

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Justin Early, who is a Democratic candidate for Congress in Congressional District 31. Justin, thank you for speaking with me today. Let me start by asking, why are you running for this office?

Justin Early

Thank you for having me here with you today, Mr. Koeffner.

You know, I'm running for this office, the why is really about my neighbors, my family, and my friends, the people who live here. I believe in true representative government. But what spurred this really is what drove the why.

You know, I had my dark funk after the 2024 election. I have a strong faith in humanity. I didn't think that Donald Trump would be elected again.

But then it happened. And so then when I pulled myself out of my little funk, I said something has to happen, you know, and then the DOGE cuts came. And I'm prior military, I served in the army.

My parents were both in the army as well. We come from a very working class family. And the DOGE cuts, what they were targeting was the things specifically that helped my family get from a lower economic status to a higher one, especially, you know, with the military and the government jobs, because a lot of my family work government jobs.

And so 80% of my parents income come from federal government from the federal government, such as their retirements and their VA benefits. And so I stated that, hey, look, if nobody's going to fight for these things and stand up for us, somebody has to. I wanted to give a choice to the voters of District 31 to state, hey, it's up to the voters what they want to choose.

But I want to give you a choice of somebody who's a fighter for them, and who's going to stand up for their rights.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Tell me a little bit about your background. I know you served in the army, you worked in the Defense Intelligence Agency, you work for Dell now. Tell me a little bit about your professional background and your political background.

Justin Early

Yes, sir. So political background, we'll start there. You know, I really saw myself in the outskirts, I wanted to support a lot of different candidates. I've been on three different congressional campaigns.

This is my first time being the candidate themselves. I like to joke that the first campaign I was on, we had a great cam or great candidate, a horrible campaign. And the second one, we had a great camp great camp, well, I'm sorry, a great campaign and a horrible candidate.

And so I figured if I can combine both of those together, maybe I can have a great campaign and be a great candidate. And so did a lot of work in around Tarrant County, when I lived up there, Parker County as well, I was a delegate for the Obama administration in 2008. And a lot of work with Wendy Davis and Beto O'Rourke, really just trying to support as much as I can to get Democrats up and down the ticket here in Texas.

Specifically, professionally, I'm a cybersecurity architect. So I do today. So I've done anything from sales to, you know, fingers on keyboard doing the actual work to program things and to set things up.

And I understand how systems work. And I understand how to communicate to people those things. One of my superpowers at work is the ability to take complex tasks and explain them to everyday people, especially the executives and leaders who'd understand the importance of these things.

And it's hard to sometimes get not get lost in the weeds. You have to have the ability to communicate these complex things in order for people can understand them, digest them to make accurate and, you know, great decisions based off the information. So I want to take all those blessings and everything that I've had and taught myself and worked with throughout my life and say, how do we do this for real representation here in Texas 31?

And the incumbent has been there for 24 years. He's one of the longest sitting, you know, representatives here in Texas. And so while we see a sea of change and things happening, I wanted to give that choice, that ability to say, hey, which direction do we want to go in? Do we want to continue on the same path or do we want to do something new? And so I took all the things that I had my professional background, all the experience I've taken with other congressional campaigns and said, hey, let's go and throw a hat in the ring and see what we can do. Okay.

Charles Kuffner

Well, as it happens, cybersecurity is my profession as well. So I wanted to ask you a little bit about that because, you know, it does pertain to what is going on with our national government and our president, like among the DOGE cuts. And I think this was more a function of President Trump's vengeance about things that were reported on following the 2020 election is, you know, the CISA agency, which oversees cybersecurity in the U.S. has basically been dismantled.

You know, which, you know, CISA did a lot of work with local and state governments with businesses because, you know, cybersecurity threats are all over. They come from, they're global. They're often from non-state actors. It has disrupted business. It has disrupted government. So I'd like to hear what would you do as a member of Congress to, you know, I don't know, make cybersecurity a priority again in the government? What are your thoughts on that?

Justin Early

So, yeah, we could probably talk forever on that one. I'm glad to hear somebody who understands, you know, I do both cybersecurity and information security, and some people don't understand the between the two. So cybersecurity specifically, I want to talk about the attackers who are trying to do things and disrupt the way of life that we have today. And CISA was amazing, is, I still believe their mission is great, but I never felt like it was as strong as it should be or could be.

I'm sure if you've been in the industry, you know, that people love to say they want to share TTPs, you know, tactics, you know, and procedures. Thank you. Of what the attackers are doing, but then nobody really wants to tell people what actually happened to them, because then you're also tipping your hand of what, you know, systems you have in place, your weaknesses. And so it's kind of that catch 22. I do believe that we need to have stronger, you know, inner workings between business, government, and, you know, the private sector in order to say, hey, here's what's happening. Here's what's attacking our country, our entities, and here's how we can prevent it as a whole.

One of my favorite stories I like to tell people whenever they want to get into cybersecurity is, I used to work for BNSF Railway, and to disrupt the railway is something that people, attackers, think would

be a great thing to do. A lot of commerce goes through the railway. And so my job was to manage the secure operations center.

And one time we had an attack, it was coming from a church. And I knew the church wasn't attacking us, right? I knew another actor had gotten to the church, got their systems, and then were attacking us through that way. And if you went to the church directly and said, hey, look, somebody's taking over your machine and they're attacking us, they wouldn't understand how important that is, because that is the weak link across the entire U.S. And because we understand that people go to church, we as an entity, you know, as an organization, allow people to visit these church websites.

But the amount of data that was passing back and forth, things that were happening, that was actually being used by another actor. I'm not gonna say who it was, but another actor to basically break up and disrupt the railroad. And so understanding whenever those things happen today, you can contact the FBI and let them know that's happening.

But then it's kind of like, thanks for collecting us, thanks for letting us know. The feedback loop is not there. So one of the things I want to really strengthen is that feedback loop.

I want private industry, government as well to work together on understanding what happens when something gets attacked. Second to that is understanding our data privacy laws and data security laws, because we have very weak and lax data security here in this country. A lot of entities make a lot of money based on understanding and collecting our data.

But then where does that data go? How is it being used? And what happens when they are attacked with that data? What goes with that? So when we talk back to the DOGE cuts and what Elon Musk was doing when he got into the federal government, where is that data now? What has been done with it? What was it being used with? And so we need to have real strong data privacy laws as well, because once somebody does attack your system and they get inside, their goal is the data. And what they do with that data, they can do a million different things of more than that. So I want to make sure that we have strong data privacy laws as well.

Charles Kuffner

I'm glad you brought that up. And I've got two related questions before I move on to other topics, but artificial intelligence is both a big part of our economy now. It's a big trend. It's a big push. Trump administration is four square behind them. But of course, that brings emerging threats as well.

I mean, we are now seeing, for example, people using vibe coding methods to create agents for themselves that have access to all their stuff. And it's already being flagged as a major vulnerability. Plus, of course, people are very concerned with who is liable for AI when it does something wrong.

Look at, for example, all the horrible stuff Grok AI and XAI were doing. Who owns this stuff? What is it going to mean for the job future? So as a member of Congress, what's your view on the state of AI? And what would you work towards in the world of regulation or information? What would you want to do about AI as a member of Congress?

Justin Early

Yeah, great question. It's very important. It's actually one of my three pillars that I actually do. This is the second pillar, which is responsible technology, specifically around automation and AI. And so first and foremost, I want to tell people, I want people to understand that we're not against innovation.

We're talking about regulating AI and regulating automation. I'm not against innovation. We can absolutely provide for innovation while also protecting for people and protecting people's livelihoods.

And that goes from their jobs to their environment to their data that's actually being utilized. So let's dial it back a little bit and state that in order to build these models that they're trying to build, they're gobbling atrocious amounts of data around things and people. Who is allowing that? Is it being used? If it's something illegal that they've stolen and done, who's responsible for that? That's where we really need to focus on, to me, is the responsibility of where they're at and what they're doing with the data they get.

When people talk about AI, they want to talk about things like Terminator or they want to talk about the science fiction of it. And while I understand there's an allure to that, we're anthropomorphizing something that's not truly there. And so while we're in love with the thought it could be this wonderful intelligence, it's not.

These are extreme programs that eat up extreme amounts of data that use an extreme amount of power in order to one day get to the state that they want it to be. To get there, they're plowing through every, you know, like I said, data privacy rules, their environmental laws. They're doing everything they can to build these systems to do so.

So when we talk about the dangers of AI, we have to absolutely talk about what you state in your question, which is who is responsible when things go wrong? Because when we talk about what the responsibility is, then we start talking about policies around that and making sure that we can say, hey, if you are a child and you are 13 years old and you're utilizing a system, is that data yours? Is that data allowed to be for that system? And then what can that data be used to train in later on? Secondly, if you are an author or you, you know, you create this video here, do we own this video? And if we're recording over Zoom right now, Zoom has an AI. Does Zoom have the ability to take our words here and actually utilize it, train their models and go further with that? So the responsibility is the number one thing. And right now it's being hidden behind the mask of lack of innovation.

I don't believe it's a lack of innovation. I believe it's a focus on responsibility. So number one, we need to make sure we have responsibility for the output and outcomes that they're doing. We need to have safety measures on the models that are being built because there are a lot of models that are very favorable to certain demographics of people. They're anti-democrats to other people, simply because we're human beings creating systems and those systems reflect the best and the worst of us. If we have a small subset of people building these models, then we're going to have a small subset of the people who are actually benefiting from these models.

And finally, the environment, right? The race to build these data centers in order to have these intelligent systems, neural networks, all the things that they're trying to build at. We don't have enough power in the United States. We don't have the power in the world today to do what they think is going to need to happen to do that.

So then are they going to race to build that out and then crash on the way there? Or are they going to get as far as they can? And I think with government regulation and an understanding of technology with the capitalism or the commerce of that, we can actually build a system that works for people and not for billionaires. Because right now, those with the technology, those who own these companies are going to get the most out of them as they can. And we are the ones who are not going to be able to benefit from it if we allow this to continue on.

I guess one final small point is the federal government did say that states cannot do regulation on AI. Donald Trump said that. I think that is completely wrong.

We have 50 labs in the United States that actually can test out regulation, but the federal government should have the floor, not the ceiling, because then that way we can build up from there and say, hey, look, Colorado does a great job or Maine does a great job. Then we can adopt those later on into the federal government for the federal standard of AI.

Charles Kuffner

And one more technology topic that's very relevant these days is surveillance, which is being used to a large degree by Homeland Security and ICE, both for all of the atrocities they're committing with immigrants or people they suspect are immigrants, but they're also being used to monitor and crack down on the people who are observing, watching the watchers, observing ICE and attempting to hold them accountable.

Again, what would you do as a member of Congress to do something about this? I don't want to direct you in any way, so tell me what you think.

Justin Early

Well, I'm already there, and this is something I speak about all the time. This is part of that responsible technology.

Part of that, so the three pillars, since I've mentioned them a little bit, is affordability, responsible technology, and defending our democracy. And so this question leads to the last two, responsible technology and defending our democracy, because we need to have accountability for the agencies that are utilizing this stuff. Surveillance capitalism is capitalism that makes money because we have governments or government entities who are utilizing that and doing those and spending money on those things.

That is against our Fourth Amendment, illegal search and seizure. You can use technology to find people and do something if you have a warrant and you're specifically targeting that individual themselves. Whenever you go get cell phone records, you have to know exactly whose phone it is, what phone it's on, and the carrier.

You have to go specifically to that person. The way surveillance capitalism works is you download an app on your phone, and that app may be Candy Crush or whatever it may be. So then they'll say, hey, I need all Candy Crush data in this area here.

That's a dragnet, and they're pulling all these people in to figure out who they can target in order to do those actions, whether it be for ICE, whether it be for the FBI, whomever it may be. So for my first stances, deny agencies the ability to buy this data in bulk. If they're buying those things, it needs to be specifically adhering to Fourth Amendment, and they cannot use, like ICE is doing today, a memorandum from ICE to say they can get this data.

That should not be done. Second to this point is surveillance capitalism itself. I would love to work at de-incentivizing companies who do these things.

They get incentivized by the government purchasing this data, but then they're also trying to invent new ways to sell this data. I believe if we have the same fervor around the Fourth Amendment that we do around the Second Amendment, we can actually make a better situation for us all and not be subject to surveillance capitalism. The third and final point is any companies, any organization, any

government entity or government agency that's utilizing this as a congressperson, you have the power of the purse.

You can have stipulations in there whenever they break. You can have \$100 million for this agency. However, it cannot be used against surveillance capitalism or any of that nature.

We need to build those guardrails in there and then pull that money back. We need to follow through with those things. They are there today, but there's no follow through with it.

Jasmine Crockett specifically had put in, I can't remember what bill she had or House resolution she put together, that was basically against ICE for the surveillance capitalism piece. We need to make stronger teeth and bigger teeth whenever these organizations utilize them.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. We've covered a lot of ground on not just technology, but also accountability. I want to talk a bit more about democracy here. A lot of what we talked about is relevant towards the attack that's been on our democratic institutions in the second Trump term.

As a member of Congress, hopefully you'll be in the majority and maybe even have a Senate to work with and can work towards putting forth legislation or doing investigations that will strengthen and rebuild and revitalize our democratic infrastructure. Talk a bit about what sorts of things you would want to do as a member of Congress along those lines.

Justin Early

Absolutely. Number one is, I had a great conversation this weekend with a group and they asked the question, impeach or impede? The reason why I'm bringing this up is because we have to work towards getting to the big answer. People like to say, oh, we need to impeach or we need to do these big things, but you have to have an investigation first. First and foremost, we would call for investigations specifically in and around what has gone on, the 2024 election, the DOGE data information that's been going on, anything that has the semblance of pulling back away from our democracy today.

We have supposed to have three equal branches of government. The Congress today has been yielding some of that power to the executive branch, and so we need to make sure that we use the power of the purse to dial that back.

The second piece to that is moving forward with getting a coalition together, because we can't bring around a strengthened democracy if we don't bring a coalition together to do it. Having the majority is great, but then we have to make sure we're aligned and we're moving forward with it to have not only the members of the House there, but also members of the Senate there in order to move forward with strengthened democracy.

The final piece to this, I'll say, is our democracy is now 250 years old, and we have been changing and doing things as well, but other countries who have stronger democracies than our do have revamped some of the things and they're younger than that. Germany's gone through a couple of constitutions.

I'm not saying we need to go through the Constitution and redo it, but we need to make sure that we're putting in additional guardrails and making it easier for us to amend the Constitution, because while someone had said the framers had seen a Donald Trump coming, he still came, and he's still here, and he's still utilizing the presidency in order to become a dictator or authoritarian. So we need

to make sure we have guardrails against that, and in order to do that, I believe the problems with democracy can be fixed with more democracy. So people talk about expanding the courts.

You know, if you expanded the courts, yes, it could be a tit-for-tat, but at the same time, you would have it so there's only nine justices hearing your case at one time. So because of those nine justices would be amongst, you know, let's say 15 or 18, you're not getting the same people that you can adhere to or you can, you know, converse with all the time. It kind of shakes up the process there.

Second to that same point is the House. We've locked the number of the House members at, you know, 435, 438, since 1929, I believe, around that time. I think we adjusted once or twice, but it's been locked at that number for a while.

That means each representative is representing more and more people each census. If we were to keep track with the House as we do with the Supreme Court, more representatives, then we would have more people and Congress look more like, you know, the United States versus one person representing 766,000. We can add 150 members in order to have everybody represent 500,000 people. So that way we're making it more democratic. You have more access to your representative.

I guess the third point to the last point would be to tackle the Senate as well.

The Senate has what's appropriated. Germany, they have a Senate as well, but they don't have just two people per area. If there's more population, then you can add additional senators in order that way you can divide that power out.

While I think that third one is a little bit harder to do, I do think those are the three things to do, and that's expanding our democracy by providing more people a seat at the table.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. We've talked a lot about things that we need to do. Let me give you some space to talk about something you would like to do as a member of Congress, something that, you know, isn't necessarily a response to things being on fire, but something where, you know, what are one or two things you would like to do as a member of Congress just to make things better?

Justin Early

Yeah. Great question. And, you know, I have this vision of a center of excellence for women's health in Texas. I would love to be able to put that together here because while we have some laws in the state of Texas that are very anti-woman, I believe we can do a lot if we actually build a women's center of excellence around health care. That being said, it would center around, you know, all health care, not just maternal care, not just, you know, I believe that the whole woman is not being looked at whenever something happens. A lot of times on the trail, I hear a lot of people talking about, you know, health care, and I hear women's stories that are like they went through to the doctor four or five, six, seven times to finally find out in the end it was something else.

But every story I hear is every first attack or that they may want to, you know, get to handle for that women's health care is, you know, something that all human beings have. Men or women. And not until we get to the fifth or sixth time, they say, well, let's look at, you know, something specific within your organs or something specific in your life. And so I think if we started looking at the whole woman first and building a women's center of excellence here in Texas, I think it would go a long way.

Also, I would love to see more, you know, innovation for, you know, underprivileged groups or, you know, minorities who are here. I had the opportunity to join different science clubs and things as a

kid, but people in my district today, I mean, I was 20 some years ago when I did these things, don't have access to an opportunity to have more science-based things to make them inquisitive about what's going on.

So in my office, what I want to do is build an innovation coalition of basically high school students in the area to submit ideas and where they would like to see government be and how it could actually do for them or work for them. And so while that's not something that's on fire and we need to take care of right away, I would love to involve more young people, more people of color to have a seat at the table in the government.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. All the things we've talked about would be a lot easier to do if Democrats have majorities in the House, certainly, and in the Senate, and eventually get the presidency back. But we're focusing on this election and this House and what's going, and you know, our state government as well. What will you do as a candidate and as a person to help get Democrats elected up and down the ballot in Texas in 2026?

Justin Early

Great question. Number one is it takes a partnership. You know, any platform that's given to me such as this here, any other places I'm out speaking, it's a partnership between, you know, everybody at the top of the ticket to the bottom of the ticket. We need to make sure Democrats are elected here in the state.

We've had a Republican majority in the state for 30 plus years. And the question really should be asked, are we better for that? Does that, and even if we have, you know, all Democrats across, you know, they got the House, the Senate, and the presidency, does that make for the best system of America? I believe strongly that we should have build more coalitions and have more coalition governments. But before we get there, we need to work together to do that.

You know, we're working with other people in the area and there's a lot of Democratic infighting. And I believe that that's not helpful to the party. I think if we focus on what really matters, like these kitchen table issues, we can also bring along those independents, those Republicans, those people who just don't vote, because that's the number one voting block is the ones who don't vote.

I think if we can talk specifically to those issues, we can do that. And that builds that coalition. They were aligned on the things that actually matter.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Well, in order to get to November, you first have to get through March. You do have an opponent in this primary when people go to vote to name the Democratic nominee for Congressional District 31. Why should people vote for you and not for your opponent?

Justin Early

Another great question. You know, I really challenge people. I say, hey, look both of us up, right? This is about choice. Democracy, having a contested primary, shows a strong democracy. At the same time, this is also not like business as usual. This is not politics as usual.

And so while I'm not a career politician, I am a soldier. I have taken an oath to defend my country. This is my way of doing service back.

I want people to understand that I am there for them. I communicate with them. And not only because I can sit in a Democratic room and get people on my side, but I can communicate with people of all walks of life.

I communicate with people of all backgrounds because I've lived those experiences. I've been paycheck to paycheck. I've been in a situation where one of us, the two of my wife and I lost a paycheck and we had to figure out how we're going to pay the rent and put food on the table for our seven children.

And so I feel like that really connects and resonates with people because this is not business as usual. This is the time to inspire. This is the time to motivate. And this is the time to mobilize. And that's what I'm trying to do here. All right.

Charles Kuffner

Justin Early, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Justin Early

Thank you, sir. Appreciate talking with you as well.