

## The Razor's Edge: Janet Napolitano

By Alexis Jetter



Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano  
Photo by: Dan Winters

Arizona governor Janet Napolitano is on the front lines of the battle over immigration. Her tough stand has the rest of the country paying attention — and wondering what her next move will be.

### Crossing the Border

Every day nearly 5,000 Mexican men, women, and children try to dig, run or climb across the Arizona-Mexico border, looking for work and a better life. Some scale razor-sharp metal fences; others crawl through storm drains. But most of them simply walk into the unforgiving heart of the Sonoran Desert, a stark landscape of thorny mesquite, giant saguaro, rugged mountains, and -- with increasing frequency -- human remains. In 2007, the U.S. Border Patrol and humanitarian volunteers found 235 bodies, some just bleached skeletons, in the Sonoran's arid expanse. "It's a hard crossing," says Arizona governor Janet Napolitano, 50, as she gazes out the window of the police cruiser that doubles as her

second home during weekly treks around the state. "The desert is picturesque, but it's deadly if you're walking in 120-degree heat. And you can't carry enough water to make it across."

It is a rare unguarded moment for Napolitano, who knows only too well that expressing sympathy for people trying to duck across the border can be politically costly. Indeed, all the presidential candidates, Democratic and Republican alike, are finding slippery footing in what commentators call the immigration swamp. Nowhere is this debate more frenzied than in Arizona, where a human wave is cresting along the state's southern tier, the nation's busiest portal for illegal immigrants. In 2007, the Border Patrol arrested 416,231 of them here -- almost half the number detained in the entire United States. For millions of immigrants, blocked by crackdowns at formerly busy crossings in California and Texas, Arizona is the only way in.

It's Janet Napolitano's job to stop them.

## Hard Right at the Border

Policing the border is an uncomfortable task for a moderate Democrat of immigrant stock who came to power promising more money for schools, improved healthcare, and an even shake for women, Hispanics, Native Americans, and the poor. But Napolitano -- a turbocharged five-foot-four-inch woman with short black hair and a white forelock -- has shown she can do it all. A Manhattan-born former prosecutor, she combines Rosie O'Donnell's brash charm with the political shrewdness of Bill Clinton and, reaching further back, the common touch of Fiorello La Guardia, New York's blustery former mayor. "I am very pragmatic," says Napolitano, relaxing in her statehouse office near a custom-tooled leather saddle, a gift from the governor of the neighboring Mexican state of Sonora. "I'm not a flowery speaker. But I'll talk with anybody about what needs to happen and why."

A rising star in the national Democratic party, Napolitano fairly hums with intensity. She's pugnacious, fiercely opinionated, thin-skinned, and hooked on goofy one-liners. Supporters say she has perfect political pitch in a swing state that's an economic and social blueprint for a changing America. Critics call her a chameleon, willing to embrace any position that bolsters her approval ratings. But nobody sells Napolitano short. As Jana Bommersbach, a veteran Arizona journalist, says, "Janet is easily the smartest person in the room in any situation."

One recent afternoon, though, Napolitano was nearly knocked off balance -- and by a most unlikely challenger: Uriel Martinez, 17, a shy, bespectacled youth who's part of an Arizona State University program for gifted math and science students. Martinez rose to greet Napolitano during a campus visit and then told the class that he would not be able to attend college. "This is the closest I can get," he said softly. "Because I'm not a U.S. citizen. I was 12 when my parents came. And so I'm not eligible for financial aid."

Four years ago, Arizona voters passed a series of ballot measures that barred illegal immigrants from receiving a host of benefits, including tuition assistance. Every student in the room grew silent, waiting for Napolitano's response. "I want to talk directly to you," she told Martinez. "It is a hard time now, a hard historical time and a hard time for you. But I want you to know: There is private money that can help you go to college. You're not out there by yourself."

Ordinarily, Napolitano resembles an overgrown kid at public events -- laughing and joking with the crowd. But today, back in the car, she needs to vent. "This business of taking immigration policy out on young people just burns me," she says, pushing aside *The Rise of American Democracy*, a hefty tome that she reads between stops. "That young man has all the potential in the world. If you put that student up in front of a lot of Arizonans, they'd say, 'Of course I want him to succeed.' But if you put up a ballot measure and ask, 'Should we spend tax dollars for college tuition for illegal immigrants?' they'll vote no. When you go from the specific to the abstract, you lose that boy's face."

It's a struggle, then, to remember that this is the woman who signed a bill that passed into law on January 1, 2008, allowing prosecutors to revoke a business owner's license if the owner is caught more than once knowingly hiring illegal workers -- a law widely described as the most draconian of its kind in the country. Signing the bill has put Napolitano, hailed as one of the sanest voices in the immigration debate, in unfamiliar terrain: denounced by progressives and business leaders alike. Both sides say the law could cripple the state's economy and embolden such vigilante groups as the Minuteman Project, whose members patrol the border and round up suspected interlopers.

"If I had vetoed that bill, the wrath of God would have descended," Napolitano counters. "The immigration debate is red-hot here." She says she was caught in a bind: Congress failed to enact immigration reform; the state's schools, prisons, and hospitals are bursting at the seams; and 85 percent of Arizonans support sanctions. "She's walking the razor's edge," says Fred Solop, a professor of political science at Northern Arizona University. "And she saw the writing on the wall."

The wall, to be precise. Two years ago, after long resisting calls to militarize the border, Napolitano reversed her position. She persuaded the federal government to station 2,400 National Guard troops along the 376-mile Arizona-Mexico frontier and dropped her opposition to the \$6 billion, 700-mile border fence long sought by anti-immigration ideologues. Napolitano once publicly scoffed at the idea of a barricade: "You show me a 50-foot wall, and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder," she repeatedly said. In 2006, however, Napolitano looked on approvingly as President Bush signed into law the bill authorizing its construction.

Despite this about-face, Napolitano says she's committed to creating a streamlined legal path to citizenship. "People have this idea that the illegal immigrant is this guy who sneaks up to our border with a backpack full of dope, swims the Rio Grande, and skulks into our communities," Napolitano says. "In fact, over half the illegal immigrants came in legally but over-stayed their visas." Napolitano is silent as she looks out her car window at a dry arroyo near Tempe. "You'd do better in a new country if the possibility of citizenship is held out to you," she says finally. "But under current law, no matter how hard you work, how many children you raise -- you can still get hauled away."

One scheme that Napolitano says won't work is forcing all 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. to return to their country of origin and apply to get back, a plan pushed by Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee, among others. "That would be like asking everyone who lives in New York and Los Angeles to get up and move," she told the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., in 2007. "What a joke. Let's turn to reality." Yet Huckabee's opponents call him soft on immigration. By contrast, Representative Ron Paul wouldn't allow the children of illegal immigrants -- even those born here -- to become citizens. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney says there should be no path to citizenship for illegal immigrants and claims he proudly supported deporting undocumented workers from his state -- except for the landscapers working on his home, rivals gleefully point out. Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, who once championed immigrants' access to education and healthcare, now says that what he really wanted to do was kick all 400,000 illegal immigrants out of the city.

As Napolitano sees it, what she's doing may not be perfect, but at least she's taking concrete steps to address the issue. "Our nation's capital has allowed this problem to fester for far too long," she says. "It's been building and building. Arizona is at the front end of the wave, but the wave is going to affect everyone."

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## By the People

Napolitano may well be the most popular governor in Arizona history, no small feat for a Democratic woman in the scorched heartland of Barry Goldwater. And that's despite a looming \$1 billion deficit. In her last election, Napolitano carried every legislative district -- the widest margin of victory ever for an Arizona governor. There are Business Leaders for Janet, Sportsmen for Janet, and People of Faith for

Janet.

But Napolitano's most reliable political base has always been women -- including Republicans, who have crossed over in droves to vote for her. "Republican women support Janet because she stands for a lot of the things we think are important, like the freedom to make decisions about reproductive rights," says Roselyn O'Connell, a Republican political activist from Scottsdale. "And whether we're Republican or Democratic, Greens or whatever, we're women first."

Napolitano's views are fairly centrist: She's pro-choice and for the death penalty; in recent months she has talked about a slow pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq. She champions issues that are hard to resist: improved protections against child abuse and sexual predators, pay raises for teachers, continued funding for the arts. Yet the right-leaning Arizona legislature has fought her tooth and nail. "You start off wanting to do everything through cooperation, but I'm not a potted plant," she says with a combative grin. "There was a lot of testing going on -- and not just because I'm a woman and a Democrat. I was an unknown quantity."

No longer. At 149 vetoes and counting, Napolitano has deep-sixed more bills than any other governor in Arizona history. (Her favorite veto was for a bill that would have made it legal to bring a loaded gun into a bar. When opponents complained that bullets and beer don't mix, backers amended the measure -- so it would have prevented gun toters from drinking in bars. "We called it the designated shooter bill," Napolitano says jokingly.)

Yet Arizona is no longer easy to stereotype. Recent transplants from both coasts are bringing increasingly moderate views. Rather than red or blue, Arizona is turning purple, making it a swing state that's largely up for grabs. That translates into clout for Napolitano. Rated by *Time* magazine as one of the nation's top five governors, she was the first woman to lead the National Governors Association. In addition to becoming the Democratic Party's go-to person on immigration, she is now a leading party spokeswoman on climate change and education.

Because Arizona puts a two-term limit on its governors, Napolitano will vacate her seat in two years. Already she has been mentioned as a possible presidential running mate in 2008, as the next U.S. attorney general or, most often, as a U.S. senator. In March 2007, she formed a federal political action committee for a possible 2010 Senate race for John McCain's seat; recent polls indicated that she'd beat him by double digits.

Napolitano may be in Washington sooner than that. Just before the Nevada and Arizona primaries, after long promising to stay neutral, she threw her support to Barack Obama. A clearly gratified Obama hinted there would be room for Napolitano in his cabinet if he wins: "[She has] the kind of tone and temperament I'd like to see in my administration."

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## The Click Moment

Napolitano wasn't always a political animal or even a particularly outspoken one. Raised (mostly) in Albuquerque, where her father was dean of the University of New Mexico medical school and her mother stayed home with the kids, Napolitano jokes that her childhood resembled the television show *The Wonder Years*. "I even had that bicycle with the banana seat," she says. She attended college in Santa Clara, California, and law school at the University of Virginia, before moving to Phoenix in 1983. "I had a Honda hatchback," she says. "Everything I owned fit inside, and my bicycle was on the back." She clerked for a federal judge, then worked as a commercial lawyer for a well-heeled firm.

And so she might have remained, if not for Anita Hill's electrifying accusation, broadcast on national television in 1991, that she'd been sexually harassed by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. It happened that Napolitano's charismatic mentor at her Phoenix law firm, John Frank, was an expert on

derailing Supreme Court confirmations. When Hill's allies asked Frank for help, Napolitano agreed to join the legal team. "I thought it was amazing that a complete stranger would come forward and show that kind of commitment," Hill recalls. "There were some pretty powerful lawyers in Washington, D.C., who would not touch it. But Janet was absolutely courageous, and she put her career on the line to get involved."

At the hearings, sitting under the hot lights of the television cameras and watching the older, white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee display its tone-deaf obliviousness to sexual harassment, Napolitano, then 33, had an epiphany. "I sat in that committee room, and I looked up at that panel, and I thought, this is crazy," she says. "That was a life-changing moment. I said to myself, you know what? At some point, you might want to get in the game yourself."

The following year, 1992 -- the Year of the Woman -- Napolitano threw herself into Democratic party politics in Arizona. By 1993, she'd made enough of a name for herself in legal and political circles that President Bill Clinton appointed her U.S. attorney for Arizona; at 35, she was one of the youngest U.S. attorneys in the country. In 1998, she decided to run for state attorney general. "I was getting ready to turn 40," Napolitano recalls. "And I thought, do I want to do this another four years or try something else? I didn't want to be 80 and look back and think, I would've, should've, could've run for office."

Napolitano won that election handily and was continuing at her breakneck pace -- white-water rafting in the Grand Canyon, trekking up Mount Kilimanjaro and following Wagner's Ring cycle to Italy -- when a mammogram stopped her in her tracks. At 42, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. "They did a lot of biopsies, and they were all positive," she says. "I didn't have many options. I had a mastectomy." Napolitano rarely talks publicly about her ordeal, but she says it profoundly affected her: "I had great healthcare because I was the AG of Arizona, so they caught it early. If I had not been so fortunate, I would have been in really bad shape. It drove home, personally, the value of early detection and education and intervention." These are lessons she has tried to apply as governor: In the past five years, she has opened a new medical school, recruited 50 percent more sorely needed nurses, and handed seniors one of the nation's first free prescription-drug discount cards.

Napolitano is close to her father, Leonard Napolitano, and happily turns to him whenever she needs a family member to help with a campaign ad or inauguration ceremony. "It humanizes me a little bit," she says candidly. "You know: I have family too." (Napolitano is single. Her mother died when Janet was 35; her older brother, Leonard Jr., is a computer engineer; and her younger sister, Nancy, is an audiologist.) Napolitano's home page as governor includes a gallery of photos from her childhood and college years. It's a quirky, skinned-knee tour of her life that's notable for what is missing: the generic photo of the governor with a glowing spouse and children.

And that raises a silly but inescapable question: Despite her smarts, humor, political savvy and rough charm, can Napolitano win a national election? Being single hasn't been much of an issue in Arizona, though Napolitano's opponents have tried to use "family values" against her. In her 2002 governor's race, Napolitano faced a Republican ex-Congressman who "tried to highlight the fact that he was a family man and she was not," says Stephanie Sklar, former executive director of the Arizona League of Conservation Voters. "That has been a theme, not just in this state but in national elections, and it has helped men with families beat women without families. But he tried that here, and it didn't work."

If family values aren't Napolitano's Achilles' heel, maybe immigration will be. Bommersbach, the columnist, says many Democrats are shell-shocked by Napolitano's willingness to sign the employer sanctions bill. "The whole party is looking at her and saying, 'What the hell are you doing?' This right turn was too much for many of them." But that's changing fast: All of the Democratic presidential frontrunners now support employer sanctions. (Ultimately, all of them ended up voting for the wall too.)

For her part, Napolitano is betting that the controversy over sanctions will fizzle, or that the rest of the country will come to see the issue her way. While in Rome this past fall, celebrating her 50th birthday with friends and attending the opera in Verona, contributions to her PAC hit \$50,000. What will she use

it for? "Fifty is the new 30," the governor says merrily. "I have so much left I want to do."

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