How Does the Federal Judiciary Function?



U.S. District Courts

District Courts are the primary trial courts of the Federal Judiciary in the United States. These courts handle both civil and criminal cases under federal jurisdiction. They have jurisdiction over cases arising under federal statutes, the U.S. Constitution, or treaties, and also handle cases involving parties from different states. There are 94 federal judicial districts across the United States, including at least one district in each state, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories: Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The District of Massachusetts has a courthouse in each division: Boston, Worcester, and Springfield. The United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts is the sole federal district court in the state, headquartered in Boston at the John Joseph Moakley Federal Courthouse.

U.S. Courts of Appeals

The Courts of Appeals review decisions from lower Federal courts and are responsible for making sure the law is applied correctly. If the law is applied incorrectly, it could cause major issues. The lower court's decision is thoroughly reviewed for errors in its application of the law. The lower court's ruling can be overturned if an error is found in its ruling. If no errors are found, the original decision is affirmed.

Appellate judges sit in three-judge panels. The decisions of the Court of Appeals are binding on the district courts in its federal circuit and can only be overruled by the Supreme Court. Courts of Appeals were created in 1891 and replaced the federal Circuit Courts.

Supreme Court of the United States

The Supreme Court of the United States is the highest court in the U.S. and serves as the final authority on federal law and the Constitution. It reviews decisions from lower courts, has the power of judicial review to deem laws or executive actions unconstitutional, and interprets the Constitution to ensure federal and state laws comply. The Court's rulings establish precedent for all other courts, though these can be altered by subsequent decisions or constitutional amendments.
The Supreme Court of the United States consists of a Chief Justice and eight Associate Justices, who hold lifetime appointments. Cases typically come to the Supreme Court through the appeals process, and review is granted only when four justices vote to accept a petition for a *writ of certiorari*. The Court also has original jurisdiction in rare instances, usually concerning state disputes or issues of national importance.

Smith v. Goguen and the Federal Court System

- Valarie Goguen was arrested and convicted under Massachusetts state law for displaying a U.S. flag on the back pocket of his jeans.
- After litigating his case in the Massachusetts state courts, Goguen sought a writ of habeas corpus from the U.S. District Court of the District of Massachusetts.
- In his habeas petition, Goguen argued that his imprisonment was unconstitutional because it violated his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights.
- The District Court granted the writ of habeas corpus and ordered Goguen's release. Judge Campbell held that the Massachusetts statute violated Goguen's constitutional protections.
- The case was then appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, which affirmed Judge Campbell's decision, and ultimately to the Supreme Court of the United States.
- The federal judiciary's role was to determine if the state law conflicted with the U.S. Constitution.
- Affirming the First Circuit, the Supreme Court held that the Massachusetts flag law was unconstitutionally vague under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Fun Facts

- Before 1911, Supreme Court justices traveled across the country to preside over cases in circuit courts; this was called circuit riding.
- The Supreme Court did not have a dedicated building until 1935.



Supreme Court of the United States

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Ashley Ovalle, Hasini Reddy, Kailani Deeran, Niko Maillis

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