Since the establishment of the judicial branch of Ohio government with the adoption of the first state Constitution, 161 men and women have served as judges and justices of the Supreme Court of Ohio. These public servants have come from every corner of our diverse state. That first Constitution provided for a court consisting of three judges and required they hold session each year in every county of Ohio. So the judges traveled extensively on horseback, and the early sessions of the court were not held in courtrooms or the Statehouse, but in private homes.

Today, there are seven justices who serve on the Court, each elected by the citizens of Ohio in all 88 counties. The justices serve six-year terms, with two seats open for election every even-numbered year. The exception is in the year when the position of chief justice is open, when three seats are up for election. The chief justice, in addition to hearing cases and writing opinions, oversees the administrative functions of the Court and its superintendence of the Ohio judiciary.

The justices hear oral arguments, deliberate on cases, and conduct other business in the Thomas J. Moyer Ohio Judicial Center, the Court’s home on the Scioto River in Columbus. The Court still holds session outside of Columbus twice each year in a program designed to educate high school students about the judicial branch and the workings of the Court.

This guide is designed to introduce citizens to the justices of the Supreme Court by providing basic biographical information. For more information about the justices, the Court, and the state judiciary, including live and archived video of oral arguments, visit the Supreme Court website at sc.ohio.gov.

**The Supreme Court of Ohio**

Maureen O’Connor  
Chief Justice

Sharon L. Kennedy  
Judith L. French  
Patrick F. Fischer  
R. Patrick DeWine  
Michael P. Donnelly  
Melody J. Stewart  
Justices
Chief Justice Maureen O’Connor is the 10th chief justice and the first woman in Ohio history to lead the Ohio judicial branch.

Since she took office in 2011, Chief Justice O’Connor has led significant reforms and improvements in the Ohio judicial system, including improving access to justice by addressing the impact of court fines, fees, and bail practices on economically disadvantaged communities, an issue she focuses on as co-chair of the National Task Force on Fees, Fines and Bail Practices. She also is past president of the Conference of Chief Justices and immediate past chair of the National Center for State Courts Board of Directors.

In addition, in 2016, she started an effort to address the opiate/heroin epidemic by gathering legal experts and state court officials from nine surrounding states to determine ways to address the issue on a regional basis. She also established a task force to improve public trust and confidence in grand juries, created a committee to examine the administration of the death penalty, and proposed improvements to strengthen judicial elections.

She joined the Supreme Court of Ohio as a justice in January 2003, and was re-elected in November 2008. She was elected chief justice in 2010, and was re-elected in 2016. Her first statewide judicial election in 2002 made her the 148th justice to the Court, the sixth woman to join the Court, and gave the Court its first-ever female majority.

Born in the nation’s capital and raised in Strongsville and Parma, Chief Justice O’Connor’s career in public service and the law spans three decades and includes service as a private lawyer, magistrate, common pleas court judge, prosecutor, lieutenant governor, and Supreme Court justice.

She earned her bachelor of arts degree at Seton Hill College in 1973, before earning her law degree from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 1980.

While practicing as an attorney during the early 1980s, Chief Justice O’Connor created a home for her family and her legal career in Northeast Ohio. Appointed a magistrate in Summit County in 1985, she served in that capacity until becoming a common pleas court judge in 1993. As a busy trial judge, Chief Justice O’Connor was selected by her peers to serve as the administrative judge.

She resigned from the bench to become the Summit County prosecuting attorney in 1995. There, she aggressively prosecuted repeat offenders, violent criminals, and public officials who committed ethical violations or improprieties, and lobbied the General Assembly for tougher laws on rape and gang-related offences. Her untiring work received accolades from victims’ rights groups and educational institutions. In 1998, she was elected lieutenant governor. She became the governor’s chief adviser on criminal justice issues, serving as director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety, and as chair of Ohio’s Security Task Force and the State Building Security Review Committee.

In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, she led the state’s response to new threats of terrorism by working with law enforcement, Ohio EMA, and the Department of Homeland Security, efforts that garnered praise of federal homeland security officials.

Chief Justice O’Connor has two adult sons, Alex and Ed Kipp, and has five grandchildren.

Last day of current term: Dec. 31, 2022.
On Nov. 4, 2014, Justice Sharon L. Kennedy was re-elected to a full term on the Supreme Court of Ohio after a decisive victory winning all 88 counties and garnering 73 percent of the vote. Justice Kennedy first joined the Court in 2012, having been elected to fill an unexpired term.

Prior to her term on the Ohio Supreme Court, Justice Kennedy served at the Butler County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division beginning in 1999. From 2005 to December 2012, Justice Kennedy served as the administrative judge. Working with state legislators she championed a “common sense” family law initiative to reduce multiple-forum litigation for Butler County families.

When Butler County faced tough economic times, Justice Kennedy organized elected officials in a county-wide Budget Work Group. Seeing the need to bring private sector financial know-how to the government, she worked to create an Advisory Committee to the Budget Work Group. Justice Kennedy served as the facilitator and led discussions between county officials and private sector leaders to analyze county finances, study and implement cost-saving measures, and present business-driven fiscal policy to the county commissioners.

In 1991, after obtaining her law degree from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Justice Kennedy worked as a solo practitioner. While in private practice she served the legal needs of families, juveniles, and the less fortunate. As special counsel for Attorney General Betty D. Montgomery, Justice Kennedy fought on behalf of Ohio’s taxpayers to collect monies due the State of Ohio. As a part-time magistrate in the Butler County Area Courts, she presided over civil litigation and assisted law enforcement officers and private citizens seeking the issuance of criminal warrants for arrest.

Justice Kennedy began her career in the justice system as a police officer assigned to a rotating shift, single-officer road-patrol unit at the Hamilton Police Department. From the routine, to the heart-pounding, to the heart-breaking, she saw it all. During her time as an officer, Justice Kennedy also worked undercover operations, implemented crime prevention programs, and assisted in drafting police policy and procedure for its accreditation program.

Justice Kennedy has served on numerous boards, developed and facilitated programs to address the needs of young people, and worked with judges across the state. As a dedicated jurist, she has received many awards of recognition, including: The AMVETS Department of Ohio 2018 Past Department Commanders’ Civil Servant of the Year Award; The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution Silver Good Citizenship Medal, May 5, 2018; Leadership Ohio Community Leadership Award, 2016; The University of Cincinnati College of Law Nicholas Longworth, III Alumni Achievement Award, May 17, 2014; Northwest High School Distinguished Alumnus Award, April 25, 2014; named one of 13 professional women to watch by The Cincinnati Enquirer, March 17, 2013; Excellence in Public Service, June 2009; Judge of the Year, 2006; Above the Fold Award, 2002; and the Furtherance of Justice Award, 2001. Justice Kennedy also was featured in Trends in the Judiciary: Interviews with Judges Across the Globe, Volume II, published by CRC Press in February 2015.

Justice Judith L. French became a justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio in January 2013 and was elected to her first full term in 2014. With a history of public service and wide-ranging legal experience, a passion for equal justice, and a special interest in civic education, Justice French is committed to serving as a resource for the people of Ohio.

For the past two decades, Justice French has dedicated her career to public service. In that time, she served the State of Ohio as a lawyer for a state agency, an assistant attorney general, counsel to the Governor, and, finally, as a judge.

In 1993, she joined the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency as deputy director for legal affairs. From 1997 to 2002, she worked for Attorney General Betty Montgomery as an assistant attorney general, and later as chief counsel.

While in the Attorney General’s Office, Justice French argued two cases before the United States Supreme Court. One of those cases was the Cleveland School Vouchers case, in which she served as lead counsel. Her successful presentation of the state’s position helped ensure equitable educational opportunities for every Ohio student.

From 2002 to 2004, Justice French served as chief legal counsel to Governor Bob Taft. In that role, she served as the chair of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Task Force, which made recommendations to the legislature for making Ohio’s sex-offender laws more effective.

In 2004, Justice French was elected to the Tenth District Court of Appeals, where she served for eight years. In December 2012, Governor John Kasich appointed her to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court of Ohio.

Justice French began her career as an attorney with the Columbus law firm of Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur, specializing in environmental law, and she also served as in-house counsel for a large manufacturing company.

Justice French understands the critical need for access to judicial and the gap between that need and the resources available to Ohioans who cannot afford a lawyer. In 2013, she served on the Supreme Court’s Access to Justice Task Force, which recommended immediate and practical remedies to widen judicial access. Working with the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation and legal-aid organizations around the state, Justice French also advocates for changes and programs to ensure access to justice for all Ohioans.

The daughter of a schoolteacher, Justice French appreciates her Ohio roots and education, and is committed to supporting civic education in Ohio. As an attorney, she served as a tutor and mentor in the Columbus Public Schools and she currently serves as a College Bound mentor for Franklin County Children’s Services.

Justice French received three degrees from The Ohio State University: a B.A. in political science, an M.A. in history (with a concentration in military history and strategic studies), and a J.D., with honors. She is a member of the Moritz College of Law National Council, and in 2018 was awarded the college’s Distinguished Jurist Award for her work on the bench.

Justice French resides in Grandview Heights with her husband. They have two children.

Last day of current term: Jan. 1, 2021.
Justice Patrick F. Fischer began his six-year term on the Supreme Court of Ohio on Jan. 1, 2017, following his election in November 2016. Previously, he was elected to serve as a judge on the Ohio First District Court of Appeals in 2010, and was re-elected in 2012.

Justice Fischer has dedicated himself to the practice of law for more than 30 years. An honors graduate of Harvard Law School and Harvard College, as a practicing lawyer he tried cases throughout the country, and was named to Best Lawyers in America, one of the Top 50 Lawyers in Cincinnati, and one of the Top 100 Lawyers in Ohio. He routinely was named to Ohio Super Lawyers.

A respected member of the legal community, from 2012 to 2013 then-Judge Fischer served as president of the Ohio State Bar Association. He previously served on the Ohio State Bar Association’s Board of Governors, chaired its budget and headquarters committee, and served on numerous other Ohio State Bar Association committees and task forces, and in its House of Delegates. Justice Fischer recently completed his second tenure on the board of the Ohio Lawyers Assistance Program. He also was elected by his peers to serve as president of the Cincinnati Bar Association for 2006 through 2007.

Justice Fischer has an abiding interest in ethics and professionalism. As an attorney, he served two terms on the Ohio Supreme Court’s Commission on Professionalism, including serving as vice chair. He also chaired the Cincinnati Bar Association’s ethics and professional responsibility, as well as its professionalism, committees.

Having represented plaintiffs and defendants while an attorney, Justice Fischer knows the importance of being able to see and listen to both sides of an issue. Knowing and understanding the law as he does, Justice Fischer is aware of how important it is that the law be applied properly to the facts in each case. The late Chief Justice Thomas J. Moyer named him to co-chair a task force to make Ohio’s judicial system more efficient and just. He served on the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission, and was vice chair of its committee on the judicial branch.

Justice Fischer began his legal career with a clerkship for U.S. District Court Judge William Bertelsman, and in 1987, he began working for the law firm of Keating Muething & Klekamp. Four years later, he became a partner in the trial department. Although on inactive status, he also is a licensed attorney in Texas.

Justice Fischer has served on numerous local boards, such as the Hamilton County Mental Health & Recovery Services Board, Visions Community Services Board, St. Ursula Villa, and the Pleasant Ridge Community Council. He was a founding member of the Cincinnati Children’s Museum and served on its board.

Justice Fischer, his wife Jane, and their dog live in Cincinnati. He has one married daughter who is a practicing attorney in Ohio, and one grandson. A graduate of St. Xavier High School, Justice Fischer also is an active, long-time member of St. Xavier Catholic Church in downtown Cincinnati, serving as both a lector and Eucharistic minister.

Last day of current term: Dec. 31, 2022.
Justice DeWine began his six-year term on the Supreme Court of Ohio on Jan. 2, 2017, following his statewide election in November 2016. An excellent writer, Justice DeWine is known for the quality and thoroughness of his legal opinions. His opinions reflect his strong belief in judicial restraint and his respect for the constitutional roles of the other coequal branches of government.

Justice DeWine has served at all levels of the Ohio judiciary. Prior to his election to the Supreme Court, Justice DeWine served on the First District Court of Appeals, and prior to that, on the Hamilton County Common Pleas Court.

Justice DeWine has a strong commitment to furthering the rule of law through education. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati College of Law, where he teaches Appellate Practice and Procedure. He also taught courses at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio Government & Politics and American Courts.

Justice DeWine graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in the top 10 percent of his class with Order of the Coif honors. At Miami University for undergraduate studies he had a perfect 4.0 grade-point average and received summa cum laude honors. He also was a member of the varsity track and cross country teams.

After law school, he served a clerkship on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. He served under the Honorable David A. Nelson, who was appointed by President Ronald Reagan.

Justice DeWine understands the litigant’s perspective, having practiced law for 13 years with one of Cincinnati’s top law firms, Keating, Muething & Klekamp. He represented clients in appellate matters in Ohio and in federal courts across the country. He handled a diverse range of litigation matters, including mass tort bankruptcies, securities fraud litigation, and constitutional issues.

Justice DeWine brings a unique perspective to the bench because of his public service as a county commissioner and a member of Cincinnati City Council.

As a member of the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners, he focused on reforming county government, lowering the tax burden, eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy, and promoting public safety. He led the citizens referendum that repealed the nearly $1 billion sales-tax increase enacted by his colleagues on the Commission. The Reason Foundation named him an “Innovator in Action,” for his efforts to reform county government.

On Cincinnati City Council, he was known as a taxpayer watchdog, successfully rooting out wasteful spending and abuse in city government. He helped eliminate unnecessary regulations, led the effort to crack down on quality-of-life issues affecting city neighborhoods, and created a development fund that leveraged private capital to spur new housing development downtown and across city neighborhoods.

He was a founder of the Build Cincinnati reform group that successfully passed a charter amendment to allow Cincinnati voters to directly elect the mayor.

Last day of current term: Jan. 1, 2023.
Justice Michael P. Donnelly is the 160th justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio. He took office in January 2019, following his statewide election in November 2018 to a full term on the Court.

Prior to joining the state Court, Justice Donnelly served as a judge on the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, General Division for 14 years, from 2005 to 2018. He was elected to the seat in November 2004 and re-elected in 2010 and 2016.

Before serving as a member of the local judiciary, Justice Donnelly was an assistant Cuyahoga County Prosecutor from 1992 until 1997. He went on to practice civil litigation for seven years, representing plaintiffs and injured workers in asbestos litigation, personal injury lawsuits, and workers’ compensation claims.

In recent years, Justice Donnelly served as chair of the Ohio Supreme Court’s Commission on Professionalism and currently is a member of both the Ohio State Board of Bar Examiners and the Ohio Jury Instruction Committee. He was appointed by the chief justice to the Ohio Supreme Court Death Penalty Task Force in 2013.

In addition, from 2010 to 2017, he was one of five judges on Cuyahoga County’s Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Court, which oversees criminal cases involving defendants who suffer from schizophrenia, schizophrenic disorder, or a developmental disability. He also has been a faculty member of the Ohio Judicial College, teaching both attorneys and judges at numerous continuing legal-education seminars on professionalism and issues of civil and criminal justice reform.

He is a proud recipient of the Honorable William K. Thomas Professionalism Award from the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and also received the Ohio Association of Civil Trial Attorneys 2017 Public Service Award.

Justice Donnelly serves on the board of the Cleveland Baseball Federation, which helps inner-city boys and girls play baseball and softball in the summer at no charge. He also was involved with the development of the Western Reserve Fire Museum, which educates children about fire safety.

He is a graduate of St. Ignatius High School and John Carroll University, both in Cleveland, and received his Juris Doctor degree from Cleveland State University’s Cleveland-Marshall College of Law. He was admitted to the practice of law in Ohio in 1992.

He and his wife, Nancy, reside in Cleveland Heights. They have two children.

Last day of current term: Dec. 31, 2024.
Justice Melody J. Stewart was elected in November 2018 to a full term as the 161st justice to serve on the Court. Prior to joining the Supreme Court, Justice Stewart served on the Eighth District Court of Appeals – elected to an unexpired term in 2006, and twice reelected to full terms. She served as the court’s administrative judge in 2013.

Justice Stewart has more than 30 years of combined administrative, legal, and academic experience. She was an administrator for a health care management company, a music teacher, a civil defense litigator, and a law school administrator and professor before being elected to the Court of Appeals. While on the appellate court, Justice Stewart was assigned to hear cases in other appellate districts and on the Ohio Supreme Court.

Justice Stewart earned a Bachelor of Music degree from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati; her law degree as a Patricia Roberts Harris Fellow from the Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, Cleveland State University; and her Ph.D. as a Mandel Leadership Fellow at Case Western Reserve University’s Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. She also was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Cleveland State University in 2018.

After practicing law as an assistant law director for the cities of Cleveland and East Cleveland, Justice Stewart worked as a lecturer, an adjunct instructor, and an assistant dean at Cleveland-Marshall before joining the full-time faculty. Her primary teaching areas were ethics and professional responsibility, criminal law, criminal procedure, and legal research, writing, and advocacy. Additionally, she taught at the University of Toledo College of Law and at Ursuline College. She also was director of student services at Case Western Reserve University’s School of Law.

Justice Stewart has served on many boards of trustees and been a member of various professional, educational, civic, and community organizations. She also served as a commissioner and chair of the Board of Planning and Zoning for the city of Euclid. Recently, Justice Stewart completed serving as a member of the Ohio Criminal Justice Recodification Committee; on the board of the Supreme Court’s Judicial College; and as chair of the Ohio Capital Case Attorney Fee Council.

Justice Stewart is admitted to practice in the state and federal courts in Ohio, the District of Columbia, and the United States Supreme Court.

Of historical note: Justice Stewart is the first African-American woman elected to the Ohio Supreme Court.

Last day of current term: Jan. 1, 2025.