

# Appointing Supreme Court Justices

## Standard/Objective

- Describe the role of institutions in furthering both continuity and change. (NCSS)
- Students will analyze a cartoon about Ronald Reagan's appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor and give reasons for the cartoon's content and title.

## Materials

Copy of the facsimile *Justice O'Connor Cartoon*; Copies of the historical background information (page 60); Copies of the student activity sheet, *Interesting Justices* (page 61); For optional use, *Justice O'Connor Cartoon* (page 62)

## Discussion Questions

- Provide a new caption for this cartoon.
- What is this cartoon about?
- What does Lady Justice stand for?
- What point was the illustrator trying to make with this cartoon?

## Using the Primary Source

Show your students the cartoon and allow them a few minutes to analyze it. Explain to students that the woman in the middle of the cartoon is Lady Justice. She is blindfolded to show that she is not influenced by anything. She judges by the weight of the scales in her hands. Place your students in groups of four. Ask the discussion questions above and have each group work together to answer them. Let each group share their best ideas with the class.

Distribute copies of the historical background information (page 60). Have each group read it together. Then, allow students to ask questions. Make sure your students understand that it was a very important decision to appoint a female justice to the Supreme Court.

Tell your students that there have been many interesting justices in our history. Distribute copies of *Interesting Justices* (page 61). This sheet talks about five interesting justices. Your students will be designing coins to commemorate these justices. Have the students work in their groups to decide on the design for each coin. Then, each student should be in charge of one of the coins. Let the groups present their coins to the class.

## Extension Idea

- Have your students work together to create a mini documentary on what it is like to be a Supreme Court justice. This documentary can be put on a multimedia program and presented to other classes.

# Appointing Supreme Court Justices *(cont.)*



## Historical Background Information

In 1980, Ronald Reagan ran for president. If elected, he promised to appoint a woman to the Supreme Court. There had never been a female Supreme Court justice before. After he was elected, he kept his promise. He chose Sandra Day O'Connor to replace a retiring justice. O'Connor had practiced law for many years. She had opened her own practice because no one wanted to hire a female lawyer. She was a senator and assistant attorney general for Arizona. Everyone in the United States Senate voted to approve her appointment as a Supreme Court justice. Many people were excited to see a woman in the court.

The Supreme Court justices hear court cases. Then, the nine justices take a vote. Many times O'Connor has been the tiebreaker. Sometimes, her vote is with Republicans. Other times, her vote is with Democrats.

The president chooses and appoints the Supreme Court justices. Then, the Senate has to approve the appointment with a vote. These Supreme Court justices keep their jobs for the rest of their lives. There are nine justices on the Supreme Court. One is a chief justice and the others are associate justices. The Supreme Court justices have an important job. They tell Americans how to understand the Constitution. They meet from October through June. Cases that have to do with the Bill of Rights are presented to them. The Bill of Rights is the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution. Most of the time, these cases have already been heard by lower courts. When people do not agree with a court's decision, they appeal it. Then a higher court hears the case. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the country. Once a case reaches the Supreme Court, it cannot go to any other court in the country. The Supreme Court justices' decisions are final. In all, they hear about 5,000 cases each year.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Interesting Justices

## Background Information

Supreme Court justices come from all walks of life. One was a professional football player. Another was a newspaper owner. One even gave singing lessons, and another played violin in a jazz band. This cartoon shows “Lady Justice” on the steps of the Supreme Court building. She lifts her blindfold and sees the first female Supreme Court justice entering the building.

## Activity

**Directions:** Five Supreme Court justices are listed below. You have been selected to design a coin for at least three of them. These coins will be collector’s items. Be sure to design the front and the back. Each coin should include something to indicate which president nominated the justice.

The first Supreme Court chief justice was John Jay. George Washington nominated him. Jay went to the first and second Continental Congresses. He was even elected president of the Continental Congress in 1798.

John Marshall was selected to serve by President John Adams. At the same time, Marshall was also secretary of state. He kept that job for part of Jefferson’s presidency, too. He served 34 years, the longest serving chief justice.

Just nine years after his presidency, Howard Taft was appointed chief justice. President Warren Harding nominated him. Taft had always wanted this job. He served for nine years.

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson chose Thurgood Marshall to be a Supreme Court justice. Marshall was the first black man to serve on the Supreme Court. He had previously argued a famous case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, in 1957 before the Supreme Court. This case allowed blacks and whites to go to the same schools.

Sandra Day O’Connor was the first woman to be a Supreme Court justice. President Ronald Reagan nominated her. The Senate approved her unanimously. She is known for being the tiebreaker on many cases.

## Challenge

O’Connor is not the only female justice. Find out about the second woman to serve as a justice.

# Justice O'Connor Cartoon



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