

## Politics

Women's groups quiet on Sotomayor



(AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor, center, is escorted by security personnel to her meeting with Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, July 9, 2009.

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### WASHINGTON -

Women's groups, euphoric when [President Barack Obama](#) chose [Sonia Sotomayor](#) for the [Supreme Court](#), have been remarkably quiet in the weeks since on the judge who would be the court's third woman ever.

Sotomayor's few rulings on reproductive issues have made abortion rights activists unwilling to crusade on her behalf, and other liberal women's organizations say they're waiting to voice full-throated support until they know more about her record.

Their relative silence may be helping Sotomayor - who's been accused of letting her personal experiences interfere with her judging - more than it hurts her.

"She's been able to rise above some of that interest group politics," said [Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.](#), a member of the [Judiciary Committee](#) that will begin questioning Sotomayor next week in a marathon set of highly publicized hearings.

Prominent Republicans may have made that job easier for Sotomayor, Klobuchar said, by attacking her early on as racist, unintelligent and temperamental - criticisms that were quickly rejected by the party's senators.

"If I were her, I'd rather have Republican senators having to defend me against completely over-the-top complaints than women's groups doing rallies."

Hispanic groups have led the charge in promoting and defending Sotomayor, who would be the first Latina to serve on the Supreme Court.

And in the weeks since Sotomayor was nominated, civil rights organizations, law enforcement leaders and some environmental groups have come out in enthusiastic support, some holding news conferences, calls with reporters, and launching new Web sites to champion her nomination. Several have written letters to the Judiciary Committee advocating her confirmation.

Most women's groups, by contrast, have hung back. Aside from issuing favorable statements the day she was chosen, they have done little publicly to press for her confirmation.

Melody Drnach, the vice president of the [National Organization for Women](#), said it's a question of resources for her group, which has been electing new leaders and is embroiled in the debate over health care reform.

"We're doing everything we can do in terms of supporting her," Drnach said, adding that the group will soon step up its efforts behind the scenes, counting votes for Sotomayor and lobbying if necessary to get senators to support her. The group's D.C. chapter plans a rally Monday outside the confirmation hearings.

Drnach acknowledged that early on, NOW talked internally about whether and how strongly to support Sotomayor given her unknown record on abortion rights and the lack of specific indications in her rulings about how she would handle issues important to women.

"We had that conversation, but we also talked about the fact that it would be very, very surprising if the president and his team would nominate somebody who was not going to believe in full equality for women and girls to be a part of the highest court in the land," Drnach said. "It came down to the fact that it's incredibly important to have women's voices at the table and certainly on the" Supreme Court.

Some outside observers say women's groups may be loath to weigh in on Sotomayor's nomination for fear of seeming to confirm her critics' accusations that she would let her own feelings or biases interfere with the law.

"You don't want to do anything that would actually hurt her chances by making it seem like if we get this woman, she'll be sympathetic to women," said [Debbie Walsh](#), director of [Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics](#). "Then she'd be called a sexist, and that doesn't help."

[Marcia D. Greenberger](#) of the National Women's Law Center said organizations like hers are not holding back in any way on support for Sotomayor, but they're busy delving into her record to see what kind of a justice she would be.

"There was certainly initial euphoria that such an extraordinary woman was identified with her background and her experiences and her long record, but then the hard work begins for any nominee - including a woman of her stature and her accomplishment - to really look in a very careful way at how she would be on the Supreme Court," Greenberger said.

The center is working on a report on Sotomayor that will be made available after the conclusion of her confirmation hearings.

The [National Association of Women Lawyers](#) rated her "highly qualified" this week, but in a letter to the Judiciary panel, its president, [Lisa Horowitz](#), noted that in certain areas important to women - including domestic violence and reproductive choice - the group had "no decisions to review."

Horowitz said Sotomayor shows she's sensitive to the impact of racial and sexual comments and behavior on the job, but doesn't always rule for plaintiffs in such cases unless their claims have a solid legal basis.

Don't expect to hear from [NARAL Pro-Choice America](#), the abortion rights group. Its leaders clammed up about Sotomayor once she was nominated, and the group is spending its time and resources pressing senators to ask her questions about the right to privacy during the hearings.

Women senators have stepped into the breach. They held a kind of speak-in on the Senate floor late last month and a news conference last week to champion Sotomayor.

[Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.](#), said she's been hearing plenty from women who strongly back the appeals court judge, but so far there's been no need for "muss or fuss" from groups who represent them.

"Things are going really well. I would predict that she's going to be confirmed. There is no need for groups to get all geared up and go out and tell people to write," Boxer said. "If things take a turn for the worse ... that's a whole other story."

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