Q56 – Supreme Court justices serve for life. Why?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
Unlike elected officials, federal judges – including justices of the Supreme Court – serve for life so as to be independent of outside influence – especially politics.

But politics still affects the choice of justices. Presidents nominate justices whom they hope will share their philosophy –liberal, conservative, or moderate. Because justices serve for life, the presidents who nominate them hope to influence decisions of the Court for two or three decades. But presidents have often been sorely disappointed.
Appointed by Franklin Roosevelt, Justice Felix Frankfurter ended up moving to the right in the decades to come. Likewise Byron White – chosen by John F. Kennedy – again disappointed Democrats. Harry Blackmun – nominated by Richard Nixon – sided with the majority in the controversial abortion case of Roe v. Wade. And David Souter – nominated by the conservative George H. W. Bush – often sided with liberal justices.
One of the most famous examples of confounded expectations was Chief Justice Earl Warren. But as Chief Justice, Warren became a champion of civil rights – starting with the landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education that overturned the doctrine of “separate but equal” and declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

Southern politicians denounced the Brown decision, and Chief Justice Warren in particular. But because Supreme Court justices serve for life, they are independent of such political pressure.