

THE JUDICIAL BRANCH AND ARTICLES IV–VII

Organization of the Judicial Branch

(See Article III, Section 1)

The third branch of the United States government is the judicial branch. We learned that the legislative branch makes the laws and that the executive branch carries out and enforces the laws. It is the job of the judicial branch to interpret, or explain, the laws.

When Congress passes a law and the president enforces it, it is then the job of the Supreme Court to decide what that law really means. The Supreme Court is the major body of the judicial branch. The Supreme Court Building is located in Washington, D.C. The Supreme Court is the highest, and most important, court in the United States. The Constitution spells out what kinds of cases it can hear and what the powers of the Court are. The Constitution also provides for lower courts as well.

The Supreme Court is made up of nine justices, or judges. There are eight associate justices and one chief justice. The justices are appointed by the president and are approved by the Senate. Once approved, they serve for life. They cannot be removed except by impeachment. When deciding a case, only five of the nine must agree to reach a decision. The salaries of the justices cannot be lowered during their time in office. With these checks and balances, the judicial branch is free from interference by the other branches.

There are several other court systems under the Supreme Court. The lowest federal courts under the judicial system are the district courts. There are 91 district courts in the United States. After a case has been heard in the district court, it moves to the United States Court of Appeals. It is here where a case can be appealed, or heard for a second time, to reverse the original judgment. There are 12 appeals courts.

There are also several other courts that feed into the Supreme Court. The highest court in any state is usually the state supreme court. A case can be appealed from a state supreme court to the United States Supreme Court. The Court of Military Appeals, the United States Tax Court, and the United States Claims Court also feed cases to the Supreme Court. These courts hear specialized cases.

