

The Federal Courts

ARTICLE 3 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, as stated Times, receive for their services, a Compensation, which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office.

- U.S. Constitution

Examining: State vs. Federal Courts

State Court:

Handles cases that fall under state and local laws, such as civil and criminal ones.

Federal Courts:

Handle cases that fall under federal law, when the Federal Government is involved, or when the Constitution is violated.



Examining: Granting a Writ of Certiorari

If either party is unsatisfied with the Appellate Court's verdict, they may appeal to the Supreme Court by filing a writ of certiorari, which translates to "to be informed of" in Latin. After four Justices agree to hear a case, they grant the writ of certiorari. This is called the "rule of four." The case is then scheduled on the docket and the lower court is ordered to send records of the original trial for hearing.



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURTS (94)

TYPES OF CASES

The Federal District Court system is made up of 94 Districts. Currently, you are standing in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama. This court serves 23 counties in the Middle District. Besides this Courthouse there are two other courts; one in Opelika, AL, and the other in Dothan, AL. This court hears cases that address federal or constitutional questions and cases involving multiple states (diversity jurisdiction).

Federal courts only try cases that question federal laws and constitutional issues. If a party disagrees with the federal district court's ruling, it can appeal the decision to the United States Courts of Appeals for its circuit.

JURISDICTION

Original Jurisdiction:

The authority of a court to hear a case for the first time. Commonly, original jurisdiction is given to lower trial courts.

Appellate Jurisdiction:

The authority of a court to review a case that has already been heard and decided upon by a lower court. Most cases the U.S. Courts of Appeals and the Supreme Court hear are appellate. Higher courts often determine if the lower court applied the law correctly.

UNITED STATES COURTS OF APPEAL (13)

The U.S. Courts of Appeals are the intermediate appellate courts that review appeals from cases that have already been heard and ruled on in U.S. District Courts. Made up of 13 circuits (12 territorial and one federal), these courts routinely handle more than 50,000 cases yearly. The 11th Circuit serves the people of Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.

These cases are not retried with new evidence; instead, they rely on court transcripts and previous evidence to evaluate the lower court ruling. Most appellate decisions are final and binding on lower courts within the same circuit. Circuit court judges sit in a three-judge panel to hear cases and determine if the lower court applied the law correctly.

Like all federal judges, Court of Appeals judges are appointed by the President and approved by the Senate. Around 10% of Appellate decisions are appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court hears oral arguments and takes fewer than 100 cases every year.

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States Supreme Court is the highest court in the country, established directly from Article III of the U.S. Constitution. Ninety-nine percent of cases handled by the Court are appellate, and the remaining one percent of cases are original jurisdiction. The Court is composed of one chief justice and eight associate justices. These justices are appointed by the sitting president and confirmed by the Senate.

There have been as few as five associate judges and as many as nine. The current members of the Supreme Court are Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., Justice Clarence Thomas, Justice Samuel Alito Jr., Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Justice Elena Kagan, Justice Neil Gorsuch, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, and Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

The Supreme Court determines the cases it hears by reviewing petitions for writ of certiorari. Court decisions are bound by the Constitution, legal precedent, and public legitimacy, making it a powerful and carefully maintained institution in the American legal system.

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