

The U.S. Courts

Article III of the United States Constitution establishes the judicial branch as one of the three separate and distinct branches of the federal government. The other two are the legislative and executive branches.

The federal courts often are called the guardians of the Constitution because their rulings protect rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Through fair and impartial judgments, the federal courts interpret and apply the law to resolve disputes. The courts do not make the laws. That is the responsibility of Congress. Nor do the courts have the power to enforce the laws. That is the role of the President and the many executive branch departments and agencies.

The Founding Fathers of the nation considered an independent federal judiciary essential to ensure fairness and equal justice for all citizens of the United States. The Constitution they drafted promotes judicial independence in two major ways. First, federal judges are appointed for life, and they can be removed from office only through impeachment and conviction by Congress of "Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors." Second, the Constitution provides that the compensation of federal judges "shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office," which means that neither the President nor Congress can reduce the salary of a federal judge. These two protections help an independent judiciary to decide cases free from popular passions and political influence.

United States Supreme Court

The United States Supreme Court consists of the Chief Justice of the United States and eight associate justices. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States and handles the paramount cases regarding Constitutional law. The President and Senate are responsible for nominating and approving, respectively, the Chief Justice and Associate Justices.

At its discretion, and within certain guidelines established by Congress, the Supreme Court each year hears a limited number of the cases it is asked to decide. Those cases may begin in the federal or state courts, and they usually involve important questions about the Constitution or federal law.

The majority of cases do not start at the Supreme Court; cases are first heard by lower courts. If a case originates at a local level and the losing party does not think that justice was served they may appeal the case to a higher court. If the higher court agrees with the lower court the party may then ask the Supreme Court to take the case. Only cases regarding Constitutional law are brought before the Supreme Court. To win a case in the Supreme Court it takes a majority of the Justices to side with your argument in the case.

The Supreme Court also has original jurisdiction which gives the Court the power to sit as a trial court to hear cases affecting foreign officials and cases in which a state is a party.

The Supreme Court hears approximately 90 cases a year out of the approximately 8,000 that it is asked to hear. The Court is very selective in the cases it hears. Its duties are exercised carefully to insure that lower courts across the nation apply federal laws and the Constitution even-handedly and that those courts give the same meaning and effect to the Constitution and federal laws. The Court often uses its power only when a case presents a pressing issue of constitutional or federal law.

United States Courts of Appeals

The 94 U.S. judicial districts are organized into 12 regional circuits, each of which has a United States court of appeals. A court of appeals hears appeals from the district courts located within its circuit, as well as appeals from decisions of federal administrative agencies.

In addition, the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit has nationwide jurisdiction to hear appeals in specialized cases, such as those involving patent laws and cases decided by the Court of International Trade and the Court of Federal Claims.

United States District Courts

The United States district courts are the trial courts of the federal court system. Within limits set by Congress and the Constitution, the district courts have jurisdiction to hear nearly all categories of federal cases, including both civil and criminal matters. Every day hundreds of people across the nation are selected for jury duty and help decide some of these cases.

There are 94 federal judicial districts, including at least one district in each state, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Three territories of the United States -- the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands -- have district courts that hear federal cases, including bankruptcy cases.

Bankruptcy courts are separate units of the district courts. Federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over bankruptcy cases. This means that a bankruptcy case cannot be filed in a state court.

There are two special trial courts that have nationwide jurisdiction over certain types of cases.

1. The Court of International Trade addresses cases involving international trade and customs issues.
2. The United States Court of Federal Claims has jurisdiction over most claims for money damages against the United States, disputes over federal contracts, unlawful "takings" of private property by the federal government, and a variety of other claims against the United States.

United States Bankruptcy Courts

Federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over bankruptcy cases. Bankruptcy cases cannot be filed in state court. Each of the 94 federal judicial districts handles bankruptcy matters.

The primary purposes of the law of bankruptcy are:

1. To give an honest debtor a "fresh start" in life by relieving the debtor of most debts, and
2. To repay creditors in an orderly manner to the extent that the debtor has property available for payment

United States Special Courts

The Special Courts include US Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, US Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, US Court of Federal Claims, the Court of International Trade, and US Tax Court.

Geographic Boundaries

of United States Courts of Appeals and United States District Courts

