

The Oklahoma Court System is made up of

- Supreme Court
- Court of Criminal Appeals
- Court of Civil Appeals
- 77 district courts – one for each county
- Courts of limited jurisdiction

Courts of limited jurisdiction

- Most common is municipal courts, where you go for city citations and traffic tickets

District courts hear the majority of cases

- Civil, like divorces and lawsuits
- And criminal

Unlike most states, Oklahoma has **two courts of last resort** – meaning there are no higher courts

- Court of Criminal Appeals, which has **5 judges**
- Supreme Court, which has **9 justices**

Civil appeals

- are decided by the **Supreme Court** or **Court of Civil Appeals**
- The Supreme Court **also hears challenges to state laws and changes to the Oklahoma Constitution**

The **Court of Criminal Appeals** decides **all criminal appeals**

For a long time

- Oklahoma's **highest court judges were elected**
- They ran campaigns as **politicians**, raising money and making **campaign promises**

In 1965

- **Former Supreme Court Justice** Corn testified **he and 2 other justices took bribes**
- Corn claimed to take \$150,000 (**equaling nearly \$1.2 million today**), paying \$7,500 (or **nearly \$60,000 today**) to each of the other **2 justices**
- Bribes were **disguised as campaign contributions to rule in favor of an Oklahoma business**
- 1 justice was **jailed**, 1 was **impeached and removed** from office and 1 **resigned**
- Scandal gained **national attention**
- Oklahoma's court system was called "**the best justice money can buy.**"
- But it brought about **positive change...**

In 1967

- **Oklahoma voters chose** to amend the Oklahoma Constitution
- Create the **Judicial Nominating Commission** (or JNC)
- Establish **governor-appointed** judges

Now, the Judicial Nominating Commission

- Helps **ensure impartial judges** by **eliminating the influence of political pressure** and campaign promises
- Since the new system was enacted, there have been **no instances of bribery or scandal involving appointed judges**

So how does the Judicial Nominating Commission work?

The Judicial Nominating Commission has

- 15 unpaid volunteer members
- **6 are lawyers** elected by Oklahoma Bar Association members
- **9 cannot be lawyers** and **cannot have a lawyer in their immediate family** (even in another state)

Of those 9 nonlawyers:

- 6 are appointed by the **governor**
 - Not more than 3 governor's picks **can be from one political party**
- 1 is chosen by the **speaker of the House**, 1 by the **Senate pro tempore** and 1 by the **other commission members**
 - Not more than 2 of those **can be from the same political party**

Though **district court judges are usually elected...**

The **governor appoints judges** to the highest courts:

- Supreme Court
- Court of Criminal Appeals
- Court of Civil Appeals

When a judge or justice on these courts **retires or their term expires**, lawyers and judges can **apply to fill the vacancy**.

To **help ensure the most qualified candidates are appointed**, the Judicial Nominating Commission

- Carefully **reviews all applications**
- Provides the governor with **only the three most-qualified applications**
- The **governor selects one** of these three to fill the vacancy
- Once appointed, they appear on an election ballot
 - Oklahoma voters choose if they **get to keep (or retain) their position**
 - This is **called a retention ballot** and only requires a **"yes" or "no" vote**