

# Traditional Republican on the Rehnquist Court: The Career and Legacy of Sandra Day O'Connor



## David Hackett Souter: Traditional Republican On The Rehnquist Court by Tinsley E. Yarbrough

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Sandra Day O'Connor made history in 1981 when she became the first female Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Her appointment by President Ronald Reagan marked a watershed moment in American history and signaled a new era of diversity and inclusion on the nation's highest court.

O'Connor served on the Court for 25 years, during which time she established herself as a moderate conservative and a key swing vote in many landmark decisions. Her thoughtful and pragmatic approach to legal interpretation earned her the respect of both liberals and conservatives alike.

This article will explore the life and career of Sandra Day O'Connor, examining her contributions to the Rehnquist Court and her enduring legacy on American law.

## **Early Life and Education**

Sandra Day O'Connor was born on March 26, 1930, in El Paso, Texas. Her father was a rancher and her mother was a registered nurse. O'Connor attended Stanford University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in economics and political science. She then went on to Stanford Law School, where she graduated first in her class in 1952.

After graduating from law school, O'Connor worked as a lawyer in private practice in Phoenix, Arizona. She also served as an assistant attorney general for the state of Arizona and as a judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals.

## **Appointment to the Supreme Court**

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan nominated O'Connor to the Supreme Court. Her nomination was initially met with some opposition from conservative groups, who were concerned about her lack of experience on the federal bench. However, O'Connor eventually won confirmation by a vote of 99-0.

O'Connor's appointment was a significant milestone for women in America. She was the first female justice in the Court's history, and her presence on the bench helped to pave the way for other women to achieve success in the legal profession.

## **Judicial Philosophy**

O'Connor was a judicial conservative who believed in interpreting the Constitution according to its original meaning. She was also a pragmatist, and she often sought to find common ground between the Court's liberal and conservative wings.

O'Connor's judicial philosophy was most clearly articulated in her 1989 opinion in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, which upheld a Missouri law that placed restrictions on abortion. In her opinion, O'Connor argued that the Constitution does not confer a right to abortion, but that states have the power to regulate abortion within certain limits.

O'Connor's opinion in *Webster* was a major victory for anti-abortion groups, but it also drew criticism from liberals who argued that it would lead to a rollback of abortion rights.

## **Legacy**

Sandra Day O'Connor retired from the Supreme Court in 2006. She left behind a legacy of service and intellectual rigor that has had a profound impact on American law.

O'Connor was a trailblazing figure who helped to break down barriers for women in the legal profession. She was also a thoughtful and pragmatic jurist who sought to find common ground between the Court's liberal and conservative wings.

O'Connor's legacy will continue to shape American law for years to come. She was a true pioneer who made a significant contribution to the nation's

highest court.

## Additional Resources

- Sandra Day O'Connor's biography on the Supreme Court website
- Sandra Day O'Connor's opinions on Oyez
- Sandra Day O'Connor's papers at the Library of Congress

\*\*Alt attribute for image:\*\* A photograph of Sandra Day O'Connor, the first female Supreme Court Justice, wearing a black judicial robe and seated in front of a red curtain.



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