

ARIZONA

With Sen. Kyrsten Sinema quitting, do independents anywhere have a chance in politics?

**Ronald J. Hansen**

Arizona Republic

Published 6:03 a.m. MT March 7, 2024 | Updated 6:03 a.m. MT March 7, 2024

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema should have had a fighting chance at keeping her seat in Washington. At least on paper.

She is the incumbent. She was good at raising money. The public knows her. Arizona is teeming with independent voters. And she could legitimately claim a central role in some of the biggest legislation in the Biden era.

Instead, Sinema, I-Ariz., announced Tuesday what had become all-too-obvious weeks earlier: She won't seek a second six-year term.

It ends her own political career, at least for now, but also strikes a heavy blow on others who would like to see an end to the two-party dynamic that dominates American politics.

"If she didn't think that she had a reasonable chance of winning, given her strengths ..., then I don't there are many other candidates throughout the country who can go through a realistic assessment of their chances and reach a different conclusion," said William Galston, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution.

Prep for the polls: See who is running for president and compare where they stand on key issues in our Voter Guide

Bernard Tamas, a political science professor at Valdosta State University who has researched third party politics, said America's two-party system is safe for now.

"There's no real signs of any real immediate movement toward another political party or a lot of independent candidates winning major office in the U.S.," said Tamas, who is the author of "The Demise and Rebirth of American Third Parties."

“There’s a lot of support, at least hypothetically, for a third party or third-party candidates. Most Americans would prefer that we move past the two-party system. But when you get to the actual elections, the tendency is that any third-party candidate is usually going to wind up with a pretty small percentage of the vote.”

Sinema wasn’t an ordinary independent candidate.

She had every advantage an independent could want. But in the face of polling that consistently showed her running a distant third in a three-way race, she walked away without publicly trying to hang onto her seat.

Thom Reilly co-chairs the Center for an Independent and Sustainable Democracy at Arizona State University and is co-author of the recent book, “The Independent Voter.”

“If there is a state (for independents to win), it would have been Arizona,” Reilly said. “The bottom line is third-party candidacies are increasingly difficult because the system is skewed against anyone running but a Republican and a Democrat.”

Sinema would have had to gather far more petition signatures than a Democrat or Republican just to qualify for the ballot, he said.

“Now we’re down to that deep polarized ballot that everybody says they hate. They had an alternative, but they didn’t want it.”

It comes as third-party efforts across the country have injected a new measure of uncertainty into the presidential race. The No Labels Party and independent Robert F. Kennedy Jr., have qualified for the ballot in several states, perhaps including Arizona. Liberal activist Cornel West is running and former Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., has sparked speculation about a potential run.

In each case, those efforts are largely seen as chances to play spoilers, not actually win the White House.

Sinema is arguably the highest-ranking true independent in America. She was elected in 2018 as a Democrat and switched to independent in December 2022.

Other independents, such as Sens. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Angus King, I-Me., are widely viewed as de facto Democrats.

All 50 governors are either Democrats or Republicans.

The last exception to that came in 2014, when former Republican Bill Walker ran with the leading Democrat as his lieutenant governor and won the governorship of Alaska running as an independent unity ticket. Facing a likely defeat in 2018, he quit after one term.

“I think the country is ready, but not quite sure how to do it,” Walker said of third-party politics.

“You know, we break up all the monopolies around the country, AT&T, and the oil companies, but not politics. I think that’s too bad because it keeps good people from the process because the process causes you to do things to stay in it that I found I couldn’t live with.”

Walker said being in office as an independent was ideal.

“It’s a dynamite way to govern. Oh my God, it’s awesome. You can just do what’s right,” Walker said. “I wouldn’t do it any other way.”

In the end, voters often like independents but are drawn to vote against the party they dislike the most, forcing them back to the two-party dynamic, Walker said.

“They retreat to their respective corners,” he said.

Jesse Ventura, a former Navy SEAL, professional wrestler and actor, was the most recent third party candidate to win a governor’s race when he was elected Minnesota’s governor in 1998 as a member of the Reform Party. He, too, left after one term.

Ventura introduced Kennedy to a crowd in Tucson last month and made clear in a tweet how he views the issue of breaking the two-party system.

“I support ALL 3rd Party and Independent candidates running for U.S. President this year ... and everyone else not running under the Democrat and Republican Party banner,” he wrote. “We must end the duopoly of Republican and Democrat control in Washington.”

Billionaire Michael Bloomberg could claim the status of the nation’s best-known independent. He won three terms as mayor of New York City and made a short-lived run for president as a Democrat in 2020.

His campaign quickly ran out of steam in that cycle. Even as the public is broadly united in its desire for a choice other than Biden or Trump, there is no inertia for another Bloomberg candidacy.

A third-party presidential candidate hasn't won a single electoral vote since George Wallace in 1968. That includes the notable but fruitless campaigns of John Anderson in 1980; Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996; and Ralph Nader in 2000.

Gallup has tracked public support for third parties and independents for two decades. In October, it found 63% of U.S. adults surveyed felt a need for a third political party. That finding was not very different than what it has found for more than a decade.

One change, however, is that 58% of self-identified Republican respondents said they favored another party, compared to 45% who felt that way in 2022.

Less than half the Democratic respondents supported the idea of a third major party, Gallup found.

In any event, many political observers believe that still won't change the usual two-party domination.

"You almost always have a large fraction of the population indicating an interest in third parties and independent candidacies," Galston said. "It rarely translates into a significant share of the vote in the general election."

Galston said one reason non-major party candidates can't win is because the Democrats and Republicans are so starkly different. That raises the stakes for all voters so high that they often vote for a candidate they can tolerate, if only to prevent being governed by one they can't, he said.

"If they didn't see that much difference between the two political parties, they would be more willing to take a flyer on an independent or third-party candidate," Galston said.

"I've reached the conclusion that as long as we have the electoral system that we do," Galston said, "the two-party system is our fate."

