
A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO COURTS OF APPEAL.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. In one of her last published decisions, Justice
2 Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote that a court abuses its discretion
3 when it departs from the principle of party presentation and
4 decides a case on grounds not raised by the parties. *United*
5 *States v. Sineneng-Smith*, 140 S. Ct. 1575 (2020). Justice
6 Ginsburg explained that the American legal system follows the
7 principle of party presentation:

8 [I]n both civil and criminal cases, in the first
9 instance and on appeal . . . , we rely on the parties to
10 frame the issues for decision and assign to courts the
11 role of neutral arbiter of matters the parties
12 present.

13 *Id.* at 1579. This is because the American legal system "is
14 designed around the premise that [parties represented by
15 competent counsel] know what is best for them, and are
16 responsible for advancing the facts and argument entitling them
17 to relief." *Id.* (alteration in original).



1 Justice Ginsburg elaborated that:

2 [C]ourts are essentially passive instruments of
3 government. They do not, or should not, sally forth
4 each day looking for wrongs to right. [They] wait for
5 cases to come to [them], and when [cases arise,
6 courts] normally decide only questions presented by
7 the parties.

8 *Id.* (alteration in original) (internal quotation marks and
9 citation omitted).

10 Justice Ginsburg's decision comports with United States
11 Supreme Court precedent stating that decisions reached without
12 full briefing or argument have less precedential value and
13 should be given less deference. For example, the Court has
14 recognized that it has been "less constrained to follow
15 precedent where, as here, the opinion was rendered without full
16 briefing and argument." *Hohn v. United States*, 524 U.S. 236,
17 251 (1998).

18 The United States Supreme Court has also stated that
19 "somewhat less deference [is owed] to a decision that was
20 rendered without benefit of a full airing of all the relevant
21 considerations. That is the premise of the canon of



1 interpretation that language in a decision not necessary to the
2 holding may be accorded less weight in subsequent cases."
3 *Monell v. Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 709 n.6 (1978)
4 (Powell, J., concurring).

5 Furthermore, "[s]ound judicial decisionmaking requires both
6 a vigorous prosecution and a vigorous defense of the issues in
7 dispute, and a constitutional rule announced *sua sponte* is
8 entitled to less deference than one addressed on full briefing
9 and argument." *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of*
10 *Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 572 (1993) (Souter, J., concurring)
11 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). Additionally,
12 the Court has stated that "a rule of law unnecessary to the
13 outcome of the case, especially one not put into play by the
14 parties, approaches without more the sort of dicta ... which may
15 be followed if sufficiently persuasive but are not controlling."
16 *Id.* at 572-573 (quotation marks omitted).

17 *Sua sponte* decisions that result from disregard of the
18 principle of party presentation violate due process. In those
19 situations, the court substituted itself as a party and denied
20 the parties the opportunity to litigate their own cases. Due
21 process is especially violated when an appellate court makes a



1 *sua sponte* decision that alters the remedy sought by the
2 parties.

3 For example, in *Cox v. Cox*, 138 Haw. 476 (2016), a majority
4 of the Hawaii supreme court *sua sponte* invalidated a family
5 court rule to deny the prevailing party an award of attorneys'
6 fees and costs. No one in the litigation requested that the
7 rule be invalidated. Nor did the supreme court provide the
8 parties with an opportunity to address the issue.

9 Again, in *State v. Chang*, 144 Haw. 535 (2019), a majority
10 of the Hawaii supreme court vacated a conviction when the court
11 unilaterally held that a motion to suppress may not be
12 consolidated with a trial even when the parties consent to such
13 an action. In making its decision, the majority overruled
14 forty-year-old precedent. At no time did the majority afford
15 the parties an opportunity to address the issue.

16 Denying a party the opportunity to present its own case is
17 analogous to denying a party from engaging in a meaningful
18 colloquy with a judge. On multiple occasions, the Hawaii
19 Supreme Court has reiterated a party's right to discuss and
20 explore its rights, claims, and defenses through a colloquy.
21 *State v. Wilson*, 144 Haw. 454 (2019) (colloquy required before a



1 trial court accepts a stipulation to an element of a charged
2 offense); *State v. Eduwensuyi*, 141 Haw. 328 (2018) (colloquy
3 required to discuss right to testify); *State v. Ui*, 142 Haw. 287
4 (2018) (colloquy required to discuss party's waiver of right to
5 have State prove all elements of a charge); *State v. Kaulia*, 128
6 Haw. 479 (2013) (colloquy required when defendant intends to
7 leave courtroom during trial).

8 There are potential remedies that may prevent rash
9 decisions. A party may be permitted to appeal the *sua sponte*
10 decision to another court or an aggrieved party may be permitted
11 to seek a recovery for any damages it may have incurred as a
12 result of the decision.

13 The legislature finds that the better course of action is
14 to simply prohibit an appellate court from rendering *sua sponte*
15 decisions unless the parties have been heard. An appellate
16 court must require supplemental briefing and hold oral argument.
17 This alternative will ensure due process and permit the parties,
18 rather than the appellate court, to litigate their own case.

19 The purpose of this Act is to prohibit the courts of appeal
20 from affirming, modifying, reversing, or vacating a matter on
21 grounds other than those raised by the parties to the



1 proceeding, unless the parties are provided the opportunity to
2 brief the court.

3 SECTION 2. Chapter 602, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is
4 amended as follows:

5 1. By adding a new section to part I to be appropriately
6 designated and to read:

7 "§602- Sua sponte decisions. The supreme court, when
8 acting on a matter on appeal, shall not affirm, modify, reverse,
9 or vacate a matter on grounds other than those raised by the
10 parties to the proceeding, unless the parties are provided the
11 opportunity to brief the court."

12 2. By adding a new section to part II to be appropriately
13 designated and to read:

14 "§602- Sua sponte decisions. The intermediate appellate
15 court shall not affirm, modify, reverse, or vacate a matter on
16 grounds other than those raised by the parties to the
17 proceeding, unless the parties are provided the opportunity to
18 brief the court."

19 SECTION 3. New statutory material is underscored.

20 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect upon its approval.



Report Title:

Courts of Appeal; Sua Sponte Decisions

Description:

Prohibits courts of appeal from affirming, modifying, reversing, or vacating a matter on grounds other than those raised by the parties to the proceeding, unless the parties are provided the opportunity to brief the court. (SD1)

The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes only and is not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.

