

## The U.S. Supreme Court

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The controversy over "Indecision 2000" continues this month as legal battles over the outcome of the 2000 Presidential election move to America's highest court. On December 1, the Supreme Court will consider constitutional questions arising from a previous ruling by Florida's Supreme Court, which forced Secretary of State Katherine Harris to accept manually recounted ballots after the state's November 14 deadline.

GOP lawyers argue that Article II of the U.S. Constitution explicitly gives full power to a state's Legislature—not its Supreme Court—over the appointment of presidential electors. The suit also contends that the Florida Supreme Court's ruling introduced new election procedures after the election, thus violating voters' rights to due process.

Given the current focus on the U.S. Supreme Court this month, and with continuing legal battles over who actually won the Florida vote, December is an excellent time to introduce students to a brief study of America's highest court.

### Structure of the U.S. Federal Courts

The Federal Judiciary refers to America's federal court system. Included in this branch of government are trial courts, appellate courts (courts of appeals), and the Supreme Court. Ask students to visit the [Federal Judiciary](http://www.uscourts.gov/fedcourts/fedcourts.asp) site and study the graphic of the structure of the [United States Federal Courts](http://www.uscourts.gov/fedcourts/fedcourts.asp). What federal courts are outside the judicial branch? Discuss the unique role of these entities.

#### Curriculum Standard

- [TEKS: 113.35](#)  
United States Government

(9.C) Students analyze the structure and functions of the judicial branch of government, including the federal court system and types of jurisdiction.



Have students return to the [main](#) page and click [Frequently Asked Questions](#). They can then click on each of the questions about Federal Judges and read each answer. Pose these questions: What is the term for a Supreme Court justice? Who appoints them?

## The Role of the Supreme Court

Moving on to the Supreme Court, check for background knowledge by asking students about the role of the Supreme Court in relation to the other two branches of the federal government. Develop a list of questions or clarification points that students can take with them to the [United States Supreme Court](#) site by the USCC+ Database. The site is divided into six sections; ask students to study the first four. They should look for answers to their questions, or answers to the questions posed:



[I. The Court and Constitutional Interpretation](#). In terms of defending the Constitution of the United States, what power does the Supreme Court have? What kinds of cases does the Supreme Court hear?

[II. The Court as an Institution](#). Where did the Supreme Court originally meet? How many Chief Justices have there been in the history of the court?

[III. The Court and Its Traditions](#). Explain the symbols on the traditional seal of the Supreme Court. Why do all Justices shake hands at the beginning of the day?

[IV. The Court and Its Procedures](#). On what day does a Term of the Supreme Court begin? Who announces the entrance of the Justices and what is said?

## The Justices of the Supreme Court

It's worth taking time to learn about the nine extraordinary men and women who serve as Justices of the Supreme Court. A good Web resource for this is the [Oyez Project](#) of Northwestern

University. When the site opens, ask students to click [Justices](#), and then click the name of each Justice (listed in order of seniority). From there they can study the *Appointment*, *Family*, *Education/Experience*, and *Biographical Sketch* of each Justice. Who is the current Chief Justice and when was he appointed? Do his opinions suggest he is more conservative or liberal in his views?

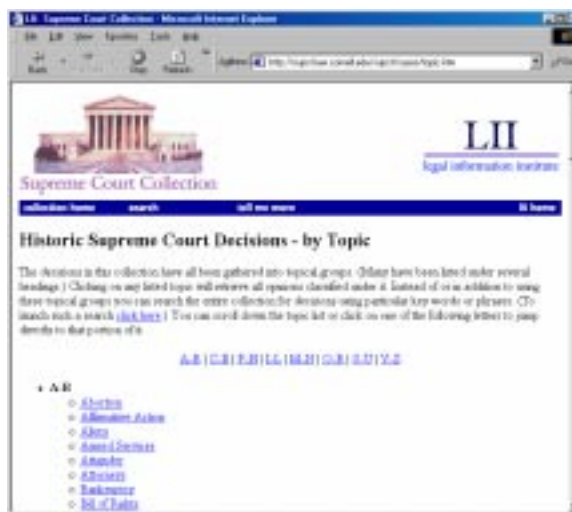
While you're at the Oyez Project site, don't miss the chance to take a [virtual tour](#) of the U.S. Supreme Court Building (requires QuickTime 4.1). Along the tour you and your students will see 360-degree panorama images of each part of the building.



## Supreme Court Decisions

It's too early to tell how the Supreme Court will rule on the case before it (but for the first time in history, a recording of the hearing will be available to the media within hours after arguments have been presented). In the meantime you and your students can search the Legal Information Institute's [Supreme Court Collection](#) to learn how the court has ruled on important issues in the past. Working individually or in teams, invite students to scroll down the list and click any topic of interest.

By clicking *Education*, for example, students will see a list of cases and dates. One of the most important civil rights cases was *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which discrimination in public schools was ruled unconstitutional. Click the + symbol next to that case to see an expanded view and read the judgments.



Go back to the topics list and click *Voting*. What cases regarding voting have come before the Supreme Court in the past? What were the judgments?

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**Reference:**

Federal Judiciary

<http://www.uscourts.gov/>

United States Federal Courts—Federal Judiciary site

<http://www.uscourts.gov/outreach/structure.jpg>

USCC+ Database—United States Supreme Court

<http://www.uscplus.com/info/index.htm>

The Oyez Project

<http://oyez.nwu.edu/>

Supreme Court Collection— Legal Information Institute

<http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/cases/topic.htm>