



Kyrsten Sinema.

Sinema, Kyrsten (b. 1976)

by Linda Rapp

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After serving several terms in the Arizona state legislature, Kyrsten Sinema ran successfully for the United States House of Representatives in 2012, becoming the first openly bisexual person elected to that body.

Kyrsten Sinema is a progressive legislator who also has a reputation for reaching across the aisle and engaging in dialogue with people of differing views in order to see that the needs of her constituents are met. After serving several terms in the Arizona state legislature, she ran successfully for the United States House of Representatives in 2012, becoming the first openly bisexual person elected to that body.

Sinema is a native Arizonan, born July 12, 1976 in Tucson. Her parents divorced when she was young, however, and, following her mother's remarriage, the new family moved to Florida. There they faced hard times after her stepfather lost his job and the family had to live for a couple of years in an abandoned gas station without electrical service or running water outside the town of Defuniak Springs in the Florida Panhandle.

Despite the adverse circumstances, Sinema excelled in high school, graduating as valedictorian of her class at the age of sixteen. She had simultaneously been taking college classes, and so she had enough transfer credits to be able to complete her bachelor's degree in social work at Brigham Young University in just two years.

The choice to go to Brigham Young was likely influenced by the fact that, as Sinema told Jessica Coomes of the *Arizona Republic*, her parents were "very, very, very, very strict Mormons."

Sinema would later leave the church, but, she stated to Coomes, "Growing up in that environment helped me learn about personal strength. It helped me learn to do a lot of research and find my opinions and hold them, even when they're unpopular."

Sinema told Manuel Roig-Franzia that she has great respect for the LDS church, especially their commitment to family and taking care of each other, but that "I just don't believe the tenets of the faith that they believe."

Sinema subsequently returned to Arizona, where she pursued a career as a social worker and also continued her education. She earned her master's degree in social work at Arizona State University in 1999 and her law degree in 2004. She would add a doctorate in Justice Studies from the same institution in 2012.

Sinema entered the political arena in 2001, running unsuccessfully for a seat on the Phoenix City Council. The next year she made a bid for the Arizona House of Representatives, running as an independent. Once again she was defeated.

Declaring as a Democrat in 2004, she won the primary election for a seat in the House and the subsequent general election in the 15th District. She ran successfully for re-election in the next two biennial races.

Sinema threw herself into her role as a legislator, introducing numerous bills on issues of importance to her, including glbtq rights, energy conservation, and immigration rights, but initially she met with little success. A self-described "righteously indignant crusader," Sinema soon saw that she needed a different approach to achieve the goals in which she so strongly believed.

"I didn't like losing," she stated to Jeremy Duda of the *Arizona Capitol Times* "so I learned pretty quickly that the best way to win is to work with others."

Sinema began reaching across the aisle, a strategy that worked. "She got clever about making Republican allies that could carry issues she cared about, understanding that it's a Republican Legislature and that's the way she could find success," stated former state legislator Stan Barnes to Duda. "It's a hard thing to do as an elected official because someone else is getting the credit."

Lobbyist Mike Gardner also commented to Duda on Sinema's change in tactics. "She learned a lot and changed a lot as a statesman [sic], as a politician. She started out as this firebrand bomb-thrower. And then she realized that in order to get things done she needed to work with all sides. She developed this really fascinating relationship with other smart people in the Legislature, like [Senator Andy] Biggs and [Representative Eddie] Farnsworth" as well as Senator Russell Pearce--all conservative Republicans.

Her initiatives drew some complaints from Democrats, especially for her friendship with Pearce who sponsored Arizona's notorious "show your papers" anti-immigrant bill and was subsequently recalled. But Sinema, who identifies as a progressive, continued to use coalition-building as a way to achieve her objectives.

In 2006 Sinema was a leader of the group Arizona Together, which worked to defeat Proposition 107, a ballot initiative that would have amended the state constitution not only to limit the right to marry to heterosexual couples--already the law in Arizona--but also to prevent the state or its municipalities from allowing domestic partnerships, which some cities had instituted.

Instead of focusing only on the deleterious effects that the proposition could have for gay and lesbian couples, opponents pointed out that others who would suffer from its provisions were elderly heterosexual couples in Arizona--a haven for retirees--who stood to lose both Social Security and pension benefits if they remarried. They would also lose important rights regarding decisions about medical care for their domestic partners.

The proposition was defeated. However, the victory was only temporary. A scant two years later, a simplified version of the amendment that targeted only same-sex marriage was easily approved by voters.

After serving three terms in the Arizona House of Representatives, Sinema was elected to the state Senate in 2010. She left her seat in 2012 to run for the United States House of Representatives.

The campaign was hard fought. The National Republican Congressional Committee poured some \$900,000 into an attempt to defeat Sinema with various ads, including one in which a satellite--apparently controlled by earthlings, including, presumably, Arizonans--attempted to establish contact with Sinema until a voice lamented "We're losing touch with you, Planet Kyrsten" and concluded "She's far out."

One attack ad dredged up a loopy interview that Sinema gave in 2006 to a now-defunct fashion magazine. In the interview, she seemed to diss stay-at-home mothers, said that she owns more than 100 pairs of shoes, and described herself as "a Prada socialist."

During the campaign, she brushed off those comments as failed attempts at humor and refused to discuss her work as a criminal defense attorney.

In the end Sinema prevailed, although the race was so close and the counting of all ballots so slow that it was over a week after the election before she could claim victory.

In addition to becoming the first openly bisexual member of the United States Congress, Sinema also stands out as one with no declared religious affiliation. (Representative Pete Stark of California was open about his views as a non-believer in religion, but he has since retired.)

When the question of religion came up, Sinema's spokesperson Justin Unga stated to Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times* that "Kyrsten believes that the terms 'nontheist,' 'atheist' or 'nonbeliever' are not befitting of her life's work or personal character. . . . Though [she] was raised in a religious household, she draws her policy-making decisions from her experience as a social worker who worked with diverse communities and as a lawmaker who represented hundreds of thousands."

He went on to add that Sinema "is a student of all cultures in her community" and "believes that a secular approach is the best way to achieve . . . good government."

Sinema had earlier taken on the issue of the separation of church and state, and, in the process, demonstrated her mastery of bipartisanship.

In 2005, when a debate over displays of the Ten Commandments on government property was moving through the courts, mainly because of a granite monument that had been installed in Alabama, Sinema hosted a radio show featuring stand-up comedian Chris Bliss, who asked her to sponsor a bill "to put up displays of the Bill of Rights next to [the Ten Commandments] and let people comparison shop."

Recognizing that the support of a Republican legislator would be necessary to pass just about any bill in a red state like Arizona, Sinema called on state Senator Karen S. Johnson--an extremely conservative politician best known for proposing a bill to permit people to carry concealed weapons on the campuses of public colleges and universities--to co-sponsor a bill calling for a monument to the Bill of Rights to be paid for through private donations. In an anomaly for the legislature of Arizona, the bill passed unanimously in both houses.

Although Sinema is open about her identification as a bisexual and her lack of religious belief, she frequently expresses exasperation with the media fixation on those identities. For example, she told Roig-Franzia, that poverty more than religion or sexuality is what drives her. "I don't think religion or my orientation shaped my world view. They're parts of who I am, but they're not the driving force."

Notwithstanding the fact that she eagerly sought and welcomed the endorsement and financial support of gay rights groups, she was surprised and disappointed that following her election news reports around the world distilled her to a single distinguishing characteristic based on her sexual orientation.

Of her identity as a bisexual, Sinema, who is single and does not discuss her private life, has said, "It just doesn't matter if that other person is a man or a woman." She tends not to adhere to common notions about the categories of sexual orientation. Instead she blends them. She told Roig-Franzia, "Bisexuals are gay people--we're all gay," she said, and added, "Some people don't like that."

Sinema comes to Congress with priorities that include glbtq rights, environmental protection, healthcare reform, and fair immigration laws.

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