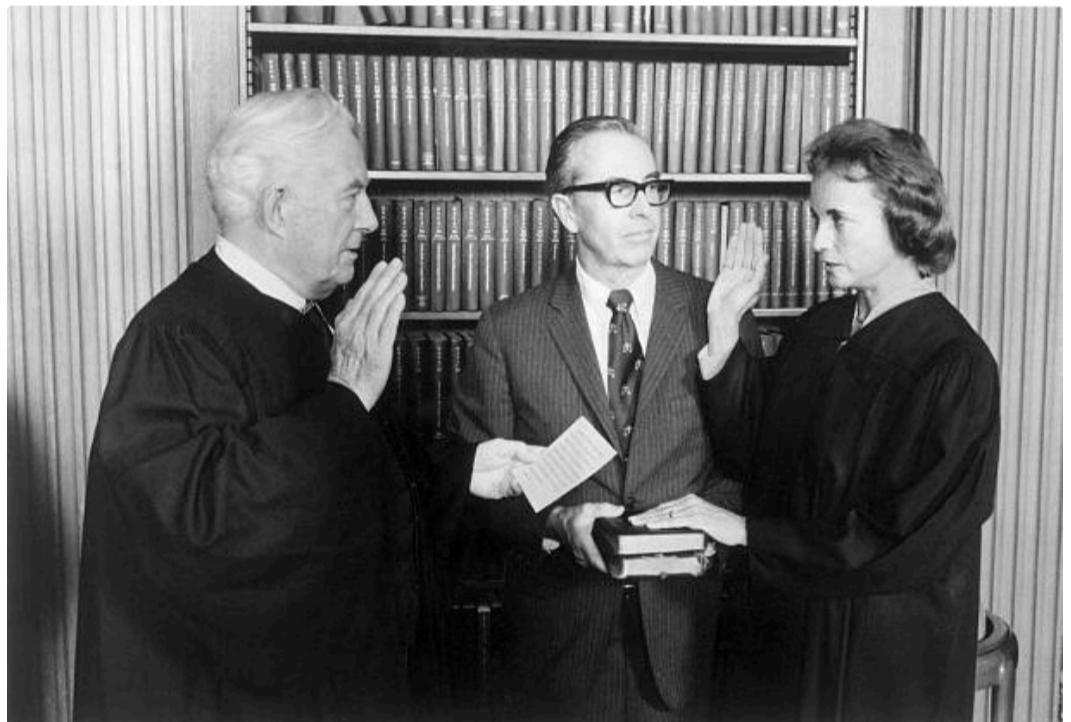




# Life Story: Sandra Day O'Connor

This article details the life and career of Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court. It covers her early life on an Arizona ranch, her education at Stanford, her legal career, her appointment to the Supreme Court, and her impact on American jurisprudence, particularly in cases related to women's rights.



# Early Life and Education

Sandra Day was born in El Paso, Texas, on March 26, 1930. Sandra grew up on Lazy B, the Day family ranch in Arizona. Their house had no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no electricity. Sandra's parents wanted Sandra to attend a good school, so they enrolled her in an elementary school in El Paso, four hours from the ranch. Six-year-old Sandra moved in with her grandparents in El Paso, only visiting her parents for holidays and summers.

Sandra did incredibly well in school and graduated from high school at the age of 16. She was then admitted to Stanford University. Over the course of her four years in college, Sandra thrived. She made friends, had her first boyfriend, and became active in the Stanford community. In 1950, Sandra graduated from Stanford with a bachelor's degree in economics.

Sandra then enrolled in Stanford Law School. Of the 150 students in her year, only four were women. However, she did not feel like the male students or professors treated her differently. Sandra quickly rose to the top of the class and was the only woman of her year chosen as one of the editors of the Stanford Law Review. She befriended fellow student William Rehnquist. Years later, they would both serve on the Supreme Court.

In law school, Sandra met John O'Connor. After their first date, he asked her out for the next night, then the following night. The two went on dates for 41 nights in a row. They got married on the Day family ranch in December 1952.



# Legal Career and Political Involvement

1

## Early Career Challenges

Sandra took the California bar exam in October 1952, two months before her wedding. At the time, it was expected that married women stayed home to take care of their families. Sandra, however, wanted to work. But finding a job in the legal field was difficult for a woman in the 1950s. Sandra eventually took an unpaid position at the San Mateo County district attorney's office. After John graduated from law school, in 1953, he joined the military in a lawyer position. The military assigned John to a post in Frankfurt, Germany.

2

## Return to Arizona

The army released John in 1957, and the O'Connors moved to Phoenix, Arizona. It was a fast-growing city with plenty of job opportunities. But not for women seeking employment at law firms. After becoming a mother in 1958, Sandra opened her own small firm with another lawyer. Sandra and John had two more children, and they decided Sandra would stay at home to take care of their three sons. But she continued to take on legal work, worried that leaving the profession altogether would make it impossible to return to her career later.

3

## Political Involvement

Sandra became an active member of her community through volunteer work, becoming the president of the local Junior League. She also worked on the presidential campaign of Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. In 1965, Sandra decided to return to work. She was hired as an assistant district attorney. When a seat in the Arizona state senate became available in 1969, Sandra was appointed to the seat. In 1972, she was chosen as the Republican majority leader of the Arizona state senate, the first woman in the country to hold this position.

4

## Judicial Appointments

Sandra was appointed to the Maricopa County Superior Court in 1974. Five years later, she rose to the Arizona State Court of Appeals. "Do the best you can in every task, no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time. No one learns more about a problem than the person at the bottom."

# Supreme Court Justice and Legacy

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart announced his retirement on June 18, 1981. During the 1980 presidential campaign, President Reagan had promised to appoint the first woman to the Supreme Court. After an informal interview, he formally nominated Sandra to Justice Stewart's seat. The Senate confirmed her nomination unanimously.

Sandra joined the Supreme Court in October of 1981. She quickly learned that the position required an enormous workload. Justices must read over a thousand pages a day of legal briefs and write difficult judicial opinions that can have major impacts on millions of Americans.

In 1982, Sandra heard arguments in her first sex discrimination case, *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan*. Joe Hogan had been rejected from the university's nursing school program because he was a man, and he sued the school for discrimination. The Supreme Court votes in order of seniority. As the most recently appointed justice, Sandra voted last. The vote was tied, four to four. Hers would be the deciding vote. In her majority opinion, she ruled that the nursing school had to admit men as well.

Despite her generally conservative rulings, Sandra did often vote in favor of women's rights. Most notably, she voted to preserve the right to an abortion as ruled in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and in the 1992 case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.

On July 1, 2005, Sandra announced her decision to retire from the bench. John had suffered from Alzheimer's disease for years, and she wanted to take care of him as his health deteriorated. They moved back to Phoenix, where he passed away in 2009. After her career on the Supreme Court, Sandra launched iCivics, an online learning tool for teachers and students with the goal of expanding students' knowledge of American civics.

Sandra Day O'Connor passed away on December 1, 2023 in Phoenix, Arizona. She was 93 years old.

## Vocabulary

district attorney:  
Lawyer who prosecutes crimes on behalf of the government.

## Vocabulary

Junior League: All-women volunteer organization.

## Vocabulary

majority leader:  
Leader of a legislative body, elected member of the political party that has the most seats.

## Vocabulary

majority opinion:  
Judicial ruling that the majority of justices agree with.

## Vocabulary

unanimously: Agreed to by everyone.