

Sandra Day O'Connor, First Woman on the Supreme Court, Is Dead at 93

During a crucial period in American law — when abortion, affirmative action, sex discrimination and voting rights were on the docket — she was the most powerful woman in the country.



Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in 2005. Although William H. Rehnquist served as chief justice during much of her tenure, the Supreme Court of that period was often called the O'Connor court, and she was referred to as the most powerful woman in America. Credit...Matt York/Associated Press

By [Linda Greenhouse](#) Dec. 1, 2023

Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman on the United States Supreme Court, a rancher's daughter who wielded great power over American law from her seat at the center of the court's ideological spectrum, died on Friday in Phoenix. She was 93.

The Supreme Court announced her death in a statement, saying the cause was complications of dementia. She grew up in Arizona and lived there most of her life.

[In a public letter](#) she released in October 2018, when she was 88, the former justice, who had not been seen in public for some time, announced that she had been diagnosed with the beginning stages of dementia, "probably Alzheimer's disease," and consequently was withdrawing from public life.

Although William H. Rehnquist, her Stanford Law School classmate, served as chief justice during much of her tenure, the Supreme Court during that crucial period was

often called the O'Connor court, and Justice O'Connor was referred to, accurately, as the most powerful woman in America.

Very little could happen without Justice O'Connor's support when it came to the polarizing issues on the court's docket, and the law regarding affirmative action, abortion, voting rights, religion, federalism, sex discrimination and other hot-button subjects was basically what Sandra Day O'Connor thought it should be.

That the middle ground she looked for tended to be the public's preferred place as well was no coincidence, given the close attention Justice O'Connor paid to current events and the public mood. "Rare indeed is the legal victory — in court or legislature — that is not a careful byproduct of an emerging social consensus," she wrote in "The Majesty of the Law: Reflections of a Supreme Court Justice," a collection of her essays published in 2003.



Judge O'Connor during a Senate confirmation hearing in 1981. She was a judge on a midlevel appeals court in Arizona when President Ronald Reagan nominated her to the Supreme Court. Credit...George Tames/The New York Times

When [President Ronald Reagan named her](#) to the Supreme Court in 1981 to fulfill a campaign promise to appoint the first female justice, she was a judge on a midlevel appeals court in Arizona, where she had long been active in Republican politics, though she had friends in both parties. Fifty-one years old at the time of her nomination, she served for 24 years, retiring in January 2006 to care for her ailing husband. As the court moved to the right during that period, her moderate conservatism made her look in the end like a relative liberal.

“Liberal” was undoubtedly not her self-image, but as the court’s rightward shift accelerated after her retirement — her successor, Samuel A. Alito Jr., was notably more conservative — she lamented publicly that some of her majority opinions were being “dismantled.”

“What would you feel?” she responded to a questioner in 2009, who asked her reaction to decisions that had undermined some of her rulings.

Justice O’Connor spent an active retirement, sitting as a visiting judge on federal appeals courts around the country and speaking and writing widely in support of two causes, judicial independence and civics education. She also catered to her six grandchildren, taking them on trips and writing two children’s books based on her own colorful childhood on a remote Arizona ranch.

Her husband, John Jay O’Connor III, whom she met when they were both students at Stanford Law School and married shortly after her graduation in 1952, [died of Alzheimer’s disease in 2009](#).