

Gaggle - Sinema Senate 24.mp3

Amanda [00:00:00] Hi gaggle listeners. Today's episode was recorded before the national security bill was blocked by the Senate. So you're going to hear Ron and Mary Jo talk to our guest about how the bill looks like it's going to fail. Just wanted to give you a heads up. Enjoy the episode.

Ron Hansen [00:00:23] The collapse of Senator Kyrsten Sinema's bipartisan border security bill unceremoniously ended her hopes of adding a deal on perhaps the most difficult issue in congressional politics to her legislative scorecard. With that off the table and an April deadline to collect at least 42,000 signatures from Arizona voters, looming Sinema's political future is quickly approaching the crossroads.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:00:50] Since she quit the Democratic Party in December 2022. Sinema's fundraising has plummeted, and she's about 20 percentage points behind her challengers in most of the polling on the US Senate race. Democratic frontrunner Ruben Gallego and Republican frontrunner Kari Lake, both of Outrage Sinema of late Sinema. And in 2023, with her worst fundraising quarter in three years and she spent more than she brought in. All of which begs the question does Sinema have a path to reelection? And what does that mean for the race if she's stepping out of politics?

Ron Hansen [00:01:28] Welcome to The Gaggle, a politics podcast by the Arizona Republic and azccentral.com. I'm Ron Hanson. I covered national politics for the Republic.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:01:38] And I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I cover state politics and policy. Today, we're examining Arizona's U.S. Senate race and putting into context how much weight Arizona pulls in D.C.. Joining us remotely today is Jessica Taylor. She's an editor at the Cook Political Report, which focuses on the US Senate and governors. Jessica, welcome to the gaggle.

Jessica Taylor [00:02:03] Thank you for having me.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:02:11] Senator, Sinema has energetically thrown herself into a border security bill that looks destined to fail with Republicans, and maybe even with some Democrats. She's repeatedly forestalled a decision on her political future. But we're less than two months from when she has to turn in 42,000 signatures to qualify for the November ballot. As we record, Sinema hasn't even started that undertaking. So this begs the question is she a serious contender for reelection at this point?

Jessica Taylor [00:02:40] Because she is an incumbent, you must take her seriously, even if it work. Maybe a member of Congress or a state legislator or something talking about this, and they have not taken these steps. But I think there is still a benefit to incumbency, but it's far less of one, given her predicament. And after leaving the party, and there's still a lot of questions, I have more questions than answers about this race. I think we all do. I call this my asterisk race because, you know, it's hard to handicap. We have it as a toss up. I've had it from a toss up from the beginning. I think even if this is just a two person race between Kari Lake and Reuben Guy ego, I think it's still a toss up because Arizona is a toss up state down the board, and has become one of the most important states in the Electoral College and the Senate. I feel like I've had a race in Arizona for, I don't know how long. I feel like I've never not had a race in Arizona. When we look back over the past few election cycles, you are the epicenter of the political universe. But again, you have to, I think, still take her seriously. She won this seat back for

the Democrats. She's someone that's fascinating to me because she's gone through such an evolution. I mean, she was a member of the Green Party. And, you know, there's ads of her, like wearing the tutu and everything. And so she has just refashioned herself in a remarkable way. And she's someone that you cannot predict what she is going to do. But I think when I look at the cold, hard facts that you mentioned of the number of signatures that she has to get, that is far more substantial than if she were running on a party line. And we look at her fundraising, which has been a bit small, and she does not have that same infrastructure that she had before of small dollar donors coming and that she was so successful with in 2018. So I actually looked at this race last year and thought, I still think she runs. She's such an idiosyncratic person that I think she's just going to do what she wants. But in talking with Democrats, even the thought that she might run, I increasingly think, again, you have to take concrete steps. You have to have this type of campaign infrastructure. I mean, we've seen candidates kicked off before because they don't have the signatures. And like, that is just this is like step number one. And you have to focus on step number one before you can look to step number eight. And is this bill part of her reelection strategy. Again you're looking at this. You're looking so much forward that you you have to you know, keep it simple stupid almost. You know that that you have to get this done first. So I think it's something she's passionate about. But is this her thinking this is what I want my legacy to be, or is this as the crux of my reelection? But again, you have to get those things in order in order to be on the ballot.

Ron Hansen [00:05:14] I want to talk about this on two tracks for a moment. Let's assume that she does run. How does Arizona's Senate race look to you at this point in a three way contest, given the current trends of what's on the menu and what we've seen, is there a clear favorite.

Jessica Taylor [00:05:32] You know, in the three way polling? We certainly see that. I think Guy typically has a slight edge. And I do think the danger for someone like Lake, who is obviously a polarizing figure in her own right, is that do those moderate Republicans that she has to keep in her camp independent voters, if they go to Sinema? I think that's the biggest thing. But, I mean, this race would be an interesting political experiment. Certainly that is there a way for, you know, everyone complains about the partizanship and everything in politics. We're too far to the left or too far to the right. We'll hear a sentiment who is offering sort of a way toward the middle? And will people take it? You know, it's the same way that when we look at the no labels question and different things, and I still think politics ultimately are a binary choice because we, we have a two party system, for better or for worse, but at a national level, that's hard to break through in a presidential race. But like in a smaller scenario, could this work? I mean, I still see a more difficult path for her. I think she is clearly running third in a three way race. You know, I look back at the history of Arizona and the types of senators that it has had Jeff Flake, John McCain, and she's trying to position herself in that role. And then when you look at the transformation that the Arizona Republican Party has had over the past few cycles, and the way that it has pulled its candidates more toward the right, I remember meeting Martha McSally as a House candidate, and if she had run as that type of Martha McSally, I think we could have been looking at a very different race. But I think she had to morph into someone that would be acceptable to the way the Republican Party in Arizona had been taken over. And. Kelly Ward, and to ward off those primary challenges that made it so difficult for her both to run in 2018 and then even in 2020. And you look at it and it should be a simple scenario. You run more toward the middle. And I think Mark Kelly was able to do this. But then to me, it's even interesting looking at the Democratic side, because Reuben Geiger is clearly a very different candidate than Mark Kelly has been in these past two cycles, too. So it's a test of, okay, can a more liberal type candidate win as well? Because I think there are liabilities

that again, you know, first of all, being an astronaut is like the best job you can have to run for politics. And but I mean, Ruben Geiger has an interesting story too. And then you have the potential for the first Latino senator and everything. So there's just so many interesting dynamics here. And then with Kari Lake, it's like you look at everything that has gone wrong with the Arizona Republicans over the past few cycles. And like, this is exactly the type of candidate you would not want to run. But this is who they have. And I think talking with Republicans in DC, they've sort of come to a reluctant acceptance about that. I'm also interested over the past few weeks, you know, with everything that's gone on with the state party chair and her reception at the state convention, how does that play into it? I think that adds a little bit of intrigue. So, I mean, Arizona has no shortage of intrigue to me.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:08:24] Now, let's assume Sinema doesn't run for reelection. Do you see a more traditional two way race playing out with Kygo and Mike? Do they change their messaging if Sinema is not in the race.

Jessica Taylor [00:08:37] I'm not sure that Kari Lake is going to change her messaging. I'm not sure that she is a person that has changed who she well, you can say she sort of changed who she was when she was a newscaster, but the person that she presented in the governor's race, I think she has been pretty consistent about and I think back to that reporting visited with the state party chairman was not surprising in the way that you saw the reporting of her sort of confronting Geico at the airport and different things. I think she believes what she believes. She's going to go forward in that. And it's just interesting to me, as I look at the Senate map as a whole and sort of the recriminations that happened after 2022, not with candidates across the map in Georgia, in Pennsylvania and in Arizona. You know, you look at someone like Blake Masters and the many problems he had. Blake has so many of the same ones as well. I you know, I looked at that governor's race and Katie Hobbs did not run a strong campaign at all and was probably one of the Democrats weakest gubernatorial candidates across the board. And it was very close. But she still won. And one of the main things I've talked with Republicans about, saying that they want their Senate candidates to move forward is to abandon the big lie and talk about things going forward. And I feel like with Kari Lake, it's a noun and a verb. And the election was stolen. So can she move past that? And he can go, he's more progressive. He's a member of the Progressive Caucus. And when you add in everything on immigration and you know Arizona is not a blue states, it is or people more uncomfortable with him in a way that they weren't necessarily with Mark Kelly or a 2018 version of Kyrsten Sinema that she's not going to be appealing to the Democratic Party in a primary. I think she absolutely would have lost that primary to Geico. But could that cost them the race, depending upon how Geico comes out? So it is more of a traditional race, and I think it exposes sort of both parties weaknesses in a way of Republican candidates and sort of the Democratic Party struggle as well.

Ron Hansen [00:10:34] Senator Sinema has \$10 million in cash, but her fundraising has noticeably slipped from her own standards. Ruben Gallego and Kari Lake both outraised her last quarter. How can Sinema come back from 20 points behind in the polls, especially for campaign, is at risk of running low on money and other resources?

Jessica Taylor [00:10:57] What minimal she has been, she seems to have put back in, but I think she sort of remained around that for cash on hand. But you've got to build a campaign, and I think, you know, these things we're talking about that she has to be doing, getting signatures and things that takes time and money, and it takes a lot of money. And a campaign going forward would take money. And she would not have, presumably, the resources she would have had before in party committees or in superPAC supporting her.

Where do some of these corporate donations go? Because I can see a lot of businesses and corporate PACs not being comfortable supporting someone like Kari Lake. And is there an opening there for Sinema? But, I mean, I don't see a path because I think the moderate energy is not harnessed online necessarily. We see it on the far left and on the far right, really. And so that is a financial complication for her in that regard. And I still think for her everything has to go right and she still may not win. And I think that Kari Lake as a candidate gives her an opening in that regard. But, you know, in that memo she put forth and, you know, and I know you've talked to a lot of the people I've talked to, pollster, sort of about what she needs. It is just very hard to get that number of independents and a percentage of Republicans and the percentage of Democrats that she would still need. I mean, what would be interesting about this bid is that, again, elected as a Democrat, she would need more support from Republicans than she would from Democrats. But I think it's sort of taking over that independent lane and owning it that you have to sort of make both Kari Lake and Ruben Geico unappealing to those. But again, where is she getting her her firepower from? I've just never seen a scenario like this in recent American politics that I can point to.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:12:44] That might answer my next question, which is that can you think of any instance in like, recent history where somebody has come back from 20 points down to win, especially if they're an incumbent who's who's well known.

Jessica Taylor [00:12:58] Absent the scandal? Not really. But we also are at a point where I think the electorate is not fully engaged. So I do think polls this early has to be taken with a grain of caution. And Arizona obviously has a lake primary too, but Sinema isn't known entity. Kari Lake is a known entity. I think Ruben Geiger is less of a known entity, so he has maybe more of an opportunity to to introduce himself. But he's still very well known within Maricopa. That's going to be the majority of the vote and everything. So. I think it's hard. And the Democrats, if she runs it, they sort of do they support Guy go or does he have his own money enough? Because are they thinking, okay, well if we get Geico or Sonoma, are we okay with that? But then they also have to be careful because even though she says she doesn't caucus with them, she effectively does because she gets her committee assignments from them. And if she leaves, then they don't have a majority anymore, you know, or a very tenuous one. So it would be back to 5050. So, I mean, she's beneficial. The Democrats very beneficial in that regard. So you don't want to anger her. It's just what else comes out. But I feel like Kari Lake is just such a ticking time bomb in many ways of what she's going to do or different things that that uncertainty adds to it. And while I think national Republicans are getting behind her, how far does that go? But I mean, she has a following, clearly. But again, I go back to I think the past few weeks have been really interesting because she losing the support of any of the grassroots or things because she can't really afford to do that, especially if she's alienated the more moderate wing of the party. She's just a fascinating person that I think we've only sort of begun to scratch the surface with since 2022.

Ron Hansen [00:14:42] I want to ask you to step back for a moment on the whole sort of arc of Senator Sinema's political career, if you would. Her efforts on the border security bill don't look like they're probably going to bear fruit at the moment. But she has scored some pretty impressive legislative wins, infrastructure and gun laws. Just to mention a few. Yet she has to be considered a long shot right now for winning another term, which seems a little different than maybe what we might think of for incumbents in Washington. Seems like normally the argument is they didn't do anything while they were there. That's not what we're probably going to hear about, Senator Sinema. So how did we reach this moment where she's considered sort of the outside looking in?

Jessica Taylor [00:15:26] I think that where we are with the polarization of politics is that being in the middle is not rewarded, at least on a party standpoint. And the fact that you have to strong personalities and viable candidates on both sides, because I look at, you know, when Joe Lieberman left the party and ran, they didn't have a Democrat who was actively supporting him. So he sort of ran as the de facto candidate. When you, you know, Angus King has been elected and Bernie Sanders. But it's just so different in this regard because she left the party because she was going to lose primary. But you see, no signal in the way that that they got behind Lieberman or something to that effect. And again, I think it's just because the parties have become drawn to the extremes in many ways. And how could that affect either party is they need to keep this seat. Again, these things she's tried to do are not necessarily being rewarded, especially as I look at among the grassroots. And I think it's clearly her position. She took on the filibuster and with some of Biden's bills and emphasizing things, you know, in the same way that Joe Manchin was sort of a person without a party for the past, the whole of the Biden administration has sort of been Sinema. Manchin what are they going to do? They're these key cogs, and they've really steered some legislation toward things. But I think some of her proposals that she has been painted is more friendly to corporate interests. And that's certainly not where you see the Democratic Party writ large trying to be favorable to.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:16:56] So I sort of want to get to the whole question of we are all fascinated with the Sinema situation. You know, she in, is she out, what's she's standing for? But when you look at how the races are shaping up for this year, we know that the Senate won't have West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, a conservative Democrat. And it's possible that Sinema, who is a centrist independent, could be replaced by either a Republican and Kari Lake or a Democrat in Giago. So what does this mean for the Senate moving forward? Who's going to control? How important is Arizona?

Jessica Taylor [00:17:31] When I look at the map, West Virginia is gone. Republicans will win that seat. So there is no room for error for Democrats. And if they lose the white House, they have already lost the Senate, because that means it will be down to 5050. Whoever controls the presidency will have control. So this whole thing may be moving at this point, unless Democrats could flip another seat, which I think Florida and Texas remain very big longshots. We have seen sort of these types of senators that were in the middle. Either they lose in primaries or they're forced out, you know, in sort of the way the Jeff Flake was. And, you know, the other two, I think the most vulnerable Senate seats we're looking at or Montana in Ohio, which of course are very red states represented by Democrats. You don't see them being as vocal on things, I think, in the way that Manchin and Sinema were, which is sort of interesting. But I mean, definitely I would say tester's more of a moderate than the caucus as a whole is. And we see this in the House as well, that a lot of sort of those problem solvers in the middle, the Blue Dogs, have essentially become extinct. And that's not recent. That's going back to 2010 and over this whole past decade. You know, the places where I still see that that can happen is in places that states that have different types of elections in the way that Lisa murkowski was still able to be reelected in Alaska because they have top four primary and ranked choice. The way that I mean, Susan Collins won without ranked choice, but we still have it in Maine. That could help her next time if she runs and Angus King as a as an independent. So but those primaries they don't reward working across the aisle. I mean there's one of the senators, James Lankford from Oklahoma, that worked with Sinema on this. He was just reelected, so he doesn't have to worry about anything for a while. But there's already been calls that you should primary him or he should resign. And all of this, like again, working across the aisle in either party sometimes is not seen as a positive thing. And then yet everyone

complains that we're too Partizan. Well, people who are trying to fix this are not being rewarded. And like I said, I don't think it's a problem. I think it's a problem in both parties to maybe different degrees. That's why I'm fascinated by sort of these. Different types of electoral systems that could change. Nevada could change it this year. I believe there's even been talk in Arizona, if I'm correct, about about trying to do some of this top primary system or something. But again, when you take a stand against your party, it's not rewarded. Look at all of the people who voted for President Trump's impeachment that were either lost in a primary or decided to retire because they were going to lose. I mean, look at someone like Mitt Romney as well. He's also come out very forcefully against his party. And now stepping down. So you are losing so much of that middle.

Ron Hansen [00:20:11] Well, that is all duly noted. We feel rewarded with your time and your thoughts here. Jessica, thank you for joining us. As always, if people want to follow your work, where can they find you online or on social media?

Jessica Taylor [00:20:26] On X, I am at Jessica Taylor, I think on Threads and Blue Sky. I'm at Jessica Taylor CPR and then you can join. You can follow the Cook Political Report at at Cook Political and our website is politico.com. And you can learn about becoming a subscriber.

Ron Hansen [00:20:41] Thanks so much.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:20:43] Thanks again.

Jessica Taylor [00:20:43] Thank you.

Ron Hansen [00:20:53] That is it for this week. Gaggle listeners have questions about today's episode or topics you'd like us to cover on the show. Send us a message at (602) 444-0804, or a voice memo to the gaggle at Arizona republic.com. That's one word all spelled out.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:21:15] This episode was edited and produced by Kelly Monahan with assistance from Amanda Liberto. Episode oversight is by Cara Edgerton and our news direction is from Kathy Tula mello. Our theme song and music comes from Universal Production Music.

Ron Hansen [00:21:32] Never miss an episode of The Gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. If you learned something new today, be sure to share this episode with a friend. You can also leave us a review and rate of five stars. You can follow the gaggle on social media at Easy Podcasts. And I'm at Ronald J. Hansen. That's h a n s e n.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:21:57] And I'm at Mary J. Petzel. That's pit XL. The gaggle is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. We'll see you next week.