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Membership of the Supreme Court, as specified by the establishing act, consisted of a Chief Justice and five Associate Justices. Congress made frequent changes in the number of Associate Justices until in 1869 it fixed the number at eight.

The date for convening the Court has changed frequently, and the terms are named for the months in which the Court convened. The 1789 act that established the Court provided for two terms annually, one to begin the first Monday in February and the other the first Monday in August. In February 1801 an act provided that the Court should meet on the first Monday in June and December of each year. In March 1802 this legislation was repealed and the days for convening were restored to those provided in the act of 1789. In April 1802 an act abolished the August term except for the receipt of motions and other routine business. Because of these changes there was no session of the Court after the one convened in December 1801 until February 1803. By an act effective in 1827 the annual term was set to begin on the second Monday in January, and in 1845 the day was changed to the first Monday in December. In 1873 the day was changed to the second Monday in October, and in 1916 to the first Monday in October, which remains as the day for beginning the annual term. The Supreme Court may also hold special terms when necessary for the dispatch of its business.

Until 1869, except for a brief interval in 1801-2, members of the Supreme Court served as regular members of the Federal circuit courts, of which the district judges were also members (1 Stat. 73; 2 Stat. 89, 132, 156). On April 10, 1869 (16 Stat. 44), Congress provided for the appointment of a circuit judge in each circuit who was to have all the powers of the circuit justice, as a member of the Supreme Court serving on circuit was known. The act also provided that each member of the Supreme Court should attend as least one term of the circuit court in each district during every 2-year period. The act of March 3, 1891 (26 Stat. 826), which established the circuit courts of appeals, provided that members of the Supreme Court were competent to sit as judges of the circuit courts of appeals within their respective circuits.

An alphabetical list of members of the Supreme Court, 1789-1831, which gives the dates of their service on the Court, appears after the information on related record groups in these introductory pages.