

# Lower Federal Courts



## Supreme Court

- Highest court in the federal system
- Nine Justices, meeting in Washington, D.C.
- Appeals jurisdiction through *certiorari* process
- Limited original jurisdiction over some cases



## Courts of Appeal

- Intermediate level in the federal system
- 12 regional "circuit" courts, including D.C. Circuit
- No original jurisdiction; strictly appellate



## District Courts

- Lowest level in the federal system
- 94 judicial districts in 50 states & territories
  - No appellate jurisdiction
- Original jurisdiction over most cases

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# We the People

insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, We ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

## Article. I.

Section. 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section. 2. The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, in each State shall have <sup>the</sup> Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch in that State.

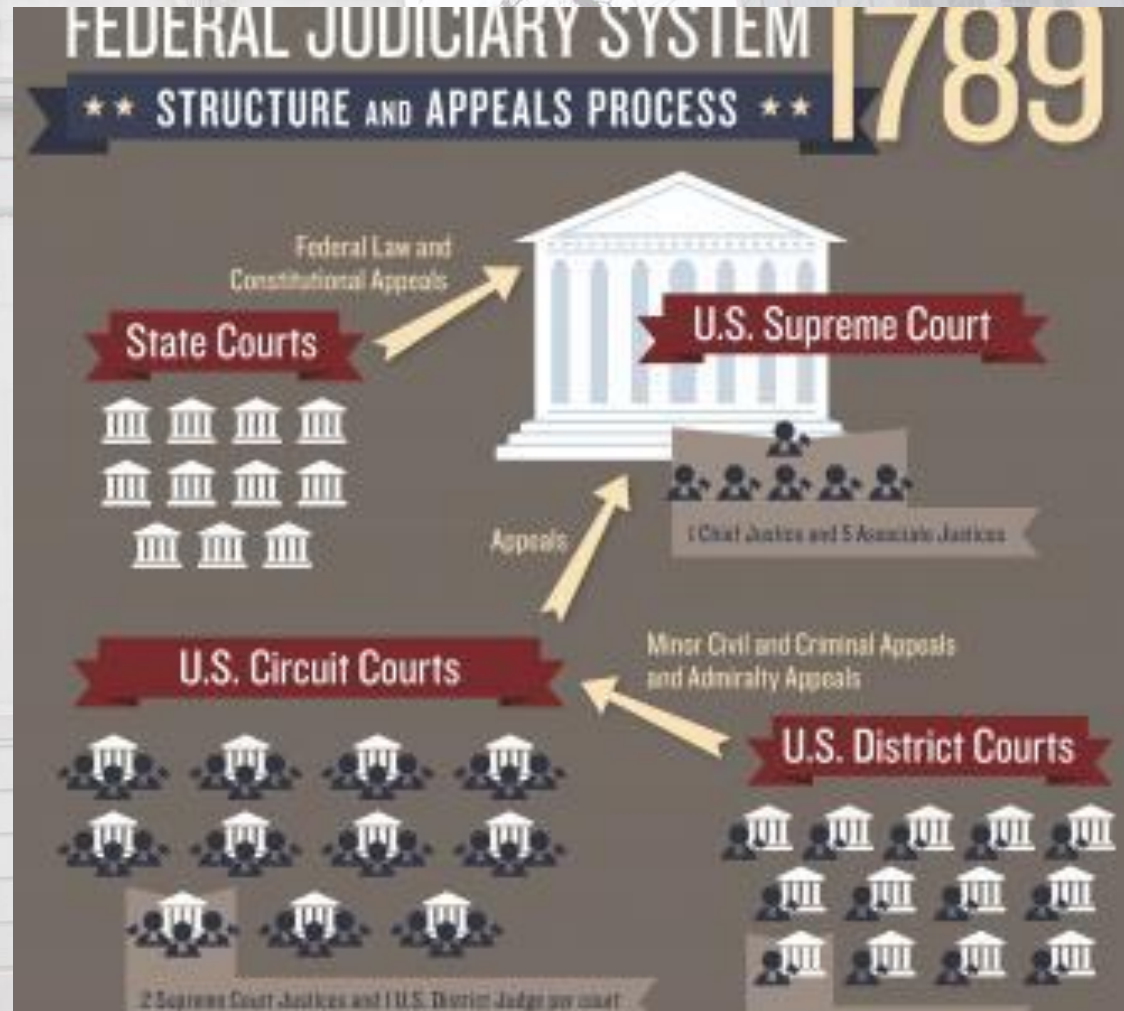
No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, and seven Years, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including all bound Persons for Service and Labor, and



# Federal District Court

- Lowest level of federal courts
- There are 94 district courts – every state has at least 1 district court
- All federal cases must begin at this level because they have original jurisdiction – the authority to hear cases for the first time
- Each court presides over a district
- Responsible for determining facts for a case; where witnesses testify, and juries reach verdicts
- District courts complete about 90% of the federal caseload



Judiciary Act of 1789 – Established federal district courts and circuit courts of appeals

# Federal Judicial Circuits and Districts





# Purpose of the U.S. District Courts

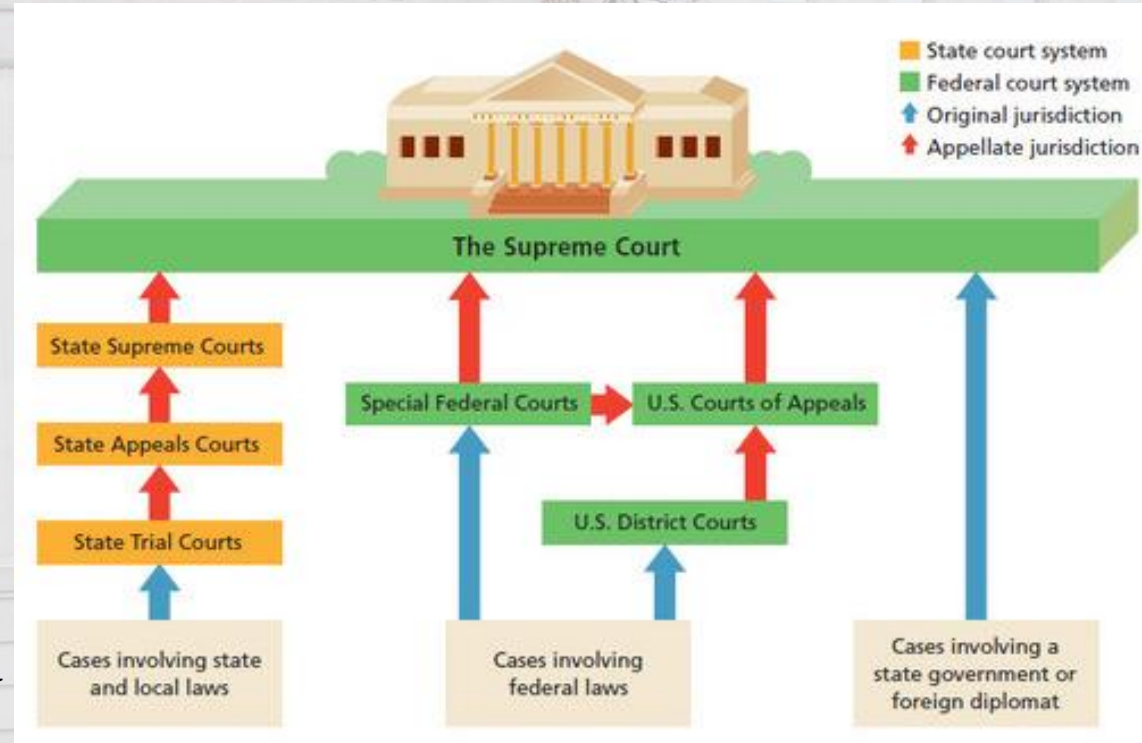
-District courts handle cases that fall under federal jurisdiction

-Hold both criminal and civil trials

-District courts use a jury trial to decide guilt or innocence

-Judges are to interpret the law and determine punishments

\*Federal trials and lawsuits usually begin at the federal district court level



# THE UNITED STATES FEDERAL COURTS





# Federal District Court Officials

-Judges: appointed by the president w/ Senate approval and serve a life terms

There are about 650 judges who preside over district courts; each court has at least 2 judges

-U.S. District Attorneys: represent the government in all cases – appointed to 4-year terms by the president with Senate approval

They investigate complaints of crime, prepare formal charges, and present evidence in court and prosecute people accused of breaking federal laws

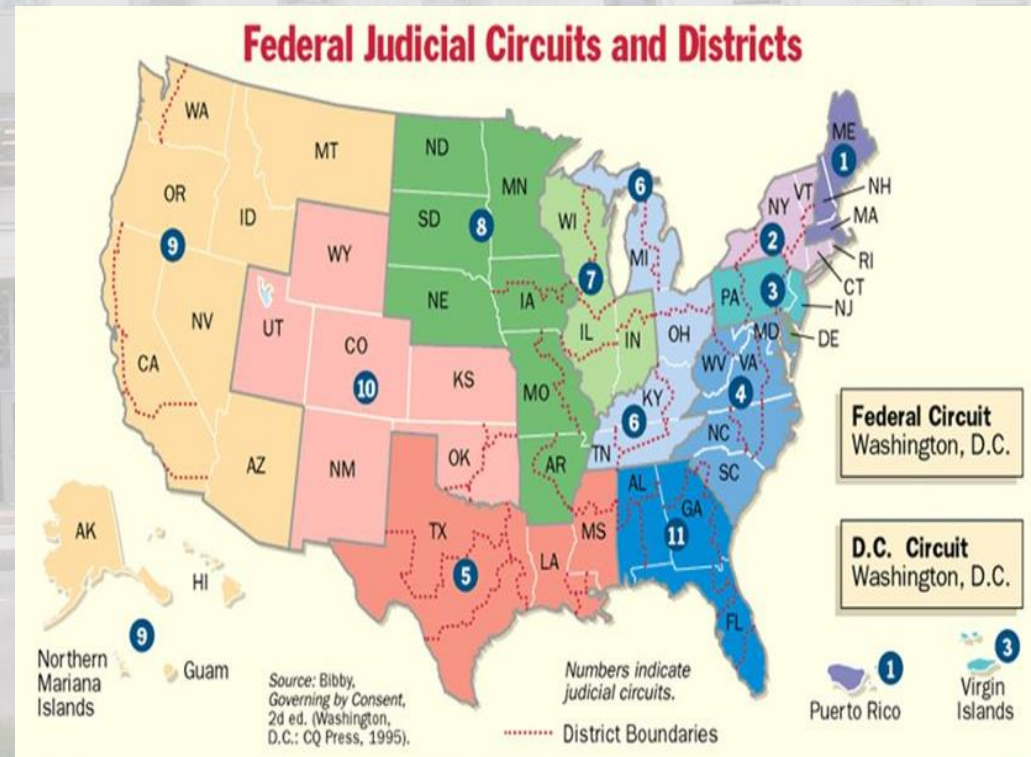
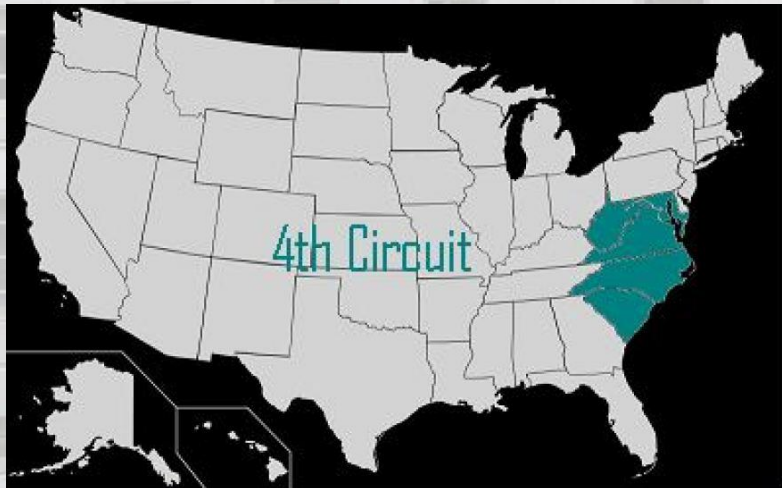
-U.S. Marshals: make arrests, collect fines, and take convicts to prison





# Federal Appeals Court

- Appellate courts serve as the 2<sup>nd</sup> level in the system and only have authority to hear a case that has been appealed from a lower court
- 12 appellate courts (and one to handle specialized cases in D.C.) in the U.S. = 13 total
- Cases are appealed to the court because of unfairness or error (usually a case is appealed when lawyers feel that the district court judge followed the wrong procedure or did not apply the law)
- There also may be new evidence that needs to be heard





# Court Procedure

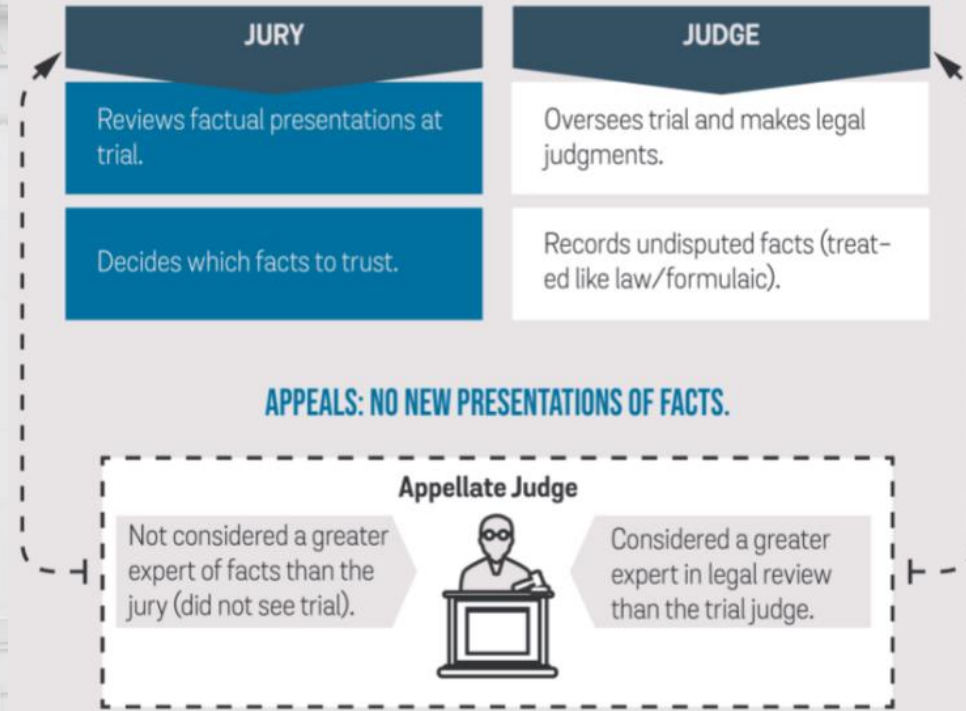
-No juries are used in appeals courts

-No determination is made on guilt or innocence

-Only decision is whether a fair trial was given (and thus, whether rights have been protected)

-Written briefs of the unfair ruling or trial error are prepared and oral arguments are presented before the court

-Panels of 3 or more judges hear the cases and make decisions



**This difference justifies different review standards for factual conclusions vs. legal conclusions.**

## **STANDARDS OF REVIEW**

Appellate courts take a "fresh look" at legal conclusions but will defer to a trial court's factual findings.

### **Clearly erroneous** standard of review

Used for questions of factual judgment. An appeals court will overturn a trial court's conclusion of fact only if "clearly erroneous."

### **De novo** standard of review

Used for questions of legal judgment. An appeals court will take a "fresh look" at legal conclusions without giving deference to the lower court.



# Court Rulings

-Appeals courts can make three decisions in a case:

1. Uphold/Affirm: confirm the previous court's decision →  
(if material facts and issues are the same, similar cases will end up with that ruling)
2. Overturn: reverse the previous court's decision
3. Remand: send the case back down to a lower court for reexamination

## "Stare Decisis"

*The principle that lower court rulings should be governed by the precedent rulings of higher courts*



Illustration by Barbara Kelley