

Gaggle - 2024 look ahead.mp3

Ron Hansen [00:00:05] It's the beginning of a big year in Arizona politics. Next week, the governor will give her second state of the state addressing what happened in her first year and her goals for the year ahead. This could set the tone for the year in Arizona politics. And what a year we expect it to be. Once again, look for Arizona to hold the national political spotlight. Arizona will be among the few swing states on the map. President Joe Biden's narrowest victory in 2020 came in Arizona, and Republicans are looking to win back a state they carried for decades. Beyond that, Arizona's U.S. Senate race could offer a rare three way contest for the seat held by independent incumbent Kyrsten Sinema. That race already includes Democratic Congressman Ruben Gallego and Republican star Kari Lake. And the state could play a key role in the battle for control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Two GOP held seats are on Democrats radar. As if that's not enough. Both chambers in the state legislature are narrowly divided. In Arizona, voters will likely weigh a ballot measure to determine whether to enshrine abortion rights in the state's constitution, even as the 2020 election remains a source of controversy. We're getting ready for 2024. Welcome to the gaggle, a politics podcast by the Arizona Republic and AZCentral dot com. I'm your host, Ron Hansen. I covered national politics for the Republic. My co-host, Mary Jo Pitzl, and I are joined today by our colleagues to break down what we've been keeping an eye on in the New Year. Folks, if you could go around and introduce yourselves. Ryan, we'll start with you.

Ryan Randazzo [00:02:04] I'm Ryan Randazzo. I'm a reporter for the Arizona Republic, and I'm covering national politics.

Sasha Hupka [00:02:09] I'm Sasha Hupka and I'm the county government reporter here at the Arizona Republic.

Stacey Barchenger [00:02:14] Stacey Barchenger, I cover state politics, in particular the governor and the attorney general.

Robert Anglen [00:02:19] And I'm Robert Anglen. I'm an investigative reporter.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:02:22] So, Stacey, as we go into 2024, what are you hearing or what would you expect to see from Governor Hobbs in terms of her style of governance and maybe any lessons learned from her first year in office?

Stacey Barchenger [00:02:36] Well, I think you kind of said what I'm most excited to see. Any lessons learned? We don't know yet what that will look like if the way she approaches split government is different. We saw, you know, last year, she really exerted her executive authority sometimes to the frustration of Republican lawmakers who are returning in a week or so to get back to work. There was an evolution there. I wonder how she will try to keep whatever goodwill she built with Republican leaders going into this year when it will look environmentally very different. Last year we had a bipartisan budget because there was enough money to go around to buy votes. As you know, that certainly isn't the case this year. There was a lot of drama with her Cabinet nominees last year that she has at least temporarily kind of worked around with this legal maneuver that maybe has settled things. And the other thing I'm very interested in is whether her political aims bleed over into the legislature. My money is on. Absolutely. Yes, they do. But she has a stated goal of well, she is governing next year. She's going to try and get more Democrats in the legislature. And I have to think that that's going to sour some already sour relationships.

Ron Hansen [00:03:55] Ryan, I want to pivot to you for a moment. Last year, Congress expelled Republican George Santos. They had standoffs over the debt ceiling and over funding the government and to avoid a shutdown. How do they top that in 2024? We've seen some really interesting dynamics with the far right members of Arizona's delegation. This is creating some pressure, I would think, on the less far right members of Arizona's Republican delegation and a good deal of frustration for the Democrats in Arizona, I would think.

Ryan Randazzo [00:04:32] So, I mean, maybe being optimistic that 2024 would have less of that because there's a presidential election. And and of course, then the congressional elections and maybe people would realize maybe a good strategy for winning elections is to not have drama in your job and to cause people to lose faith that you have the ability to do that. So that's the optimistic look. The more pessimistic look is that former President Trump was egging on a lot of that dysfunction in Congress and the people that want to continue to prove their loyalty to him as he likely takes the lead in the Republican nomination for president, are going to continue to push those things. And, you know, cutting aid to Ukraine, which, you know, of course, has been a sticking point on on the budget and in the speaker race. So those kind of issues are two ways to look at it. We could see it settle down and, you know, maybe we see more.

Ron Hansen [00:05:21] You've invoked the presidential race. That certainly figures to be very prominent in Arizona throughout the year. President Biden seems to be really struggling in the polls, especially here in Arizona. We will once again be one of the critical swing states in this race. What are your thoughts on how Arizonans view their choices at the moment? Is it very different than the country as a whole? Does it seem that Joe Biden has a way back to winning the state that he carried in 2020? Does Donald Trump have a firm grasp on the state he once carried in 2016?

Ryan Randazzo [00:05:59] You know, general sentiment in 2020 was that people didn't necessarily love either candidate, but sometimes some were motivated to vote just in opposition of one or the other. And that sentiment has only soured. Right. No one really likes either one of those candidates more than they did before, especially, you know, folks that are somewhat in the middle. But you're right. Polling doesn't look fantastic for the incumbent. So my guess is Arizonans as a whole are going to be very sick of election advertisements and news and events by the time Election Day rolls around, because Biden is going to need to make more appearances here and have more of a presence than than he did four years ago. And obviously, Trump or whoever comes out of the Republican primaries is also going to focus a lot here because this was the closest state in the nation. So we are going to see just a ton of attention on our state. Again, optimistically, if I were to look at that, I'd say, well, maybe that's good. And Arizonans concerns will be reflected in the campaigns, but then maybe that's a little overoptimistic and maybe we're just going to see a lot of attention and a lot of grenade tossing and not a lot of substance out of the candidates.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:07:04] 2024 is going to bring us three elections. We've got a presidential preference election on March 19th. Then we have a primary in August and the general election, of course, in November. Robert, to what extent do you see 2020 still looming over what's. In a roll out in 2024 in terms of elections.

Robert Anglen [00:07:25] I'm here to tell you that 2020 is going to keep being an issue well into 2024. It's not stopping. You still have at this moment, Kari Lake claiming the election fraud you have. Abiomed are doing the same even as they're running for different

offices, the elections that they lost. But more than that, you have the debacle that was the Arizona audit that cost taxpayers millions of dollars. It didn't work. It wasn't set up to work. And yet it still it was concocted to become this kind of domino effect for the country that we would we would engage in audits to determine election fraud in other states, other counties. And that actually is working despite the fact that it was a train wreck. So you don't have to look far either or You only have to look to Cochise County, Mojave County and Pinal County, all of whom have flirted with the idea of a hand count. Despite the expense, despite the fact that it takes an enormous amount of time and resources and the idea that hand counts are notoriously inaccurate doesn't seem to sway anybody. So welcome. 2020, 2024.

Sasha Hupka [00:08:32] And I want to chime in on this, too, because I've been covering some of those discussions around hand counting and certifying election results in some of these counties that are very Republican heavy. So now Mojave and coaches to a certain extent as well. And it's worth noting that one of the things that is going to dominate the conversation this year on the election administration front is that every single county position in all 15 of Arizona's counties is up for election. And so a lot of the people who are leading these counties, the county supervisors, the county recorders, they are running for reelection. Many of them are Republicans and they're Republicans who so far have not voted to hand count or have pushed ideas of not certifying the election. But they are Republicans facing competitive primaries. And so I've definitely seen a tone shift where, you know, supervisors had acknowledged to me both privately and to a certain extent publicly in 2022 that, well, hand counting isn't really that feasible of an idea. You know, we have concerns around the amount of money it would take to do. We have concerns around finding space to do it, around finding volunteers to help count around just the logistical concerns of the thing. Now they're taking a stance that's much more walking the line with it and flirting, I think is the appropriate word, as you said, Robert, with those ideas. And that's going to be something to watch.

Robert Anglen [00:10:03] The dark horse in all of this, of course, is the Arizona attorney general who just got indictments against two Cochise County supervisors who were toying with the idea of hand counts and delayed certification of the election. The attorney general's office also is apparently investigating the fake electors and perhaps the audit itself. So the whole issue of these election integrity efforts, as they're called, is the outcomes are going to be murky and potentially lead to convictions or indictments.

Stacey Barchenger [00:10:34] Which is all just to say. Right, Robert? Maybe one of the new things we'll see in 2024 is more prominent state officials being willing to wade into these battles, whether it be indictments or public statements pushing back on the counties that do kind of go rogue.

Robert Anglen [00:10:49] Or and Sasha might talk to this leaving office altogether.

Sasha Hupka [00:10:55] And it's worth noting with all this, too, that county leaders are well aware of what you just mentioned, Stacey, about Attorney General Mayes being possibly more hands on with enforcing some of the election laws than our former attorney general was. In fact, that is a key concern for them. They have spoken at length in public meetings about the fact that they are worried that if they make moves towards refusing to certify or make moves towards trying to do a hand count, that they're going to get sued and taxpayer money is going to be wasted trying to defend them from a case that more likely than not, they can't win. To your point, Robert, we have we've seen this exodus to a certain extent of Arizona election officials, and even more so than that, What we're starting

to see in terms of election administration is that less people are willing to serve as poll workers and also that less places are willing to serve as polling locations. And that's an issue that is also on the horizon coming up this year.

Ron Hansen [00:11:57] That brings me to a question I wanted to put to the floor. How much concern should the public have? How much concern should the nation have given the presidential stakes that run through Arizona in the administration of our elections by next November in particular? Will we have the resources, the personnel, the will to carry out and conduct the kinds of elections that are needed to help sort out all the very important races and issues that we expect to see?

Sasha Hupka [00:12:31] I think that largely depends on how these elections go. Last year we saw that there were a few Arizona counties that struggled with their elections. Pinal County had issues during both their primary and their general election. And then Maricopa County in November had some of their printers not work the way they were supposed to and ended up having ballots getting rejected by Tabulators because they were printed incorrectly. And those are the types of things that erode trust in our election system, even though at the end of the day, there were safeguards in place and both of those elections were ultimately counted correctly and the results were accurate. It still freaks people out when they see that there are problems on that scale. And so these counties tell me that they've learned from last year that, you know, in Pinellas County's case, they have more staff now. They're putting more money towards their election system, and they have a recorder down there who is new and who is very much so working to ensure that this year's elections go off without a hitch. In Maricopa County, they've implemented more testing. They're getting new printers that are going to stand up a little bit better to the real world conditions that they'll be putting them in. But the reality is that even when everything goes right, sometimes there's also imagined issues. I mean, we've had that just last year in November and the general very small jurisdictional election. But we had people freaking out and thinking that there was something nefarious going on just because there was one polling center that closed earlier than others and people were really concerned and upset by that. And so I think some of it depends on, you know, how good are they at communicating the things that can go wrong, so to speak, on Election Day. How good are they at making sure that things run smoothly for the voter and that the voter has a good experience and doesn't encounter anything that gives them cause for concern? And then the other thing that we might encounter this year in regards to the presidential race specifically is that there are potentially some some deadline issues given Arizona's new recount statute. We expect that a number of races, including potentially the presidential race, might fall into recount territory under the expanded recount threshold that was put into place last year. And that might mean that there is some confusion unless lawmakers can figure it out. And I know in the legislature already the Association of Counties is lobbying for a solution to this. But that might mean that there are some issues in terms of getting our results reported on time, and that could have catastrophic consequences.

Robert Anglen [00:15:16] That expansion was brought to you by the legislature, by far right members of the legislature. Right. Who wanted and pushed the idea of hand counts still, because by expanding it, they get a better opportunity to do more hand counts. Am I wrong on that?

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:15:30] It was a direct response to Biden's very narrow win in Arizona, which under the standard that was established by lawmakers in 2022, would have required the 2020 presidential race to have been automatically recounted. This may come back to bite them. Also wanted to comment that in 2024, what I'll be watching for in terms of voter

behavior is how many people will go back to voting by mail. There was a lot of skepticism about mail in voting. We saw more people going to the polls to vote, especially on the Republican side of the aisle. We've had litigation over that that found early voting is perfectly constitutional. It's still in place. Let's see how voters react to that.

Ron Hansen [00:16:15] Mary Jo, I will put the question back to you and others. If they care to join in one of the other variables for 2024, it seems, is the role of abortion rights as an issue that could help drive turnout, motivate people to enter races in the first place. And certainly the issue matrix that candidates are going to be dealing with throughout the calendar. How big of an issue should we expect this to be in an election environment that is already very high stakes? We have a presidential race that could come down to the state of Arizona. We have a Senate race. We have a lot of other important races across the state. What does abortion do to help rejigger the calculus?

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:17:01] Well, I'll defer to Stacey, but because she's going to she's covering that issue. But I will note that the day after Ohio voters in November of 23 approved abortion access, I ran into the chair of the Democratic Party in Arizona. She was beaming. She was like walking on clouds. She thinks this is going to be a big part of their ticket to success.

Stacey Barchenger [00:17:23] Yeah. Just to expound on that point, I mean, you're going to see Democrats up and down the ballot talking. About abortion. It's a winning issue for them, they think, and using that to drive turnout, you know, whether it tips the scales in some of these very close races. Who knows? There's another theory out there that because there very likely will be a question on your November ballot about whether the state should protect abortion rights as they were in Roe. Whether people can separate that as an issue and won't consider it as much as they pick candidates. The example being maybe because you can say, yes, I want to protect abortion rights, enshrine them in the Arizona Constitution, maybe you would be willing to vote for a candidate who isn't quite where you're at on that same issue. That's all speculation at this point. Something we'll be watching as this ballot measure goes forward.

Ron Hansen [00:18:21] Mary Jo, we know that there are other ballot measures that may come into play, especially regarding election choices moving forward. How might those issues sort themselves out, especially given an electorate that will be driven by presidential race and especially issues like abortion?

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:18:40] Well, nothing's going to top the presidential race at the top of the ballot. I think abortion will come pretty close as a close second or maybe a not so close second. We also have some election reform measures. First, we got to see if they qualify for the ballot. I don't know how much that's going to attract voters, but if the message is if you don't like the way things have been going thus far and how our elections are run, vote for the make elections fair or the better ballot measure that might appeal to a certain group of voters. But nothing's going to top the presidential race. And remember, the ballot propositions are at the very bottom of your ballot, which could be a very, very long ballot. And there is historically voter fatigue on some of these issues.

Ryan Randazzo [00:19:24] So, Ron, you're going to be covering is it fair to say maybe the most closely watched Senate race in the country this year? Do we see any other potential three way tie ups across the nation?

Ron Hansen [00:19:36] I don't think that there will be any other three way races that generate the kind of interest that this one will. The thing that is unique about Arizona in the race to win the seat currently held by Senator Kyrsten Sinema is that she is the incumbent. She is an independent who is the incumbent. Nobody else is going to be using that kind of strategy, it appears. So there's a uniqueness to Arizona that is likely to make this one one to watch throughout the year because it is possible it will turn into a three way race. It also introduces a lot more variability than what we're used to seeing. Ruben Gallego is the congressman who is the only prominent Democrat running in that race. And Kari Lake is the favorite to win the Republican nomination. And the polling, limited as it is to this point, certainly suggests that Kyrsten Sinema is behind. It is worth noting she has not even formally said she is going to seek reelection. So the dynamics in that race are still unsettled as 2024 dawns on us. And that also just helps keep a spotlight on what will the contours of this race ultimately look like. Okay, Mary Jo, we can't end this without asking about the legislature. The legislature will enter 2024, obviously, with a staredown with Governor Hobbs, it seems. What can we expect from a budget outlook and also just from the kinds of social or other policy related bills that may or may not advance to the governor's desk?

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:21:18] Lawmakers return on January 8th. We'll see how they if they have a different reaction to Governor Hobbs at the state of the state than they did last year. But legislatively, I would expect in many ways a replay of what we saw in 2023. I mean, it is an election year. Candidates want to be able to talk about the bills that they have pushed, even if maybe they get vetoed and don't get signed into law. And I think what will loom over all of this is the state budget. The state budget currently is in a deficit situation. We have lower tax collections because of the flat tax. We have increased costs because of we're going into the second year of the universal voucher school voucher program. And last year the legislature spent the whole \$2.5 billion surplus. So there's really not any kind of a cushion. Lawmakers are loathe to tap into the rainy day fund, even though it might look like it's pouring. Cats and dogs. I expect the budget will in a way, perhaps be a less protracted debate because you're going to have to cut stuff. You don't have a lot of room to move on that. So those are the main things budget. They've also got to deal with things like are they going to waive this aggregate expenditure limit for. Schools, which is just a perennial headache. Are they going to early on tackle the automatic recount law so that it doesn't risk running afoul or messing up Arizona's ability to get its electors a voice? And will Republican lawmakers and I think this is a no brainer, but will they refer to the ballot their proposal for a \$4,000 per teacher pay raise? It's a nice counterpoint and it's a nice thing to get on the ballot that would have universal appeal.

Stacey Barchenger [00:23:00] You know? Mary Jo, Governor Hobbs did set the single year veto record in state history last year, 143 vetoes. Do you think she'll go for bus this year?

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:23:09] Well, let's both put some money down on that, Stacey. I say no.

Stacey Barchenger [00:23:13] Okay, well, I'll take. Yes, just for five bucks.

Sasha Hupka [00:23:16] Not to take us off the topic of the legislature. But one thing I do want to note that I think will impact a lot of the races that we're all covering this year is that election administration is really going to loom pretty large over a lot of these races, including the ones I'm covering. You know, I expect that will generate a whole lot of conversation. And it should, because voting and elections are things that are foundational to our democracy. At the same time, one of the things I'm planning on doing with my

coverage this year is really trying to give voters a false sense of all of the stakes, not just the issues that get a lot of traction like election administration. And I would say I think voters should expect that the candidates for these positions. Yes, talk about that, but also talk about other things, things like public health and education and the environment and other big issues that we've seen are hugely crucial to all of the communities that we live in here in Arizona. So I'll just leave on that thought that I think we should all going forward, keep an eye on those things to.

Ron Hansen [00:24:19] Well, as we look to that galaxy of topics and issues in 2024, we will be covering them all on the gaggle, I'm sure. I want to thank our guests for coming in, as they do every year at the dawn of the year, to talk about what the year ahead might offer us. I'm sure we'll have each of you back throughout the year to discuss the coverage that you're working on and whatever emerges in this newsworthy election year. Of course, listeners can find your work on AZCentral dot com, but where can they find you on social media?

Robert Anglen [00:24:55] I'm on X at Robert Anglen. That's r-o-b-e-r-t-a-n-g-l-e-n.

Stacey Barchenger [00:25:02] And you can follow me at sbarchenger, that's s-b-a-r-c-h-e-n-g-e-r.

Sasha Hupka [00:25:10] I have options. You can follow me on x formerly known as Twitter at Sasha Hupka. That's s-a-s-h-a-h-u-p-k-a. And if you'd like a different option than x. I'm also on Instagram and Threads at sashahupkasnaps.

Ryan Randazzo [00:25:28] I'm at utility reporter.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:25:35] We're looking forward to being with you throughout 2024 and bringing you the most important political conversations in Arizona. We want to hear from you. Send us a message at 6024440804. Or a voice memo to the gaggle at Arizona Republic. That's all one word all spelled out. This episode was edited and produced by both Amanda Luberto and Kaely Monahan, news director from Kathy Tulumello. Our music comes from Universal production music.

Ron Hansen [00:26:10] Never miss an episode of the gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. If you learn something new today, be sure to share this episode with a friend. You can also leave us a review and write us five stars. You can follow the gaggle on social media at A-z-c podcasts. I'm at Ronald J. Hansen. That's h-a-n-s-e-n.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:26:33] And I'm Mary Jo Pitzl That's p-i-t-z-l.. The gaggle is an Arizona Republic and Azcentral.com production. Thank you again for listening. We'll see you next week.