

final - Gaggle - AZ Senate Race.mp3

[00:00:00] **Ron Hansen** It isn't an election year and you won't be filling out the bubbles on your ballot this November. But the Arizona Senate race is lurking in the shadows. So far, only one prominent candidate has announced they're running.

[00:00:13] **Rep. Ruben Gallego** You're the first group of people that are hearing this. Besides my family, I will be challenging Kyrsten Sinema for the United States Senate, and I need all of your support. There is no lobbyist for working families. We can argue different ways about how to do it, but at the core, if you're more likely to be meeting with the powerful than the powerless, you're doing this job incorrectly.

[00:00:45] **Mary Jo Pitzl** But as Arizona continues to be one of the most watched swing states in the country, the question of who will be on the ballot come 2024 is beginning to be top of mind. Sitting Senator Kirsten Cinema announced in December that she quit the Democratic Party and she's now an independent.

[00:01:02] **Sen. Kyrsten Sinema** What I think is important about this decision and this move is that I'll be able to show up to work every day as an independent and not be, you know, stuck into one party's demands of following without thinking.

[00:01:18] **Ron Hansen** And the Republicans are looking to regain a seat in Arizona with plenty of names to offer. Welcome to the Gaggle of Politics podcast from the Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm Ron Hansen. I cover national politics for the Republic.

[00:01:33] **Mary Jo Pitzl** And I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I covered State government for the Republic. Today on the show, we're joined by Erin Covi. She's a political reporter and analyst for Inside Elections, which provides nonpartisan analysis of presidential, congressional and gubernatorial races. Erin, welcome to the gaggle.

[00:01:55] **Erin Covey** Hi, Mary Jo. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:57] **Ron Hansen** There's been a conspicuous silence about Arizona's latest Senate race. Ruben Gallego entered the contest for Democrats in January, and after that, it's been pretty quiet on the candidate front. To this point. Senator Kyrsten Sinema hasn't officially said she's running for a second term. And while a lot of people think Republicans could win the contest, no prominent candidates have entered the race, at least not so far. So, Erin, given what these races cost now, is it unusual that others haven't already jumped in at this point in the calendar?

[00:02:33] **Erin Covey** I think it's a little bit unusual, though not particularly unusual. Among the current Senate battlegrounds. I think we're still seeing a lot of uncertainty in Republican primaries in Michigan and Wisconsin. Even in Pennsylvania, there is kind of a presumed front runner there. And David McCormack, but he hasn't announced he's running yet. And also, you know, money, obviously you point that out is a huge factor. But in Arizona, there are several candidates who are considering who would have the ability to self-fund their campaigns because they're independently wealthy. And so that's a factor as well. If you're in that position, there's less pressure to announce early and start fundraising. But yeah, it has been quite slow kind of across the board. We've noticed this in House and Senate races. There has just not been a lot of actual announcements from candidates, even as there is folks who are considering it.

[00:03:25] **Mary Jo Pitzl** What do you attribute that hesitation to? Are they waiting to see who else gets in, how the field shapes up or how how Biden is faring?

[00:03:34] **Erin Covey** I think so. I think, you know, a lot of this has to do with the fact that there is it's a presidential year and there is so much uncertainty about the top of the ticket right now. And that's going to affect all of these races more. So the House races and the ones further down ballot where candidates are less well-known and are going to be more tied to the Republican nominee for president. Senate races are a little different. Candidates are more able to kind of create their own weather in that scenario. At the top of the ticket still matters a lot, obviously. And because there's so much uncertainty with that, I think that's causing some hesitation. On top of that, you do have situations like in Arizona specifically where you have some prominent candidates who ran last year, like Kari Lake, for example, who are in the process of deciding whether they want to run or not. And that's kind of freezing the field for a lot of other candidates. Like in Arizona specifically, I know like Masters and a couple of other potential candidates have signaled that if Kari Lake does run, they may not get in. And so I think everyone's kind of waiting to see what she's going to do. There are some Republican candidates who have said, you know, my decision will not be dependent on what other folks do. But I think her specific role and her popularity within the Republican base in Arizona is certainly a factor in slowing this process down.

[00:04:52] **Mary Jo Pitzl** I think you touched on this a little earlier when you mentioned some of the other states where there are Senate races that are likely to be pivotal. But can you give us a larger context in which to view Arizona's race? We know Arizona is a swing state, but how likely is next year's election to change the balance of power in the Senate? And where might that happen?

[00:05:13] **Erin Covey** Yeah, that's a great question. So, I mean, right now Democrats have an incredibly narrow majority in the Senate of just one seat. And Sinema's decision to leave the party didn't affect that majority since she's not caucusing with Republicans. So that doesn't really affect the math. But right now, the main three Senate battlegrounds are going to be in Ohio, Montana and West Virginia, which are all three states that have Democrats running for reelection in states that are Republican leaning to various extents. And so Democrats ability to hold the Senate in 2024 is, first of all, going to be dependent on their ability to hold at least two out of three of those seats probably. And then you have kind of the second tier of Senate battlegrounds, which includes Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin. These are states that are going to be presidential battlegrounds. They're very competitive statewide. And so these are going to be races where you're going to see significant investment from both parties. And, you know, Sinema's decision didn't change that calculation. You know, regardless of whether she decides to run for reelection or not, Arizona is a very competitive state and it's going to be central to both parties, battlefields and their path to controlling the Senate majority in 2024. So it's guaranteed to see a lot of attention from both parties. The big question right now is kind of how the national Democratic apparatus in D.C. is going to handle Sinema and whether they are going to get behind the Democratic nominee who looks like will probably be Ruben Gallego at this point. He's pretty much cleared the field or whether they would stay out of the race. But there's a lot of complicating factors. Arizona at the moment.

[00:06:55] **Ron Hansen** Speaking of complicating factors, there's the whole independent pool of voters in Arizona. That's a fairly wide swath. If Senator Sinema does run for reelection, how does that label how does that faction of our electorate play out? Does

having the independent label, for example, necessarily attract voters who call themselves independents on the voter registration rolls?

[00:07:23] **Erin Covey** Yeah, that's a good question. And I think that's something we're all still trying to figure out. Unlike places like Georgia, Arizona does have a more significant population of independent voters, and so they do play a really important role in 2022. We saw Mark Kelly won them by about 16 points, and that was pretty much replicated across the map in a lot of these competitive Senate races. You saw the Democratic nominees win over independents by double digits. So that kind of fell within the national trend. What's going to happen in 2024 is really going to be dependent, I think, on who Republicans nominate. Sinema does obviously have an advantage with these independent voters. They're going to be more likely to back her than Democratic base voters and Republican base voters, obviously. But she still like what we've seen from polling is that she has kind of similar approval ratings across Republicans, Democrats and Independents, kind of around the same. I think the last poll we saw showed that her approval rating is actually higher among Republicans than Democrats right now in Arizona, which kind of shows how consequential the Republican primary is going to be, because she has the ability to potentially persuade a significant amount of more moderate leaning Republicans and Republican leaning independents to support her in 2024. And that's going to depend on who Republicans nominate. And if they nominate someone who is a polarizing candidate to the far right wing of the party like they did last year, kind of across the board in their statewide offices, and she will have a better chance of winning over those voters and retaining her the independent voters as well.

[00:09:02] **Ron Hansen** Let's do some rapid fire predictions you've mentioned. It depends on who the nominees may be. Let's go through a few possibilities on the Republican side to see what happens with these different folks. Probably the candidate with the most eyes on her for the Republicans at the moment is Kari Lake, who you've mentioned already. She was last year's gubernatorial nominee.

[00:09:24] **Kari Lake** It is something I will consider seriously consider. I've looked at a lot of polling, probably five polls showing that I can, not only win handily in a primary, but I can go on to win the entire race for Senate.

[00:09:38] **Ron Hansen** What does she add to the race into the primary field if she gets in?

[00:09:44] **Erin Covey** So Kari Lake is probably one of the most prominent Republicans in Arizona right now. And what we saw last year was that she is incredibly popular among the base and has been able to, I think, energize a lot of Trump supporters in the way that a lot of other Republican candidates have maybe not been able to. She is very charismatic, obviously has a kind of a background in local news and knows how to work audiences in a way that has proven to be effective. And so if she does run in the primary, she is going to be difficult to beat, certainly, And a lot of that will probably also depend on what's happening at the presidential level. By the time the Arizona Senate primary happens and the presidential nominee will be decided at that point, since Arizona has a pretty late primary. I think a lot of her fortune will depend on that as well. And it seems like right now she is actively considering running. She has met with the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which is the main group tasked with electing Senate Republicans. And so she's demonstrated clear interest. So it seemed like she has indicated that she would not make a decision until the lawsuits that she's engaged in over the 2022 race have concluded, which I haven't been following super closely. But there's obviously not really

any basis to that. And she is attempting to kind of follow in Trump's steps and overturn the results of an election that is already clearly decided and over. But I think it seems like her timeline will depend on that as well.

[00:11:20] **Ron Hansen** She is often mentioned, at least around here, as a possible vice presidential running mate for President Donald Trump. If he were to be the nominee for the Republicans. How seriously is she seen as a VP possibility?

[00:11:36] **Erin Covey** She's definitely up there, I think, in the kind of top tier of potential vice presidential hopefuls on the Republican side, I think there's there's kind of several candidates that would probably be at the top of the list. From what I've gathered, and that includes Kari Lake. That includes Kristi Noem, the governor of South Dakota. Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina, who is currently running for president. And even like someone like Marjorie Taylor GREENE in Georgia. So I think the conventional wisdom is that whoever the Republican presidential nominee is is probably more likely to nominate a woman to be vice president. And Kari Lake, again, has kind of demonstrated an ability to carry Trump's mantle in a way that a lot of other Republican candidates have tried to do, but maybe not done as effectively. And so I think she would certainly be up there, though. I mean, obviously, it's really hard to tell what things are going to look like next year. And Trump is such an unpredictable figure. I mean, who knows who will be on his good side and his bad side by the time we get to next summer.

[00:12:42] **Mary Jo Pitzl** A couple more possible candidates. Pinal County Sheriff Mark Lamb has shown interest. How do you size him up?

[00:12:49] **Erin Covey** Yeah, it seems like he might be the most likely to actually announce a bid at this point and has indicated the clearest interest in running.

[00:12:59] **Sheriff Mark Lamb** Look out for a possible announcement because we're going to take this fight. We're going to restore law and order and the Constitution to Washington, D.C..

[00:13:09] **Erin Covey** He would probably be in a similar lane as Lake, though he's also said that Kari Lake's decision won't affect his decision. So I think that is notable. And he has certainly shown an ability to, again, energize the Trump voters in the Republican base and would probably have a decent chance. But, you know, it kind of depends on how many other Republicans are running. And I don't see him as probably a top tier candidate at this point, especially if you have someone like Kari Lake running who kind of overlaps with his lane. And so it's hard to kind of see a path that he would take. But if he does become kind of the only Trump esque candidate in that primary, he certainly would have a chance. Just kind of depends on who else jumps in at that point.

[00:13:58] **Blake Masters** But now it's time to unite. And so let me be the first to welcome you to our team. Because together we can and will beat Mark Kelly in November.

[00:14:12] **Ron Hansen** Last year's nominee was Blake Masters. There were rumblings that he could get in the race as well. How do you view his possible entry into this? What does it depend on and how might he fare this time around?

[00:14:26] **Erin Covey** He'll be an interesting position. He obviously did not come as close as Lake did to winning statewide in Arizona. And so I think is seen as even less of a viable general election candidate than she is by a lot of Republicans in D.C.. Of course, that

doesn't necessarily mean he can't win a primary. Republican primary voters showed in 2022 that candidates like Masters and like Blake are the types of candidates that they generally prefer at this point. But yeah, I think his fortune also is going to depend on who else runs. I think he has indicated that if Lake were to run or reportedly has indicated that if Lake were to run, he might not run because they probably would split that vote. And so I think if Lake doesn't run, I think he has a pretty decent chance and has obviously already ran statewide and has the infrastructure to be able to mount a pretty serious statewide campaign. But you're certainly going to see if he does run a lot of opposition from other Republicans. He wants to make sure that he isn't the nominee again and doesn't jeopardize their ability to win a competitive race.

[00:15:38] **Mary Jo Pitzl** And then lastly, we've got Karrin Taylor Robson, who ran for governor last year in the Republican primary, didn't make it out of there, but has shown, at least in that race, showed a great willingness to self-finance.

[00:15:51] **Karrin Taylor Robson** There are a lot of good people involved in this process and it is vitally important that they take the time necessary to get it right. Whether you cast a ballot for me or one of my opponents. Every legitimate vote counts.

[00:16:06] **Erin Covey** So that doesn't make her a really formidable candidate. But as we saw last year, money isn't everything. And we saw this with Jim Lamon in the Senate race as well. Just because you are able to pour a ton of money into your own campaign doesn't necessarily guarantee that you're going to be able to win. It matters a lot, but it's not everything. And so I think, though, if she were to run, she would be the type of candidate that you would see a lot of support from more establishment Republicans and there might be more motivation early on to make sure that she would be able to win a primary, unlike last year, just because Republicans already saw that the candidates that they had last year jeopardize their ability to win in 2022. So she probably would have some serious support early on.

[00:16:54] **Ron Hansen** Let's shift to some of the dynamics for just a moment. Last year, former President Trump's endorsement seemed to really tip the GOP primary. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's allied PACs didn't support Blake Masters, the eventual nominee. And Peter Thiel masters, his principal benefactor, largely sat it out in the general election. How different will things like that be this cycle?

[00:17:22] **Erin Covey** Yeah, that's a good question. I think a lot of that depends on whether Trump is the presidential nominee or not. If he is the presidential nominee, his endorsement will have more weight than if he isn't. But even if he isn't, his endorsement would still carry a significant amount of weight within the Republican primary. I think it's hard to tell how much his influence has waned since 2022. I think a lot of Republicans are hopeful that it has waned and so are maybe more optimistic about it. But I think, like we have seen that he obviously has been able to survive so many political scandals and has been like Teflon. And so I think I remain a little skeptical that his influence has waned significantly. I think if he does end up endorsing in the Arizona Senate primary, it will mean a lot. It may not mean that this person automatically becomes the frontrunner, but it's going to be a significant factor and it's going to be something that these candidates are probably going to be actively vying for by the time the field is more clear.

[00:18:28] **Mary Jo Pitzl** And lastly, Kyrsten Sinema, she's out raising money. She's filed paperwork for another Senate run, but she hasn't made it official either. So what's the

holdup and what's the difference between a three way race and a more conventional contest between a Democrat and a Republican?

[00:18:46] **Erin Covey** Yeah. So for her, I think she has a bit of a delay timeline because she is going to be running as an independent. And so she's not going to have to go through a Democratic primary. Sinema doesn't have a lot of incentives to announce this early on, I think. And she's probably still waiting. I imagine to see what happens in the Republican primary, and that could affect her decision as well. And so there's just a lot of factors that are up in the air right now. I think, you know, we have seen recently she switched fundraising platforms. She's no longer using ActBlue, the Democratic digital fundraising platform, and is now using one that's used by independents and Republicans. She's filed to run for reelection. So she is making moves that would indicate that she is definitely thinking about running for reelection. And I mean, even the fact that she switched parties in and of itself was kind of seen as a signal that she wanted to run for reelection in 2024 because there was a lot of concern that if she ran in a Democratic primary against someone like Yago, who had been signaling that he was going to primary her for a while, she may not be able to win. And so I think some read her decision to switch parties as a necessary thing that she would have to do to win a Senate race in 2024. But I think mostly because of the fact she doesn't have to go through a primary and she has until April of next year to collect the signatures, she would need to get on the ballot as an independent. She doesn't have the same time constraints that a Democratic or Republican candidate has.

[00:20:18] **Ron Hansen** Erin, thank you for sharing your insights. If people want to follow your work online and on social media, where can they find you?

[00:20:27] **Erin Covey** Yeah, so my Twitter handle is @e-r-covey and you can find my work at inside elections dot com. I write there with Jacob Rubashkin and Nathan Gonzalez, and we cover mostly Senate and House races and we do some governor races as well. But we will be covering the Arizona Senate race very closely in the next several months.

[00:20:50] **Ron Hansen** Well, thank you for coming on the gaggle.

[00:20:52] **Mary Jo Pitzl** Thanks so much.

[00:20:53] **Erin Covey** Yeah, thanks for having me.

[00:21:00] **Mary Jo Pitzl** That is it for this week gaggle listeners to follow along with how the Senate race might unfold. You can always read Ron's work at AC Central dot com. He'll be covering the race closely. Do you have questions you want us to answer or topics you want us to cover? Reach out to the gaggle at Arizona Republican or give us a call at 6024440804. And if you like the show, please leave us a review and share it with a friend. To make sure you never miss an episode, follow the gaggle on your favorite podcast app and you can follow me on Twitter at Mary J. Pitzl That's P-I-T-Z-L.

[00:21:43] **Ron Hansen** You can follow me on Twitter at Ronald J. Hansen That's an H-A-N-S-E-N. The editor and producer of today's episode is Amanda Luberto. You can follow her at Amanda Luberto. That's I newbie. L-U-B-E-R-T-O. Thanks for listening to the gaggle, a podcast from the Arizona Republic and AC Central dot com. We'll see you next week.