

The Kyrsten Sinema Theory of American Politics

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Story by McKay Coppins

Kyrsten Sinema knows what everybody says about her. She pretends not to read the press coverage—"I don't really care"—but she knows. She knows what her colleagues call her behind her back ("egomaniac," "traitor"). She knows how many articles *The New York Times* has published about her wardrobe (five). She feels misunderstood, and she would like to explain herself.

We're sitting across from each other in her "hideaway," a small, windowless room in the basement of the U.S. Capitol Building. Every senator gets one of these subterranean, chamber-adjacent bunkers, and most are outfitted with dark, utilitarian furniture. But Sinema's walls are pale pink, the couches burnt orange, and desert-themed tchotchkes evoking her native Arizona are interspersed among bottles of wine and liquor.

Sinema tells me that there are several popular narratives about her in the media, all of them "inaccurate." One is that she's "mysterious," "mercurial," "an enigma"—that she makes her decisions on unknowable whims. She regards this portrayal as "fairly absurd": "I think I'm a highly predictable person."

"Then," she goes on, "there's the *She's just doing what's best for her and not for her state or for her country*' narrative. "And I think that's a strange narrative, particularly when you contrast it with"—here she pauses, and then smirks—"ya know, *the facts*."

You can see, in moments like these, why she bothers people. She speaks in a matter-of-fact staccato, her tone set frequently to smug. She says things like "I am a long-term thinker in a short-term town" and "I prefer to be successful." The overall effect, if you're not charmed by it (and a lot of her Republican colleagues are), is condescension bordering on arrogance. Sinema, who graduated from high school at 16 and college at 18, carries herself like she is unquestionably the smartest person in the room.

No one would mistake her for being dumb, though. In the past two years, Sinema has been at the center of virtually every major piece of bipartisan legislation passed by the Senate, negotiating deals on infrastructure, guns, and a bill that codifies the right to same-sex marriage. She has also become a villain to the left, proudly standing in the way of Democrats' more ambitious agenda by refusing to eliminate the filibuster. The tension culminated with her announcement in December that she was leaving the Democratic Party and registering as an independent.

[\[Lee Drutman: Kyrsten Sinema and the myth of political independence\]](#)

Sinema hasn't given many in-depth interviews since then, but she says she agreed to meet with me because she wants to show that what she's doing "works." She thinks that, unfashionable though it may be, her approach to legislating—compromise, centrism, bipartisan consensus-building—is the only way to get anything done in Washington. I was interested in a separate, but related, question: What exactly is she trying to get done? Much of the discussion around Sinema has focused on the puzzle of what she *really* believes. [What does Kyrsten Sinema want? What Does Kyrsten Sinema stand for?](#) The subtext in these headlines is that if you dig deep enough, a secret belief system will be revealed. Is she a progressive opportunistically cosplaying as a centrist? A conservative finally showing her true colors? The truth, according to Sinema herself, is that there is no ideological core to discover.

I learn this when I describe for Sinema the story I hear most often about her: that she started out as an idealistic progressive activist—organizing protests against the Iraq War, marching for undocumented immigrants in 100-degree heat, leading the effort to defeat a gay-marriage ban in Arizona—but that gradually she sold out her youthful idealism and morphed into a Washington moderate who pals around with Republicans and [protects tax breaks](#) for hedge-fund managers.

To my surprise, Sinema doesn't really push back on this one. For one thing, she tells me, she's proud that she outgrew the activism of her youth. It was, in her own assessment, "a spectacular failure."

I ask her to elaborate.

"Well," she says, with a derisive shrug. "You can make a poster and stand out on the street, but at the end of the day all you have is a sunburn. You didn't move the needle. You didn't make a difference ... I set about real quick saying, 'This doesn't work.'"

Listening to her talk this way about activism, it's hard not to think about the protesters who have hounded her in recent years. They chase her through airports, yell at her at weddings. In one controversial episode, a group of student protesters at Arizona State University followed her into the bathroom, continuing to film as they hectorated her. (The ASU police recommended misdemeanor charges against four students involved.)


I ask Sinema if, as a former activist herself, she could understand where those students were coming from. Would she have done the same thing when she was young?

"Break the law?" she scoffs. "No."

She doesn't like civil disobedience, thinks it drives more people away than it attracts. More to the point, Sinema contends, the activists who spend their time noisily berating her in person and online aren't doing much for the causes they purport to care about. "I am much happier showing a two-year record of incredible achievements that are literally making a difference in people's lives than *sharing my thoughts on Twitter*." She punctuates these last words with the sort of contempt that only someone who's tweeted more than 17,000 times can feel.

It's not just the activism she's discarded; it's also the left-wing politics. Sinema, who described herself in 2006 as "the most liberal legislator in the state of Arizona," freely admits that she's much less progressive than she used to be. While her critics contend that she adjusted her politics to win statewide office in Arizona, she chalks up the evolution to "age and maturity." She bristles at the idea that politicians shouldn't be allowed to change their mind. "Imagine a world in which everybody who represented you refused to grow or change or learn if presented with new information," she tells me. "That's very dangerous for our democracy. So perhaps what I'm most proud of is that I'm a lifelong learner."

Still, Sinema insists that people overstate how much she's changed. Leaving the Democratic Party was, in her telling, a kind of homecoming. "I'm not a joiner," she says. "It's not my thing." She points out that she wasn't a Democrat when she started in politics. I point out that at the time she was aligned with the Green Party. She demurs.


Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona attended hearings on Capitol Hill on Wednesday afternoon. (Photograph by Natalie Keyssar for The Atlantic) © Provided by The Atlantic

"I never think about where [my position] is on the political spectrum, because I don't care," she tells me. "People will say, 'Oh, we don't know what her position is.' Well, I may not have one yet. And I know that's weird in this town, but I actually want to do all of the research, get as much knowledge as possible, spend all of the time doing the work before I make a decision."

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I ask her if there's any ideological through line at all that explains the various votes she's taken in the Senate. She thinks about it before answering, "No."

She says she's guided by an unchanging set of "values"—she mentions freedom, opportunity, and security—that virtually all Americans share. When it comes to legislating, Sinema sees herself as "practical"—a dealmaker, a problem solver. And if taking every policy question on a case-by-case basis bewilders some in Washington, Sinema says it's just her nature. Even in her private life, she tells me, she's prone to slow, painstaking deliberation. I ask for an example.

"It took me eight years to decide what to get for my first tattoo," she offers.

So what did you decide on? I ask.

"I don't actually want to share that."

To illustrate the effectiveness of her legislative approach, she likes to point to the gun-control bill she helped pass last year. It began the day after a man opened fire at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, killing 19 kids. Sinema made a rare comment to the press, telling reporters that she was going to approach her colleagues about potential legislative solutions. From there, she recalls, she went straight to the Senate floor and asked Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, "Who should I work with?" He pointed her to Republican Senators John Cornyn and Thom Tillis, both of whom she immediately texted. A few minutes after that, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat, texted her asking if she meant what she'd said to the press. "I was like, 'I'm Kyrsten. I always mean what I say.'"

[\[Conor Friedersdorf: The Senate needs more Kyrsten Sinemas\]](#)

"The next morning, four of us senators sat right here and had our first meeting," she tells me. "Twenty-eight days later, we had a bill."

It was the first gun-control bill to pass Congress in nearly 30 years, and getting the deal done wasn't easy. But Sinema says she followed a few lessons she'd learned from past negotiations. The first was to ignore the reporters who were camped out in the hallways. "We would come out of the meeting, and they would be like little vultures outside the door asking what just happened," she recalls. "*Why on earth* would I tell anyone what just happened in the meeting when I'm trying to nail down some of the most difficult elements of an agreement?"

Her allergy to the Capitol Hill press corps—which she tells me is generally obsessed with covering "the petty and the hysterical"—was not shared by all of her colleagues. "There are some folks who really enjoy talking to the press so they can tell them what they think or whatever. I'm not that interested in telling people what I think."

Another principle she followed was to prioritize dealing directly with her colleagues in person. She'd found that many bipartisan negotiations get bogged down early on with a process termed "trading paper," wherein senators' staffs exchange proposals and counterproposals until they agree on legislative language—or, more often, reach an impasse. "When I first got here, I was like, *What are you doing?*" She says disagreements can be resolved much more quickly by getting her colleagues in a room and refusing to leave until they've figured it out.

This is why when progressives criticize her as flaky, dilettantish, or out of her depth, it strikes her as fundamentally gendered. More than any other line of attack, this seems to really bother her. She points to Democratic Representative Ro Khanna, who [said in 2021](#) that Sinema lacked "the basic competence" to be in Congress.

"I mean, when there are ... elected officials who say 'She's in over her head,' or 'She's not substantive,' or 'She doesn't know what she's talking about'—that is, um, *absurd*," she tells me, her tone sharpening. "Because I know every detail of every piece of legislation. And it's okay if others don't. They weren't in the room when we were writing it." She added that Khanna "doesn't know me, and I don't know him. The term *colleague* is to be loosely applied there." (Asked for comment, Khanna told me that he'd criticized Sinema during the debate over the

Build Back Better bill "because she was unwilling to explain her position and engage with the press, her colleagues, and the public.")

The result of all the laborious gun-control negotiations was the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which was signed into law last June. The law expanded background checks for gun buyers under 21, enhanced mental-health services in schools, and provided funding for states to implement "red-flag laws," which allow authorities to temporarily confiscate guns from individuals deemed dangerous. Critics on the left dismissed the law as a half measure. But to Sinema, the fact that she and her colleagues made any progress on such an intractable issue was validation for her method of operating.

Patient, painful bipartisan dealmaking, she tells me, is "the only approach that works. Because the other approaches make a lot of noise but don't get anything done."

I ask her what other approaches she's thinking of.

"I don't know," Sinema says with a shrug. "Yelling?"

Members of her former party would argue that there was another option for enacting their policy vision—eliminating the filibuster, which requires 60 votes for most legislation in the Senate, to start passing bills with simple majorities—but Sinema ensured that was impossible. She makes no apologies for voting to preserve the filibuster last year. In fact, she tells me, she would reinstate it for judicial nominees. She believes that the Democrats who want to be able to pass sweeping legislation with narrow majorities have forgotten that one day Republicans will be in control again. "When people are in power, they think they'll never lose power."

[\[Read: A troubling sign for 2024\]](#)

Before departing her hideaway, I return to Sinema's central argument—that her approach "works." It's hard to evaluate objectively. What to make of a senator who leaves her party, professes to have no ideological agenda, and yet manages to wield outsized influence in writing the laws of the nation? Some might look at her record and see a hollow careerism that prizes bipartisanship for its own sake. Others might argue that in highly polarized times, politicians like her are necessary to grease the gears of a dysfunctional government.

One thing is clear, though: If Sinema wants to persuade other political leaders to take the same path she has taken, she'll need to demonstrate that it's electorally viable. So far, the polls in Arizona suggest she would struggle to get reelected as an independent in 2024; she already has challengers on the right and the left. A [survey](#) earlier this year found that she was among the most unpopular senators in the country.

Sinema tells me she hasn't decided yet whether she'll seek reelection, but she talks like someone who's not planning on it. She's only 46 years old; she has other interests. "I'm not only a senator," she tells me. "I'm also lots of other things." I ask if she worries about what lessons will be drawn in Washington if her independent turn leads to the end of her political career.

She pauses and answers with a smirk: "I don't worry about hypotheticals."