

UNITE and **How to build coalitions that win— and last** Conquer Kyrsten Sinema

Foreword by Janet Napolitano
Governor of Arizona, 2003–2009

An Excerpt From

***Unite and Conquer:
How to Build Coalitions that Win – and Last***

by Kyrsten Sinema
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FOREWORD

During my time as governor of Arizona, there were many instances where I was at an event and someone would lean over to me and whisper “I’m a Republican, but I voted for you.”

They had to be out there. I was elected three times—once as attorney general and twice as governor—as a Democrat in a state where Democratic support alone can’t win you an election.

The key to making change in politics is to give those types of people a home—to enlarge the circle, include people who may not agree with you on everything, and make skeptics into partners. This can be difficult, but the larger and more diverse the coalition, the greater the potential to achieve common goals. This has been one of my priorities during my time in politics. I try at every turn to think about how I can reach a wider array of people who may have an interest in a common vision and bring them together.

That’s the imperative at the center of *Unite and Conquer*, where Kyrsten Sinema describes her experience putting together winning coalitions—at the ballot box and in the legislature—against long odds.

Kyrsten is one of the greatest characters in Arizona politics today, but she is also one of its least likely success stories. As Kyrsten explains, if you had met her when she first ran for

the legislature, you would not have believed that someone so suspicious of those who disagreed with her, and someone with political beliefs so unconventional for Arizona, would help to leave a tangible mark on the state's politics just a few years later. Anyone who has thought about getting involved in politics but then thought "I don't have the chance to do anything important" should pay close attention.

As Kyrsten demonstrates, during a career in politics, everyone grows. You think about your past experiences, learn lessons, and apply them to situations you encounter in the future. This has certainly been true in my own case.

The key in this process of growing is to remember the touchstone of your involvement: why you got involved in the first place. This imperative encourages people to stay true to their beliefs—but it also can discourage compromise or working with potential adversaries, the kind of activities that make change happen in reality.

The tension between doing what's needed to accomplish tangible change and staying true to one's beliefs—the clash between ideology and practicality—is a tough line to walk. And to someone just beginning in organizing, the challenges of putting together a winning coalition can be daunting. In this book, Kyrsten helps make that a bit easier. Few people turn from a gadfly member of the legislature into an effective organizer. But that is Kyrsten's story—and this book contains not just the account of how that happened but also the lessons she took from that experience. She learned over the course of several terms in the legislature so you can learn over the course of a few hundred pages.

The greatest need for any person trying to make meaningful change in his or her community is other people—whether they're voters whispering in your ear or legislative colleagues across the aisle giving your position a fair hearing. No one can do it alone. Here, Kyrsten has written a practical blueprint that's a must-read for those who feel the need to change their communities through the political process. But she is also one of the first to explain, in nuts-and-bolts terms, the workings of our country's new type of politics—a politics where diverse people unite behind common goals, where leaders are willing to put aside small differences for the sake of the big picture, and where unity replaces division as the key to great leadership.

In the past, efforts to describe the essence of politics have resounded with cynicism. Politics is likened to sausage making or cat herding; it is called the organization of grievance, or the process by which people who once had good intentions sell out for expediency.

But the political phenomena that have changed our country in the last few years—foremost among these President Obama's historic rise to the White House—have given us a less cynical and more hopeful model for what politics really is: the organization of people with common interests and concerns and the act of mobilizing them toward a common goal.

We have seen the ability of broad-based, well-led coalitions to change politics and empower people who had never thought they could make much of a difference. And that's what this book is truly about.

The lessons in this book about empowerment replacing cynicism emerge from Kyrsten's own experience. The "side-line" approach to politics that she describes as typical of her early legislative career is one characterized by doubt. It comes from a feeling that you're powerless to make meaningful change in a political process swirling around you.

This is a volume full of practical advice for those who have ever felt that sensation but who also feel the need to make a difference through the political process. Kyrsten intelligently discusses all the important questions for idealists at work in politics today: how to compromise without compromising your beliefs, how to disagree without being disagreeable, how to take people who differ on many issues and inspire them toward common goals, and how to lead people in a way that is simultaneously successful in the rough-and-tumble world of politics and true to the core beliefs of the participants.

Kyrsten's book provides the kind of practical advice that makes the difference between a starry-eyed idealist on the sidelines and a seasoned idealist enacting meaningful change. There are millions of people who might whisper to you "We may not agree on everything, but I supported you on this issue"—and those are the type of interactions that will empower more people in the political process and bring needed change to our communities.

Janet Napolitano
Governor of Arizona, 2003–2009



PREFACE

I didn't set out to write a book, but this exciting and somewhat scary endeavor came to me in the form of an irresistible offer to share what I've been working on, talking about, and teaching others to do for several years. Here's how it happened. Around January of 2008, I was invited to speak at the 2008 Take Back America Conference in Washington, DC. I accepted the invitation, bought a plane ticket, and put together a PowerPoint presentation. Two months later, I found myself speaking to a large group of political activists, elected officials, and probably a few bloggers about Arizona Together, a statewide coalition formed to defeat a same-sex marriage ban initiative in Arizona.

You see, from January 2005 through November 2006, I had served as the chair of Arizona Together. It was a grueling two years full of challenges, internal questions, doubt, controversy, and incredible pressure to perform. As chair, my job was to guide the campaign every day toward victory, make strategic decisions about messaging, raise money, decide how to spend the money, direct community outreach efforts, and more. We won. And by *won*, I mean that we actually got more votes than the other guys. This was pretty exhilarating because no one wins these campaigns. And by *no one*, I literally mean no one. Activists have

battled thirty of these initiatives around the country, and we have won only once. Lucky for me, it happened in Arizona. Since then, people around the country have wanted to know how we managed to do the impossible, and I have wanted to tell people how we did it. Hence my willingness to leave sunny, warm Arizona in the spring to travel to cold, wet Washington, DC.

So there I was at the conference, clicking through my Power-Point slides and telling the audience how we brought a bunch of disparate people together, formed a pretty massive coalition, raised some decent money, figured out how to talk to the voters, and worked our tails off for two years. The presentation was based on a thesis of our campaign—that we had to reach out to those voters who are different from ourselves (ourselves being the gay activists and traditional LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] allies) and speak a language relevant to their lives in order to build a base big enough and strong enough to win on election day. While this thesis sounds like a pretty good recipe for winning a ballot initiative campaign, it was not developed or executed without controversy, the same kind of controversy progressives have faced for years.

The question of whom we as progressive political actors will collaborate with is not an easy one to answer. Some believe that we should work with anyone and everyone to accomplish our higher goals (world peace, etc.) and that adjusting our language and the way we interact with each other and the world is a valuable exercise that helps us win and makes us stronger. Others believe that working with our natural

base* is the only way to achieve success and that working with those who operate on a different plane (read: conservatives) is tantamount to selling out. Arizona Together chose the first route. It wasn't easy and we had some pretty bumpy times, but it worked.

You might be thinking, "Well, if the strategy worked, then it isn't very controversial, is it?" But, oh, it is—because another reader (and this might be you too, dear reader) is slowly shaking his or her head back and forth right now, thinking "That girl will do anything to win. What a shame." We've been dealing with this quandary for years, without any clear consensus about what exactly we should do and where, if anywhere, we should draw the line when working with disparate groups.

So, again, there I was talking to the progressive faithful about our controversial thesis—committing to working with people who are wildly different from me and learning to speak a new language to people who are different from me, all in order to protect health care for unmarried families in Arizona and stop the marriage ban—and I could feel some people in the room shooting me dark looks and muttering under their breath about sellout politicians. In such situations, I find that humor helps. It's hard to justify throwing things at the girl at the front of the room if she's just told a self-deprecating joke.

* The *base* is what politicians call their true believers. It usually includes you, your six best friends, and a handful of people just like you. Both the Left and the Right have their own base, which is slightly larger than my little description here—but not by much.

In fact, if the girl's tone is just right, the person gripping the rock or pen or little hotel glass cup holding cheap candy might actually relax that tight, sweaty grip on the object to be thrown and chuckle a little. I did what any girl would do at this point—I threw in a little humor. The speech ended, and a handful of people gathered around the dais to talk a bit more. I spent a few moments with each person, and then only one person was left. This editor looked at me, said something nice about the speech that I can't remember, and then asked me if I wanted to write a book about building coalitions.

And here we are.

The Beauty of Coalitions

I've been building coalitions all my life, although I didn't know to call them coalitions in the early years. When I was little, my parents told me I just talked too much and needed to mind my own business. In junior high, everybody thought I was just bossy. In high school, I called what I did organizing, and when I was preparing for a career in social work, I learned it was really coalition building.

To put it simply, coalition building is the practice of gathering disparate people and groups together for a common purpose or goal. The beauty of coalition-building is that everyone can come to the coalition full of his or her own values and ideals and not be asked or required to give up a single one of them. Not giving up values or ideals makes me

happy because I am a bit stubborn about those sorts of things (as really most of us are). After all, I have some pretty good reasons for choosing these values and ideals, and I'm not giving them up for every attractive proposal that saunters by. Coalitions allow you to get important work done while being who you really want to be. They also have the great benefit of being bigger than just you, so the outcome of your work can also be much bigger than just the work you could accomplish on your own. And if you're a social animal like me, then they offer the bonus of getting to do great work in the company of other people doing great work.

For some of us, working in coalitions comes naturally. I took to it at an early age, probably due to my extraordinary interest in talking to people, and that included all people—everyone I saw. My early attempts included wandering away from my family at the Tucson Mall, hanging around another random family for a bit to see what they were up to, and eventually asking a mall security officer to help me find my own family again. The next attempt came in the first grade when I teamed up with another little girl after school one day to sell chocolate bars in the neighborhood to raise money for my big brother's soccer team. We sold every single bar in the box that afternoon* to the slightly surprised adults throughout the neighborhood and then headed

* Except for the one bar that we ate ourselves toward the end of the afternoon. All that walking and talking really tuckered us out. Plus, even at the age of six, I was addicted to chocolate.

home, only to find four police cars in the driveway. I'd neglected to tell anyone where my enterprising friend and I were going—or get permission to go in the first place.

While I showed some proclivity toward coalition building at a young age, I learned many of the finer points through trial and error over the years. In college, I studied social work, with the intention of changing the world, ending global hunger, and saving the environment, and I was hoping to get it all done within a year or two. Dissatisfaction set in almost immediately, when I found myself working as a school social worker in a deeply impoverished community and counting distributing food boxes among my greatest achievements. Working one-on-one with children and their families is incredibly important, but I found it quite depressing. I kept asking myself, "Couldn't I have a larger impact—couldn't I make a difference in the underlying structure that created this vicious cycle of poverty?" So I went back to school at night to earn a master's in social work, hoping that the extra training and knowledge would make me a more effective change agent. I learned lots of stuff like how to effectively organize in communities and create meaningful programs that impact people's lives, and I spent another six years organizing immigrant and refugee families in the community, creating and expanding empowerment programs, and lobbying the Arizona legislature for state reform.

Then in 2002 I felt like I'd really hit a wall. I'd done as much as my training and hyperactive mind allowed me to do, and it was time to move on. I met my friend Sandy Bahr for coffee,

and by the end of the meeting, I'd made the decision to quit my job, get a law degree, and run for state office. I hoped that learning to think like a lawyer would help me get access to the power attorneys wield so I could wield some of that power for good. And I'd decided that serving in the state legislature would help me change some of those institutional barriers to success that I'd struggled with over the years. Along the way, I learned so much from other talented activists, organizers, and policy makers about how to work together and create lasting, meaningful change. We've been able to do some pretty great things for our little corner of the world over the years, and my intention in writing this book is to share some of those stories with you and explain how you might do them too.

I hope this book will illuminate some of the finer points of coalition building, and I've sprinkled a few stories throughout the book to illustrate the trials and errors of attempting coalition work. Now I'm a politician (wait! don't put the book down!), so in my world we expect everything to be short and snappy with the important stuff highlighted. You've already seen that this book is small, which I hope induced you to pick it up and flip through it. I've done my best to make each chapter snappy—first by making my point, then by telling a story or two to illustrate the point, and then by adding some humor to make sure you don't get bored. And finally, the important stuff is easy to find. I've got nifty little text boxes throughout the book, highlighting some of the parts that you can read in a jiffy and then use in the real world.

Sneak Preview

And now I'll give you a quick preview of the whole book in case you're reading this the night before you start your first community organizing job and you're panicking because you might have overstated your experience and, in fact, don't know what on earth to do. Or maybe you're a veteran coalition builder and aren't sure that there's anything in this book that you don't already know. Perhaps you just bought the book for the pretty purple cover (I totally would) and now are in the process of deciding whether it's actually worth reading. Whatever your reason, here's the preview:

In the introduction, "Because You Can't Get There on Your Own," I introduce the concept of coalition building, what brought me to it in my current incarnation as an elected official, and why working in coalition with other people is the greatest thing since sliced bread. Chapter 1, "The Politics We Want," describes what's gone wrong with politics lately and why Americans hate politics and politicians (except perhaps Barack Obama). The chapter outlines the kind of politics we really want and proposes a transformation to a new ethos that can guide our political thoughts and behavior to get us the politics we want. Chapter 2, "Letting Go of the Bear and Picking Up the Buddha," teaches the steps to transforming politics from the tired old style of pettiness to a new style rooted in a place of peace, motivated by the genuine desire to do good, and tempered with individual awareness and centeredness. Chapter 3, "Creating Coalitions You Actually Want to Join," covers the important steps required to build

coalitions that people want to be a part of, points out common pitfalls to coalition building, and discusses the vital role of leadership in coalitions. In chapter 4, “Shedding the Heavy Mantle of Victimhood,” I jump right into the lion’s den with the controversial proposal that we dump identity politics—the practice of dividing up into subgroups based on some aspect of shared identity—and instead focus on the larger truth that we all share most things in common and want mostly the same things out of life.* Chapter 5, “Making Friends,” is one of my favorite chapters. It stresses the importance of making friends when setting out to build a meaningful coalition and provides a guide for readers to use when making friends. In chapter 6, “Letting Go of Outcomes,” we explore what outcomes are, why we’re so attached to them, and how this attachment gets in the way of finding effective solutions in coalition settings. Chapter 7, “Getting Back to Our Shared Values,” brings us back to what we as Americans can all share—our core values. This chapter illustrates that when we use values-based language, we can attract more people to the table to work together and then provides examples of how to create and use values-based language. Chapter 8, “Naming Our Interests,” explains what an interest is and how it is different from an outcome, then discusses how naming interests helps guide our coalition work to shared successful outcomes that everyone can embrace. Chapter 9, “The Third Way,” illustrates just how a coalition’s work can be successful when coalition members eschew

* Money and fame, right?

identity politics; create meaningful, trust-based relationships; let go of predetermined outcomes; name shared values; and then use interest-based work to create and execute the coalition's plan. Chapter 10, "And, Not But," proposes the elimination of the word *but* from our coalition vocabulary and submits the word *and* in its place. By using the word *and* when working with diverse people and groups around the coalition table, we can decrease unnecessary arguments, increase creativity, and move faster and more powerfully toward real solutions that meet everyone's needs. In chapter 11, "Keeping the Team Together," I discuss three tools coalition builders can and should use to keep the coalition together and working for a common purpose. In the conclusion, "Get Your Coalition On," I wrap up the lessons from the book and set you, the reader, forth to unite and conquer. And at the very end of this little book, you'll find a bonus "Coalition Builder's Toolkit" that describes the method I use when running (and winning) campaigns in a coalition setting.

There's the preview for this book. I hope it was tempting and juicy because the real book starts when you turn the page, and it would be a shame to skip all that.



INTRODUCTION

**Because You
Can't Get
There
on
Your Own**

I kind of fell into this whole legislator gig. I didn't really intend to run for office, but as a school social worker in the late 1990s, working with immigrant and refugee kids in poverty, I found myself spending more and more time at the state capitol as time went on. I was often frustrated that these kids weren't getting the same opportunities that I had as a child or that other children in our state had access to, and I thought that lobbying was my best shot at getting something for these kids. Well, I didn't make a whole lot of headway in that respect, but I did learn about state politics. I was kind of surprised—I'd always assumed that legislators were somehow different from the rest of us. But it turns out that they're just regular people.

What I didn't like is that not enough of those regular people seemed to care about the things that I cared about—like affordable health care for kids; good, strong schools with equal opportunity; clean air and water; and investments in the future via smart growth and economic development. So after a while, I decided I'd run for office.

I was elected in November 2004 to represent District 15 in central Phoenix, an urban district that cares about education, health care, and the environment. Going into my first legislative sessions, I felt pretty confident that I'd represent the interests of my constituents well—after all, I told them what I believed in, and they'd elected me to serve them. I showed up to the capitol quite bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to take the state by storm.

Except it didn't quite work out like that. I showed up all right. And for the first several months, I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, coming to work every morning full of vim and vigor, ready to face off for justice—which made me rather annoying. I'd stand up four or five times a week on the floor of the house and give scathing speeches about how this bill and that bill were complete and utter travesties of justice, and the paper would capture one or two of the quotes, and then we'd vote on the offending bills and they'd pass with supermajorities. I'd get righteously indignant and head back to my office, incensed that my colleagues could not only write but actually support and vote for such horrid policies!

Meanwhile, everyone else went to lunch. In short, my first legislative session was a bust. I'd spent all my time being a crusader for justice, a patron saint for lost causes, and I'd missed out on the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with fellow members in the legislature, lobbyists, and other state actors. I hadn't gotten any of my great policy ideas enacted into law, and I'd seen lots of stuff I didn't like become law. It was just plain sad.

I spent the summer figuring out what I wanted to change. I knew that I couldn't keep doing what I was doing because it wasn't working for me and I hated it. I had, without actually planning to do so, fallen quite easily into the role of the loyal opposition, the righteously indignant crusader, the bomb thrower. In legislative lingo, a bomb thrower is a legislator who chooses to yell from the sidelines, cackle at the rest of the body, and generally raise hell from the corner of the

room. A person who chooses to be a bomb thrower in the legislature is choosing to remove himself or herself from the work of the body: negotiating on bills, working to find compromises, and sometimes teaming up with unusual allies to promote or kill legislation. This person plays an important role at the capitol because he or she calls out the body on a regular basis (which is needed, especially considering that the general public hears or reads roughly 0.3 percent of what happens each day inside the legislature). However, the bomb thrower has made a choice—whether consciously or not—to be excluded from the actual process of negotiating proposed legislation. You can't play both roles in the legislature; if you choose to be a bomb thrower, you will not get the opportunity to amend bills, participate in bipartisan meetings to craft good legislation, or work with people on the other side of the aisle to kill bad legislation. I unwittingly chose to be a bomb thrower my first session, which led to my unhappiness and regret.

Over the summer, I consciously chose to reject the bomb thrower role. For me, it was not a hard choice to make. I was miserable as a bomb thrower. And since I hadn't consciously chosen that role, I was even more depressed when I realized that I had become a bomb thrower and worked my way right into that lonely corner. It didn't fit me. I do love to give fiery speeches. But I also love people. I love talking with people, working together, and making friends. The bomb thrower doesn't get to make friends much (understandably so), and she certainly doesn't get to work with all the people she's throwing bombs toward.

I reflected on the lessons I'd learned as a social worker—about meeting people where they are, forming trust-based relationships, and working with others to create a realistic plan of action that gets you toward your goal. My social worker skills had served me well over the years, and I thought I'd try them at the capitol. I knew that I wouldn't be successful all the time (after all, Arizona's legislature is controlled by the other party in both the house and the senate, and Democrats rarely passed bills with their names attached), but I figured I'd be at least marginally more successful (there's only one way to go up from zero) and certainly a lot happier. So I took the advice that I'd ignored the year before from my state senator, Ken Chevront,¹ and started over. When I went back to the legislature a few months later, it was like a whole different world had opened for me.

I calmed down and stopped taking everything so personally, which made me a lot nicer and, I think, reduced the frowning of my brow. I made friends with Democrats, Republicans, and everyone in between, which made me a lot happier. I had meetings with lobbyists that were relaxed and comfortable (regardless of whether or not we agreed on an issue). I laughed with legislators both liberal and conservative. I accepted losses with greater grace, participated in a few wins, and started getting invitations from Republican legislators to work together on bills.

It's not all fun and roses—sometimes it's still really, really hard to be in the legislature, and some days I still wonder why anyone would do this job²—but for the most part, I'm

glad that I'm there, and I'm glad that I get lots done. It took four steps for me to get to the place I am now—where I can work well with just about anyone and where I can form and operate in coalitions that are some of the most unlikely you've ever heard about. First, it took recognition on my part that I didn't like where I was or what I was doing and recognition that it could be different and I could make it so. Second, it took some personal transformation. I had to change the way I thought and behaved so I could see other people and reach out to them and work effectively. Third, it took relationship building. I had to make friends and find common ground with people who were sometimes very, very different from me. I had to build trust with them and allow them to build trust with me. And fourth, it took strategic work where we'd all put aside our own preconceived ideas of how to solve the world's problems and instead use our shared values to create plans that worked for everyone.

Not only did these four steps change the way that I work at the capitol, in the community, and around the nation, they helped my work matter. Thanks to my ever-developing coalition-building skills, I've been able to be a part of some really exciting and meaningful change in this country—from protecting health care for families to fighting genocide to supporting diversity in higher education and more.

I probably could have found other ways to fill my time as a legislator without seeking out and forming coalitions, but I'm thinking that would have been horrid. My first year in the legislature sure was. Going it alone is no fun, plus there's no

one to invite to the victory party. Coalitions, on the other hand, are challenging, hard, exhilarating and rewarding, and ultimately lead to a larger concept of winning. That sounds like a pretty good party to me.

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