Federal Court System

Civics Education Project
Courts of the Fifth Circuit

The federal court system is a complex, overlapping multi-court system in which courts are generally defined by their *authority* and their *jurisdiction*. In general, there are three sources of judicial authority:

- The Constitution of the United States, Article III
- The Constitution of the United States, Article I
- United States Code, Title 28

Courts created pursuant to Article III have certain assurances of judicial independence such as life tenure and guaranteed compensation. These courts include the Supreme Court of the United States, 13 appellate courts, and 94 district courts.

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Most court cases start in the **district court**, also known as trial court. These courts may only hear certain types of cases defined by their jurisdiction. District courts hold trials, either criminal or civil, and determine the facts and law of a case.

If one or more parties to that case believe that the trial court erred, for example, by excluding evidence or applying the incorrect law to the facts, then they may appeal to the appropriate **appellate court**. The appellate courts are divided into 13 circuits, so called because these courts sit to hear cases from multiple places in one geographic area. (Originally the judges traveled from place to place via horse.)

A district court case may only be appealed to the appellate court that governs the circuit in which the district court is located. In most cases, an appellate court cannot hear new evidence, and is restricted to the record from the trial court.

Finally, there is the **Supreme Court** of the United States. This court is the trial court for disputes between states (i.e. water rights) or disputes involving ambassadors and other high ranking officials. These are the only cases which the Supreme Court *must* hear. All other cases must apply for a writ of certiorari, which the court may grant or deny.

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