

A federal statute admitting a state to the Union granted the state certain public lands and established some very ambiguous conditions on the state's subsequent disposition of these lands. This federal statute also required the new state to write those exact same conditions into its state constitution.

One hundred years later, a state statute dealing with the sale of these public lands was challenged in a state court lawsuit on the ground that it was inconsistent with the conditions contained in the federal statute and with the provisions of the state constitution that exactly copy the conditions contained in the federal statute.

The trial court decision in this case was appealed to the state supreme court. In its opinion, the state supreme court dealt at length with the ambiguous language of the federal statute and with cases interpreting identical language in federal statutes admitting other states to the union. The state supreme court opinion did not discuss the similar provisions of the state constitution, but it did hold that the challenged state statute is invalid because it is "inconsistent with the language of the federal statute and therefore is inconsistent with the identical provisions of our state constitution."

If the losing party in the state supreme court seeks review of the decision of that court in the United States Supreme Court, how should the United States Supreme Court proceed?

- A. The court should accept the case for review and determine the validity of the interpretation of the federal statute if it is an important and substantial question.
- B. The court should ask the state supreme court to indicate more clearly whether it relied on the state constitutional provision in rendering its decision.
- C. The court should decline to review the case because a decision by a state supreme court concerning the proper disposition of state public lands is not reviewable by the United States Supreme Court.
- D. The court should decline to review the case on the ground that the decision of the state supreme court rests on an adequate and independent state ground.

Explanation:

The **Supreme Court of the United States** (SCOTUS) has appellate jurisdiction to review decisions issued by lower federal courts and the **highest state courts** that concern important and substantial issues of federal law. But SCOTUS has **no jurisdiction to review** a state court decision that is supported by **state-law grounds** that are both:

- **adequate** – when state law completely resolves the matter such that the application of federal law would not affect the outcome of the case *and*
- **independent** – when the state court did not rely on federal law to reach its decision.

Here, a state statute dealing with the sale of certain public lands was challenged in state court and held to be inconsistent with a federal statute *and* the state constitution (adequate state grounds). But the state supreme court's decision relied on federal case law that interpreted identical language in other federal statutes (no independent state grounds) **(Choice D)**. Therefore, SCOTUS should review the state supreme court's interpretation if it is an important and substantial question.

(Choice B) The state supreme court explicitly stated that it relied on federal case law, so no clarification is needed. But even if the grounds for the state court's decision were unclear, SCOTUS would not ask the state court for clarification. Instead, SCOTUS would assume that the state court used federal law to reach its decision, rule on the federal issue, and remand the case to state court to resolve any remaining state-law issues.

(Choice C) SCOTUS can review a state supreme court decision—even if it involves the proper disposition of state public lands—as long as that decision was *not* based on adequate and independent state-law grounds.

Educational objective:

The U.S. Supreme Court has *no* jurisdiction to review a state court decision based on an adequate state-law ground that completely resolves the case independent of federal law.

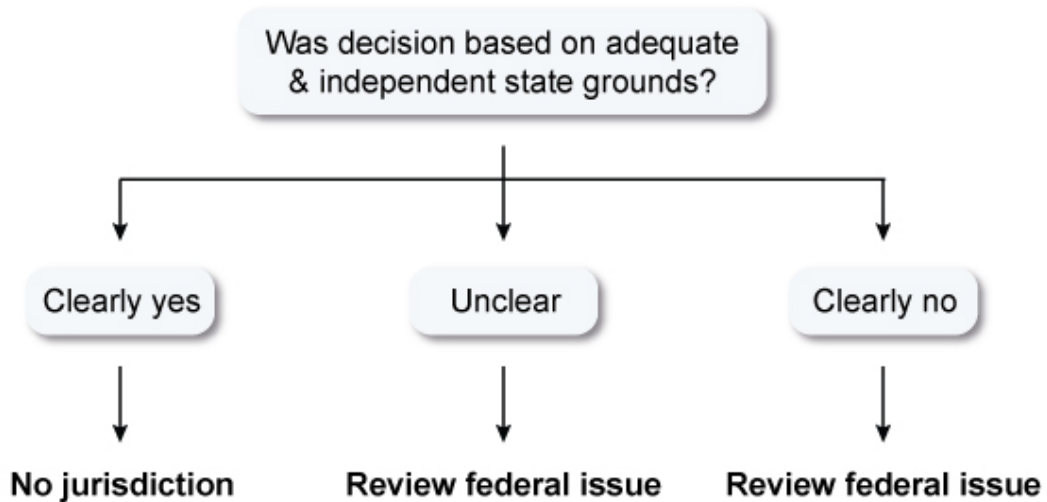
References

- Michigan v. Long, 463 U.S. 1032, 1040–41 (1983) (explaining when a state supreme court judgment rests on adequate and independent state-law grounds).
- 4 Am. Jur. 2d Appellate Review § 44 (2019) (listing the rules to determine whether a decision rests on adequate and independent state grounds).

Copyright © 1997 by the National Conference of Bar Examiners. All rights reserved.

Copyright © UWorld. All rights reserved.

SCOTUS review of state court decisions (adequate & independent state grounds)



SCOTUS = Supreme Court of the United States