

Charles Kuffner

Speaking today with Marcos Velez, who is a Democratic candidate for Lieutenant Governor in Texas. So Marcos, first of all, thank you for speaking with me today. And let me ask, why are you running for this office?

Marcos Velez

Yes, sir. Hey, thank you for having me. I'm running for Lieutenant Governor because when I came out of high school, it was really easy to get a family sustaining job.

I look at my children now and what's available in the economy. I look at Americans struggling to pay bills that used to be relatively easy for middle class Americans to pay. I'm looking at a declining middle class and I'm watching people's civil liberties and civil rights being eroded away. This is not the Texas that I grew up in.

And I believe that the people in Austin do not have working people priorities at the forefront of their minds. And so I think we need a normal everyday Texan that goes to work every single day, like the system was set up to support advocating for Texans in the Texas Senate.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Tell me a little bit about your background, specifically your political background and what interactions you've had with the Texas legislature and the House or the Senate.

Marcos Velez

Yes, sir. So I'm a labor activist. I'm the Assistant Director for the United Steelworkers, the largest manufacturing union in the United States. I represent workers across every major industry, paper, glass, oil, chemical. We have public sector employees.

So a very wide range of bargaining unit members. I negotiate against multinational corporations for things like higher pay, better health insurance, retirement benefits, all of the things that are important to Texans. It's what we deal with on a daily basis.

From a political standpoint, the union is very active in working on our legislative priorities. And so for years and years and years, we've prioritized legislation to raise the minimum wage. We find friendly either Senators or Reps in the House or in the Senate to move those bills for us.

The problem being those bills continue to die on the vine. They'll make it through either the House or they might make it to committee in the Senate, but they never see the light of day. You know, bills that would increase the supply of affordable housing, bills that would increase the amount of clean energy being used to improve the grid.

We just seem to lack an interest in advancing those bills from the Texas Senate.

Charles Kuffner

Well, I mean, one obvious reason for that is because the Texas Senate is majority Republican and Republicans tend not to be aligned with organized labor. You know, as lieutenant governor, you would preside over the Senate, but you know, you yourself don't introduce bills and you yourself don't have a vote on bills.

So in terms of moving legislation forward, it would still come down to what senators themselves want to do. So given that and given that, you know, what realistically do you think you can accomplish as the person who presides over the Senate? And you would have some other powers like committee assignments and some other things. But I mean, like I said, you yourself can't make a bill pass as the lieutenant governor.

So what realistically, what are your realistic goals for what you would like to accomplish given that?

Marcos Velez

Yeah. So look, while the lieutenant governor only votes in the event of a tie, those committee assignments are very important, but also the lieutenant governor controls the budget. And so I think when we look at what's been going on in the Texas Senate for far too long, there's been very little oversight and no pressure on the senators that work in the Texas Senate.

Look, the things that I'm talking about are very popular with Texans, but they're not hearing about the opposition to it. It's not being presented in a way that's transparent to your everyday voters. So one, I think by increasing transparency, when we're trying to move a bill to raise the minimum wage, when Republicans try to push propaganda that it's going to hurt business or that it's going to hurt Texans, we have to have a competing message that's easy to understand and that's easy to access for the people of Texas.

And so one, I think improving on the way communication occurs, but two, ensuring that these backdoor deals that are stopping progress, you know, they stop. I think that's a big change. I think having someone that makes it clear to Republicans that, look, we can discuss things that are important to them, but if they're not good for working people, look, gumming up the works is what organized labor has done since the of time and we've done it very successfully. We're not moving their issues if our issues do not move.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. I mean, you know, you've hit on a recurring theme around Democratic politics, which is communications, both in terms of infrastructure, but also messaging.

I mean, you know, as I, as I said, Republicans traditionally are not favorable or amenable to, you know, labor issues, but that hasn't stopped some, you know, labor organizations, labor groups from, you know, supporting Donald Trump in 2024 or, you know, not being as supportive of Democrats as they have been in the past. There's a variety of reasons for that, including, you know, some class issues. So, you know, you're on the front lines of this, you know, can you be more specific about, you know, the messaging part of this? What, what is it that, you know, is working and not working in terms of conveying a positive message towards people who should be amenable to what democratic politicians have to offer?

Marcos Velez

Yeah. So I think there's two parts to a message. There's the message and there's the credibility that comes with it. I don't know that I would blame democratic voters for drifting away from the Democratic party when we're going to be completely honest.

All we've seen over the last 30 years is wages stay stagnant. We've seen jobs shipped overseas. We've seen our schools defunded. We've seen our communities attacked. We've seen people pushed out of their homes. We've seen costs soar out of control.

But Democrats who mostly are millionaires and claim to be blue collar people, they're doing just fine. The Democratic politicians are not suffering. It's the people in the community. And so they can say what they want to say, but when your actions do not match your words, then you lose credibility. You lose authenticity. I think we lost the by the people part of government in the Democratic party.

It's an elite social group. And most blue collar workers, most middle-class Americans are having a really hard time identifying with the Democratic party. Now I say all that, not to say that the Republican party is a party that's easy to identify with.

I mean, definitely not, but they have us beat on the messaging game. We've gotten so far away from working people issues in the Democratic party that we really don't even talk about them anymore. Campaign time, they'll talk about, yes, we need to raise the minimum wage.

But if you ask a lot of them, they'll talk about how they introduced a bill and had zero success moving it. And so you have these competing conversations that are going on. On one hand, they say they want to do all these things for working people. And then on the other hand, they say, give us a whole bunch of money and keep reelecting us. We're going to do differently than we've done in the last 30 years.

What I'm saying is I have spent my career advocating for working class people and winning. I've spent my career fighting in contentious situations. You don't go up against the largest multinational corporations in the world and win and just chalk it off like it was an easy win. The reality that comes through building power, that comes through messaging, and that comes through talking to people and making sure they understand what's going on behind the scenes.

If you go in and you tell an employer that you need cuts to healthcare costs and they say no, then you have to go to the people and you have to say, look, this company's EBITDA is up year after year. This proposal we have is not going to hurt jobs. And we need all of you guys to ring the phone off the hook at the plant until they move.

And it's through solidarity building actions like that, not operating behind closed doors. I think the messaging piece has to change because Democrats have a lot to say, but they don't have a lot to show for it. We have to start producing.

If you go in and you actually accomplish something, it makes it a lot easier to rally people behind you.

Charles Kuffner

Well, again, the challenge here is that, you know, in the absence of a majority, it's hard to move anything. You know, I would argue, and I'm sure that the Republicans would argue, that they have been very successful at moving the issues that they have been elected on, because they have the numbers. They have the majority. They have the governorship, the lieutenant governorship. You know, they've accomplished what they've been able to set out for because they have the numbers.

So, you know, I mean, I kind of see that as part of the messaging problem. You know, it is unrealistic to expect things that you want to get done if the government doesn't represent you. And I feel like sometimes that gets lost in there.

Is that, you know, do we need to spend more time talking to people about how this actually works and why and connect that to why their vote matters?

Marcos Velez

I think one thing we do really well in labor is instead of talking about candidates, we talk about issues. And what we find time after time is the Republican party's issues are very unpopular with voters. Democrats don't talk about issues.

They talk about Republicans. And so I do agree with you. The messaging has to change in that facet.

We have to make sure that when we talk about the minimum wage, we talk about it as a working Texan issue and not as a Republican or Democrat issue. I think when we talk about defunding schools, we have to talk about the factual impacts to our communities. When we talk about school vouchers, we have to talk about the fact that 60 percent of Texas doesn't have a single private school and only five percent of Texans at best will see any benefit from the vouchers.

When we talk about issues in those terms, instead of hiding behind, you know, complicated political talk, I think it's very easy to bring people to the light. And I think it's also very easy to show them that they've been voting against their best interest. Okay.

Charles Kuffner

Let's go back to the more practical side of things for a moment, because, as I said, the main power of the lieutenant governor is in presiding over the Senate from, you know, from committee appointments, you know, but also things like what legislation advances and, you know, he does have some power on some statewide commission, such as the Legislative Redistricting Commission or the Legislative Redistricting Board, I mean. So, you know, it's also a case that, you know, the lieutenant governor sort of sets the tone for the Senate in terms of, you know, I mean, in the same way that the governor can put out a list of priority legislation, so can the lieutenant governor. And those things get to be voted on first on that side of the aisle.

So, you know, after 30 years of Republican control, there's any number of things that we can point to and say, that's what's wrong with the Senate. You know, what would you say are like the top two or three things that you would do differently as lieutenant governor than Dan Patrick and, you know, the others before him? Sure. So, look, my campaign is funded by working people. I do not take PAC money from

corporate entities. One of the biggest issues that we have with the lieutenant governor's office is the money in politics. And that could be a whole interview in and of itself.

But my priorities are going to be priorities that benefit working class Texans, because I am one. So when you start looking at what's currently being prioritized, we're prioritizing these fringe social issues that really just divide people. I plan to prioritize issues that bring people together.

We need to prioritize raising the state minimum wage. We need to prioritize fully funding public schools, teacher salaries, teacher pensions. We need to prioritize the funding of bringing down the cost of housing.

And so we could do that through a multitude of different plans. But again, we have to bring down the cost of housing. We have to bring down the cost of groceries and everyday essentials for Texans.

We have to make sure that we have a power grid that people can depend on. When Republicans are talking about the bills that they've passed, when Democrats talk about the bills they've passed, Americans are worried about the bills that they cannot pay.

We have to make sure that people can afford to live in their homes. We have to focus on bringing new revenue streams into the state so that we're not so reliant on property taxes. But we also have to make sure that we can fund education. And so, look, these are all priorities that have been long pushed aside by the Republican Party.

And those are the things that I intend to focus on.

Charles Kuffner

When you talk about bringing new revenue streams in, the first word that's going to come to people's mind is gambling. Dan Patrick has very vocally opposed any form of expanded gambling in the state of Texas. Casinos, horse racing was the thing for a while. Now it's sports betting.

In order to do any kind of expansion of gambling in the state of Texas, it would require a constitutional amendment, two-thirds support in each chamber. What is your position on gambling or expanded gambling in the state of Texas?

Marcos Velez

I'm a strong supporter, and here's why. If your religious beliefs tell you that gambling is a sin, there are plenty of sins in just about every religious book. Don't do it. The reality is it's a sin and it's a shame that Texans can't afford their property taxes. We need to expand legalized gambling in the state. We need to direct that revenue to fund public education.

The gambling is already occurring. There isn't a single state that borders Texas, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, that doesn't allow legalized gambling. That money is just leaving the state of Texas. People are gambling. They're just driving a couple hours to do it. If they could do it within the borders of our state, if we could tax it, that'd be a huge revenue stream that we could direct to benefit the population instead of watching it go to other states.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, another revenue enhancer that has been in the news and certainly on Dan Patrick's mind lately is everything related to THC, cannabis, and CBD, all of that. As things stand right now, I mean, marijuana is strictly illegal in Texas. We have a limited medical marijuana or medical CBD industry.

THC products were not banned in the last legislative session. That was an argument that never quite got resolved, but Greg Abbott issued some executive orders that would put some new restrictions on it and more enforcement on it. Where do you stand on all this? What would you advocate for as lieutenant governor with regards to THC, cannabis, marijuana, and so on?

Marcos Velez

Look, I support legalizing marijuana in the state of Texas. I support dedicating the tax revenue directly to public education. If adults are already buying it, Texas should regulate it and use the revenue to fund our schools. I also support retroactively clearing low-level marijuana convictions so that people are not permanently punished for conduct that's no longer illegal.

People are purchasing marijuana. Now, I know it's not everybody's cup of tea, but the reality is it's a revenue stream, and there are tons of studies that have been done. We have the capacity now to test for impairment. There's no reason that it shouldn't be legal.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. So to be clear here, are you talking about a full legalization like Colorado and Colorado style or more like a decriminalization where it's not necessarily endorsed, but you won't get busted for it? You see the distinction I'm making? Which side of that are you on?

Marcos Velez

Full legalization. And I say that as someone that a lot of people laugh when I say this, I have never smoked marijuana in my life. It's not something for me. But again, are we going to be big government or small government? Because depending on which political party you align with, it's funny how people drift back and forth on those issues.

Look, grown adults decide that they want to partake in the consumption of marijuana. Who are we to stop them? Let's tax it, let's regulate it, and let's use the revenue to benefit our schools.

Charles Kuffner

We are seeing some interesting times at Texas' public universities in terms of their governance and also in terms of what they're allowed to teach now.

I almost can't even wrap my mind around the whole Plato controversy at Texas A&M. I'm old enough to remember when the complaint was that we weren't teaching Western civilization anymore, and now we can't teach Plato. Some of this is the result of laws. Some of it is the result of more things that the Trump administration is doing. Some of it is the result of just the effect of Greg Abbott's appointees onto the

various boards at Texas universities. I guess my question to you is, how would you approach this? What do you see as the future of Texas' universities, and what would you advocate for to help them be what they can and should be?

Marcos Velez

First of all, history is uncomfortable, and I think it should be uncomfortable. There are things in our past that we have no right to be proud of, but having to acknowledge them keeps us from repeating them. I fully support the right of professors to teach as they see fit. They need the freedom to be able to educate their students without fear of reprisal.

The state's intervention in public education and in higher education, in my opinion, is a scary Orwellian. You feel like you're in George Orwell's 1984. The government should not be controlling what we're teaching our children.

Now, we should have standards, but standards and what can be discussed are two completely different things.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. As I said, all the things we've talked about here really do come down to which party has a majority in what legislative chambers. Everything we would like to do will be easier with Democrats holding majorities. That's both true in Texas and in Congress, where just having at least one chamber in Democratic control would at least bring some accountability or at least some counterbalance to whatever crazy stuff the president is doing. That's going to require getting a lot of Democrats elected.

It's going to require unseating some Republicans along the way. What will you do as a candidate and as a person to help get Democrats elected up and down the ballot in Texas?

Marcos Velez

I think the best thing that I can do as a candidate is spread a genuine, authentic message, not political talk, not broken promises. The work that I've done within labor is the same work that I intend to do in government.

There are things that I've already accomplished. I already work with people all across the political spectrum. I cooperate, but I don't capitulate. I stand firm in my convictions. For me, going out and talking to people about other candidates that I believe are strong advocates of labor, you have Jose Loya running for land commissioner. He's a union man. Taylor Rehmet up in Dallas, union man. A lot of really good, blue-collar, hardworking people that are on the ballot this time. I think Texans really have an opportunity to elect normal, everyday people.

Beyond that, sharing resources, campaigning on behalf of other candidates, door-knocking, inspiring people that are willing to vote for me to actually go out and vote straight down the ballot. If not straight down the ballot, as far down the ballot as you can for Democratic candidates. I think working together,

because one thing I will tell you as a person running on the Democratic ticket, there's not a whole lot of collaboration.

I think everybody wants to be friends when you're doing well, but the reality is the Democratic Party operates in a bunch of silos. If you're not an insider and you don't have a ton of money, very hard to break into that world. I want to make that world easier for entry for good candidates.

Charles Kuffner

We also have to talk about money in terms of campaign resources. The Republicans have a lot of it. Greg Abbott has \$100 million.

Nobody likes talking about raising money. I've never met a candidate who likes making calls to donors, the so-called dialing for dollars stuff. But the fact of the matter is you need a certain level of resources just to be able to get your message out.

You want to be able to run ads. You want to be able to send mail. You want to have field operations. Texas is a big state, a lot of media markets. It really does cost a couple million dollars just to have something resembling the bare bones of a statewide campaign. What's your thoughts on that? What's your plan for that?

Marcos Velez

Look, I have a very aggressive fundraising strategy. Obviously, being a candidate supported by the people, a lot of small dollar donations, but also I have a huge amount of support. I would venture as far to say unprecedented support from organized labor. If it wasn't for organized labor, this campaign wouldn't be functioning.

But I am closing the gap between me and my next closest fundraising candidate in this race on the Democratic ticket. I'll have surpassed them here shortly. And that's only having launched my campaign less than a month ago.

We're doing really well fundraising, working with professional fundraisers, because as ugly as it sounds, that's the reality of this business. But after I am elected, I do intend to push for reform.

We need term limits. We need to get big money out of politics. You should never, ever have to compete against \$100 million in a race that should be for the people by the people. Right now, it's for the big investors by the big investors, and that's just wrong.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Well, in order to get to November, you have to get through March. As you say, you have two opponents in the primary for the nomination for Lieutenant Governor. So when people go to vote in March for the Democratic nominee for Lieutenant Governor, why should they vote for you and not one of your opponents?

Marcos Velez

Sure. Look, nothing against my opponents, but I think this race is about looking at two things. One, who's actually going to go and do the work and not make excuses? Again, I do the work every single day. This is nothing different from what I do on a daily basis for union employees. I just plan to do it for all Texas employees. But two, we also have to look at who can beat Dan Patrick.

The Democratic Party is not going to beat Dan Patrick with a cookie cutter candidate that they keep throwing at us. We've tried it in presidential elections. We've tried it in Senate elections. People are sick and tired of politicians. They're not going to get off their couch and go vote for someone that looks just like the last candidate they voted for.

I do believe people feel motivated to get up and go vote for their neighbor, for someone that's just like them, for someone that understands what it means when they say they've had to worry about how they were going to pay their bills or how they were going to get to work.

It's the shared experiences that I have with everyday Texans that I think will motivate them to get off the couch and go vote for me. Because again, I believe that I have more in common with just about every single Texan in the state than Dan Patrick or any other candidate on this ticket.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Marcos Velez, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Marcos Velez

Thank you.