

2024 Civics Essay Contest Winners

This year students were asked to explore the legacy of the late Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner and the value of civic engagement.

Students in grades 3-5 were asked, “What does it mean to be involved in your community? Can you think of ways you can help make your school or neighborhood a better place?”

Students in grades 6-12 were asked to discuss the role Justice Sandra Day believed citizens should play in shaping their communities and government and why she thought that civic participation is so important to democracy.

Elementary School Winners

1st Place - Nicholas Jakimier, Grade 5, Texas



Mother Teresa said, “We ourselves feel what we do is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.” Community involvement means each of us adding our drop. For example, I help donate family clothes and toys to charities, and volunteer my time and skills in Scouts cleaning the park, making sandwiches for soup kitchens, and teaching younger kids outdoor skills. Everyone encounters opportunities daily. We can smile at others, invite someone new to join an activity, and attend local performances and games. Together, our drops make our schools and neighborhoods better!

2nd Place - Ana Cervantes, Grade 4, Kansas



Communities have many needs, but the most basic need is friendly human interaction. There are many simple yet impactful actions that can improve your community. Welcoming a new neighbor with cookies, a smile, and wave could have a chain reaction that positively impacts many others. Be generous if a neighbor asks for a cup of sugar! Start a conversation with someone who might be lonely. You can rake leaves, shovel snow, or even more important, check in on elderly neighbors. When people feel cared for and understood, they are happier, and it makes your town a better place!

3rd Place - Faith Yono, Grade 4, Michigan



Being a part of my community means being respectful to others even if I don’t always agree with them. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor was a major supporter of Civil Discourse. One way I can contribute to making my school or neighborhood a better place is by making sure everyone is treated fairly regardless of their sex, race, or ethnicity. I can help with this problem by ensuring that the person who is being disrespectful will get a fair consequence. One consequence could be to stay in for recess for three days or more depending on their actions.

Middle School Winners

1st Place - Sophia Ling, Grade 6, California



Justice Sandra Day O'Connor believed that as citizens of America, it is vital that we must vote. Voting isn't just about a specific party or person. It's about exercising our rights. O'Connor believes that it is about democracy, the very things our country is built upon. To secure the right to vote has come far, there were times when women couldn't vote, when African Americans couldn't either.

By voting, us citizens can have a voice in the government. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Elections belong to the people. It's their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters."

There are many people in the world who would do anything to have a voice in their world. Laws are built with the priority of the citizens in mind. How can you find the United States of America that we all want if the lawmakers don't even know what's best for us? How are we a democracy when our people do not have any say in our government? How are so many citizens not voting? It's what we fight for.

Voting isn't just about a specific party or person. Voting is about creating the best form possible of America with what we, the people, have in mind.

Democracy, a word of Greek origin means, "the power of the people." This is how we show our power. It's how we exercise it. It's how we use it.

2nd Place - Ashley Wagner, Grade 8, Massachusetts



Justice Sandra Day O'Connor believed that citizens should take an active role in their government. She stressed the importance of participating both in the national government and in our local communities. This is important because as citizens in a democracy we have the power to make change, and the responsibility to do so when necessary. Justice O'Connor explained that to make a positive change in our government and be active citizens we must place more value on the common good than benefiting ourselves. If we want to make change we must make sacrifices for the nation and the greater good. A major

part of this is ensuring that our government is functioning properly, and that the Constitution is being upheld. She thought that civic participation is important to democracy because a democracy can't function properly without active citizens following their civic duty. This includes voting, protesting when necessary, running for office, serving jury duty, and more. If citizens don't actively participate our democracy will not be a true reflection of the needs and desires of the people that make up our nation.

3rd Place - Anoushka Pandey, Grade 8, Maryland



“I had become increasingly concerned in recent years about the lack of civics education in our nation's schools. In recent years, the schools have stopped teaching it. And it's unfortunate.”

The United States is a country built on civic engagement, which is evident in the numerous times that the actions of citizens have led to new laws and amendments. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots took place after police officers raided the Stonewall Inn. The protests that began went on for six days, eventually leading to new laws preventing discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor believed that “Without basic civic education, we cannot expect to preserve or improve our system of government.” She grew increasingly concerned that we were taking our democracy for granted and not tending to the garden where flowers of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the foundations of our democracy, could bloom. By voting for city, state, or national leaders, or advocating for what we believe in, we can become engaged citizens.

A lack of civic engagement can lead to despondency with the system, as people might begin to believe the system is not theirs and is imposed on them. Justice O'Connor believed that civic participation is essential to democracy because only when people are involved with their government, the United States will truly have a government “of the people, for the people, by the people.”

High School Winners

1st Place - Daniella Cuevas, Grade 12, California



Justice Sandra Day O'Connor passionately advocated the need of civic engagement in sustaining a healthy democracy. She emphasized that an informed and involved citizenry is an essential component of a democratic society and that citizens should actively participate in developing their communities and government. O'Connor was adamant that a democracy is likely to thrive when its citizens are well-informed of how their government operates, conscious of their rights and obligations, and actively engaged in the political process by casting informed ballots, serving on juries, participating in public

discourse, and performing community service.

O'Connor argues that the democratic process is not a spectator sport, which is why she advocates for civic engagement. She viewed a correlation between a democracy's health and the degree of civic engagement and awareness among citizens. She voiced caution against the dangers of civic ignorance and disengagement, emphasizing how these conditions destroy democracy and place society's most essential liberties and rights in danger. According to O'Connor, civic education is essential for fostering a culture of involvement and resisting civic complacency. She argued that

citizens would be more inclined to contribute to their communities and hold their leaders accountable if they understood the functions of their government and their position within it.

A system of representative government can only be as reliable as the participation and awareness of its citizens, as Justice O'Connor's emphasis on civic engagement demonstrates. She advocated for the concept that civic education and active participation are crucial to the preservation and development of democracy.

2nd Place - Mattie Jane Carpenter, Grade 12, Georgia



Democracy thrives on active civic participation. For Sandra Day O'Connor, the first female Supreme Court Justice of the United States, citizens' engagement is not merely a privilege but a responsibility integral to the functioning of a democratic society.

O'Connor emphasized that democracy is not a spectator sport; it requires active involvement from its citizens believing that individuals should contribute their voices, ideas, and efforts towards the betterment of communities and our nation noted through various forms, from voting in elections to volunteering, advocating for causes, or even running for office.

For O'Connor, civic participation wasn't just about influencing policy; it was about fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among citizens. She recognized that when people engage with their communities and government, they develop a deeper understanding of societal issues and cultivate empathy towards fellow citizens. This, in turn, promotes cooperation and inclusivity, essential elements of a thriving democracy.

O'Connor saw civic engagement as a safeguard against the erosion of democratic principles. She understood that when citizens disengage from the political process, it opens the door to apathy, polarization, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. By actively participating in civic life, individuals can hold their leaders accountable, advocate for justice, and ensure that democratic values endure.

Sandra Day O'Connor believed that democracy flourishes when citizens actively participate in shaping their communities and government. Through their engagement, individuals uphold the principles of democracy, foster social cohesion, and contribute to a more just and equitable society.

3rd Place - Jacob Hertz, Grade 12, California



Earlier this week, while calling my sister, I asked if she voted in the recent primary election. She responded with abhorrent news: "Yes, but I didn't know who the candidates for Judge of Court of Public Pleas were, so I picked the coolest-sounding name."

I will cut my sister some slack—she votes in every election, and keeping track of numerous candidates and initiatives can be hard. However, Sandra Day O'Connor warned, "Everyone is going to grow up to be a citizen. Democracy is not a spectator sport." The justice emphasized that democracy requires active civic engagement. Every citizen's decision, whether to run for office, cast a ballot, serve in the armed forces, or volunteer, is a thread comprising American democracy. These actions create our functioning democratic society; yet, they require citizens to actively participate in their communities.

O'Connor understood that democracy is composed of more than big-picture politics. Not just Presidents, Representatives, and Justices, but also mayors, council members, school board members, and so many more roles. Democracy requires citizens to engage with these roles...to run for office or lobby politicians to make meaningful changes on a local level. To serve in the armed forces that protect our lives and freedoms. To volunteer for community organizations that support and uplift others.

I reprimanded my sister, encouraging her to research candidates before voting. As Sandra Day O'Connor declared, everyone is "a part of the decision-making that all of us as citizens must do."