



# THE UNITED STATES COURT SYSTEM

## Class Notes



### I. Federal (US) Courts

- A. Article III of the U.S. Constitution establishes the judicial branch
- B. Supreme Court only court specifically mentioned in Constitution
- C. Constitution allows Congress to create “inferior” federal courts

### II. Jurisdiction

- A. *Original jurisdiction*- trial court, hears case for the 1st time
- B. *Appellate jurisdiction* - appeals decisions from lower courts

### III. Federal Court Structure

- A. Constitutional Federal Courts - (Established by Article III of the Constitution)
  1. ***U.S. Supreme Court***
    - a. Highest federal court with both original and appellate jurisdiction
    - b. 9 justices
  2. ***U.S. Court of Appeals*** - Created in 1891
    - a. Has only appellate jurisdiction
    - b. 13 courts, 168 judges
    - c. Hear appeals (@ 34,000/year and climbing) from five jurisdictions:
  3. ***U.S. District Courts*** - Created in 1789
    - a. The trial courts in the federal system with original jurisdiction in most cases
    - b. 94 (with at least one in each state, Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico); 500+ Judges with 12 regional circuits
    - c. Hear cases of criminal and civil federal cases; Hear 90% of all federal cases (@312,000/year)
- B. Legislative Courts - helps Cong. exercise its powers; specialty courts in which members have fixed terms
  1. ***US Claims Court*** - original jurisdiction. >>> hear claims against US
  2. ***U.S. Tax Court*** - original jurisdiction >>> Tax cases of citizens v. IRS or Treasury Dept.
  3. ***Military Appeals Court*** - appellate >>> “GI’s Supreme Court”

### IV. Dual Court System

- A. The U.S has two separate court systems: federal and state
- B. ***Dual Sovereignty*** - a doctrine holding that state & federal authorities can prosecute the same person for the same conduct (Rodney King, Emmett Till murder, DC Sniper case)
- C. ***Federal Courts*** - Constitutional issues & federal laws (mail fraud, terrorism, forgery)
- D. ***State Courts*** - state laws (ex: murder, assault, robbery; Everything else left to the states (95% of all cases))
- E. A person can be charged in federal & state courts for committing the same act
  1. Not considered “double jeopardy”
  2. ***Double Jeopardy*** - can’t be tried twice for the same offense in the same court if found not guilty

### V. Types of Law

- A. **Criminal Law**- The Government (“The People”) versus The Defendant
  1. Offenses considered to be crimes against society as whole
  2. Warrant punishment by and in the name of society
  3. Examples: Alexis Murphy abduction and murder, Yeardeley Love murder
- B. **Civil Law** – The Plaintiff v. The Defendant
  1. The body of laws of a state or nation dealing with the rights of private citizens
  2. Suits between individuals or groups of individuals against each other or a governmental body.
  3. Usually involves monetary redress or stop/take action or both.
  4. Examples: OJ Simpson civil case – OJ found “liable for wrongful death;” customer suing McDonald’s for scalding coffee injury
- C. **Constitutional Law** - Relates to the meaning of the Constitution in a case.

### VI. Guiding Principles of the American Legal System

- A. ***Equal Justice Under the Law***”- Every citizen is treated and judged fairly, regardless of who they are.
- B. ***Due Process Under the Law***- The government must respect all of the legal rights owed to a person under the law
- C. ***Adversarial System of Justice*** - The accused is entitled to present their case in court along with the prosecution
- D. ***Presumption of Innocence*** - Accused is “innocent until proven guilty with the burden of proof on the government