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Sonia Sotomayor may not change the politics of the [Supreme Court](#) if she is confirmed to replace retiring Justice David Souter. But she likely will broaden its perspective.

Sotomayor, a judge on the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals, was nominated by President Barack Obama on Tuesday, May 26. If the Senate approves the choice, Sotomayor will become [the first Hispanic](#) to serve on the nation's highest court.

In their initial reactions, Republicans vowed to examine Sotomayor's record carefully, but they made no overt threats to block her nomination.

In seeking a replacement for Souter, Obama said that he was looking for someone who would understand how court rulings affect people in their day-to-day lives. He said the nominee should demonstrate "empathy."

He may have found that quality in Sotomayor, 54. She grew up in public housing in the New York City borough the Bronx as the daughter of Puerto Rican parents who came to U.S. during World War II. Her father died when she was 9, leaving her mother to raise her and her brother.

Sotomayor went on to graduate from Princeton University and Yale Law School. Before being appointed to the circuit court, she was a judge on the district court serving the New York City area. Previously, she was a Manhattan assistant district attorney and a partner at a private law firm.

Her upbringing sets her apart from her court colleagues, according to Charles Craver, a professor at the George Washington University Law School.

"She will have a greater appreciation of the economic diversity of the country than most people who make it to the Supreme Court," Craver said.

She'll share that perspective with other justices during their case conferences and in less formal meetings. It's possible that her input could sway a 5-4 decision.

But Craver doesn't foresee Sotomayor shifting the court's political makeup. Souter often voted with the four-justice liberal minority.

In employment cases, that may mean that Sotomayor sides with people suing corporations rather than with companies defending themselves.

"In general, she has been perceived to be someone who is sympathetic to a plaintiff's point of view," said Betsy Plevan, a partner at Proskauer Rose in New York.

Both Craver and Plevan say that it's difficult to tell where Sotomayor will come down on employment cases. She did participate on the Second Circuit panel that decided that the city of New Haven, Connecticut, could throw out an employment test because no African American firefighters qualified for promotions. [The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in that case](#) in April and is expected to rule by the end of June.

But employment law lends itself to surprises when it comes to forecasting Supreme Court actions. A conservative-leaning court under Chief Justice John Roberts Jr. has ruled in favor of employers in the high-profile [Lilly Ledbetter pay discrimination suit](#) but has upheld workers' arguments in a number of other cases.

Besides, once a judge takes a seat on the court, he or she may not maintain a consistent political approach. Souter, for instance, was appointed by President George H.W. Bush in 1990 but has often disappointed conservatives.

"She could decide to be more conservative or more liberal because she's persuaded by her colleagues," Craver said. She'll have more latitude in her jurisprudence because "she's now at the top."

Sotomayor may do more to change the dynamic of the panel than the way it votes, according to Plevan.

"She's very bright and energetic and will add a lot of vitality to the court," Plevan said. "She's someone who speaks her mind. She will express her views candidly and openly with the other judges."

Both Sotomayor and Souter are praised for their sharp intellects. But Sotomayor may be more colorful than the quiet Souter.

Plevan, a friend of Sotomayor, has seen her in action in court and at bar association meetings.

"She's outgoing and likes to get to know lawyers," Plevan said. "Her intelligence shines through in her dealings with people."

The other two qualities Obama sought in a nominee were “a recognition of the limits of the judicial role,” and an understanding of day-to-day challenges.

Sotomayor has an abundance of the latter, he said when introducing her at the White House on Tuesday.

“It is experience that can give a person a common touch and a sense of compassion, an understanding of how the world works and how ordinary people live,” Obama said.

“Along the way [Sotomayor has] faced down barriers, overcome the odds, lived out the American dream that brought her parents here so long ago.”

—Mark Schoeff Jr.

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