

## United States Supreme Court

The United States Supreme Court consists of the Chief Justice of the United States and eight 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 UNITED STATES FEDERAL COURTS

#### SUPREME COURT

#### UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT

#### APPELLATE COURTS

#### U.S. Courts of Appeals

12 Regional Circuit Courts of Appeals  
1 U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit

#### TRIAL COURTS

#### U.S. District Courts

94 judicial districts

U.S. Bankruptcy Courts

U.S. Court of International Trade  
U.S. Court of Federal Claims

#### FEDERAL COURTS AND OTHER ENTITIES OUTSIDE THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

Military Courts (trial and appellate)

Court of Veterans Appeals

U.S. Tax Court

Federal administrative agencies and boards

## The Jurisdiction of the Federal Courts

Before a federal court can hear a case, or "exercise its jurisdiction," certain conditions must be met. First, under the Constitution, federal courts exercise only "judicial" powers. This means that federal judges may interpret the law only through the resolution of actual legal disputes, referred to in Article III of the Constitution as "Cases or Controversies." A court cannot attempt to correct a problem on its own initiative, or to answer a hypothetical legal question.

Second, assuming there is an actual case or controversy, the plaintiff in a federal lawsuit also must have legal "standing" to ask the court for a decision. That means the plaintiff must have been aggrieved, or legally harmed in some way, by the defendant.

Third, the case must present a category of dispute that the law in question was designed to address, and it must be a complaint that the court has the power to remedy. In other words, the court must be authorized, under the Constitution or a federal law, to hear the case and grant appropriate relief to the plaintiff. Finally, the case cannot be "moot," that is, it must present an ongoing problem for the court to resolve. The federal courts, thus, are courts of "limited" jurisdiction because they may only decide certain types of cases as provided by Congress or as identified in the Constitution.

Although the details of the complex web of federal jurisdiction that Congress has given the federal courts is beyond the scope of this brief guide, it is important to understand that there are two main sources of the cases coming before the federal courts: "federal question" jurisdiction, and "diversity" jurisdiction.

In general, federal courts may decide cases that involve the United States government, the United States Constitution or federal laws, or controversies between states or between the United States and foreign governments. A case that raises such a "federal question" may be filed in federal court. Examples of such cases might include a claim by an individual for entitlement to money under a federal government program such as Social Security, a claim by the government that someone has violated federal laws, or a challenge to actions taken by a federal agency.

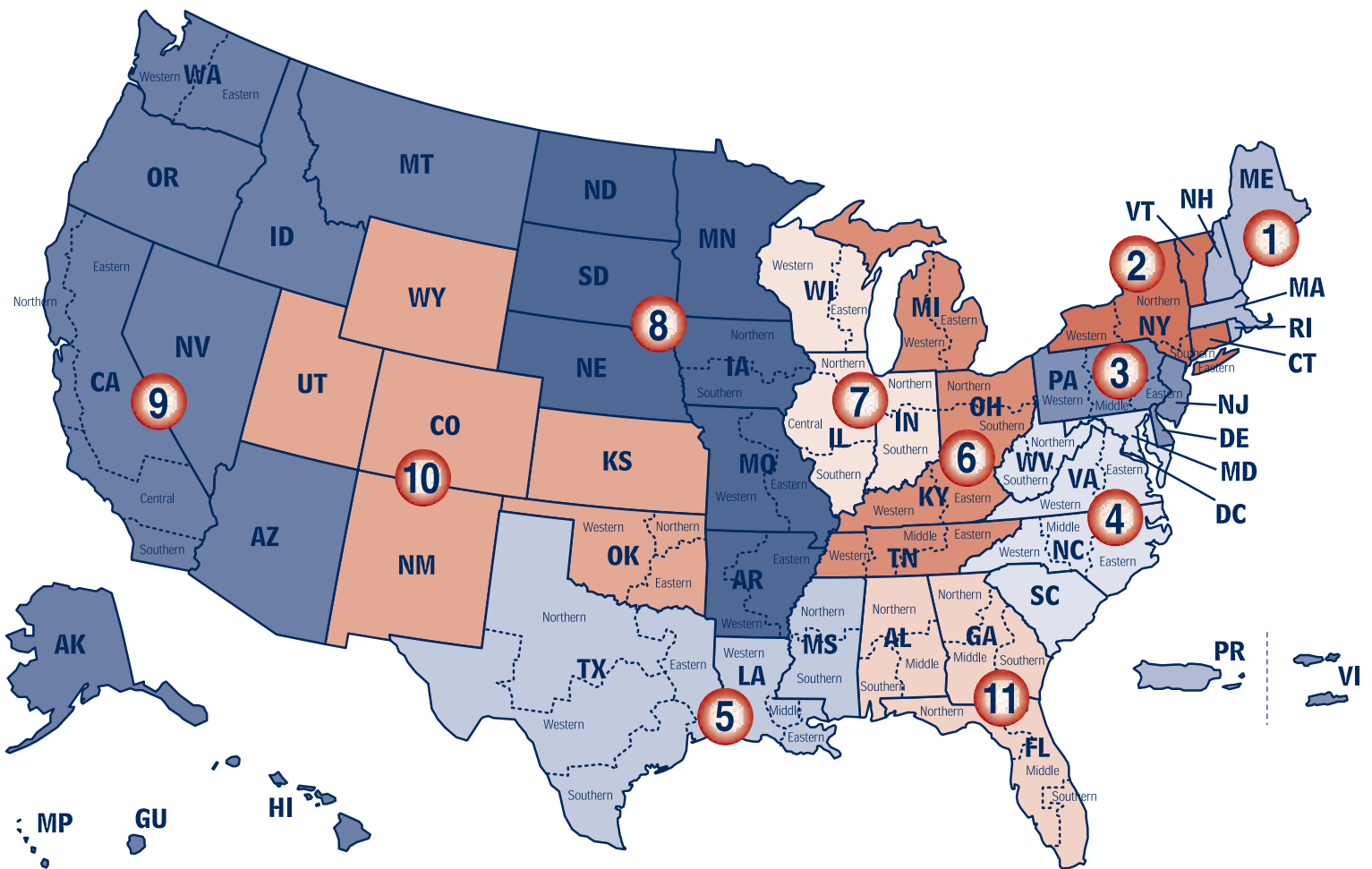
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# GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES

## OF UNITED STATES COURTS OF APPEALS AND UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURTS



A case also may be filed in federal court based on the "diversity of citizenship" of the litigants, such as between citizens of different states, or between United States citizens and those of another country. To ensure fairness to the out-of-state litigant, the Constitution provides that such cases may be heard in a federal court. An important limit to diversity jurisdiction is that only cases involving more than \$75,000 in potential damages may be filed in a federal court. Claims below that amount may only be pursued in state court. Moreover, any diversity jurisdiction case regardless of the amount of money involved may be brought in a state court rather than a federal court.

Federal courts also have jurisdiction over all bankruptcy matters, which Congress has determined should be addressed in federal courts rather than the state courts. Through the bankruptcy process, individuals or businesses that can no longer pay their creditors may either seek a court-supervised liquidation of their assets, or they may reorganize their financial affairs and work out a plan to pay off their debts.

Although federal courts are located in every state, they are not the only forum available to potential litigants. In fact, the great majority of legal disputes in American courts are addressed in the separate state court systems. For example, state courts have jurisdiction over virtually all divorce and child custody matters, probate and inheritance issues, real estate questions, and juvenile matters, and they handle most criminal cases, contract disputes, traffic violations, and personal injury cases. In addition, certain categories of legal disputes may be resolved in special courts or entities that are part of the federal executive or legislative branches, and by state and federal administrative agencies.



## United States Courts of Appeals

<b>Court of Appeals</b>	<b>Districts Included in Circuit</b>	<b>Number of Authorized Judgeships</b>	<b>Location</b>
Federal Circuit	United States	12	Washington, DC 20439
District of Columbia Circuit	District of Columbia	12	Washington, DC 20001
First Circuit	Maine Massachusetts New Hampshire Rhode Island Puerto Rico	6	Boston, MA 02109
Second Circuit	Connecticut New York Vermont	13	New York, NY 10007
Third Circuit	Delaware New Jersey Pennsylvania Virgin Islands	14	Philadelphia, PA 19106
Fourth Circuit	Maryland North Carolina South Carolina Virginia West Virginia	15	Richmond, VA 23219
Fifth Circuit	Louisiana Mississippi Texas	17	New Orleans, LA 70130
Sixth Circuit	Kentucky Michigan Ohio Tennessee	16	Cincinnati, OH 45202
Seventh Circuit	Illinois Indiana Wisconsin	11	Chicago, IL 60604
Eighth Circuit	Arkansas Iowa Minnesota Missouri Nebraska North Dakota South Dakota	11	St. Louis, MO 63101
Ninth Circuit	Alaska Arizona California Hawaii Idaho Montana Nevada Oregon Washington Guam N. Mariana Islands	28	San Francisco, CA 94101
Tenth Circuit	Colorado Kansas New Mexico Oklahoma Utah Wyoming	12	Denver, CO 80294
Eleventh Circuit	Alabama Florida Georgia	12	Atlanta, GA 30303

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