

# Florida's Key

*The U.S. Supreme Court Geographic Centers  
with Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson*

Robert A. James\*  
April 7, 2022

For forty years, building on my editing of pioneering insights by my Yale classmate Ben Zuraw,<sup>1</sup> I have charted the geographic center of the United States Supreme Court. Our tongue-in-cheek satire of legal scholarship has proven an entertaining way of looking at regional perspectives on the Court over time.

A synopsis of our work is that over much of American history, the Court's center (the mean location of the Justices at the time of their appointments to federal office—or of their place of birth or upbringing, in order to mark an alternative center) moved westward at a pace roughly comparable to that of the nation's population center. In recent decades, however, there has been a strong eastward regression, as most appointees nominated by Presidents of both parties have hailed from what has been called the Court of Appeals for the Acela Circuit—the corridor from Washington, D.C. to Boston.<sup>2</sup>

I diligently kept track of the center through the years—from Bern, Kansas (the westernmost recorded appointment center) back through Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The results were published in a distinguished journal of legal

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin C. Zuraw, [The Supreme Court and the Westward Movement](#), 1 J. ATTEN. SUBT. 9 (1982), reprinted in 9 JOURNAL OF LAW 91 (2019), and updated in Benjamin C. Zuraw & Robert A. James, [The Supreme Court and the Westward Movement](#), 11 GREEN BAG 2D 341 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Adam Liptak, *Obama Has Chance to Select Justice With Varied Résumé*, N.Y. TIMES, May 1, 2009.

scholarship, to which I am grateful.<sup>3</sup> But the last few appointment battles especially have been painfully grueling and politically bruising. It seemed off-key to keep broadcasting in print something so inconsequential when so many were incensed over a thwarted nomination, a nominee's qualifications, or a vetting and consent process. The updates were effective only when they could be counted on to be humorous to most of the publication's readers.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, that was less and less often the case, and the pieces felt tired. I therefore took a sabbatical after the 2019 installment.

Friends overcame my baseline sensitivities and urged me to keep the flame alit. I therefore provide this narrowcast social-media update to the centers upon today's confirmation of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson<sup>5</sup> to fill the seat of Justice Stephen Breyer (effective on his retirement at the end of the present Term). The recent centers, including the Justice Amy Coney Barrett centers and the brand-new ones, are detailed in the Appendix hereto.

Replacing the appointment data is a straightforward endeavor. The retiring jurist was a Harvard Law School professor of regulation before being elevated to the Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in Boston, Massachusetts. The new jurist practiced for many years in Washington, D.C., and was appointed to the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. In contrast to the heat and intemperance of her confirmation hearings, there is no drama in the geographic facts here.

The resulting Court appointment center shifts slightly eastward and slightly southward with the replacement of Washington for Boston—to the outskirts of Lowber, Pennsylvania (lat. 40° 4' N, long. 79° 50' W). Were the nine Justices shipped by transporter beam to their new center, they would find themselves next to King Koop's Scrap & Towing and within earshot of Bigi Truck & Equipment Repair.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert A. James, [The Roberts\(dale\) Court](#), 22 GREEN BAG 2D 137 (2019) (also citing updates published in [2009](#), [2010](#), and [2017](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ROBERT ZEMECKIS, WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT? (Touchstone Pictures 1988) (title character could slip out of handcuffs [when, but only when, it was funny](#)).

<sup>5</sup> The new Justice is the third Jackson to sit on the Court, after Justice Howell Edmunds Jackson (1893-1895) and Justice Robert H. Jackson (1941-1954), whose tenure was interrupted during service as prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. President Andrew Jackson arguably esteemed himself an authority coequal with the Supreme Court on enforcement of its judgments (see *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. 515 (1832) (holding states lack criminal law jurisdiction in Indian tribal territory) (of which the often-misquoted President Jackson wrote, "The decision of the supreme court has fell still born, and they find that it cannot coerce Georgia to yield to its mandate"))).

Looking as always for something controversial, I turned my attention to the alternative center, based the locations of Justices at the time of birth (or at least childhood). Again, Justice Breyer's origin story is simple—he was born in San Francisco, California, and educated there through his undergraduate years at nearby Stanford University. For the new Justice, however, a judgment call is in order. She was born in Washington, D.C., but moved as a child to the Miami, Florida metropolitan area.

Justice Jackson is reported to have attended both junior high school and high school in Miami before heading north for college.<sup>6</sup> This transcript is more than sufficient for me to land on the Sunshine State. Junior high can be miserable, or it can be memorable, but in any event it is formative. Middle school is the crucible out of which our personalities are forged.<sup>7</sup>

Substituting Miami for San Francisco produces a large change in the Court's birth or childhood center, both eastward and southward. It now lands outside of Gate City, Virginia, on the Tennessee state border (lat. 36° 40' N, long. 82° 31' W). Some sense of this part of the country is evident from the nearby Creation Kingdom Zoo, which rejects evolution but encourages children to pursue a career in science.<sup>8</sup>

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Diverse parts of this nation are showcased amid this ongoing story of the Court's centers. This particular succession of Justices demonstrates the utility of keeping track of two centers in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

Geography plays a smaller role in judicial appointments today than in prior eras. We have seen, however, that in the rest of political life, geography still matters a great deal. Anything we can do to encourage greater familiarity with our varied regions, even something as trivial as this, may serve some purpose. Thanks to the key fact of her Florida upbringing, the Court's centers with Justice Jackson on the bench furnish us with just that opportunity. ■

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<sup>6</sup> See Patricia Mazzei, *How a High School Debate Team Shaped Ketanji Brown Jackson*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 22, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Leslie Crawford, *7th Grade: The Worst Year Ever*, GreatSchools.org, June 17, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> See Marcie Gore, *Creation Kingdom Zoo boasts animals from six continents*, KINGSPORT (TENN.) TIMESNEWS, July 1, 2020 (“entirely based upon the principles of creationism instead of an evolution standpoint, like a lot of other zoos use”).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. ISAAC ASIMOV, FOUNDATION (1951), FOUNDATION AND EMPIRE (1952) & SECOND FOUNDATION (1953) (novels exploring the consequences and wisdom of establishing not one but two centers).

## Appendix

2010

| JUSTICE                    | BIRTH LOCATION    | Lat  | Lat  | Lat  | Long | Long | Long  | APPOINTMENT LOCATION | Lat  | Lat  | Lat  | Long | Long | Long  |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
|                            |                   | Deg. | Min. | Dec  | Deg. | Min. | Dec   |                      | Deg. | Min. | Dec  | Deg. | Min. | Dec   |
| Roberts, J.                | Long Beach, IN    | 41   | 45   | 41.7 | 86   | 50   | 86.8  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8 | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Kennedy                    | Sacramento, CA    | 38   | 31   | 38.5 | 121  | 30   | 121.5 | Sacramento, CA       | 38   | 31   | 38.5 | 121  | 30   | 121.5 |
| Breyer                     | San Francisco, CA | 37   | 37   | 37.6 | 122  | 23   | 122.3 | Boston, MA           | 42   | 22   | 42.3 | 71   | 2    | 71.0  |
| Sotomayor                  | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7 | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | New York, NY         | 40   | 46   | 40.7 | 73   | 54   | 73.9  |
| Kagan                      | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7 | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | Cambridge, MA        | 42   | 22   | 42.3 | 71   | 20   | 71.3  |
| Thomas                     | Savannah, GA      | 32   | 8    | 32.1 | 81   | 12   | 81.2  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8 | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Ginsburg                   | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7 | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8 | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Alito                      | Hamilton Twp, NJ  | 40   | 10   | 40.1 | 74   | 40   | 74.6  | Newark, NJ           | 40   | 42   | 40.7 | 74   | 10   | 74.1  |
| Scalia                     | Trenton, NJ       | 40   | 17   | 40.2 | 74   | 49   | 74.8  | Chicago, IL          | 41   | 54   | 41.9 | 87   | 39   | 87.6  |
| CURRENT MEANS              | Coal City, IN     | 39   | 12   | 39.2 | 87   | 1    | 87.0  | Tappan Lake, OH      | 40   | 21   | 40.3 | 81   | 11   | 81.1  |
| 2010 US Geographic Center: | Plato, MO         | 37   | 31   | 37.5 | 92   | 10   | 92.1  |                      |      |      |      |      |      |       |

2017

| JUSTICE       | BIRTH LOCATION    | Lat  | Lat  | Lat   | Long | Long | Long  | APPOINTMENT LOCATION | Lat  | Lat  | Lat   | Long | Long | Long  |
|---------------|-------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|----------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|
|               |                   | Deg. | Min. | Dec   | Deg. | Min. | Dec   |                      | Deg. | Min. | Dec   | Deg. | Min. | Dec   |
| Roberts, J.   | Long Beach, IN    | 41   | 45   | 41.7  | 86   | 50   | 86.8  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8  | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Kennedy       | Sacramento, CA    | 38   | 31   | 38.5  | 121  | 30   | 121.5 | Sacramento, CA       | 38   | 31   | 38.5  | 121  | 30   | 121.5 |
| Breyer        | San Francisco, CA | 37   | 37   | 37.6  | 122  | 23   | 122.3 | Boston, MA           | 42   | 22   | 42.3  | 71   | 2    | 71.0  |
| Sotomayor     | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7  | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | New York, NY         | 40   | 46   | 40.7  | 73   | 54   | 73.9  |
| Kagan         | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7  | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | Cambridge, MA        | 42   | 22   | 42.3  | 71   | 20   | 71.3  |
| Thomas        | Savannah, GA      | 32   | 8    | 32.1  | 81   | 12   | 81.2  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8  | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Ginsburg      | New York, NY      | 40   | 46   | 40.7  | 73   | 54   | 73.9  | Washington, DC       | 38   | 51   | 38.8  | 77   | 2    | 77.0  |
| Alito         | Hamilton Twp, NJ  | 40   | 10   | 40.1  | 74   | 40   | 74.6  | Newark, NJ           | 40   | 42   | 40.7  | 74   | 10   | 74.1  |
| Gorsuch       | Denver, CO        | 39   | 45   | 39.7  | 104  | 52   | 104.8 | Denver, CO           | 39   | 45   | 39.7  | 104  | 52   | 104.8 |
| CURRENT MEANS | Jerseyville, IL   | 39   | 8    | 39.14 | 90   | 21   | 90.35 | Columbus, OH         | 40   | 7    | 40.11 | 83   | 6    | 83.10 |

2018

| JUSTICE          | BIRTH<br>LOCATION         | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec | APPOINTMENT<br>LOCATION | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec |
|------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
|                  |                           |             |             |             |              |              |             |                         |             |             |             |              |              |             |
| Roberts, J.      | Long Beach,<br>IN         | 41          | 45          | 41.7        | 86           | 50           | 86.8        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| <i>Kavanaugh</i> | <i>Washington,<br/>DC</i> | <i>38</i>   | <i>51</i>   | <i>38.8</i> | <i>77</i>    | <i>2</i>     | <i>77.0</i> | <i>Washington, DC</i>   | <i>38</i>   | <i>51</i>   | <i>38.8</i> | <i>77</i>    | <i>2</i>     | <i>77.0</i> |
| Breyer           | San Francisco, CA         | 37          | 37          | 37.6        | 122          | 23           | 122.3       | Boston, MA              | 42          | 22          | 42.3        | 71           | 2            | 71.0        |
| Sotomayor        | New York,<br>NY           | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | New York, NY            | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        |
| Kagan            | New York,<br>NY           | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | Cambridge, MA           | 42          | 22          | 42.3        | 71           | 20           | 71.3        |
| Thomas           | Savannah,<br>GA           | 32          | 8           | 32.1        | 81           | 12           | 81.2        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Ginsburg         | New York,<br>NY           | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Alito            | Hamilton<br>Twp, NJ       | 40          | 10          | 40.1        | 74           | 40           | 74.6        | Newark, NJ              | 40          | 42          | 40.7        | 74           | 10           | 74.1        |
| Gorsuch          | Denver, CO                | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       | Denver, CO              | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       |
| CURRENT<br>MEANS | <i>Milhausen,<br/>IN</i>  | 39          | 10          | 39.1        | 85           | 25           | 85.4        | <i>Robertsdale, PA</i>  | 40          | 9           | 40.1        | 78           | 10           | 78.1        |

2020

| JUSTICE                          | BIRTH<br>LOCATION                                         | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec | APPOINTMENT<br>LOCATION                             | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
|                                  |                                                           |             |             |             |              |              |             |                                                     |             |             |             |              |              |             |
| Roberts, J.                      | Long Beach,<br>IN                                         | 41          | 45          | 41.7        | 86           | 50           | 86.8        | Washington, DC                                      | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Kavanaugh                        | Washington,<br>DC                                         | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        | Washington, DC                                      | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Breyer                           | San Francisco, CA                                         | 37          | 37          | 37.6        | 122          | 23           | 122.3       | Boston, MA                                          | 42          | 22          | 42.3        | 71           | 2            | 71.0        |
| Sotomayor                        | New York,<br>NY                                           | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | New York, NY                                        | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        |
| Kagan                            | New York,<br>NY                                           | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | Cambridge, MA                                       | 42          | 22          | 42.3        | 71           | 20           | 71.3        |
| Thomas                           | Savannah,<br>GA                                           | 32          | 8           | 32.1        | 81           | 12           | 81.2        | Washington, DC                                      | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| <i>Barrett</i>                   | <i>New Orleans,<br/>LA</i>                                | <i>29</i>   | <i>57</i>   | <i>29.9</i> | <i>90</i>    | <i>5</i>     | <i>90.0</i> | <i>South Bend, IN</i>                               | <i>41</i>   | <i>41</i>   | <i>41.6</i> | <i>86</i>    | <i>15</i>    | <i>86.2</i> |
| Alito                            | Hamilton<br>Twp, NJ                                       | 40          | 10          | 40.1        | 74           | 40           | 74.6        | Newark, NJ                                          | 40          | 42          | 40.7        | 74           | 10           | 74.1        |
| Gorsuch                          | Denver, CO                                                | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       | Denver, CO                                          | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       |
| CURRENT<br>MEANS                 | <i>Bullocktown,<br/>IN</i><br>(near<br>Evansville,<br>IN) | 37          | 58          | 37.9        | 87           | 13           | 87.2        | <i>Black Lick, PA</i><br><br>(near Blairsville, PA) | 40          | 28          | 40.4        | 79           | 11           | 79.1        |
| 2020 US<br>Geographic<br>Center: | Hartville,<br>MO                                          | 37          | 25          | 37.4<br>1   | 92           | 20           | 92.34       |                                                     |             |             |             |              |              |             |

2022

| JUSTICE            | BIRTH<br>LOCATION    |             |             |             |              |              |             | APPOINTMENT<br>LOCATION |             |             |             |              |              |             |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
|                    |                      | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec |                         | Lat<br>Deg. | Lat<br>Min. | Lat<br>Dec  | Long<br>Deg. | Long<br>Min. | Long<br>Dec |
| Roberts, J.        | Long Beach,<br>IN    | 41          | 45          | 41.7        | 86           | 50           | 86.8        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Kavanaugh          | Washington,<br>DC    | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| <i>Jackson, K.</i> | <i>Miami, FL</i>     | <i>25</i>   | <i>46</i>   | <i>25.7</i> | <i>80</i>    | <i>11</i>    | <i>80.3</i> | <i>Washington, DC</i>   | <i>38</i>   | <i>51</i>   | <i>38.8</i> | <i>77</i>    | <i>2</i>     | <i>77.0</i> |
| Sotomayor          | New York, NY         | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | New York, NY            | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        |
| Kagan              | New York, NY         | 40          | 46          | 40.7        | 73           | 54           | 73.9        | Cambridge, MA           | 42          | 22          | 42.3        | 71           | 20           | 71.3        |
| Thomas             | Savannah, GA         | 32          | 8           | 32.1        | 81           | 12           | 81.2        | Washington, DC          | 38          | 51          | 38.8        | 77           | 2            | 77.0        |
| Barrett            | New Orleans,<br>LA   | 29          | 57          | 29.9        | 90           | 5            | 90.0        | South Bend, IN          | 41          | 41          | 41.6        | 86           | 15           | 86.2        |
| Alito              | Hamilton<br>Twp, NJ  | 40          | 10          | 40.1        | 74           | 40           | 74.6        | Newark, NJ              | 40          | 42          | 40.7        | 74           | 10           | 74.1        |
| Gorsuch            | Denver, CO           | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       | Denver, CO              | 39          | 45          | 39.7        | 104          | 52           | 104.8       |
| CURRENT<br>MEANS   | <i>Gate City, VA</i> | 36          | 40          | 36.6        | 82           | 31           | 82.5        | <i>Lowber, PA</i>       | 40          | 4           | 40.0        | 79           | 50           | 79.8        |