NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH AND THERAPY OF HOMOSEXUALITY, Amicus Curiae: Gary G. Kreep, UNITED STATES JUSTICE FOUNDATION, Ramona, CA.

For INDIANA, ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Thomas Molnar Fisher, Solicitor General, IAGO - INDIANA ATTORNEY GENERALS OFFICE, Indianapolis, IN.

For AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PEDIATRICIANS, Amicus Curiae: Abram John Pafford, Attorney, Pafford, Lawrence & Ross, PLLC, Lynchburg, VA.

For CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL JURISPRUDENCE, Amicus Curiae: John C. Eastman, THE CLAREMONT INSTITUTE CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL JURISPRUDENCE, Orange, CA.

For THE BECKET FUND FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, Amicus Curiae: Kevin J. Hasson, THE BECKET FUND FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, Washington, DC.

For NATIONAL LEGAL FOUNDATION, Amicus [**11] Curiae: Steven W. Fitschen, Esquire, Counsel, THE NATIONAL LEGAL FOUNDATION, Virginia Beach, VA.

For EAGLE FORUM EDUCATION AND LEGAL DEFENSE FUND, Amicus Curiae: Lawrence John Joseph, Attorney, Law Office of Lawrence J. Joseph, Washington,

DC.

For CONCERNED WOMEN OF AMERICA, Holly Carmichael, Holly L Carmichael, Los Gatos, CA.

For NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MARRIAGE, ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Joshua K. Baker, National Organization for Marriage, Washington, DC.

For PAUL MCHUGH, M.D., ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Herbert George Grey, HERBERT G. GREY, ATTORNEY AT LAW, Beaverton, OR.

For EUGENE DONG, Esquire, Amicus Curiae: Eugene Dong, Esquire, Palo Alto, CA.

For AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS UNION, Amicus Curiae: Kenneth Alan Klukowski, Attorney, Kenneth A. Klukowski, Esq., Herndon, VA.

For PACIFIC JUSTICE INSTITUTE, Amicus Curiae: Kevin Trent Snider, Chief Counsel, Pacific Justice Institute, Sacramento, CA.

For CATHOLICS FOR THE COMMON GOOD, Amicus Curiae: Richard Gonzalo Katerndahl, Attorney, Law Office of Richard G. Katerndahl, San Rafael, CA.

For JUSTICE DONALD B. KING, (RET.), Amicus Curiae: Diana E. Richmond, Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP, San Francisco, CA.

TAMMY CRAVIT, Amicus Curiae, Pro se, Lompoc, [**12] CA.

For THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER), Amicus Curiae: Diana E. Richmond, Attorney, Louis P. Feuchtbaum, Esquire, Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP, San Francisco, CA; Richard B. Rosenthal, The Law Offices of Richard B. Rosenthal, P.A., San Rafael, CA.

For BAY AREA LAWYERS FOR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM, Amicus Curiae: Jerome Cary Roth, Attorney, Munger Tolles & Olson, LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For CONSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY CENTER, Amicus Curiae: Elizabeth B. Wydra, Chief Counsel, Constitutional Accountability Center, Washington, DC.

For LEGISLATORS FROM UNITED STATES JURISDICTIONS THAT HAVE LEGALIZED SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, Amicus Curiae: Alan E. Schoenfeld, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP, New York, NY.

For AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, CALIFORNIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY, Amici Curiae: Paul March Smith, Esquire,

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Attorney, JENNER & BLOCK LLP, Washington, DC.

For JON. B. EISENBERG, Amicus Curiae: Laura W. Brill, KENDALL BRILL & KLIEGER LLP, Los Angeles, CA.

For CALIFORNIA PROFESSORS OF FAMILY LAW, Amicus Curiae: Michael S. Wald, Stanford Law School, Stanford, [**13] CA.

For HOWARD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW CIVIL RIGHTS CLINIC, AMERICANS UNITED FOR SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE, Amici Curiae: Benjamin G. Shatz, Attorney, Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, Los Angeles, CA.

For NATIONAL LGBT BAR ASSOCIATION, Amicus Curiae: Walter Dellinger, Attorney, O'Melveny & Myers LLP, Washington, DC.

For COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS, Amicus Curiae: Maura T. Healey, Assistant Attorney General, ATTORNEY GENERAL OF MASSACHUSETTS, Boston, MA.

For CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION, Amicus Curiae: Arthur Bailey, Jr., HAUSFELD LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE, Amicus Curiae: Victoria Fishman Maroulis, Esquire, Attorney, QUINN EMANUEL URQUHART & SULLIVAN, LLP, Redwood Shores, CA.

For NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATIONAL FUND, INC., Amicus Curiae: Dale Ho, Assistant Counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., New York, NY.

For WILLIAM N. ESKRIDGE, Jr., REBECCA L. BROWN, DANIEL FARBER, KENNETH L. KARST, ANDREW KOPPELMAN, WILLIAM N. ESKRIDGE, Jr., REBECCA L. BROWN, BRUCE A. ACKERMAN, DANIEL A. FARBER, KENNETH L. KARST, ANDREW KOPPELMAN, Amici Curiae: Kathleen M. O'Sullivan, Esquire, Perkins Coie LLP, Seattle, WA.

For AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, [**14] AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS, CALIFORNIA CHAPTER, AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, CALIFORNIA, Amici Curiae: John D. Freed, Covington & Burling, LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For ACLU FOUNDATION OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, GAY AND LESBIAN ADVOCATES AND DEFENDERS, LAMBDA LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND,

INC., NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS, Amici Curiae: Jennifer Pizer, LAMBDA LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND, INC., Los Angeles, CA.

For CALIFORNIA FAITH FOR EQUALITY, CALIFORNIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, GENERAL SYNOD OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES, THE EPISCOPAL BISHOPS OF CALIFORNIA AND LOS ANGELES, PROGRESSIVE JEWISH ALLIANCE, PACIFIC ASSOCIATION OF REFORM RABBIS, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST LEGISLATIVE MINISTRY CALIFORNIA, Amici Curiae: Eric Alan Isaacson, Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd LLP, San Diego, CA.

For EQUALITY CALIFORNIA, Amicus Curiae: David C. Codell, Esquire, Caldwell Leslie & Proctor PC, Los Angeles, CA.

For JUSTICE DONALD B. KING, (RET.), Amicus Curiae: Louis P. Feuchtbaum, Esquire, [**15] Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP, San Francisco, CA; Diana E. Richmond, Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP San Francisco, CA; Richard B. Rosenthal, The Law Offices of Richard B. Rosenthal, P.A., San Rafael, CA.

For THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MATRIMONIAL LAWYERS (NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER), Amicus Curiae: Diana E. Richmond, Attorney, Sideman & Bancroft LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For CONSTITUTIONAL LAW AND CIVIL PROCEDURE PROFESSORS ERWIN CHERMERINSKY ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Elizabeth J. Cabraser, LIEFF CABRASER HEIMANN & BERNSTEIN, LLP, San Francisco, CA.

For THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER, Amicus Curiae: Scott Wm. Davenport, Attorney, MANNING & MARDER, Irvine, CA; Darin L. Wessel, MANNING & MARDER KASS ELLROD RAMIREZ LLP, Los Angeles, CA.

For ASIAN AMERICAN JUSTICE CENTER, ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Peter Obstler.

For NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN TASK FORCE FOUNDATION, ET AL., Amicus Curiae: Suzanne Goldberg, Columbia University Law School, Sexuality and Gender Law Clinic, New York, NY.

Judges: REINHARDT, Circuit Judge.

Opinion by: REINHARDT

Opinion

[*911] **MEMORANDUM REGARDING MOTION TO DISQUALIFY**

REINHARDT, Circuit Judge.

Shortly before the hearing of this appeal, the defendants-intervenors-appellants ("Proponents") requested that I recuse [*16] myself under 28 U.S.C. § 455(a) and § 455(b)(5)(iii). *HN1* [↑] Under § 455(a), I must recuse myself if "a reasonable person with knowledge of all the facts would conclude that [my] impartiality might reasonably be questioned." *United States v. Nelson*, 718 F.2d 315, 321 (9th Cir. 1983). Under § 455(b)(5)(iii), my recusal is required if my wife has an "interest" that could be "substantially affected" by the outcome of this proceeding. I denied Proponents' motion with a brief statement and promised a further explanation in due course.¹ Now that our panel has completed the immediately pressing matters regarding the appeal, I provide my further reasons.

I

The chief basis for the recusal motion appears to be my wife's beliefs, as expressed in her public statements and actions, both individually and in her capacity as Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California (ACLU/SC). She has held that position for 38 years, during 20 of which we have been married, although over one year ago [*17] she announced her retirement effective next month.

My wife's views, public or private, as to any issues that may come before this court, constitutional or otherwise, are of no consequence. She is a strong, independent woman who has long fought for the principle, among others, that women should be evaluated on their own merits and not judged in any way by the deeds or position in life of their husbands (and vice versa). I share that view and, in my opinion, it reflects the status of the law generally, as well as the law of recusal, regardless of whether the spouse or the judge is the male or the female. My

position is the same in the specific case of a spouse whose views are expressed in the capacity of an [*912] officer, director, or manager of a public interest or advocacy organization that takes positions or supports legislation or litigation or other actions of local, state, or national importance.

Proponents' contention that I should recuse myself due to my wife's opinions is based upon an outmoded conception of the relationship between spouses. When I joined this court in 1980 (well before my wife and I were married), the ethics rules promulgated by the Judicial Conference stated that [*18] judges should ensure that their wives not participate in politics. I wrote the ethics committee and suggested that this advice did not reflect the realities of modern marriage—that even if it were desirable for judges to control their wives, I did not know many judges who could actually do so (I further suggested that the Committee would do better to say "spouses" than "wives," as by then we had as members of our court Judge Mary Schroeder, Judge Betty Fletcher, and Judge Dorothy Nelson). The committee thanked me for my letter and sometime later changed the rule.² That time has passed, and rightly so. In 2011, my wife and I share many fundamental interests by virtue of our marriage, but her views regarding issues of public significance are her own, and cannot be imputed to me, no matter how prominently she expresses them.³ It is her view, and I agree, that she has the right to perform her professional duties without regard to whatever my views may be, and that I should do the same without regard to hers. Because my wife is an independent woman, I cannot accept Proponents' position that my impartiality might reasonably be questioned under § 455(a) because of her opinions or the views [*19] of the organization she heads.

Nor can I accept the argument that my wife's views constitute an "interest" that could warrant my recusal under § 455(b)(5)(iii), as such a reading would require judges to recuse themselves whenever they know of a relative's strongly held opinions, whether publicly expressed or not. *See HN2* [↑] § 455(b)(5)(iii) [*20] (requiring recusal whenever a relative "[i]s known by the judge to have an interest that could be substantially affected by the outcome of the proceeding"). I

¹ The parties were notified of the composition of the panel only a week before the hearing. The recusal request was filed two days later and I issued my denial order the following morning.

² Judge Roger J. Miner of the Second Circuit has recounted a similar experience:

When I first became a judge, I acquainted my wife with then-applicable 1972 ABA Model Code, which provided that a judge "should encourage members of his [note the archaic "his"] family to adhere to the same standards of political conduct that apply to him." My wife, a well-known political activist at that

time, responded: "Consider me encouraged," and went on to lead some statewide and national campaigns. The encouragement to adhere to judicial conduct rules now applies only in regard to the judge's own political campaign.

Roger J. Miner, *Judicial Ethics in the Twenty-First Century: Tracing the Trends*, 32 Hofstra L. Rev. 1107, 1130-31 (2004) (brackets in original).

³ *See generally* Mary Matalin and James Carville, *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President 63* (Paperback ed. 1995).

likewise cannot conceive how such an "interest" could be said to exist by virtue of the fact that the ACLU/SC as an organization has expressed positions regarding the subject at issue in this case. The ACLU/SC is devoted to advocating for numerous social issues, many of which come before the court, of which same-sex marriage is but one. To suggest that because my wife heads the ACLU/SC she has an "interest" cognizable under § 455(b)(5)(iii) in cases regarding which the organization has expressed a position would be to suggest that I must recuse myself from cases implicating the constitutionality of the death penalty, school prayer, and affirmative action, [*913] among many others. Moreover, because § 455(b)(5)(iii) applies not only to the interests of a judge's spouse, but to the interests of any "person within the third degree of relationship to either" a judge or a judge's spouse, § 455(b)(5), such a reading would require a judge's recusal when various other relatives, such as great-grandchildren and nephews-in-law, head a public [**21] interest organization that has expressed a position concerning a case. I cannot agree that § 455(b)(5)(iii) requires judges to recuse themselves whenever a relative, close or otherwise, plays a prominent role in a public interest organization that, as part of a broad and general mission, takes a position on a subject that is at issue in a case, or on a case itself.

II

A

Proponents additionally suggest that I must recuse myself due to specific ACLU/SC litigation activities. I have long had a policy regarding any conceivable conflict that might result from such activities. I do not participate in any actions by this court when the organization of which my wife is the Executive Director makes any appearance or files any brief, amicus or otherwise, before this court. The clerk's office was notified of this policy many years ago and it has been implemented in numerous cases. In fact, it is impossible to know how many times I have actually recused myself from such cases because the Clerk's office automatically assigns cases covered by my policy to panels of which I am not a member rather than to a panel I am on, as a result of this directive. Later, if there is an en banc call, I advise the [**22] Clerk to record the fact that I am recused and to notify the court.

In regard to the ACLU/SC's past litigation activities, Proponents first argue that my recusal is required due to the ACLU/SC's participation in prior California state court cases pertaining to same-sex marriage. These were cases that did not

involve the federal constitutional issue raised in the case before us-the only substantive issue presented here. *HN3* [↑] Recusal is not required merely because a relative was or is involved in other litigation concerning the same general subject matter that is before the court. *See Microsoft Corp. v. United States*, 530 U.S. 1301, 121 S. Ct. 25, 147 L. Ed. 2d 1048 (2000) (statement of Rehnquist, C.J.) (declining to recuse from Microsoft antitrust case under either § 455(a) or § 455(b)(5)(iii) where son represented Microsoft in other antitrust matters that were potentially affected by case's outcome). That the ACLU/SC participated in proceedings before a different court, that involved legal questions distinct from the one now before us-cases that were concluded before the appeal of this suit-neither provides a basis to question my impartiality nor creates an "interest" of my wife's that could be "substantially affected" by [**23] these proceedings.

Proponents further argue that my recusal is required due to the ACLU/SC's limited activities in the court below. Proponents rely on two connections to the litigation that is now before this court. The first such action to which Proponents point is that my wife and the ACLU/SC's then-legal director attended a meeting with one of Plaintiffs' lawyers and a supporter of Plaintiffs' lawsuit prior to the filing of that action in the district court. At that meeting the ACLU/SC was asked to support the lawsuit and vigorously declined. Surely, that provides no cause for my recusal.

The second is that recusal is required because the ACLU/SC ultimately joined in two amicus briefs and an unsuccessful intervention motion-the latter on behalf of [914] several Bay Area gay rights groups-filed in the district court by six civil rights organizations and signed by the lawyer for one of the other groups. The two briefs that the ACLU/SC joined were among twenty-four amicus briefs filed in the district court on behalf of 122 organizations and private individuals. The two briefs were not cited in any way in the district court's findings of fact and law, and the ACLU/SC had no further connection [**24] with the case in the district court and none at all as the case came before us.⁴

This limited participation in the district court does not endow my wife or the ACLU-SC with any "interest that could be substantially affected by the outcome of the proceeding." § 455(b)(5)(iii). Proponents do not explain the nature of the interest that they believe my wife or the ACLU/SC possesses by virtue of the ACLU/SC's tangential filings in the district court, and no such interest exists. At best, it could be said that through the filings the ACLU/SC has made clear its position regarding how this case should be decided. However, as explained above, the fact that my wife heads an organization

⁴ As a matter of interest, 49 amicus briefs were filed in this court, on

behalf of 282 individuals and organizations.

that has adopted a position concerning this case, whether the position is expressed by my wife or in any other manner, cannot warrant my recusal. And the suggestion that either my wife or the ACLU/SC could benefit in any tangible way from this court's ultimate decision simply because the ACLU/SC signed on to peripheral lower court filings is highly "unreasonable and speculative." *Microsoft Corp.*, 530 U.S. at 1302 [**25] (statement of Rehnquist, C.J.).⁵ This conclusion is consistent with the recusal policy adopted by seven of the nine then-sitting Supreme Court Justices, which does not require recusal under § 455(b)(5)(iii) due to a relative's participation in lower court proceedings absent certain "special factor[s]" not present here, such as the relative's service as lead counsel below or the possibility that a relative's compensation could be substantially affected by the case's outcome. Statement of Recusal Policy, 114 S. Ct. 52, 53 (November 1, 1993).⁶ The policy is based on the Justices' construction of § 455(b)(5)(iii), and makes clear that **HN4**[\[↑\]](#) under that provision no recusal is required where, as here, a relative's participation in a lower court proceeding had no substantial [**915] effect on any interest held by that relative. Here, that clearly was the case with respect to the ACLU's actions in the lower court. In sum, my wife neither had an interest cognizable under § 455(b)(5)(iii) nor could any such interest be substantially affected by the outcome of the case in this court.

B

Nor does § 455(a) require recusal. It is significant that none of § 455(b)(5)'s criteria for recusal based on a family member's involvement in a case applies here.⁷ As the Supreme Court has explained,

HN5[\[↑\]](#) it is unreasonable to interpret § 455(a) (unless the language requires it) as implicitly eliminating a

limitation explicitly set forth in § 455(b). It would obviously be wrong, for example, to hold that "impartiality could reasonably be questioned" simply because one of the parties is in the fourth degree of relationship to the judge. Section 455(b)(5), which addresses the matter of relationship specifically, ends the disability at the third degree of relationship, and that should obviously govern for purposes of § 455(a) as well.

Liteky v. United States, 510 U.S. 540, 553, 114 S. Ct. 1147, 127 L. Ed. 2d 474 (1994). Congress gave careful consideration to the question of when a judge must recuse himself due to a relative's participation and, [**28] in § 455(b)(5), identified the specific circumstances in which a judge must do so. Section 455(a) cannot be read so broadly as to render that determination meaningless by proscribing under that provision what is permissible under § 455(b)(5). *Cf. Baker & Hostetler LLP v. U.S. Dep't of Commerce*, 471 F.3d 1355, 1357-58, 374 U.S. App. D.C. 107 (D.C. Cir. 2006) (Kavanaugh, J., On Motion for Recusal) (concluding that because "[i]n § 455(b)(3) . . . Congress clearly and specifically addressed the effect of prior government service on a judge's recusal obligations," recusal under § 455(a) due to prior government service may be required only under "rare and extraordinary circumstances.").

That is not to say that there could be no special factors or unforeseeable circumstances that might render § 455(a) applicable where Congress, in adopting the limitations of § 455(b)(5), failed to consider certain types of actions or where new practices have arisen due to changes in the practice [**29] of law or other societal developments. Proponents point to no such special factors or unforeseen, let alone unforeseeable circumstances here, and none exist of which I am aware. However, even if one were to ignore the existence of clear rules governing a case such as this in § 455(b)(5), my recusal under § 455(a) would still be appropriate only if a reasonable person with knowledge of all the facts would *reasonably* believe that, by virtue of my marriage, I

proceeding." § 455(b)(5)(iii).

⁵ Had the ACLU/SC filed a brief in this court, it could conceivably be argued that the organization had an interest in the outcome of our [**26] deliberations, on the theory that it could then seek to claim a portion of the credit for any favorable decision this court issued in order to attempt to raise funds or solicit new members. Although I find such arguments highly questionable, in order to avoid any possible claim of conflict of interest I have, as stated above, always recused myself from cases in which the ACLU/SC participated in any way in *this* court, including filing a brief, amicus or otherwise. However, even this tenuous "interest" is not present where, as here, the ACLU-SC was one of 122 organizations and individuals to have joined an amicus brief in the lower court, but made no filing of any kind with this court. The lower court filings could under no circumstances have created an "interest" cognizable under § 455(b)(5)(iii), let alone an "interest" that could have been "substantially affected by the outcome of the

⁶ The Justices' recusal policy emphasizes that "one unnecessary recusal impairs the functioning of the Court," *id.*, a consideration that applies to this court's proceedings only to the extent that an en banc vote might ultimately be affected by a judge's unnecessary recusal. [**27] However, because the Court's conclusion that a relative's participation in lower court proceedings does not merit a Justice's recusal absent "special factors" is based on its construction of the recusal statute, it is clearly applicable to the recusal decision of this court's judges.

⁷ That is to say, that my wife is not a party to this case, § 455(b)(5)(i); is not a lawyer in this proceeding, § 455(b)(5)(ii); and does not have an interest that could be substantially affected by this proceeding's outcome, § 455(b)(5)(iii).

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might approach and decide this case differently than I would have otherwise approached and decided it. *See Cheney v. Dist. Ct.*, 541 U.S. 913, 928-29, 124 S. Ct. 1391, 158 L. Ed. 2d 225 (2004) (Memorandum of Scalia, J.); *Nelson*, 718 F.2d at 321. As stated above, my wife has no "interest" in the outcome of this case that might be substantially affected by its outcome, over and beyond the interest of any American with a strong view concerning the social issues that confront this nation. Similarly, the organization she heads, not having participated in any filings before this court, has no more to gain from the outcome of this case than any other person or entity with strong views on the subject but not directly involved [*916] with the litigation.⁸ As to the fact of my wife's [*30] views on the subject before us or any other subject that may come before us, or the views of any organization she heads, she is an independent person who need not obtain my approval or agreement to advocate for whatever social causes she chooses. The views are hers, not mine, and I do not in any way condition my opinions on the positions she takes regarding any issues. Therefore, a reasonable person with full knowledge of all the facts would not reasonably believe that I would approach a case in a partial manner due to her independent views regarding social policy, whether those views are publicly expressed and advocated for, or not, and whether advocated for by her in her private capacity or in her capacity as head of the ACLU/SC. I have been a federal judge for 30 years and have, during that time, publicly expressed my views regarding the constitution and its meaning on many occasions, including a number that predate my marriage. *See, e.g., Stephen R. Reinhardt, Symposium: The Conflict Between Text and Precedent in Constitutional Adjudication*, 73 Cornell L. Rev. 434 (1988). A reasonable person familiar with my judicial record throughout my career, and the other facts relevant to [*31] this recusal inquiry, would not reasonably believe that either my wife's beliefs or her organization's filings in the court below would play any role whatsoever in my handling of the present case. I therefore decline to recuse myself under § 455(a).

III

It is, indeed, important that judges be and appear to be impartial. It is also important, however, that judges not recuse themselves unless required to do so, or it would be too easy for those who seek judges favorable to their case to disqualify those that they perceive to be unsympathetic merely by publicly questioning their impartiality. *See H.R. Rep.*

No. [*32] 93-1453 (1974) (providing legislative history of federal recusal statute) ("At the same time, in assessing the reasonableness of a challenge to his impartiality, each judge must be alert to avoid the possibility that those who would question his impartiality are in fact seeking to avoid the consequences of his expected adverse decision."). Were I to be recused because of the facts Proponents cite, it would not be merely from serving on the present panel but from voting on whether to rehear the case en banc and taking part in any en banc proceedings held by this court. My wife has no tangible interest in this case's outcome, and I do not believe that my impartiality in this case can reasonably be questioned on the basis of either her public statements or the ACLU/SC's involvement in any judicial proceedings. For these reasons, I deny Proponents' motion.

End of Document

⁸ As noted, *supra* at 6-7, I recuse myself as a matter of personal policy whenever the organization my wife heads appears or files an amicus brief in the court on which I sit. I do so to avoid an appearance that the organization might benefit from a decision in which I play a part;

as explained *supra* n.5, no such benefit and no such appearance could arise in a case such as this where the organization does not appear before this court in any way or manner, and where its only participation in the district court was as one of 122 organizations and individuals to sign on to an amicus brief.