

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Antonio Alfonso Reyna v. Theresa Cisneros

Reyna v. Cisneros · No. 2:22-cv-2295 KJM CSK P · Decided December 30, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California adopted the magistrate judge’s findings and recommendations and denied Antonio Alfonso Reyna’s petition for a writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The court concluded that the challenged prior-robbery evidence and ineffective-assistance claims did not warrant relief under AEDPA and declined to issue a certificate of appealability.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	December 30, 2025
DOCKET	2:22-cv-2295 KJM CSK P
DISPOSITION	writ_denied
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Petitioner sought federal habeas relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. After a magistrate judge issued findings and recommendations recommending denial, petitioner filed objections and respondent filed a response. The district court conducted de novo review, adopted the findings and recommendations with clarifications, denied the habeas application, and declined to issue a certificate of appealability.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review of the magistrate judge's findings and recommendations under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C); deferential review of the state-court adjudication under AEDPA; and, for the broader recusal claim, the court stated that the result would be the same under de novo review.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district court order
PARTIES	Antonio Alfonso Reyna v. Theresa Cisneros

TOPICS

- federal habeas corpus
- ineffective assistance
- due process
- fourteenth amendment
- post-conviction relief

PRACTICE AREAS

federal habeas corpus

post-conviction relief

criminal procedure

constitutional law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the admission of evidence concerning petitioner's prior robbery conviction, and the delayed limiting instruction, warranted federal habeas relief under the Due Process Clause.
2. Whether the state courts' rejection of petitioner's ineffective-assistance claim based on counsel's failure to seek recusal from the hearing on Goins's testimony was contrary to or an unreasonable application of *Strickland v. Washington*.
3. Whether counsel was ineffective for failing to seek recusal of the trial judge from the trial as a whole, including whether the state court adjudicated that argument on the merits and whether the merits decision warranted habeas relief.

HOLDINGS

1. A state-law dispute over the admissibility of prior-conviction evidence does not itself support federal habeas relief; relief may be available only if the evidence was so unduly prejudicial that it rendered the trial fundamentally unfair under the Fourteenth Amendment. The state-court decision survived AEDPA review.
2. Counsel was not constitutionally ineffective for failing to file a recusal motion that had no reasonable probability of success and was not supported by underlying judicial misconduct.
3. The court presumed that the state court adjudicated petitioner's broader recusal argument on the merits, and petitioner did not rebut that presumption.
4. Petitioner was not entitled to habeas relief on the broader recusal claim because he failed to rebut the merits-adjudication presumption and, on the record, counsel could not reasonably have been expected to argue judicial bias after stipulating that Goins had decided to plead guilty before speaking with the judge.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Because 'habeas relief is not available for an alleged error in the interpretation or application of state law,' id. at 12, the magistrate judge appropriately turned to determining what federal constitutional right could support this claim." (at 1)

"Here, petitioner has not rebutted the presumption that the state court addressed his broader recusal argument on the merits." (at 2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Petitioner was convicted in state court after the prosecution introduced evidence of his prior robbery conviction and provided a limiting instruction twenty-eight days later. His claims also concerned testimony by Goins, who testified about when he decided to plead guilty after speaking with the trial judge; petitioner's trial counsel and the prosecution stipulated that Goins had already decided to change his plea before speaking with the judge.

Petitioner argued that counsel was ineffective for failing to seek the trial judge’s recusal from a hearing on Goins’s testimony and from the trial as a whole.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The matter was referred to a magistrate judge under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and the local rules. The magistrate judge issued findings and recommendations on August 5, 2025, addressing petitioner's evidentiary and ineffective-assistance claims. After considering petitioner's objections and respondent's response, the district court found the recommendations supported by the record and proper analysis, adopted them with clarifications, denied relief, and declined to issue a certificate of appealability.

DISPOSITION

writ_denied

CASES CITED

- Andrew v. White, 604 U.S. 86, 88 (2025) (per curiam)
- Payne v. Tennessee, 501 U.S. 808, 825 (1991)
- Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984)
- Harrington v. Richter, 562 U.S. 86 (2011)
- Johnson v. Williams, 568 U.S. 289, 293 (2013)
- Echavarria v. Filson, 896 F.3d 1118, 1129-30 (9th Cir. 2018)

OPINION

Cisneros

PER CURIAM.

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8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10

11 ANTONIO ALFONSO REYNA, No. 2:22-cv-2295 KJM CSK P

12 Petitioner, 13 v. ORDER

14 THERESA CISNEROS,

15 Respondent. 16

17 Petitioner, a state prisoner proceeding with counsel, filed this application for a writ of 18 habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. The matter was referred to a United States Magistrate 19 Judge as provided by 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and Local Rule 302. 20 On August 5, 2025, the magistrate judge filed findings and recommendations, which were 21 served on all parties and which contained notice to all parties that any objections to the findings 22 and recommendations were to be filed within fourteen days. Petitioner filed objections to the 23 findings and

recommendations. (ECF No. 41.) Respondent filed a response. (ECF No. 44.) 24 In accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C) and Local Rule 304, this 25 court has conducted a de novo review of this case. Having reviewed the file, the court finds the 26 findings and recommendations to be supported by the record and by proper analysis. 27 The court also has considered whether to issue a certificate of appealability in light of 28 petitioner's briefing provided with his objections. Regarding the questions petitioner raises with 1 respect to claim 1, based on the evidence of petitioner's prior robbery conviction introduced at the 2 beginning of his trial and the limiting instruction provided twenty-eight days later, the magistrate 3 judge addressed this claim as an attempt to portray a legal decision about state evidentiary law as 4 a determination of fact. See F&Rs at 11-12. The state courts found the evidence about the prior 5 robbery was admissible as evidence relevant to petitioner's intent, rejecting the argument that the 6 evidence was actually a dispute about identity and subject to a higher standard of admissibility 7 under state law. Id. at 8-9. Whether to apply one state law admissibility standard or another, and 8 whether relevant evidence is nonetheless inadmissible due to its prejudicial effects, is not a 9 dispute about federal law, nor a factual finding. Because "habeas relief is not available for an 10 alleged error in the interpretation or application of state law," id. at 12, the magistrate judge 11 appropriately turned to determining what federal constitutional right could support this claim. 12 The federal right in question is the due process right the Supreme Court reaffirmed in 13 *Andrew v. White*, i.e., that when "evidence is introduced that is so unduly prejudicial that it 14 renders the trial fundamentally unfair, the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment 15 provides a mechanism for relief." 604 U.S. 86, 88 (2025) (per curiam) (quoting *Payne v. 16 Tennessee*, 501 U.S. 808, 825 (1991)). Here, even if the evidence about the prior robbery were 17 unduly prejudicial, a reasonable jurist could decide the trial overall still was fundamentally 18 fair. Thus, the state court decision survives AEDPA review. The court declines to grant a 19 certificate of appealability on claim 1. 20 Regarding petitioner's claim 2, ineffective assistance of counsel, petitioner makes two 21 separate arguments. First, he argues his trial attorney was ineffective for failing to ask the trial 22 judge to recuse from the hearing on his motion to exclude Goins's testimony. Second, petitioner 23 argues his attorney was ineffective for failing to ask the judge to recuse from the trial as a whole. 24 With respect to the motion hearing recusal claim, the magistrate judge fairly determined the state 25 appellate court addressed this ineffective assistance argument squarely and found no ineffective 26 assistance. In the state court's view, there was no reasonable probability of recusal from the 27 hearing and no improper conduct by the judge. Petitioner's trial lawyer cannot have been 28 ineffective by failing to file a motion with no reasonable probability of success and no underlying 1 misconduct. At a minimum this conclusion is a reasonable interpretation of the record and a 2 reasonable application of *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984) under the Anti- 3 Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). Petitioner argues the state court 4 unreasonably interpreted the record because Goins testified at petitioner's trial that Goins did not 5 actually decide to plead guilty until after he spoke

with the trial judge. But after Goins gave his testimony, petitioner's lawyer and the prosecution stipulated that Goins already had decided to change his plea before he spoke with the judge, and that the only uncertainty was whether Goins could get out of the county jail if he pleaded guilty. Petitioner disagrees now with this stipulation, but he does not argue his lawyer was ineffective for entering into it. Viewed as a whole, the record does not support a conclusion the state court interpreted the factual record unreasonably. While the magistrate judge here did not address Goins's trial testimony about his plea and the stipulation, this court has considered that part of the record. See Rep. Tr. Vol II at 495-99, 511-15, 521-27. The court declines to issue a certificate of appealability on this aspect of petitioner's claim 2. Regarding petitioner's second argument, that his lawyer was ineffective for failing to ask the state court trial judge to recuse from the trial as a whole, the magistrate judge here as well construes the state appellate court's opinion as addressing this argument "squarely." F&Rs at 17 n.4. This court concludes the relevant portion of the opinion is ambiguous. See *id.* at 13-15. The magistrate judge presumed in the alternative that the state appellate court reached petitioner's broader recusal argument, 20 citing the California Supreme Court's decision. See *id.* 17-18 n.4. Under *Harrington v. Richter*, "when a state court issues an order that summarily rejects without discussion all the claims raised by a defendant, including a federal claim that the defendant subsequently presses in a federal habeas proceeding, the federal court must presume (subject to rebuttal) that that federal claim was adjudicated on the merits." 24 *Johnson v. Williams*, 568 U.S. 289, 293 (2013) (emphasis omitted) (citing 562 U.S. 86 (2011)). Under *Johnson*, the same rule applies "when the state court addresses some of the claims raised by a defendant but not a claim that is later raised in a federal habeas proceeding." *Id.* Petitioner argues a different standard applies when a state court addresses one federal constitutional claim but not another, citing 28 *Echavarria v. Filson*, 896 F.3d 1118, 1129-30 (9th Cir. 2018). *Echavarria* applied the *Harrington/Johnson* presumption and found the presumption had been rebutted. See 896 F.3d at 1130 2 ("The [state court's] reasoning in denying [the petitioner's] second and third habeas petitions makes clear 3 that it decided only whether the judge was actually, subjectively biased," i.e., not whether there was an 4 "intolerable risk of bias"). Here, petitioner has not rebutted the presumption that the state court addressed 5 his broader recusal argument on the merits. He has not done so in part given this court's reading of the 6 state court's opinion as ambiguous. Moreover, if the judge was not required to recuse from the hearing, as 7 reviewed above, then it is difficult to see how the judge also was not required to recuse from the broader 8 trial. The result would be the same if this court reviewed the matter *de novo*. It was undisputed at trial that 9 Goins had decided to plead guilty before he spoke with the trial judge. Petitioner disagrees, and Goins's 10 testimony at trial might have suggested the judge's comments played a role in his decision. But as noted 11 above, petitioner's trial attorney stipulated on his behalf that Goins had already decided to plead guilty 12 before he spoke with the judge and cannot have been expected to argue bias in these circumstances. The 13 court declines to issue a certificate of appealability with respect to

petitioner's claim 2. 14 Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that: 15 1. The findings and
recommendations (ECF No. 36) are adopted with the clarifications 16 provided above; 17 2.
Petitioner's application for a writ of habeas corpus (ECF No. 28) is denied; and 18 3. The court
declines to issue the certificate of appealability referenced in 28 U.S.C. 19 § 2253. 20 DATED:
December 29, 2025. 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28