
Campbell-Ewald Company v. Gomez, No. 14-857

Article III of the Constitution limits the jurisdiction of federal courts to “cases” and “controversies.” As the Supreme

Court recently explained in *Genesis HealthCare Corp. v. Symczyk*, 133 S. Ct. 1523 (2013), a lawsuit does not

present an Article III case or controversy and “must be dismissed as moot” when “an intervening circumstance

deprives the plaintiff of a ‘personal stake in the outcome of the lawsuit,’ at any point during the litigation.” Today,

in *Campbell-Ewald Co. v. Gomez*, No. 14-857, the Supreme Court held that a defendant's unaccepted offer to

satisfy the claims of a named plaintiff in a putative class-action lawsuit is not sufficient to render the suit moot.

The decision—closely watched by plaintiffs who bring class action lawsuits and defendants who face them—holds

that simply making an offer of full relief to a named plaintiff in accordance with the process outlined in Federal Rule

of Civil Procedure 68 is not enough to moot the plaintiff's individual claim. At the same time, the Supreme Court

did not address whether a defendant that actually tenders a payment for full individual relief can moot a named

plaintiff's claim.

Today's decision originated in a putative class action filed by respondent Jose Gomez against petitioner Campbell-

Ewald Co. for alleged violations of the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, 47 U.S.C. § 227. Gomez's complaint

alleged that Campbell-Ewald violated the TCPA when it sent him an unsolicited text message as part of a

recruiting campaign for the U.S. Navy. Gomez's complaint sought relief in the form of treble statutory damages,

costs, attorney's fees, and an injunction.

Before Gomez moved to certify the class, Campbell-Ewald made a settlement proposal and also filed an offer of

judgment under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 68, which permits a defendant to make a pre-trial offer to allow

judgment. Campbell-Ewald offered to pay Gomez \$1,503 for each unsolicited text message he received—which

would more than satisfy his claim for treble statutory damages—as well as costs. Campbell-Ewald also proposed an

injunction that would bar it from sending the allegedly offending text messages. Campbell-Ewald's offer was made

without an admission of liability; to the contrary, like most defendants, the company disclaimed liability. Gomez did

not accept Campbell-Ewald's offer, instead allowing it to expire.

Campbell-Ewald then moved to dismiss Gomez's complaint for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction, arguing that its

offer of judgment mooted Gomez's individual claim by providing him complete relief. Campbell-Ewald also argued

that the putative class claims were moot because Gomez had not yet moved for class certification by the time his

claim became moot.

The district court denied this motion, but later granted summary judgment for Campbell-Ewald on the ground that

Campbell-Ewald, as a naval contractor, enjoyed sovereign immunity. Gomez appealed, and the Ninth Circuit held

that both Gomez's claim and the putative class claims remained live. The court of appeals also vacated the district

court's sovereign immunity ruling.

The Supreme Court affirmed in an opinion authored by Justice Ginsburg and joined by Justices Kennedy, Breyer,

Sotomayor, and Kagan. The Court addressed mootness first. According to the Court, “basic principles of contract

law” established that “Campbell-Ewald’s settlement bid and Rule 68 offer of judgment, once rejected, had no

continuing efficacy.” In the face of Gomez’s rejection of the offer and Campbell-Ewald’s continued denial of

liability, Gomez had no entitlement to the relief Campbell-Ewald had offered. According to the Court, “We hold

today, in accord with Rule 68 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, that an unaccepted settlement offer has no

force. Like other unaccepted contract offers, it creates no lasting right or obligation.” With no such entitlement, in

turn, the parties were still adverse, and so their dispute remained a live one that a federal court could decide. The

majority expressly adopted the mootness analysis that Justice Kagan had outlined in her dissenting opinion in

Genesis Healthcare. 133 S. Ct. 1523, 1532 (2013) (Kagan, J., dissenting).

Crucially, the Court reserved judgment on the question whether “the result would be different if a defendant

deposits the full amount of the plaintiff’s individual claim in an account payable to the plaintiff, and the court then

enters judgment for the plaintiff in that amount.” As we have previously [detailed](#), the question of whether tendering

a payment (as opposed to simply making an offer) would moot a claim had featured heavily at oral argument, but

the Court determined that the “question is appropriately reserved for a case in which it is not hypothetical.”

On the issue of sovereign immunity, the Court held that federal contractors do not “share the Government’s

unqualified immunity from liability and litigation.” As the Court explained, “[w]hen a contractor violates both federal

law the Government's explicit instructions"—which, the record demonstrated, authorized Campbell-Ewald to send

recruiting text messages only to consenting recipients—"no 'derivative immunity' shields the contractor from suit by

persons adversely effected by the violation."

Justice Thomas concurred in the judgment of the Court, but asserted that the Court should have based its

reasoning on the “common-law history of tenders,” which required that defendants actually produce a payment for

full relief. As with the dissenters in this case, Justice Thomas did not address the majority’s sovereign immunity

holding.

Chief Justice Roberts filed a dissent, joined by Justices Scalia and Alito, explaining that “[i]f the defendant is willing

to give the plaintiff everything he asks for, there is no case or controversy to adjudicate, and the lawsuit is moot.”

As the Chief Justice put it, “the federal courts exist to resolve real disputes, not to rule on a plaintiff’s entitlement to

relief already there for the taking.” And although vigorously disputing the majority’s holding, the Chief Justice went

on to note that “this case is limited to its facts,” and that while the majority holds that “an *offer* of complete relief is

insufficient to moot a case,” it “does not say that *payment* of complete relief leads to the same result.”

Justice Alito also filed a separate dissent to “emphasize what” he saw “as the linchpin” for the dissenters’

mootness finding: that “[t]here is no real dispute that Campbell-Ewald would ‘make good on [its] promise’ to pay

Gomez the money it offered him if the case were dismissed.” And Justice Alito also stated that a defendant could

“make ‘absolutely clear’ that it will pay the relief it has offered” by, among other things, “deposit[ing] the money

with the district court (or another trusted intermediary) on the condition that the money be released to the plaintiff

when the court dismisses the case as moot.”

Campbell-Ewald should be of significant interest to any class-action defendant. Today’s opinion makes simple

offers of settlement insufficient to moot a case. But it leaves open the possibility that settlement offers combined

with additional commitments to pay claims—if accepted by plaintiffs—might suffice to end both individual and class

claims.

Any questions about the case should be directed to Archis A. Parasharami (+1 202 263 3328) or [Brian D. Netter](#)

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