



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

DON'T MAKE A FEDERAL CASE OUT OF IT

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“Don’t make a federal case out of it” is a common phrase we have all heard. When we say that, we mean that the matter is not as serious as it may first appear and that we should calm down. By implication the phrase suggests that a federal case is indeed a big, momentous thing and that cases in our state courts are not of the same importance or magnitude.

The reality is that what gets a case into federal court is not the size or importance of the case. Whether a case is “big” or not has no bearing on whether the case belongs in federal court. Federal courts are not just for the “big,” blockbuster, or newsworthy disputes. Most cases filed in federal court do not concern constitutional rights or lend themselves to historic Supreme Court rulings. For the most part, the cases federal courts handle on a daily basis are not the ones that attract a lot of attention but are far more routine. In most federal court proceedings across the country, very few news reporters even attend.

FEDERAL COURT JURISDICTION.

What gets a case into federal court concerns the subject matter of the case and not the size. For a case to be heard in federal court, the court must have subject-matter jurisdiction. We can think of jurisdiction as the power to hear a case. That power must come from either the Constitution or a law passed by Congress.

There are two types of subject-matter jurisdiction. First, federal courts can hear cases involving the Constitution and federal laws passed by Congress, as well as cases involving the federal government. Of course, because of this, some federal cases deal with important matters that make headlines—freedom of speech, voting rights, antitrust. Second, the Constitution also gives federal courts the authority to hear cases involving disputes between citizens, or residents, of different states where the amount at stake is above a certain threshold. Thus, federal courts’ jurisdiction to hear cases is quite limited, especially compared to state courts.

Many federal cases are of concern primarily to the parties involved and do not attract the attention of the country at large. That means a “federal case” might be something as everyday as an automobile accident, a slip-and-fall personal injury, a Social Security benefits dispute, a disagreement over employment discrimination, or a challenge to how a federal agency made a decision. These cases can have a big impact on the people involved even if they never trend on social media.

STATE COURT JURISDICTION.

State courts, in contrast, have very broad jurisdiction. They handle the vast majority of cases in our nation, large cases and routine cases. The great majority of criminal cases—murders, robberies, rapes, assaults, burglaries—present state crimes and are handled in state courts. Cases involving state law such as personal injuries cases, medical malpractice cases, contract disputes, and business disputes are typically tried in state courts. These cases can only be heard in federal court if the parties are from different states and the monetary amount involved is above the required amount. Certain state matters are never heard in federal court at all. For example, divorces and domestic relations matters, the administration of wills, landlord-tenant disputes, and local crimes are only heard in state courts.

CONCLUSION.

The phrase “don’t make a federal case of it” paints a picture that federal courts are places reserved for only the most earth-shaking matters. In truth, these courts are places where the rule of law is applied with the same seriousness whether the case is about a national policy or a single individual’s rights under federal law.

So next time you hear someone say, “Don’t make a federal case of it,” remember: in the real world, a federal case doesn’t have to be a headline-making showdown. It just has to be a matter that falls under federal jurisdiction—big or small, but always important to the people involved.

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