

SUPREME COURT OF COLORADO

Williams v. Libertarian Party of Colorado

2017 CO 86 (2017) · No. 16SC145 · Decided September 11, 2017

SUMMARY

The Colorado Supreme Court held that a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 may not be brought in a proceeding under section 1-1-113 of the Colorado Election Code. The court overruled *Brown v. Davidson* to the extent it held otherwise and concluded that section 1-1-113 does not violate the Supremacy Clause because Colorado courts remain available to adjudicate § 1983 claims. The court reversed the court of appeals and remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Colorado
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Eid; Justice Gabriel; Justice Hood
JURISDICTION	Colorado
DECIDED	September 11, 2017
DOCKET	16SC145
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Certiorari review of a Colorado Court of Appeals decision reversing the district court and remanding for determination of whether the respondents were entitled to attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Statutory interpretation reviewed de novo; the court considered whether a § 1983 claim may be joined in a C.R.S. § 1-1-113 proceeding.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Wayne Williams, in his official capacity as Colorado Secretary of State v. Libertarian Party of Colorado, Gordon Roy Butt

TOPICS

[election law](#) [recall elections](#) [statutory interpretation](#) [supremacy clause](#) [appellate procedure](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

[election law](#) [civil rights](#) [constitutional law](#) [appellate procedure](#) [statutory interpretation](#)

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 may be brought or joined in a proceeding under C.R.S. § 1-1-113.
2. Whether C.R.S. § 1-1-113's limitation to violations of the Colorado Election Code conflicts with the Supremacy Clause by excluding § 1983 claims.
3. Whether the respondents could obtain attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 for an unadjudicated § 1983 claim after prevailing on a related state constitutional claim.

HOLDINGS

1. A § 1983 claim may not be brought in a § 1-1-113 proceeding because § 1-1-113 is limited to allegations of a breach, neglect of duty, or other wrongful act under the Colorado Election Code.
2. C.R.S. § 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause because Colorado courts remain available to adjudicate § 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis when a preliminary injunction is sought.
3. *Brown v. Davidson* is overruled to the extent it holds that a § 1983 claim may be joined with a petition under C.R.S. § 1-1-113.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Therefore, a section 1-1-113 proceeding is limited to allegations of a “breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act” under the election code itself.” (¶ 4)

“We emphasize that Colorado courts remain entirely open for adjudication of section 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis if a preliminary injunction is sought, and that therefore section 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause.” (¶ 4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Gordon Roy Butt sought to run for the Colorado Senate as the Libertarian Party candidate in a 2013 recall election. The Secretary of State denied authorization to circulate Butt's nomination petition because it was submitted after the statutory deadline then prescribed by C.R.S. § 1-12-117(1). Butt and the Libertarian Party challenged the deadline under C.R.S. § 1-1-113, asserting a conflict with the Colorado Constitution, and also included a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claim alleging, among other things, a First Amendment violation. The statutory deadline was later amended, rendering the § 1983 claim moot.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The respondents sought relief under C.R.S. § 1-1-113 after the Secretary of State denied a request to circulate a recall-election nomination petition as untimely. The district court ruled for the respondents on their state constitutional claim but did not adjudicate their § 1983 claim, later denying attorney's fees and dismissing the § 1983 claim as moot. The court of appeals reversed and remanded for application of a test governing fees related to an unadjudicated § 1983 claim. The Colorado Supreme Court granted certiorari, reversed the court of appeals, and remanded.

DISPOSITION

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remand for further proceedings consistent with the opinion. Because § 1983 claims may not be brought in a § 1-1-113 proceeding, the court did not decide the remaining attorney's-fee issues.

CASES CITED

- Frazier v. Williams, 2017 CO 85, 401 P.3d 541
- Brown v. Davidson, 192 P.3d 415 (Colo. App. 2006)
- Libertarian Party of Colorado v. Williams, No. 14CA2063, 2016 WL 241406 (Colo. App. Jan. 14, 2016)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

1 Opinions of the Colorado Supreme Court are available to the 2 public and can be accessed through the Judicial Branch's homepage at 3 <http://www.courts.state.co.us>. Opinions are also posted on the 4 Colorado Bar Association's homepage at <http://www.cobar.org>. 5 6 ADVANCE SHEET HEADNOTE 7 September 11, 2017 8 9 2017 CO 86 0 1 No. 16SC145, Williams v. Libertarian Party—Election Proceedings Under Section 2 1-1-113—42 U.S.C. § 1983—Supremacy Clause.

3 4 As held today in Frazier v. Willaims, 2017 CO 85, ___ P.3d ___, a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 5 (2012) claim may not be brought in a proceeding under § 1-1-113, C.R.S. (2017). 6 1 2 The Supreme Court of the State of Colorado 3 2 East 14th Avenue • Denver, Colorado 80203 4 2017 CO 86 5 Supreme Court Case No. 16SC145 6 Certiorari to the Colorado Court of Appeals 7 Court of Appeals Case No. 14CA2063 8 Petitioner: 9 Wayne Williams, in his official capacity as Colorado Secretary of State, 0 v. 1 Respondents: 2 Libertarian Party of Colorado and Gordon Roy Butt.

3 Judgment Reversed 4 en banc 5 September 11, 2017 6 7 Attorneys for Petitioner: 8 Cynthia H. Coffman, Attorney General 9 Frederick R. Yarger, Solicitor General 0 Amy Colony, Senior Assistant Attorney General 1 Matthew D. Grove, Assistant Attorney General 2 Grant T. Sullivan, Assistant Solicitor General 3 Denver, Colorado 4 5 6 Attorneys for Respondents: 7 The Matthew C. Ferguson Law Firm, P.C.

8 Matthew C. Ferguson 9 Michelle K. Schindler 0 Aspen, Colorado 1 2 3 4 5 JUSTICE EID delivered the Opinion of the Court. 6 JUSTICE GABRIEL dissents, and JUSTICE HOOD joins the dissent. ¶1 Gordon Roy Butt sought to run for state senate for the Libertarian Party in a 2013 recall election.

The Secretary of State denied his request to circulate a petition because his request came after the deadline as then set by section 1-12-117(1). See Ch. 170, sec. 8, § 1-12-117(1), 2014 Colo. Sess. Laws 621. Butt and the Libertarian Party (collectively, “the Party”) sued the Secretary under § 1-1-113, C.R.S.

(2017), alleging that the statutory deadline conflicted with the Colorado Constitution. Within the section 1-1-113 proceeding, the Party also raised a claim for relief under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (2012), and an accompanying request for an award of attorney’s fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 (2012), alleging, inter alia, a First Amendment violation.

The district court found for the Party on the state constitutional claim, and did not address the section 1983 claim. After this court denied appellate review on a split vote, further proceedings occurred before the district court.

The case was appealed once again, and this court again denied review. ¶2 Nine months later, the Party returned to district court seeking summary judgment on its section 1983 claim and, in the alternative, an attorney’s fee award under section 1988 on the ground that the Party had been successful on its state constitutional claim.

The district court denied the Party’s request for attorney’s fees, finding that it had not pursued fees in a timely manner. It also dismissed the section 1983 claim as moot due to the General Assembly’s 2014 amendment of section 1-12-117(1). ¶3 On appeal, the court of appeals reversed the district court. *Libertarian Party of Colorado v. Williams*, No. 14CA2063 (Colo.

App. Jan. 14, 2016). Citing *Brown v. Davidson*, 192 P.3d 415 (Colo. App. 2006), it noted that section 1983 claims may be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding. *Williams*, ¶ 11. The court then held that, although the Party’s section 1983 claim was moot, the request for attorney’s fees under section 1988 was appropriate so long as the section 1983 claim was substantial, stemmed from the same nucleus of operative facts as the state constitutional claim, and was reasonably related to the plaintiff’s ultimate success.

Id. at ¶ 29. The court remanded the case to the district court to apply this test to determine whether the Party was entitled to fees. *Id.* at ¶¶ 31–32. ¶4 We granted the Secretary’s request for certiorari review and now reverse the court of appeals.¹ For reasons discussed at length in our companion case, *Frazier v. Williams*, 2017 CO 85, ___ P.3d ___, also announced today, we hold that a section 1983 claim may not be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding.

The language of that section repeatedly refers to “this code,” meaning the Colorado Election Code. Therefore, a section 1-1-113 proceeding is limited to allegations of a “breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act” under the election code itself. § 1-1-113(1).

We emphasize that Colorado courts remain entirely open for adjudication of section 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis if a preliminary injunction is sought, and that therefore section 1 We granted review of the following issues: 1. Whether *Brown v. Davidson*, 192 P.3d 415 (Colo. App. 2006), which held that a claim asserted under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 may be joined with a petition filed under section 1-1-113, C.R.S.

(2016), should be overturned. 2. Whether, when the supreme court denies review under section 1-1-113(3), that denial marks the conclusion of the proceedings, thereby triggering the deadline for attorney fees applications under C.R.C.P. 121, section 1-22. 3. Whether a plaintiff who prevails on a state claim is entitled to attorney fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 for an adjudicated 42 U.S.C § 1983 claim.

3 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause. To the extent that *Brown v. Davidson*, 192 P.3d 415 (Colo. App. 2006), holds to the contrary, it is overruled. Accordingly, we reverse and remand the case for further proceedings.

I. ¶5 This case arose out of legislative recall elections in 2013. Butt requested approval from the Secretary to circulate a petition to qualify as a successor candidate on the Libertarian Party ticket. The Secretary denied the request because it was submitted after the statutory deadline that was then set forth in section 1-12-117(1) (“Nomination petitions... shall be filed no later than ten calendar days prior to the date for holding the [recall] election....”). ¶6 The Party filed a petition for relief under section 1-1-113, arguing that the statutory deadline then set by section 1-12-117(1) and enforced by the Secretary conflicted with Article XXI, section 3 of the Colorado Constitution, which would have allowed Butt more time to file his petition.² See Colo.

Const. art. XXI, § 3 (“[P]etitions for nomination to office are required by law to be filed not less than 15 days before such recall election....”). Within the section 1-1-113 proceeding, the Party also brought a section 1983 claim alleging, inter alia, a First Amendment violation, and requested attorney’s fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. section 1988. ¶7 After bifurcating the case pursuant to C.R.C.P.

42(b), the district court concluded that the statute conflicted with the Colorado Constitution. It did not address the Party’s ² No one has challenged Butt’s joinder of a state constitutional claim under section 1-1-113, so we do not address that issue in this case. ⁴ section 1983 claim.

We declined review on an evenly divided vote. Further proceedings occurred before the district court and the case was appealed once again, and this court denied review. ¶8 The Party returned to the district court nine months later seeking summary judgment on the section 1983 claim and, in the alternative, an attorney’s fee award under section 1988 on the ground that the Party had been successful on its state constitutional claim.

The district court denied the Party's request for attorney's fees, finding that it had not pursued fees in a timely manner. It also dismissed the section 1983 claim as moot due to the General Assembly's amendment of section 1-12-117(1) that remedied any conflict between the statute and the Colorado Constitution. ¶9 On appeal, the court of appeals determined that under *Brown v. Davidson*, the Party was permitted to bring its section 1983 claim under section 1-1-113.

Williams, ¶ 11. While it agreed that the section 1983 claim was moot, it found that attorney's fees were nonetheless appropriate so long as the section 1983 claim was substantial, stemmed from the same nucleus of operative facts as the state claim, and was reasonably related to the plaintiff's ultimate success. *Id.* at ¶ 29.

The court remanded the case to the district court to apply this test to determine whether the Party was entitled to fees. *Id.* at ¶¶ 31–32.3 ¶10 We granted the Secretary's petition for certiorari review. We now reverse the court of appeals and remand the case for further proceedings. 3 The court of appeals also determined that the district court's decision as to fees was a reviewable final judgment, *id.* at ¶ 13, a conclusion that the Secretary does not challenge before this court.

5 II. ¶11 Here, the Secretary contends that section 1983 claims cannot be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding. For the reasons set forth in more detail in our lead companion case *Frazier v. Williams*, 2017 CO 85, ___ P.3d ___, we agree.

The language of section 1-1-113 limits claims that may be brought to those alleging a breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act under "this code," meaning the Colorado Election Code. Colorado courts remain entirely open for adjudication of section 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis if a preliminary injunction is sought, and that therefore section 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause.

To the extent that *Brown v. Davidson* holds to the contrary, it is overruled. ¶12 Because we find that section 1983 claims may not be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding, we need not consider the remaining two issues upon which we granted certiorari, as both assume that, if a section 1983 claim may be brought in section 1-1-113 proceeding, the court of appeals erred in permitting fees under section 1988.

Accordingly, we reverse and remand the case for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. JUSTICE GABRIEL dissents, and JUSTICE HOOD joins the dissent. 6 JUSTICE GABRIEL, dissenting. ¶13 Relying on its opinion in *Frazier v. Williams*, 2017 CO 85, ___ P.3d ___, which we also decide today, the majority concludes that (1) claims brought pursuant to section 1-1-113 are limited to those alleging a breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act under the Colorado Election Code and therefore, (2) section 1983 claims may not be joined in a section 1-1-113 proceeding.

See maj. op. ¶¶ 10, 18. For the reasons set forth in my dissent in Frazier, ¶¶ 29-60, I respectfully disagree. Instead, I would conclude that the plain language of section 1-1-113, the applicable civil procedure rules, and sound public policy support allowing parties like petitioners here to join section 1983 claims with claims under section 1-1-113. ¶14 Accordingly, I respectfully dissent.

I am authorized to state that JUSTICE HOOD joins in this dissent. 1

EID, J.

JUSTICE EID delivered the Opinion of the Court. ¶1 Gordon Roy Butt sought to run for state senate for the Libertarian Party in a *5592013 recall election. The Secretary of State denied his request to circulate a petition because his request came after the deadline as then set by section 1-12-117(1). See Ch. 170, sec. 8, § 1-12-117(1), 2014 Colo. Sess. Laws 621.

Butt and the Libertarian Party (collectively, “the Party”) sued the Secretary under § 1-1-113, C.R.S. (2017), alleging that the statutory deadline conflicted with the Colorado Constitution. Within the section 1-1-113 proceeding, the Party also raised a claim for relief under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (2012), and an accompanying request for an award of attorney’s fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 (2012), alleging, inter alia, a First Amendment violation.

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Id. at ¶ 29. The court remanded the case to the district court to apply this test to determine whether the Party was entitled to fees. Id. at ¶¶ 31-32. ¶4 We granted the Secretary's request for certiorari review and now reverse the court of appeals.¹ For reasons discussed at length in our companion case, *Frazier v. Williams*, 2017 CO 85, 401 P.3d 541, also announced today, we hold that a section 1983 claim may not be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding.

The language of that section repeatedly refers to "this code," meaning the Colorado Election Code. Therefore, a section 1-1-113 proceeding is limited to allegations of a "breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act" under the election code itself. § 1-1-113(1).

We emphasize that Colorado courts remain entirely open for adjudication of section 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis if a preliminary injunction is sought, and that therefore section 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause.

To the extent that *Brown v. Davidson*, 192 P.3d 415 (Colo. App. 2006), holds to the contrary, it is overruled. Accordingly, we reverse and remind the case for further proceedings. I. ¶5 This case arose out of legislative recall elections in 2013, Butt requested approval from the Secretary to circulate a petition to qualify as a successor candidate on the Libertarian Party ticket.

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For the reasons set forth in more detail in our lead companion case *Frazier v. Williams*, 2017 CO 85, 401 P.3d 541, we agree. The language of section 1-1-113 limits claims that may be brought to those alleging a breach or neglect of duty or other wrongful act under "this code," meaning the Colorado Election Code. Colorado courts remain entirely open for adjudication of section 1983 claims, including on an expedited basis if a preliminary injunction is sought, and that therefore section 1-1-113 does not run afoul of the Supremacy Clause. To the extent that *Brown v. Davidson* holds to the contrary, it is overruled. ¶12 Because we find that section 1983 claims may not be brought in a section 1-1-113 proceeding, we need not consider the remaining two issues upon which we granted certiorari, as both assume that, if a section 1983 claim may be brought in section 1-1-113 proceeding, the court of appeals erred in permitting fees under section 1988-.

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No one has challenged Butt's joinder of a state constitutional claim under section 1-1-113, so we do not address that issue in this case.. The court of appeals also determined that the district court's decision as to fees was a reviewable final judgment, *id.* at ¶ 13, a conclusion that the Secretary does not challenge before this court.

