

Article 3: The Judicial Branch

The Judicial Branch

Section 1. Federal Courts

The main purpose of the Supreme Court is to **interpret laws** based on the meaning of the Constitution. Once the meanings of laws, and the Constitution itself, are established, lower courts can use the interpretations to decide legal cases in a court of law. A federal judge holds office for **life** unless impeached and found guilty of illegal acts. The salaries of judges cannot be lowered while they serve. This prevents Congress from pressuring judges by threatening to cut their pay.

Section 2. Jurisdiction

Clause 1. Types of Cases

Jurisdiction is the power of a court to hear certain kinds of cases. The federal courts have jurisdiction over cases dealing with:

- the Constitution
- federal laws
- treaties with Indians or foreign powers
- ships and shipping on the seas
- disputes that involve the U.S. government
- disputes involving two or more states
- disputes between citizens of different states

Clause 2. Original and Appeals Cases

The Supreme Court has "original jurisdiction" in cases that involve the states or foreign countries. Such cases go directly to the Supreme Court. All other cases start first in the lower courts. The decisions of these courts may be appealed to the Supreme Court. Nearly all cases heard by the Supreme Court begin in the lower courts.

Clause 3. Trial by Jury

Anyone accused of a federal crime has a right to a jury trial. The trial is to be held in the state where the crime was committed. The only exception to these rules is impeachment trials.

Section 3. Treason

Clause 1. Defining the Crime

Treason is defined as making war against the United States or aiding its enemies. Convicting someone of treason is not easy. At least two witnesses must testify in court that they saw the accused commit an act of treason. Or the accused must confess to the crime in court. Talking or thinking about treason is not a crime.

Clause 2. Limits of the Punishment

Congress decides how to punish treason. It can only punish the convicted traitor, however. Punishments cannot extend to that person's family.

Thurgood Marshall was the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court. His career was marked by many important cases involving civil rights.



Supreme Court 2009



Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court. O'Connor was appointed in 1981 by Ronald Reagan.