



**“What’s On the Ballot?” North Carolina Courts Explainer**

**NC Judges are on the ballot.** Judges are powerful. They decide cases that change lives. They decide whether laws have been followed and, sometimes, whether laws stay in place or get overturned. Judges handle cases about education, your right to vote, criminal charges, family matters, and even traffic tickets. The choices they make can affect you, your family and your community.

- **N.C. Supreme Court is the state’s highest court.** It has 7 justices. The Court makes the final decisions on important legal questions in our state, including cases about elections, education law, and individual rights of North Carolinians.
- **N.C. Court of Appeals** is the next highest court. It has 15 judges. This court reviews decisions made by trial courts to make sure the law was applied correctly.
- **Trial Courts** are the lower courts. They include District and Superior Courts. Trial courts often hear cases first. They decide criminal cases, set sentences, and handle civil cases like divorce, child custody, and other disputes.

The *Appellate Division* includes the N.C. Supreme Court and the N.C. Court of Appeals. Appellate courts do not hold new trials. Instead, they review decisions from lower courts to decide if the law was applied correctly.

**North Carolina Supreme Court:** The Supreme Court is the highest court in the state. Its decisions are final. It’s made up of seven justices, elected statewide, who serve eight-year terms. Trial courts look at the facts of a case and hear witnesses. Appellate courts do not hold new trials. Instead, they review decisions from lower courts to decide if the law was applied correctly. The N.C. Supreme Court also has an important leadership role. It sets rules, policies, and standards that judges and court staff across the state must follow. The N.C. Supreme Court upholds the North Carolina Constitution and serves as a protector of your rights. It’s made up of seven justices, elected statewide, who serve eight-year terms.

**Current Makeup of the NC Supreme Court**

<b>JUSTICE</b>	<b>PARTY</b>	<b>NEXT ELECTION</b>
Paul Newby	R	2028
Anita Earls	D	2026
Phil Berger Jr.	R	2028
Tamara Barringer	R	2028
Richard Deitz	R	2030
Trey Allen	R	2030
Allison Riggs	D	2032



**North Carolina Court of Appeals:** Most cases are heard by a rotating panel of three judges assigned by the NC Supreme Court's Chief Justice. The NC Court of Appeals reviews cases from trial courts to make sure the law was applied correctly. If someone disagrees with the decision made by the Court of Appeals, they can ask the N.C. Supreme Court to review the case. It's made up of 15 judges, elected statewide, who serve eight-year terms.

#### Current Makeup of the NC Court of Appeals

JUDGE	PARTY	TERM ENDS
John Arrowood	D	2026
Jeffrey Carpenter	R	2028
Allegra Collins	D	2026
Chris Dillon (Chief Justice)	R	2028
Julee Flood	R	2030
Christopher Freeman	R	2032
W. Fred Gore	R	2028
Jefferson Griffin	R	2028
Toby Hampson	D	2026
Thomas Murry	R	2032
Michael Stading	R	2030
Donna Stroud	R	2030
John Tyson	R	2030
April Wood	R	2028
Valerie Zachary	R	2032

**Superior Court:** These trial courts decide serious criminal cases, such as felony charges, and civil cases involving over \$25,000. They also hear appeals of misdemeanor cases from the District Court. In Superior Court, people charged with serious crimes have the right to a jury trial. Judges serve eight-year terms and rotate among counties within districts on a set schedule.

**District Courts:** District courts are trial courts that hear civil, criminal, and juvenile matters. These courts handle less serious criminal cases, such as misdemeanors, as well as traffic cases and small claims. It also hears many family law matters, including divorce, child custody, and child support. Most cases in the District Court are decided by a judge, not a jury, though some civil cases may include a jury. District Court judges are elected by voters in their local district every four years.



Not all voters may have Superior Court or District Court races. To see if an election is being held in your district and learn about candidates, visit [ncvoter.org/guide](https://ncvoter.org/guide)

### ***How do the Courts impact you?***

In 2017, North Carolina shifted from non-partisan to partisan judicial elections, and in 2022, the NC Supreme Court's majority flipped, leading several landmark cases that were previously decided to be overturned. It's an important reminder that the ideological balance of the court can affect laws surrounding crucial issues such as education, voting rights, environmental protections, and reproductive access.

- **Education is on the ballot.** *Leandro v. State*
  - In 1994, school boards in Cumberland, Halifax, Hoke, Robeson, and Vance counties sued the State of North Carolina, arguing that the way schools were funded violated the North Carolina Constitution. Over the years, the N.C. Supreme Court has ruled that every child in the state has a constitutional right to a “sound basic education,” which includes well-trained teachers, strong principals, and adequate resources. The Court ordered the state to fix the problem and fund a comprehensive plan. But lawmakers have repeatedly delayed or resisted full funding. The case has returned to the courts multiple times, and the Supreme Court is again reviewing key issues. The outcome will shape whether the constitutional promise of a sound basic education is real or just words on paper.
- **Democracy is on the ballot.** *Harper v. Hall and NC NAACP v. Moore*<sup>1</sup>
  - In 2022, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that partisan gerrymandering violated the state constitution and struck down legislative and congressional maps. In 2023, after the Court's majority changed, it reversed that decision and ruled that partisan gerrymandering claims are not for courts to decide. That reversal reshaped who has the power to draw voting maps in North Carolina.

In a related case, the Court ruled that lawmakers elected from unconstitutional maps could not automatically amend the state constitution. That decision raised questions about amendments such as voter ID and the income tax cap, and whether they were passed by a legislature drawn from unlawful districts.

Voter ID litigation remains part of this story. After the voter ID amendment passed in 2018, it has faced multiple legal challenges under the North Carolina Constitution, including claims of racial discrimination and unequal impact. Courts have issued different rulings over time, and the legal fight has continued in both state and federal courts. Future state Supreme Court decisions could

---

<sup>1</sup><https://statedemocracy.law.wisc.edu/featured/2024/supreme-court-of-north-carolina-2023-review-and-2024-preview/>



determine how voter ID is enforced and whether it complies with constitutional protections.

Together, these cases show how much power the North Carolina Supreme Court has over elections, voting rights, and the rules of democracy.

- Environmental protections are on the ballot. ***Clayton, et. al. v. Person County***
  - Residents in Person County challenged rezoning decisions that allowed the construction of Dominion Energy’s Moriah Energy Center, a liquefied natural gas storage facility. They argue the decision ignored health and environmental risks, including air pollution, water safety concerns, noise, and traffic impacts. Cases like this show how courts can influence local control, environmental protections, and corporate accountability.
- **Reproductive freedom is on the ballot.**
  - After Roe v. Wade was overturned, state courts became the front line for decisions about reproductive rights. Some state supreme courts have ruled that their constitutions protect abortion access. Others have allowed strict bans to remain in place. In 2023, North Carolina lawmakers passed a 12-week abortion ban. That law is currently being challenged in federal court. But future challenges under the North Carolina Constitution could reach the state Supreme Court. The makeup of the Court will determine how state constitutional rights are interpreted in the years ahead.
- **Criminal Justice issues are on the ballot. *State v. Hobbs:***
  - In State v. Hobbs, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that lower courts did not properly consider evidence that Black jurors were excluded because of race during jury selection. The Court ordered a new hearing. The case highlights the Court’s role in protecting the right to a fair trial and addressing racial discrimination in the justice system.

**Where can I learn more about the issues in front of the courts? Check out Why Courts Matter? at [whyjudgesmatternc.com](https://www.whyjudgesmatternc.com) to learn more. To find races on your ballot, visit [ncvoter.org/guide](https://ncvoter.org/guide)**

