

Sample Opinion Column (700 words)

Confirm Sonia Sotomayor

There are few decisions that a president makes that have such an obvious long term impact as the selection of a new Justice to serve on the Supreme Court. Presidents come and go in a few years, but federal judges hold their jobs for life, and the decisions they make will affect all of us in ways too numerous to count.

For that reason, it's good news that President Obama chose Sonia Sotomayor as his first nominee to the Court. And for that same reason, we need to support her.

When he laid out what he was looking for in a nominee, the President said he was looking for someone with a sharp and independent mind, and a record of excellence and integrity. He also made clear that upholding core constitutional values requires more than just the intellectual ability to apply a legal rule to a set of facts. It requires a common sense understanding of how laws affect the daily realities of people's lives.

As a former Constitutional lawyer, President Obama has a real understanding of the importance of the Court and of the way it operates, so it's safe to say that his words were more than political posturing—they were a clear depiction of the kind of person he was looking for on the bench.

So it shouldn't be much of a surprise that Judge Sotomayor rose quickly to the top of his list. Not only does she have impeccable academic credentials (Phi Beta Kappa at Princeton; editor of the Law Journal at Yale), but she also has an inspiring life story and experience with how court rulings can affect the lives of real people.

Sotomayor grew up in a public housing project in the South Bronx. Driven by her mother's belief in the power of education and her own deeply held work ethic, she excelled in school, and graduated as valedictorian of her high school class. When she graduated from law school, Judge Sotomayor became an Assistant District Attorney in Manhattan, where she tried dozens of serious criminal cases over five years and got first hand knowledge of how our justice system works.

Before long she was nominated to be a District Court judge by President George H. W. Bush, and then to be a Circuit Court judge by President Clinton. If confirmed for the Supreme Court, Judge Sotomayor would bring more federal judicial experience to the Supreme Court than any justice in 100 years, and more overall judicial experience than anyone confirmed for the Court in the past 70 years.

Through her long career on the bench, Judge Sotomayor has proven she understands a wide range of complicated legal issues and is respected for reaching decisions based on carefully applying the law to the facts of each case. She understands the need for judicial restraint and has deep respect for the Constitutional role of the legislative and executive branches in making and administering the law.

It would be nice if a person with a sharp intellect, impeccable credentials, and an up-by-the-bootstraps story could be confirmed by the Senate without a nasty public debate, but clearly not everyone agrees with that notion. Since before she was even nominated, Judge Sotomayor has faced every kind of attack and distortion, from the personal (like Rush Limbaugh's claim that she's racist) to the absurd (like the National Review's cover illustration depicting her as an Asian stereotyped Buddha.)

That's why it's up to all of us, as Americans, to demand that the hearings in the Senate focus on real issues and not be used as a political football. Everything from our civil liberties to the environment and consumer safety will come before the Supreme Court during just the next few years, and we deserve an honest conversation about how the Court will encounter these issues.

Too often we ignore the importance of the Supreme Court, but it's a branch of government that's co-equal with the President and the Congress. To fill a position of such importance, we need someone who can bring to the job excellent qualifications, an open mind, and a real understanding of the law. In short, we need someone like Judge Sonia Sotomayor.