

Senator Kyrsten Sinema declares herself an “independent” to push the Democrats further to the right

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Early Friday morning, Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona announced that she had resigned from the Democratic Party and registered as an independent. The move came less than three days after incumbent Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia narrowly defeated Republican Herschel Walker in a runoff election, giving the Democrat a full six-year term and strengthening Democratic control of Congress’ upper chamber, with an outright 51-49 majority of seats.

Sinema’s announcement deflated attempts to portray Warnock’s win as a victory for “progressive values” and underscored the fact that the Democratic Party and the two-party system as a whole are lurching further to the right coming out of the midterm elections.

A former Green Party activist and antiwar protester, Sinema occupied a position on the right flank of the Democratic Party during three terms in the House of Representatives and her term in the Senate, which began with her election in 2018. Having publicly identified herself as bisexual, Sinema combines support for LGBTQ rights with slavish support for corporate interests when it comes to fiscal and tax policy.

As a Democratic senator, she teamed up with Joe Manchin of West Virginia to block passage of any significant social reform measures or tax increases on corporations and the rich in a Senate divided 50-50 between the two parties and requiring unanimous Democratic support to overcome solid Republican opposition.

This included opposing a \$15 federal minimum wage as part of Biden’s subsequently ditched “Build Back Better” plan and withholding her vote for the August 2022 Inflation Reduction Act until the White House agreed to drop a \$14 billion tax increase on hedge fund and private equity managers, and exclude major manufacturers from a 15 percent minimum tax on corporations. According to the nonprofit OpenSecrets, Sinema is the top recipient of campaign cash from the investment industry, having taken in \$2.2 million from 2017 to 2022.

More precisely, Sinema and Manchin provided the pretext for the Biden administration and the Democratic Party to drop reform proposals used to help get elected which, however, were

staunchly opposed by the corporate/financial elite.

She makes a practice of ostentatiously chatting with Republican supporters of the failed coup leader Donald Trump on the floor of the Senate and calls House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy “a friend.”

In September, as the midterm congressional elections were shifting into high gear, Sinema accepted an invitation from Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to speak at his McConnell Center at the University of Louisville, where McConnell called her “the most effective first-term senator” he had seen in his nearly 40-year Senate career.

Last January, the Arizona Democratic Party censured Sinema for opposing any loosening of the anti-democratic Senate filibuster rule, which effectively establishes a 60-vote threshold for passage of most legislation, so as to facilitate legislation protecting voting rights against Republican efforts to restrict the franchise in the name of election “integrity.”

A poll taken by the American Association of Retired Persons in September showed that just 37 percent of Arizona Democrats had a favorable opinion of Sinema, compared to 57 percent who had an unfavorable one. She is no less unpopular among Arizona Republicans and independents.

In an op-ed piece in the *Arizona Republic* on Friday, Sinema presented her decision to leave the Democratic Party as an affirmation of “independence,” “bipartisanship” and a level-headed approach to getting things done and solving problems. She denounced the two parties’ “rigid partisanship” and accommodation to “extreme” elements.

In the *Arizona Republic* column and subsequent interviews, she indicated that as an independent she would not caucus with the Republicans or the Democrats but would receive her committee assignments from the Democratic leadership and continue to work with the Democratic caucus, including on the confirmation of judicial and other nominees.

In an interview with *Politico*, she said, “I don’t anticipate that anything will change about the Senate structure. ... Nothing will change about my values or my behavior.”

This suggests that, despite her leaving the Democratic Party, nominally reducing the party’s majority to 50-49, the

Democrats will be able to have a one-seat majority on Senate committees in the incoming 118th Congress, as opposed to the outgoing Congress, where committee seats were divided 50-50.

This procedural advantage will not be used to address the burning issues facing working people—inflation, declining real wages, understaffing, forced overtime, brutal working conditions, the ongoing ravages of COVID-19 and Long COVID—but rather to shore up Republican support for the escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China, in large part by making concessions to GOP demands for further social cuts and sharper attacks on immigrants.

Politico reported that Sinema informed Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer of her decision on Thursday. The Biden White House rushed to embrace the ex-Democrat following her announcement on Friday. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre called Sinema a “key partner on some of the historic legislation President Biden has championed over the last 20 months.”

“We understand that her decision to register as an independent in Arizona does not change the new Democratic majority control of the Senate, and we have every reason to expect that we will continue to work successfully with her,” Jean-Pierre added.

In any event, Sinema’s move strengthens the position of Manchin. Should the multi-millionaire coal business owner and recipient of millions in fossil fuel campaign cash join with Sinema and both switch parties or caucus with the Republicans as independents, control of the Senate would flip to the GOP. Moreover, there are currently 11 Democratic senators from states with a Republican governor who could appoint a Republican replacement in the event of a vacancy, should any of these resign or die unexpectedly.

As for the political calculations driving Sinema’s decision, these seem to be focused on a possible reelection bid when her current Senate term expires in 2024. Deeply unpopular among Arizona Democrats, she would face a near-certain primary challenge by the more “left” Representative Ruben Gallego, with little likelihood of victory. Sinema may be calculating that given the prospect of a Republican victory in a three-way race for the Arizona Senate seat, should she run for reelection as an independent, the feckless Democrats will agree in the end to back her “independent” campaign.

These sordid and wholly undemocratic maneuvers underscore the imperviousness of the entire capitalist political system to any progressive change and the urgent need for the working class to break from the Democrats and the corporate-controlled two-party system.

To the extent that the midterm elections, monopolized by two right-wing parties of Wall Street and the military/intelligence complex and massively manipulated by corporate campaign cash, could be said to reflect popular sentiment, they evinced broad popular opposition to the fascistic politics of the Trump-

dominated Republican Party. Virtually all of Trump’s hand-picked, election-denying candidates in contested elections were defeated.

Nevertheless, disgust with the pro-war, pro-corporate policies of the Biden administration and the failure of the Democrats to indict Trump or his top coup co-conspirators enabled the Republicans to regain control of the House.

The rightward lurch of Biden and the Democrats has been amply demonstrated in the weeks since the November 8 general election. What have been the main developments?

· Within days of the vote, a series of federal court rulings blocked implementation of Biden’s modest and partial student debt relief plan. The Democrats have made no appeal to popular anger over the scuttling of the plan and effectively abandoned it.

· Biden immediately got to work organizing a bipartisan vote by Congress, backed by the union bureaucracies, to ban a strike by 120,000 rail workers and impose a company-dictated contract voted down by tens of thousands of the workers. That bill was passed in record time and signed into law on December 2.

· On the same day, the Democratic National Committee endorsed a plan proposed by Biden for a new Democratic primary elections schedule, putting reliably Republican South Carolina first, with its relatively large African American Democratic voter base, doubling down on an electoral strategy that cedes the “white working class” to the Republicans and focuses on minorities, students and wealthy suburbanites on the basis of identity politics.

· This week, on Wednesday, the House Democratic caucus elevated Representative Abigail Spanberger—a former CIA agent, militarist, opponent of police reform and vocal antisocialist—to head a new post to represent the more than 50 members holding closely contested seats.

· On Thursday, the lame duck Democratic-controlled House overwhelmingly passed, in a bipartisan vote, the fiscal 2023 National Defense Authorization Act increasing the military budget to a record \$858 billion.

Sinema’s maneuver and the Democrats’ response are but the latest expression of this right-wing, anti-working class trajectory.



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