

# WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

## A Civics In Real Life Series

### FEMALE FIRSTS

### SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR



For 191 years, the Supreme Court of the United States was composed of only male justices. This changed in 1981 when [Sandra Day O'Connor](#) was nominated and sworn in as the first female Supreme Court Justice. Born in El Paso, Texas Sandra Day O'Connor grew up on a cattle ranch, experiencing a childhood that emphasized education and hard work. After graduating high school early at 16, she went on to attend [Stanford University](#). Excelling there, O'Connor became Senior Class President and obtained a bachelor's degree in economics and then a law degree. While at Stanford Law, she became an editor for the *Law Review* and graduated early and at the top of her class. Upon graduation, O'Connor applied to many law firms in California, but despite her qualifications she would only be offered legal secretary positions, demonstrating the bias towards female attorneys at the time. After unpaid time as a deputy county attorney, and some civilian law work in Germany while her husband was stationed there, O'Connor returned to the United States in 1957 to [raise three sons](#) in Arizona. She returned to the workforce in 1965. She started serving as the Arizona Assistant Attorney General but then in 1969, the state senator from her legislative district resigned, and the governor chose O'Connor to fill his seat. When the seat was formally open in 1970, O'Connor ran for the seat and won in a landslide. She was chosen to be the [Arizona State Senate](#) Majority Leader, becoming the first woman to hold that position. In 1974, Sandra Day O'Connor returned to her judicial roots, becoming a county judge in the Maricopa County Superior Court and then moving on to the Arizona State Court of Appeals. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan then made the historic decision to [nominate](#) O'Connor to be the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. She was unanimously [confirmed](#), receiving more votes than any justice in history to date. Regarding her historic appointment, O'Connor stated "*I think the important thing about my appointment is not that I will decide cases as a woman, but that I am a woman who will get to decide cases.*" In her first year, she received over 60,000 letters of support, another record. A conservative justice who became known for being unpredictable in decisions, she remained committed to women's interests and gender equality as seen in her opinion in [Planned Parenthood v. Casey \(1992\)](#). Sandra Day O'Connor retired from the Court in 2006. Since then she has served as the Chancellor of the College of William and Mary, been awarded the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#), and devoted much time advocating civics education initiatives. In 2018, she [retired from public life](#) due to a dementia diagnosis. Her status as a "female first" made way for the nation's second female Supreme Court Justice, [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) in 1993. Both Republican and Democratic presidents have since [nominated](#) women to the U.S. Supreme Court.

### Civics Challenge: Search & Learn

First Woman Appointed/Elected To Your State Supreme Court:	
Years Served:	
Prior Experience:	
Contributions/Landmark Decisions:	



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