

Extra Feature Story

Obama Nominates Sotomayor to High Court

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President Barack Obama nominated Judge Sonia Sotomayor of New York to the U.S. Supreme Court Tuesday. If confirmed, Sotomayor would be the third female justice and the first person of Hispanic descent to sit on the High Court.

Sonia Sotomayor is the daughter of Puerto Rican parents and was raised by her single mother in a housing project in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City.

In a press conference with President Obama, Sotomayor cited her mother as her inspiration, who worked two jobs to support the family.

Sotomayor would not alter the ideological balance of the court, since she would replace Justice David Souter, who generally sides with the liberals on key 5-4 rulings. But at 54, she would be one of the younger judges and her writings suggest that she would provide a sharp counterpoint to some of the outspoken conservative judges.

President Obama Wanted Nominee with Life Experience

Upon announcing his pick, President Obama said that a justice should know "how the world works, and how ordinary people live."

Earlier, the president said he wanted someone who is empathetic to the lives of everyday Americans because he believes that it is important for justices to be able to identify with the people whose lives they could change with their rulings.

Sotomayor believes that her position as a Hispanic woman plays an important role in her decision making.

In a 2002 lecture she said, "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life."

A graduate of Princeton University and Yale Law School, Sotomayor was first chosen to be a judge by a Republican, President George H.W. Bush, in a deal that included a strongly conservative appointee.

Republicans ready to attack Sotomayor as a judicial activist

Conservatives critics have accused Sotomayor of "judicial activism," a term used to describe judges who make rulings that change legislation based on their own personal political beliefs.

This month conservative bloggers passed around a video of Judge Sotomayor in 2005 asserting that a "court of appeals is where policy is made." She then immediately added: "I know this is on tape, and I should never say that because we don't make law. I know. O.K. I know. I'm not promoting it. I'm not advocating it. I'm — you know."

In a statement to the press, Wendy Long of the Judicial Confirmation Network criticized Sotomayor for making her background a factor in her decision-making.

"She thinks that judges should dictate policy, and that one's sex, race, and ethnicity ought to affect the decisions one renders from the bench," Long said.

Senate expected to take up nomination this summer

All nominees to the Supreme Court must be questioned by a Senate Committee and confirmed by a Senate vote.

With Republicans controlling exactly 40 seats in the 100-member Senate, they are unlikely to muster the 40 votes necessary to block Sotomayor's nomination.

The confirmation process still could become heated as interest groups on both sides gear up for a political battle and senators probe Sotomayor's views on key issues such as abortion and torture.

According to the Senate historian's office, 28 of 158 nominations have been rejected, withdrawn or simply not acted upon since the court was founded in 1789. Most recently, President George Bush's 2005 nominee, Harriet Miers, withdrew after fierce opposition from conservatives.

The Senate has used the procedural roadblock known as a filibuster once: in 1968, to stop President Lyndon Johnson from making his close friend, Justice Abe Fortas, chief justice.

-- Compiled by Kate Stanton and Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra

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