

Anthony McLeod Kennedy served as a Justice of the United States Supreme Court from 1988 to 2018. During that time, he became known as the “swing vote” — a Justice whose decisions often decided the outcome of major national issues.

He was born in Sacramento, California, in 1936. His father was a lawyer and lobbyist, and his mother was a teacher. Kennedy grew up surrounded by both education and civic life.

He attended Stanford University, where he studied political science, and later went on to Harvard Law School, one of the most prestigious law schools in the world.

After law school, Kennedy returned to California to practice law and later became a law professor at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento. His reputation as a fair-minded and intelligent thinker grew steadily.

In 1975, President Gerald Ford appointed him to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, which covers much of the western United States. There, he built a reputation for careful reasoning and moderation.

Then, in 1988, President Ronald Reagan nominated Kennedy to the U.S. Supreme Court. Reagan’s first two choices for that seat had failed to be confirmed by the Senate, so Kennedy became the compromise choice — a conservative, but not an ideologue.

When Kennedy joined the Court, the nation was politically divided, and so was the Supreme Court. His position in the middle made him one of the most influential judges of his era.

Kennedy didn’t fit neatly into one camp. He was generally conservative on issues like government power and business regulation, but he also supported individual liberty and dignity in areas like free speech and same-sex rights.

He believed deeply in the idea of “liberty under the Constitution.” For Kennedy, freedom was not just about limiting government but about recognizing human dignity and autonomy.

One of his earliest major opinions was *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992). In that case, he helped preserve the core right to abortion established by *Roe v. Wade*, while allowing some restrictions. It showed his tendency to seek middle ground.

Kennedy often wrote in poetic, almost philosophical language. His opinions weren’t just legal — they were moral reflections on the meaning of freedom and equality in American life.

His most famous contributions came in the area of LGBTQ+ rights. He wrote several landmark opinions that changed the legal and cultural landscape of the United States.

In *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), Kennedy wrote the majority opinion striking down laws that criminalized same-sex relationships. He said the government had no right to invade the private lives of consenting adults.

Then came *United States v. Windsor* (2013), where he wrote that the federal government could not deny recognition to same-sex marriages that were legally performed in states.

Finally, in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Kennedy wrote the opinion that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. He wrote that marriage is a fundamental right that must be available to all people, regardless of gender.

That opinion became one of the most historic rulings in Supreme Court history. It reflected Kennedy's belief that the Constitution's promise of liberty evolves with society's understanding of human dignity.

He also played key roles in cases involving free speech. Kennedy consistently defended the First Amendment, even when speech was controversial or offensive.

In *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), he wrote the opinion allowing corporations and unions to spend unlimited money on political campaigns. That decision was controversial and remains one of the most debated in modern history.

Supporters said it strengthened free speech; critics said it gave too much power to wealthy interests. This case showed how Kennedy's deep belief in expression could lead to polarizing outcomes.

Kennedy also ruled on cases involving the death penalty, affirmative action, and executive power. In each, he sought balance — sometimes siding with conservatives, other times with liberals.

Because of this unpredictability, he was often called the “swing vote.” In a closely divided 5-4 Court, Kennedy's decision often determined the law of the land.

His approach was guided less by strict ideology and more by his view of human dignity — that each person's worth must be respected by the law. This idea appeared again and again in his opinions.

Kennedy retired from the Supreme Court in 2018, after 30 years of service. His retirement allowed President Donald Trump to appoint Justice Brett Kavanaugh, shifting the Court in a more conservative direction.

Historians view Kennedy as a pivotal figure — a bridge between eras of the Court. He upheld many traditional conservative principles but also expanded personal freedoms in groundbreaking ways.

His legacy is complex: he empowered corporate speech and also legalized same-sex marriage; he limited government regulation but defended privacy rights. In short, he embodied America's ongoing debate between liberty and equality.

Justice Anthony Kennedy showed that law is not just about rules, but about humanity. His writings remind us that democracy depends not only on power, but on compassion, balance, and the courage to listen to both sides before deciding.