

The Judicial Branch of the United States of America

ARTICLE III, UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Article III of the United States Constitution establishes the Judicial Branch of the federal government, a separate and co-equal branch to the Legislative and Executive Branches.

Section 1

The judicial power of the United States, shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish. The judges, both of the supreme and inferior courts, shall hold their offices during good behaviour, and shall, at stated times, receive for their services, a compensation, which shall not be diminished during their continuance in office.

Section 2

The judicial power shall extend to all cases, in law and equity, arising under this Constitution, the laws of the United States, and treaties made, or which shall be made, under their authority;--to all cases affecting ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls;--to all cases of admiralty and maritime jurisdiction;--to controversies to which the United States shall be a party;--to controversies between two or more states;--between a state and citizens of another state;--between citizens of different states;--between citizens of the same state claiming lands under grants of different states, and between a state, or the citizens thereof, and foreign states, citizens or subjects.

In all cases affecting ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, and those in which a state shall be party, the Supreme Court shall have original jurisdiction. In all the other cases before mentioned, the Supreme Court shall have appellate jurisdiction, both as to law and fact, with such exceptions, and under such regulations as the Congress shall make.

Judicial Independence

1. Federal Judges hold their offices during "good behavior" which is interpreted to mean for life or until they decide to retire.
2. While serving as a Judge, their salary cannot be reduced.

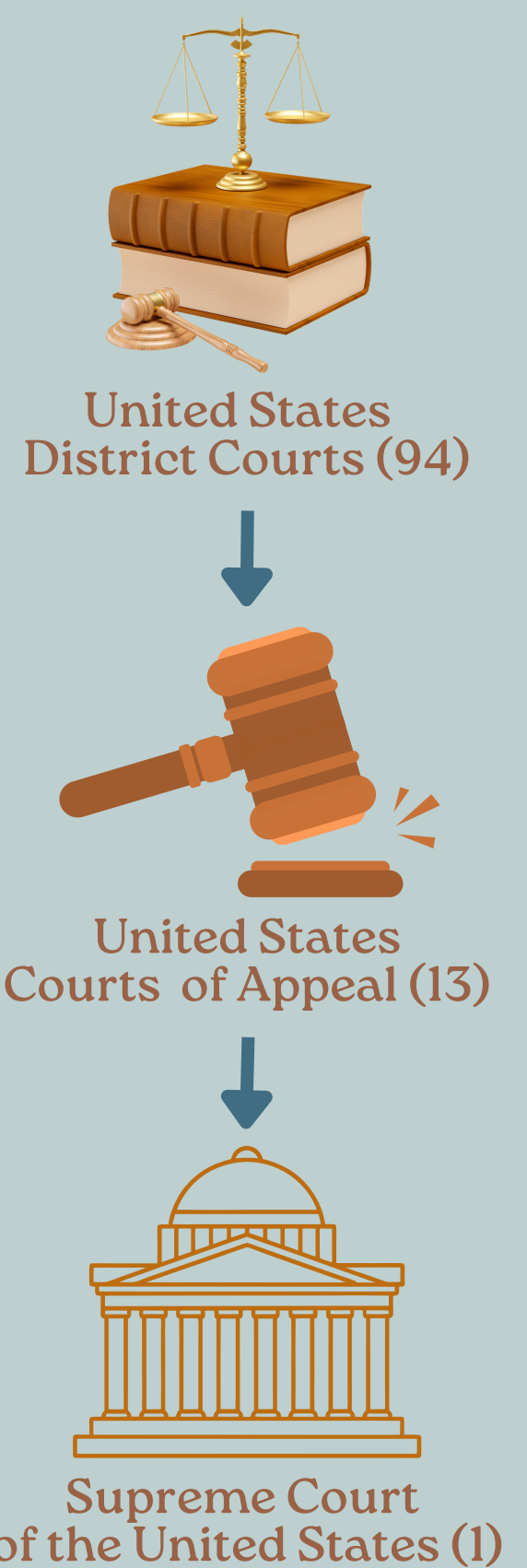
What do these rules allow judges to do?

FEDERAL COURTS

The federal courts have a meticulously structured system that ensures cases are prosecuted to the best of the system's ability. The federal court system consists of 94 United States District Courts, 13 United States Courts of Appeals, and 1 Supreme Court in Washington, DC, the capital of the vast republic. **United States District Courts** have original jurisdiction over civil and criminal cases. Each state has a minimum of one district court and a maximum of four. For example, Puerto Rico has one district court with seven judges. Each federal judge must be appointed by the President of the United States and approved by the Senate; they hold office for life. However, at age 65, they may take senior status, which reduces their workload. To help with the caseload in district courts, District Judges appoint magistrate judges, who serve 8-year, renewable terms. There are also bankruptcy court judges who are appointed by the Circuit Court of Appeals and serve renewable 14-year terms.

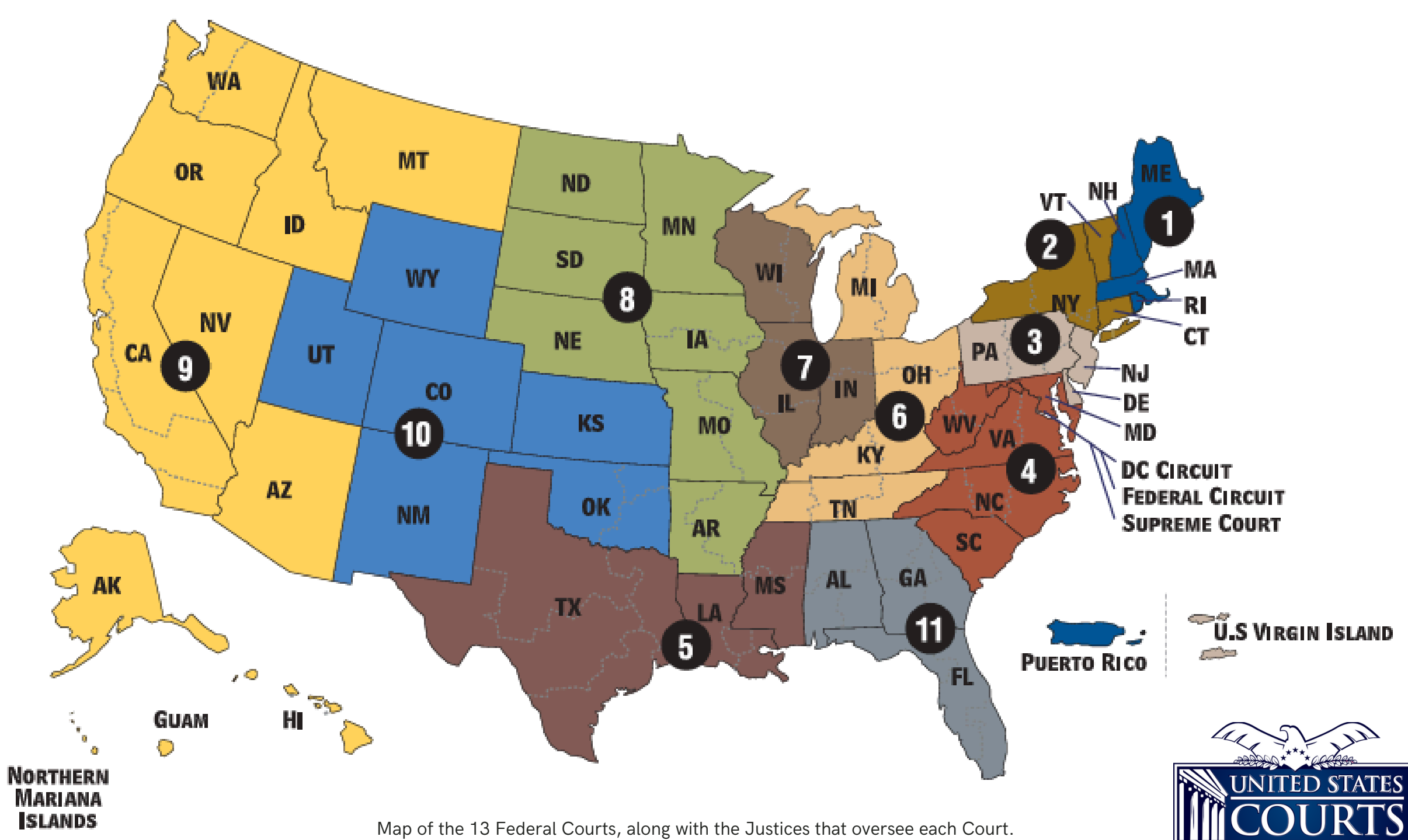
United States Courts of Appeals have appellate jurisdiction and review initial decisions by the District Courts. There are 12 geographic circuits and 1 federal circuit. These exist so that the losing party can petition the higher court to review the decision of the lower court. From 1910 to 1976, 3-judge panels were convened to review cases challenging the constitutionality of federal or state statutes. Today, the federal law states "a district court of three judges shall be convened when otherwise required by an Act of Congress," or for challenges to congressional district appointments. The decisions of the Courts of Appeals are usually the last decision made in federal courts.

Finally, the **Supreme Court of the United States** is the highest Court and has original and appellate jurisdiction over cases. There is 1 Chief Justice and 8 Associate Justices. The Supreme Court is not required to accept all cases; fewer than 100 of the 7,000-8,000 cases petitioned are accepted. The Supreme Court typically accepts cases involving constitutional matters or conflicting rulings from lower Courts of Appeals.



Geographic Boundaries

of United States Courts of Appeals and United States District Courts



The Supreme Court as Composed, 2022 to present.
Photo Credit: Fred Schilling, Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

Justices Over Each Circuit

1. Justice Jackson
2. Justice Sotomayor
3. Justice Alito
4. Chief Justice Roberts
5. Justice Alito
6. Justice Kavanaugh
7. Justice Barrett
8. Justice Kavanaugh
9. Justice Kagan
10. Justice Gorsuch
11. Justice Thomas
- D.C.: Justice Roberts
- Fed: Justice Roberts

FEDERALISM

Federalism is the way the United States shares power between the national government and the state governments. The national government is in charge of things that affect the whole country, like the military, immigration, and printing money. The state governments take care of things that are more local, like schools, police, and job licenses. Both types of government have their responsibilities, but sometimes they work together. Even though they share power, all laws must still follow the U.S. Constitution. Federalism protects individual rights, increases accountability, and encourages citizen participation. It also helps keep a balance so that no level of government becomes too powerful.

CREATED BY THE 2025 "SUPREME COURT AND MY HOMETOWN" STUDENTS

Valeria Colberg, Anna Hernández, Luis Kury, Alejandro Porrata, Ambar Roche

Program sponsored by the Supreme Court Historical Society and
the United States District Court for the District of Puerto Rico

