

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*¹

In 2022, the N.C. 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, and the case shows how much power the State Supreme Court has over elections and the rules of democracy.

Environmental protections are on the ballot: *Clayton, et. al. v. Person County*

Residents in Person County challenged

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

Cont. — 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: *State v. Hobbs*

In *State v. Hobbs*, the N.C. Supreme Court ruled 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.

Want to learn more about the issues before the courts? Explore *Why Courts Matter?* at whyjudgesmatternc.com. To find races on your ballot, visit ncvoter.org/guide



⚡ 2026 WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT

North Carolina Courts Explainer



N.C. 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. Their choices 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 Court of Appeals. Appellate courts do not hold new trials. Instead, they review lower court decisions to decide if the law was applied correctly.

North Carolina Supreme Court

The Appellate Division is made up of the N.C. Supreme Court and the N.C. Court of Appeals. Decisions made by the N.C. Supreme Court are final, and are decided by seven justices serving eight year terms. While trial courts review the facts of a case to make decisions, appellate courts review if the law was followed correctly by the lower courts. Through its administrative responsibilities, the N.C. Supreme Court sets policies and standards for judges and court administrators to follow.

Current Makeup of the NC Supreme Court

Justice	Party	Next Election
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 N.C. Supreme Court’s Chief Justice. The N.C. Court of

Cont. — 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

Justice	Party	Next Election
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

North Carolina 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 the court 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, traffic cases, and small claims. It also hears many family law matters, such as 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

HOW DO THE COURTS IMPACT YOU?

In 2017, North Carolina shifted from non-partisan to partisan judicial elections, and in 2022, the N.C. 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.