News



U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is pictured on Capitol Hill in Washington May 1, 2019. Feinstein, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1992 in the "Year of the Woman" and broke gender barriers throughout her long career in local and national politics, died Sept. 28 at age 90. (OSV News/Reuters/Aaron P. Bernstein)

Kate Scanlon

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — September 29, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Longtime U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., died the evening of Sept. 28, at her Washington residence, according to her office. She was 90.

Feinstein, who was the oldest member of the Senate, was also the longest-serving female senator and the longest-serving senator from California. She had previously announced she would not seek another term amid declining health and calls for her retirement.

"Her passing is a great loss for so many, from those who loved and cared for her to the people of California that she dedicated her life to serving," James Sauls, chief of staff to Feinstein, said in a Sept. 29 statement. "Senator Feinstein never backed away from a fight for what was just and right. At the same time, she was always willing to work with anyone, even those she disagreed with, if it meant bettering the lives of Californians or the betterment of our nation."

Sauls said there are "few women who can be called senator, chairman, mayor, wife, mom and grandmother."

"Senator Feinstein was a force of nature who made an incredible impact on our country and her home state," he said. "She left a legacy that is undeniable and extraordinary."

First elected to the Senate in 1992, Feinstein was the author of the 1994 assault weapons ban, and later became chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, as well as a prominent Senate investigator of the CIA's use of torture after the 9/11 attacks, among other assignments.

Feinstein's cognitive and physical decline toward the end of her time in the Senate sparked calls for her retirement and prompted primary challengers. Feinstein said she would not run for reelection next year and was hospitalized for several months in 2023. Despite a sporadic voting record over the course of this year, Feinstein cast

votes in the Senate the morning of her death.



Walking arm-in-arm amid the rubble, then-U.S. President George W. Bush, and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., tour a San Diego neighborhood destroyed by wildfires in 2007. Feinstein, who was elected to the Senate in 1992, died Sept. 28 at age 90. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Feinstein's death leaves a vacancy in her California senate seat. Gov. Gavin Newsom, D-Calif., previously indicated he would appoint a Black woman — there are currently none in the upper chamber — and not one of the primary candidates running for Feinstein's seat so as to not influence the March 2024 primary.

In a statement, Newsom said, "Dianne Feinstein was many things — a powerful, trailblazing U.S. Senator; an early voice for gun control; a leader in times of tragedy and chaos. But to me, she was a dear friend, a lifelong mentor, and a role model not only for me, but to my wife and daughters for what a powerful, effective leader looks

like."

Feinstein's career was not without controversy. She made the future Justice Amy Coney Barrett a household name when Barrett was nominated to a federal appeals court in 2017. Feinstein, then the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, questioned Barrett about whether she could differentiate her Catholic religious views from her legal ones, telling her, "the dogma lives loudly within you and that's of concern."

That line became a rallying cry for some who said Feinstein's remark about the Catholic jurist, who also is a married mother of seven, was a religious litmus test of sorts. Barrett was later confirmed to the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

But when Barrett was later confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2020 after a contentious nomination process, Feinstein praised her Republican colleague, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, then the committee's chair, for how he handled the hearings and gave him a hug.

Though a staunch progressive on issues such as the environment, abortion and gun control, Feinstein also was known as a pragmatic lawmaker willing to reach across the aisle, a sentiment Feinstein's colleagues from her time in the Senate, including President Joe Biden, mentioned as they offered their condolences over her death.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who worked with Feinstein on the Senate Judiciary Committee, wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, that they had a "wonderful working relationship" while he chaired that committee and she was ranking member. He said she "did an outstanding job" representing the people of California.

"She's a true public servant," Grassley said. "I'll miss her."

Sen. Alex Padilla, Feinstein's fellow California Democrat, wrote on X, "I've said it before: you can't tell the story of (California) —or American politics — without the trailblazing career of Senator Dianne Feinstein. A champion, an icon, and most importantly, a friend — Dianne will be dearly missed. Angela and I are keeping the Feinstein family in our prayers."

Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., wrote on X, "Please join me in keeping Senator Feinstein's family and friends in your prayers today."

"Although we were on opposite sides of the aisle, Senator Feinstein was always warm and welcoming to me and my colleagues, and she led a storied career," he said. "May she rest in peace."

Advertisement

In a statement, Biden said, "Senator Dianne Feinstein was a pioneering American. A true trailblazer. And for Jill and me, a cherished friend."

"In San Francisco, she showed enormous poise and courage in the wake of tragedy, and became a powerful voice for American values," Biden said. "Serving in the Senate together for more than 15 years, I had a front row seat to what Dianne was able to accomplish."

Biden noted he recruited Feinstein to serve on the Senate Judiciary Committee, saying there was "no better example of her skillful legislating and sheer force of will than when she turned passion into purpose, and led the fight to ban assault weapons."

"Dianne made her mark on everything from national security to the environment to protecting civil liberties," he said. "She's made history in so many ways, and our country will benefit from her legacy for generations."

On X, Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco, noted Feinstein "worshipped at Temple Emanuel Synagogue and graduated from San Francisco's Convent of the Sacred Heart school."

"May she rest in peace," he said.