

# SWING LEFT “HOW WE WIN” PODCAST

## It's Iowa with Congresswoman Cindy Axne

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**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 0:00**

Cindy Axne is a small business owner, parent and community activist--and now Congresswoman from Iowa's third district. She is, of course, one of our newest representatives that were elected in our Blue Wave midterms in 2018. Congresswoman Axne, thank you so much for being here and talking to us.

**Rep. Cindy Axne 0:17**

Oh, well, I'm so glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 0:20**

So you were a community activist before you ran for office. Can you talk a little bit about your first experiences as an activist?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 0:28**

Absolutely. Well, you know, I did spend a decade in state government serving under both Democrat and Republican governors overseeing multiple capacities--like strategy--at the state, working with every state agency. My goal is to always find better ways to get things done. And so when I think about my own community, I look in my backyard to see what work needs to be done. One of the very first things that I was able to help with was getting all-day kindergarten in one of our biggest school districts in the state when I found out that half the kids literally lost a lottery, Steve, and got an inferior education. They got two-and-a-half hours compared to the all-day kindergarten that the other kids got. So I decided to get busy. I didn't think that that was right for our community. I certainly knew that working families like mine needed to ensure that kids had all-day kindergarten, and it's not fair and equitable to have half of the kids in a district receive that opportunity and the

other half not. So I, you know, advocated for a year, working with the administration, working with the school board, working with the teachers, you know, to make sure that we gave this opportunity to everybody combating what I would say a lot of, you know, hurdles, because people will find every single opportunity, you know, to kind of stick with the norm. Well, that wasn't going to happen. This had to be made, the change had to be made. And so I continued to push for it, found other folks who were engaged with it as well. And I think that the power of all of us working together led to the ability to get all-day kindergarten for the West Des Moines school district, one of the biggest in the state.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host) 2:04**

That is, it's such an impressive accomplishment. How did it feel to win that first victory? And did you know at that point that you were going to run for office at some point?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 2:18**

You know, it's really interesting. I was working at the state when I was fighting for this. And so I continued to stay in my position at the state. I did not think about running for office whatsoever. You know, it was a precursor to me running for office. It was just one of those things when I took a step back and just decided to really think about what what did I want to do. You know, I said to myself, Listen, I've been out there fighting for the tough things. I've got the experience within government to understand how it functions. Why am I holding myself back? Let's get at this thing. There's, you know, there's plenty of folks who've been elected to office who haven't even fought for one darn thing. I spend my life standing up for good things for the people in our community, and this is a, this is a job that allows me to do that for an even larger group of people.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 3:06**

Well, and I can attest to how much time you spend, we were talking right before we got started about all the town halls that you have as a now-Representative, and how little time--how little free time you have. What's your day-to-day look like now that you're a Congresswoman?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 3:25**

So it's a very busy week, and the day-to-day is always, you know, really up for grabs. So for instance, this morning, I've been at caucus, I was just in the Affordable Housing hearing. I'll be going back there after this interview. But in between then, I was talking with folks about renewable fuels, waivers that are happening that are hurting our agriculture industry. So I went and did a press release on that. I'll be going back to the Affordable Housing Committee after this. Then I'll be going to a few meetings and later on, I'm going to be actually addressing working with some of my colleagues on corruption in Congress. And so one thing that a lot of us new members want to make sure that happens, folks, isn't--it's not just all about policy. We need to make sure that we've got good policy in place, but without the right structures and resources in place to support those--and if we have a Congress that that isn't acting ethically, and if we've got opportunity to take some of the corruption out of the system--that needs to be done so that we can better implement that policy and make sure that it gets to the outcomes that people in this country need.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host) 4:31**

And so you've been in Congress for just about a year now. Is it what you imagined it would be like? And do things on the inside feel as divisive as they look like from the outside?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 4:47**

First answer is no. Second answer is absolutely, yes. You know, so this is...listen, this is unfortunately a time in our country where it's just so divisive. You know, I thought, my goodness, we'll come out here, I know that we're going to be in the majority. But there's got to be some great, you know, some other folks on the other side of the aisle who are going to get behind some of these really good bills that improve people's lives. And I'll be honest, I'm, I'm really surprised that we're not able to get there. You know, one of my bills trying to get out of Financial Services, which we passed out, and we're moving that forward into law, is to ensure that businesses report where their jobs are in this country and where they're located out of this country. I don't think that's a big ask. I had a lot of pushback from my Republican colleagues on that. So that's where I've been really surprised at the lack of ability to work with other people on really common sense solutions. And, you know, I hope that we get to a point where we're, we can move back to a place where we can start getting

things done. So I think that that's probably been some of the biggest, that's been one of the biggest issues that I've been confronted with here. I would say there's been a lot of positive movement on my end. I've been able to move forward--I believe all--of my amendments through voice vote last year, which is almost impossible to get done. It means they were put together in such a way that we could get general support.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 6:12**

That's great to hear. It is tough from the outside looking at what seems like common sense-issues we should all agree on, that shouldn't, you know, be a partisan issue at all, just get blocked. So while you mentioned a lot of the great stuff that you're doing for your home state of Iowa, all eyes are on Iowa right now. There's been a lot of energy there for a long time. And Iowa's also one of Swing Left's newest super states because they have obviously important Presidential, Senate races and state house races, not to mention protecting our great new reps in the House, right? Have Iowans been able to turn the attention and energy from the presidential primary into change down the ballot and on other issues?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 7:03**

Absolutely. And first and foremost, big shout out to all my Swing Left supporters. Thank you so much for all that you do to help folks like me and Abby Finkenauer make history in Iowa and become the first two women to represent our state and two Democrats. I know, I know, we're all happy about that. Listen, the, you know, the presidential race does a lot of really good things. I'll be honest, we need them to get out of town at this point. They've been there a heck of a long time. We don't get a break in Iowa, literally. And we have not had a break, I don't think, in a political ad since I started running for my race. I mean, that's how bad it is in Iowa. So once in a while we need a break. But you know, it does bring a lot of opportunity to Iowa. And certainly it helps us engage people in the process. You know, one of the biggest things about our caucus process is it's very community driven. You're in there with your neighbors, you see who they're getting behind, you have an opportunity to try and move them into your camp, so to speak, to get the person elected that you think is going to do the best at the job. And it really allows for great conversation. We're very

different from many other states when it comes to that, and I think it's what sets Iowa apart. We're an incredibly thoughtful state when it comes to this.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 8:23**

Can you break down exactly how the--because the caucus is a such a unique process to many people--can you dig a little deeper and break down how that works?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 8:32**

Sure, sure. So we have, you know, over 1,600 precincts in Iowa are holding caucuses, and we have satellite caucus locations as well, and even some that are international, to make sure we can have folks participate. So the break down really looks like this. First, we do some introductory business, we might hear from the state party chair, some local elected officials, you know, and certainly from the permanent chair and secretary at that caucus. And then we move into what's called presidential preference. So imagine a room just chock full of people, ok, we've got, you know, multiple folks running for president, we will divide into sections of the room and go stand there. If you're going to caucus for Biden, you're standing in one corner. If you're going to caucus for Bernie, you're standing in another corner, etc, etc. And then what happens is, you've got to get 15% of the attendees to be viable. So if you don't have a group that's over 15% of the total, you're not a viable group. What that means then, is that anybody who was in one of those groups that wasn't viable, those people are up for grabs to go join another campaign. And so then it turns into a real interesting situation. I like to joke around that my single neighbor really likes it because he has women fighting over for him, you know, to get him over to another group. So it really is about talking to your neighbor, asking them what their concerns are, finding out, you know what, you know, and describing to them, here's where our candidate stands and we think that he'd be a really good fit for you or she'd be a really good fit for you. And then hopefully having those folks move into another group so that they can either create viability, let's say if you're in a non-viable group, but you're close, and there's a group that's a real low viability, you might pull from there and then be able to create viability for somebody who didn't make the top group. But then for others, you know, it's to pull into those top groups and give them even more support. So they walk away as the preferred group and the

delegates are awarded to that. So it's all about getting your delegates. It's about getting as high a percentage as you can. It's pulling folks out of groups so that you can reach those requirements. And it's a really fun and interesting look at how we support our democracy in Iowa.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host)** 10:57

It sounds fun and the viability threshold thing is really interesting to me because it seems like it really forces candidates to, to work hard to be a second or third choice, too, even if they're not someone's first choice because they might win their, their caucus vote, you know, in the end, right?

**Rep. Cindy Axne** 11:17

That's exactly right. And so you don't have to come--it's nice to come out number one in Iowa. But the candidates also know--just get yourself up in the top tier. And you know, this combined with other early states could be what you need. So you're right, it isn't just about who's got the biggest group right there. It could be that, you know, helping the second and the third contenders really build some support moving into some of those other early states.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host)** 11:43

So you literally vote with your feet, it sounds like.

So that's coming up very soon. Do you think it helps or hurts the candidates to have Iowa be the first to weigh in?

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host)** 12:00

Be honest, I know you're biased.

**Rep. Cindy Axne** 12:04

Listen, I will always say that it helps to have Iowa first and here's why. I know that there's been pushback against folks saying, well, they're not as diverse as some other states. That's

true. I'm not going to say we are. What we are is incredibly thoughtful about how we go through this process. This is a very serious situation for Iowans. I see all the time people say, you know, they have met with every single presidential contender, and they go out of their way for a year, essentially, to attend events with all of them to personally ask them questions, then to, you know, talk with their friends and family about what their thoughts are. And so, you know, this is, I think Iowa is in the place where they should be because I really don't think anybody would take it as seriously as our state when you kind of just go in and you know, place a vote in a ballot box. You know, when you have to go in and explain your answer to the neighbors, you've got a little bit more responsibility, and that, I think, shows in the effort that people put into selecting a candidate in Iowa.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host)** 13:08

Interesting. And you probably--I don't know that there's any other state that gets more, you know, opportunity for facetime with these presidential candidates than Iowa does. Certainly not California.

**Rep. Cindy Axne** 13:19

Yeah. For God's sake, no. And you know, I will say, you know, there are some people that say well, my goodness, those Iowans are demanding. You know, it is what it is and when we're baking cinnamon rolls in a house and Cory Booker is spending the night there and somebody's making them homemade cinnamon rolls, folks expect that you're going to be able to talk to people, that's how close we are. And so, you know, we've got to, you know, Iowans are just, that's how they roll. Iowa politics are local politics. I mean, I won my race because I held 160 meet-and-greet events between my, in my primary and general. I was out there across the board. And that's what Iowans expect. They expect you to be out there listening to them, and then taking those ideas and actually turning them into policy to help their lives. And so, yeah, we are, we are a little bit demanding with people's time. But I think it's for good reason. And I think it does set a really good framework for people across this country to get a good understanding about multiple candidates that might not have an opportunity. You know, there's folks that are getting more opportunity now because they're doing well in Iowa that may not have because they weren't names going in. And so,

you know, I think that that makes a big difference and why Iowa's always good at caucusing.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host) 14:38**

Turning to your district, now, the third district. you represent a swing district. And last year you voted to impeach Donald Trump. Can you talk to us about how you made that decision and what the response at home has been since then?

**Rep. Cindy Axne 14:57**

So I take this job and and certainly our Constitution and our republic very seriously. Obviously, coming from Iowa, it's a purple state. To your point, I flipped the Red Sea blue in a Trump district. And you know, it was a very, very tight win. Do I have to consider my constituents' issues in my votes? Absolutely. But when it comes to protecting our Constitution, and when it comes to upholding the country that we have in place, no one is above the law. And my job was to assess the information that came out of the impeachment inquiries and, you know, look at that from the perspective of, you know, long term for our state and for our country, never from a political position. I'm not in this job, you know, to decide things from a political position to keep me here. I never expected that I would run for Congress, and I'm here to solve problems, not for political posturing. And so for me, I took a look at the facts. The facts were very evident, the President self-admitted that he had conspired with the Ukraine, his chief of staff supported that. And then we had testimony by patriots from this country who said the exact same thing. The facts were there. My job is to uphold the Constitution. I will never shy away from that, even if it means I lose a seat. And I don't think I will, because my job is to also work hard for the people in the district, and I'm delivering for them.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host) 16:25**

Well, on behalf of myself and Mariah and every single person listening to this podcast unless there're some trolls out there, thank you. Thank you for doing that. You know, it is a dark, weird time for a lot of people. And you know, we spoke earlier about how divisive Congress is. And now it's 2020. There's a lot of excitement, but for a lot of people, the

election is getting even more real now that we're in the election year. What gives you the most hope for the future in this, you know, seemingly dark time?

**Rep. Cindy Axne** 17:06

It really is a revised sense of involvement from citizens across this country. We saw it in the 2018 midterm elections, and we're going to see it now. All reports show in my district, massive uptick in folks coming out to caucus. They're signing up in droves ahead of time. More folks, we have almost doubled the amount of folks attending pre-meetings for caucuses to make sure that we've got appropriate structure for them. We think we're going to see a huge outpouring of people attending and it really is because people are fired up and ready to go. You know, we've seen unfortunately, since this president took office, an increased number of groups who deal with civil rights, social justice, environmental issues, all because this administration is doing so much to roll back those great opportunities that we've been able to move forward in the previous administration, and they're trying to move those things away from us and and take away opportunity for people in this country. People are realizing that. They're stepping up, they're forming groups. And they're the folks who are going to come out and caucus. They're the folks who are going to change this election. And they're also the folks that are going to keep me in office and elect other Democrats who are going to look out for them, put more money in their pockets, protect their pre-existing conditions and lower the cost of prescription drugs. They know we're serious about this. And they know that it's impacting their families at this point. I literally had a town hall the other day, and somebody asked me about the ACA ruling. And I asked folks in the room who knows somebody or has a pre-existing condition? Every single hand was raised. These are massive issues for our country. And they know Democrats are going to be the winning side for them, you know, when it comes to these issues that literally help their families. So I think we're going to see a lot of people turn out. They're fired up and they're ready to go.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host)** 19:02

Well, that is so exciting to hear. And I can't wait to see what the turnout for the caucuses is. It sounds like a fun time. So I hope you enjoy chatting with your neighbors about the

candidates. And thank you for stepping out of committee to talk to us. I know you have a busy day...

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host)** 19:22

So busy. And we're so honored that you could squeeze out some time to talk to us and we really appreciate it.

**Rep. Cindy Axne** 19:28

Well, I'm grateful for all you do. Thank you for keeping the, you know, the democracy alive and making sure that we continue to support folks who want to stay out here and make lives better for people. So thanks for all you do.

**Steve Pierson (Co-Host)** 19:41

Thank you.

**Mariah Craven (Co-Host)** 19:42

Thank you.