

The American Judicial System

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ABSTRACT

The American judicial system consists of federal and state courts. The federal court system has its basis in the U.S. Constitution. State court systems have their basis in state constitutions or statutory laws. The federal courts have primary jurisdiction on federal law questions, while state courts have primary jurisdiction on laws of each respective state. Legislation relating to schools has increased significantly in both volume and complexity since the mid-twentieth century, and federal and state courts have played an important role in interpreting statutory and constitutional provisions.

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Federal Courts

In part, Article III, Section 1, of the United States Constitution provides that: “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 (*Constitution of the United States*, Article III, Section 1). Pursuant to this provision, Congress has created a network of courts. Presently, the federal court system in the United States includes district courts, circuit courts of appeal, and the Supreme Court (see Figure 1).

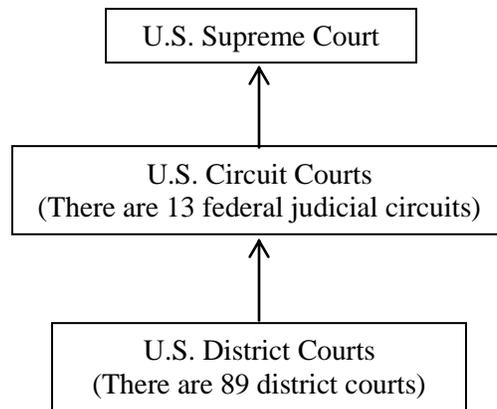


Figure 1. The federal court system.

District Courts

At the lowest court level, district courts hear and decide lawsuits arising within their territorial jurisdictions. There is at least one district court in each state; many states have two or three; and California, New York, and Texas each have four. Cases adjudicated before district courts are usually presided over by one judge. Decisions of district courts may be appealed to federal circuit courts of appeal.

Circuit Courts of Appeal

Courts of appeal represent the intermediate appellate level of the federal court system. The primary function of the appellate court is to review appeals from district courts within the circuit to determine if errors of law were committed, such as procedural irregularities, constitutional misinterpretations, or inappropriate application of rules of evidence. Federal circuit courts have from 3 to 15 judges. Most circuit court decisions are rendered by a panel of the court, but in some instances the entire court will rehear a case. A federal circuit court decision is binding only in the states within that circuit, but such decisions often influence other appellate courts dealing with similar questions of law. The nation is divided into thirteen federal circuit courts of appeal, comprising eleven regions and the District of Columbia Circuit. A thirteenth federal circuit court has national jurisdiction to hear appeals regarding specific claims (e.g., customs; copyrights, patents, and trademarks; and international trade). The jurisdiction of the federal circuits is as follows:

- First: Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Puerto Rico
- Second: Connecticut, New York, and Vermont
- Third: Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the Virgin Islands
- Fourth: Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia
- Fifth: Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and the Canal Zone
- Sixth: Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Tennessee

- Seventh: Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin
- Eighth: Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota
- Ninth: Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Guam
- Tenth: Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming
- Eleventh: Alabama, Florida, and Georgia
- District of Columbia: Washington, D.C.
- Federal: National jurisdiction on special claims

Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is the highest-level court in the federal court system, beyond which there is no appeal. It has been firmly established that the Supreme Court has the ultimate authority in interpreting federal constitutional provisions (*Marbury v. Madison*, 1803). If the constitutionality of a federal statute is contrary to legislative intent, such irregularities can be overturned only by an amendment to the Constitution or by subsequent ruling by the Supreme Court. Congress has done so with a number of civil rights laws in response to Supreme Court rulings (*Grove City Coll. v. Bell*, 1984). Nine justices, including one chief justice, constitute the Supreme Court. The appointments of Supreme Court Justices are for life.

State Courts

State constitutions prescribe the powers and jurisdiction of state courts. The structure of judicial systems varies among the 50 states, but all states have at least three or four levels of courts: courts of limited jurisdiction, courts of general jurisdiction, intermediate appellate courts, and courts of last resort (see Figure 2).

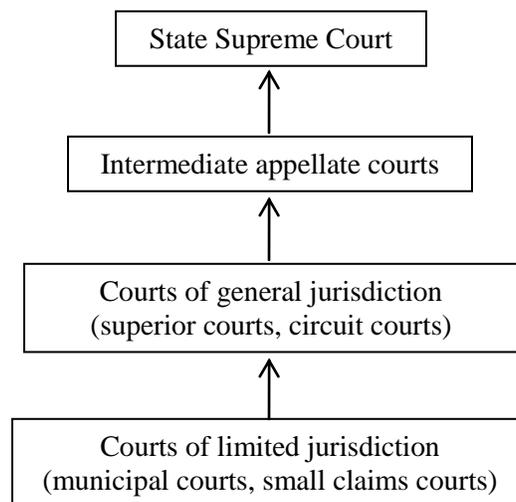


Figure 2. A typical state court system.

Courts of limited jurisdiction. Most states have trial courts, called courts of limited jurisdiction, that hear only certain types of cases (e.g., those concerning probate or criminal matters). These courts hold a variety of names called municipal, justices of the peace, probate, small claims, and traffic courts.

Courts of general jurisdiction. Courts of general jurisdiction are often referred to as circuit, chancery, district, superior, or juvenile courts. Their jurisdiction covers all cases except those reserved for courts of limited jurisdiction. Decisions may be appealed from courts of general jurisdiction to intermediate appellate courts or, in some cases, to the court of last resort.

Intermediate appellate courts. Most states have intermediate appellate courts. These courts have been established to hear appeals from trial courts or certain state agencies. The primary role of the intermediate appellate courts is to review proceedings from trial courts to determine if substantive or procedural errors occurred in applying the law. The purpose of the intermediate appellate courts and the courts of last resort are similar in this regard. The primary difference between the two courts is discretion. The intermediate appellate court has less discretion in accepting cases than does the court of last resort.

Court of last resort. All states have a court of last resort. In most states, the court of last resort is called the supreme court. The primary function of this court is to review lower court decisions on appeal. Nonfederal matters may not be appealed beyond a state's supreme court. However, if a federal question is involved, an appeal may be forwarded to the federal courts or the United States Supreme Court.

Conclusion

The American judicial system consists of federal and state courts. The federal court system has its basis in the U.S. Constitution. State court systems have their basis in state constitutions or statutory laws. The federal courts have primary jurisdiction on federal law questions, while state courts have primary jurisdiction on laws of each respective state. Legislation relating to schools has increased significantly in both volume and complexity since the mid-twentieth century, and federal and state courts have played an important role in interpreting statutory and constitutional provisions.

References

- Constitution of the United States, Article III, Sec. 1.
- Grove City Coll. v. Bell, 465 U.S. 555 (1984).
- Marbury v. Madison, 5 U.S. (1Cranch) 137 (1803).