

Federal vs state courts essay sample

[Law](#), [Court](#)



The United States is at the forefront of modern democracy. Its unique three branched system allows the government to operate under a quasi-idealistic form of checks and balances. As outlined by the U. S. Constitution, the judicial branch of government serves as the interpreter of the law and is “one of the most sophisticated judicial systems in the world.”¹ This complexity is a product of balance and structure in the form of a judicial hierarchy, with the Supreme Court at the top and local courts at the bottom. Further distinctions between federal and state courts include the selection of judges and types of cases addressed by each court. Federal courts, including the Supreme Court, generally overhear cases that affect federal constituents while local or state courts address more specialized cases.

“ Although the state and federal judicial systems are separate, federal and state courts can both rule on the same case,”² as exemplified by *Gideon v. Wainwright*. When evaluating the distinctions between federal and state courts, one must first analyze court structure and its significance. The Judiciary Act of 1789 established the United States judicial system. The Supreme Court, “ consisting of the Chief Justice of the United States and eight associate justices,”³ is the highest court in the land. It serves as the final interpreter of the law and can overturn any decision made by a lower court. Below the Supreme Court lie various circuit courts which are “ organized regionally, with ‘ circuits’ made up of three or more states,”⁴ thus, forming the Court of Appeals.

These appellate courts are specialized in addressing district court cases within a certain circuit, with the exception of the Federal Court of Appeals which generally hears cases in the District of Columbia as well as

administrative cases. The ninety four district courts serve as the “ primary trial courts of the federal judicial system.” 5 Most federal cases are heard and resolved in district courts, which “ exercise no discretion over the cases they hear.” 6 When analyzing this federal judicial structure, one comes to the conclusion that federal cases are efficiently addressed, with only the most important matters needing the attention of the Supreme Court. Ultimately, this level of organization and specialized jurisdiction is mirrored in state courts, with some apparent distinctions. Similarly to the federal court system, the state court system contains a Supreme Court, Intermediate Court of Appeals, and various trial courts.

These trial courts differ from federal trial courts primarily in the form of jurisdiction. Not only do they hear state specific trials, but most states “ operate two sets of trial courts: courts of limited jurisdiction and courts of general jurisdiction.” 7 Limited jurisdiction trial courts address criminal and civil cases of a minor degree, while general jurisdiction trial courts hear cases involving major criminal or civil charges. This two set trial court system is nearly ubiquitous among all states, but the diversity in state court systems is a more significant factor to analyze. Each state has a specialized court system that adheres to its inhabitants. Factors such as geography, population, and case topics largely determine the formation of specialized courts in each state. Colorado, for instance, has a specialized Water Court that hears cases involving the drainage systems and water rights of the state.

Furthermore, states can adjust their court systems to meet new demands that are produced by factors such as urbanization and socioeconomic growth. Therefore, “ in contrast to the federal court system, whose basic structure was largely established in 1789, many state court systems reflect the continuing pattern of demand and response that occurred in the state.”⁸ An additional factor to consider in comparing federal and state courts is the judge selection process. According to Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, the president of the United States “...shall appoint...Judges of the Supreme Court,” which require approval by the Senate. As ideally phrased in Tarr’s *Judicial Process & Policymaking*, “ the appointment of judges by a single person secures better judgment, imparts a greater sense of responsibility for the choice, and ensures that there will be ‘ fewer personal attachments to gratify’ in selecting judges.”

Although this justification is opinionated in the slightest, it draws attention to the fact that a judicial appointment by one president can essentially determine the outcome of various landmark cases for years. This is exemplified in *Grutter v Bollinger*, where “ the Court held that it was permissible to give some preference to racial minorities as part of a larger program to enhance diversity in the student body.”¹⁰ In stark contrast to the federal judicial selection process, the state judicial selection process contains a variety of methods; including elections, appointments, and merit selections. Not only do these processes vary from state to state, but each type of court may have a different method of judicial selection as well. One can witness this concept in South Dakota, where the merit selection process is used in appellate courts and the nonpartisan election process is used in

trial courts. This multi-court, multi-selection system is highly complex and frequent in each state.

An immediate effect of this setting is lack of information for common voters, who often vote, or do not, based on immaterial factors such as party affiliation. Despite the necessity for judges to lack any affiliation with a party, most lean towards the option with greater campaign and endorsement capabilities. However, in an attempt to remain on course, one must ignore such conspiracies of corruption and evaluate the most significant factor in comparing federal and state courts; jurisdiction.

The intricacies of court jurisdiction at both the federal and state levels morph an already complex judicial system into a true labyrinth of legality. Simply stated, certain courts can only hear certain cases. Generally, cases involving constitutionality of law, habeas corpus, ambassadors, state disputes, admiralty, and bankruptcy are heard by a federal trial court. Usually these cases are addressed and resolved in district courts, however cases may reach the Court of Appeals, which “ primarily engages in error correction, overseeing the work of the district courts in cases that are of interest only to immediate parties.”¹¹ Any case heard by the Supreme Court generally involves major constitutional arguments, and due to the importance of such matters, a limited number of cases are selected each year.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court holds the power of appellate jurisdiction, thus enabling any decision by the Supreme Court to overrule that of a lower federal or state court. This level of complete jurisdiction by the federal Supreme Court is mirrored to a lesser degree by state supreme courts. In

each state, “ a state Supreme Court is responsible for the development of state law, and its decisions serve as authoritative precedent within the state court system.”¹² Lower level state courts hear most criminal, probate, contract, tort, and family law cases. As previously stated, this wide range of jurisdiction allows a variety of courts to be established to address the immediate needs of the people in each state. Thus, jurisdiction is an essential factor in analyzing the judicial systems of the United States.

In an attempt to differentiate between the federal and state court systems, one must consider three essential factors: court system structure, judicial selection process, and jurisdiction. Both the federal and state court systems contain similar structures, but significantly contrast in the judicial selection process and level of jurisdiction. Despite the establishment of such a sophisticated and seemingly chaotic organization of courts and cases, the judicial system of the United States promotes candor and equality in such a way that exemplifies the American form of democracy and truly justifies its motto, “ E pluribus unum.”