

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 2 Episode 8: Julián Castro
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Abby Disney: Um, record, how do I, how do I, where's the thing to make me record on zoom? Oh! Here comes Julian. How are you?

Julian Castro: Does it still sound distant? Or...

Abby Disney: Yeah, you sound far away.

Julian Castro: Yeah, I think it's something with these headphones. Let me check. Okay. I found some wired ones.

Abby Disney: Oh, so much better.

Julian Castro: Okay.

Abby Disney: I'm Abigail Disney, welcome to All Ears, my Podcast where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I'm talking to good trouble makers. Artists, activists, politicians and others who aren't afraid to shake up the status quo. We'll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it's so important in hard times to think big. You can't think about solutions without being a little optimistic, and man oh man I think we need some optimism right now.

A lot of big questions need answering these days. Like, do norms matter anymore after the last four years of norm shattering on the part of our president? What's a Democrat? What's a Republican? And will we ever be able to work together again? So, all of this is to say it's a good time to talk about where we are, what just happened, and where we might go from here.

And today, I think we have just the guy who can help us talk about all of these things. At age 35, Julian Castro served as the mayor of San Antonio. In 2012 he broke into national prominence when he delivered the keynote address at the 2012 Democratic National Convention. And then he served as the youngest member of Barack Obama's cabinet at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Last year, he ran a feisty campaign for the democratic nomination for president.

And in September, he launched Our America with Julio on Castro, a podcast that puts a spotlight on vulnerable communities and takes a humanizing and hopeful look at how the American experience can shift dramatically from one person to the next. I highly recommend it. So coming to us from his home in San Antonio is Julian Castro. Welcome, and thank you so much for joining me.

Julian Castro: Thanks a lot. It's great to be with you.

Abby Disney: You said the most beautiful thing in your keynote speech in 2012, and that was that the American dream isn't a sprint or a marathon, but a relay race.

[2012 Democratic National Convention - Julián Castro's Keynote Speech](#)

TRT: 42 seconds

TC in: 15:30

TC out: 16:12

Julian Castro: The American dream is not a sprint. Or even a marathon. But a relay. Our families don't always cross the finish line in the span of one generation. But each generation passes on to the next, the fruits of their labor. My grandmother never owned a house. She cleaned other people's houses so she could afford to rent her own. She saw her daughter become the first in her family to graduate from college.

And my mother fought hard for civil rights. So that instead of a mop, I could hold this microphone.

Julian Castro: What I saw in my family, the story I told that night at the DNC, was that my grandmother, she came here when she was six or seven years old as an orphan. Never finished elementary school, worked as a maid, a cook, and a babysitter. And then never had a bank account, never learned how to drive a car and never owned a home. By conventional measures somebody might say, hey, you know, you didn't achieve the American dream. But what I pointed out was that she got to watch her only child, her daughter graduate from high school and then go on to college. And she got to watch my brother and me graduate from college, go on to law school. That it's a relay that she handed a baton of opportunity based on her hard work to my mom who worked hard and we were able to take that baton of opportunity, my brother and I, and go even further. So that, the American dream doesn't just happen in one generation, that it happens in a family over time.

Abby Disney: I would maybe add a layer to the metaphor because, you know, she didn't just hand the baton to your mother and then to you, she handed you, the tools and the moral consciousness that you know, you don't just build for yourself. You don't just enrich yourself. You also enrich the community you live in. You don't just race off to the finish line alone, right?

Julian Castro: Yeah, no doubt. No doubt.

Abby Disney: So that was the DNC in 2012 and less than 8 years later you ended up running for president yourself. And when you dropped out last December, you endorsed Elizabeth Warren. Why Warren?

Julian Castro: I had an opportunity to work with her when I was HUD secretary, uh, I've been an admirer of hers for years. I thought she had a very strong vision--does have a very strong vision--to ensure that even the most vulnerable communities are able to get a good shot, able to thrive. And that she did the best job, in my opinion in the campaign cycle of articulating that vision and combining it with policy prescriptions, as well as tying it into her own personal story in a compelling way. I was very impressed with her leadership and her candidacy.

Abby Disney: So, the differences between the candidates in some ways was just nuance, but what would you say about Warren's vision specifically? As opposed to Bidens?

Julian Castro: I think that if you look at, you know, the policy platforms of most of the candidates in the democratic primary, you know, there were differences, but we were all moving in the same direction. Right? I mean, for instance, when you talk about student loan debt, you know, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren might say like forgive \$50,000 of student loan debt for all folks who are carrying it. And Joe Biden might say a lesser amount than that and structure a program differently. So it was a matter of degrees but it was also a matter of focus. What I heard coming out of Senator Warren was much more of a focus on the economic inequality that people are experiencing right now.

There is no question, and the data supports that for the last 40 years basically Americans have been working harder and harder, but compared to people at the very, very top, I mean, they're getting further and further behind and, during the last couple of years, we've also seen things like homelessness start to creep back up.

We have seen the minimum wage stay stagnant for 11 years now since it was raised at the beginning of the Obama administration. All of that cries out for, I think, fresh innovative I think progressive policies to change that trajectory that we're on.

Abby Disney: You know, on the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, we're actually behind Russia and behind Brazil, which is kind of shocking but that is how much and dramatically things have changed in the 50 years that we've been watching. And nothing made this more naked than Coronavirus, right? I mean, it was just so revealing, not just about inequality, but also about race. So many things. But it also kind of showed us that government doesn't really work at least in so far as it is a supplier of basic services anymore.

Do you think that's true? Do you feel like the government can't really do its basic job anymore?

Julian Castro: Yeah. Well, I mean, the government has been helmed by incompetent and uncaring political leaders. In this Trump administration, whether you're talking about

Ben Carson, Dr. Ben Carson and my old stomping grounds at HUD, or putting a coal lobbyist in charge of the EPA or, sidelining people like Dr. Fauci that are serious bureaucrats that could help make a bigger difference. So I think that it depends on whose hands the government is in, but also since that late seventies, early eighties time period, when Reaganism really took off, you know, people, a lot of people bought into this idea that the government is never the solution, it's always the problem.

And I completely disagree with that. You know, I believe that if you do government right, and government does have its place, and of course it does have its limits, but if you do government right, it can actually make families more successful. It can help people reach their dreams. It can provide a foundation for a much stronger country. And so we have to invest in it and we have to maintain it.

Just a very quick example of this is public housing. We have about 1.1, 1.2 million units of public housing. And we lose 10,000 units of public housing to disrepair every year. And we have tens of billions of dollars across the country in backlogged maintenance needs, just in the public housing stock we have. And on top of that, we have not actually kept up with the need out there. So, to me what we get out of the government in terms of its effectiveness in part depends on our commitment to actually shaping an effective government.

Abby Disney: What do you think the next secretary is going to find there when he takes the office from Ben Carson after four years?

Julian Castro: Wow. There is going to be so much work to do. Number one, we're in the middle of this pandemic. On top of that, the next HUD secretary should recommit to the mission of the organization. They have lost a tremendous number of employees there at HUD, because I think a lot of folks didn't believe that the leadership actually was committed to the mission. For instance, on fair housing, one of the things I was proud of was that we promulgated a rule called Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing to help ensure that no matter the color of your skin or your background, that when you go out looking for a house or an apartment that, you know, you're treated the same and that, that cities and counties and housing authorities have to come up with a real plan for that, they put that on ice.

They also tried to do a way with our extension of a fair housing rule to protect transgender individuals. Uh, so when it comes to fair housing for equality, you know, the next HUD secretary is going to have to recommit to that.

Abby Disney: I think that's true of every department. It's going to be a tough road back. So, in the primaries, you were pretty vocal with Biden about immigration policy and that he really had it wrong. And I think by implication Obama had it wrong too. You'll have to correct me if I'm wrong about that, but how did they have it wrong?

Julian Castro: Yeah. I mean, what I said was that we should learn the lessons of the past. Look, I mean, I'm super proud of having served in the Obama administration and I'm very proud of President Obama. You know, I think he's been our greatest president in quite a while. At the same time, as President-elect Biden came to say toward the end of the campaign, it took too long to get it right on immigration. And I think by the end of the Obama administration, you had some really good things. You had DACA, you had something called the Family Case Management Program, which was basically an initiative, a pilot program to keep families together. They, you know, were not locked up. They did not go through all of the things that we've seen folks going through these last few years in the Trump administration, they were treated more humanely and that can work. I hope that we can build on that going forward.

Abby Disney: Do you think the border separations were a mobilizer of votes for Biden?

Julian Castro: Well, I think that they hurt Trump with a lot of the Latino community because you know, this of course is not like, like anybody else, right? The Latino community cares about many different issues, healthcare, education, jobs, and housing and so forth. But the issue of immigration also has been kind of a, for many people, a litmus test of, you know, if nothing else, where's your heart, you know, what direction are you going in?

And Donald Trump demonstrated a dark heart in no policy more so than family separation. So I think that it hurt him with a lot of people in the Latino community. Did it help him with some people out there who hold very rigid views, on undocumented immigration? Although a lot of these were people just seeking asylum, which is different.

You know, it may have helped him with some people, but I think it hurt him more than it helped him.

Abby Disney: Are we under any obligation, do you think, to repair some of the damage that we caused when we separated families at the border?

Julian Castro: I think so. I think at different different levels,

Abby Disney: Can I be more specific? Like what kind of damage do you think was caused and what would it take to repair it?

Julian Castro: First of all, the personal damage that was done to children, having been separated from their parents, psychologists have pointed out, very psychologically damaging.

It could affect many of them for the rest of their lives. So, making sure that they get the kind of counseling that they're going to need. There are still more than 600 children who have not been reunited with their parents. I'm hopeful that the task force that President-elect Biden has said he's going to establish to reunite children with parents

will begin immediately and be as effective as it possibly can be and will reunite every single one of those children with their parents. And then there's the damage that has been done in terms of who we are as a country. I mean, this torture was basically done in the name of all of us as Americans. We need to turn away from that cruelty and we need to reform our immigration laws with some common sense and with some compassion and, you know, that's the whole slate of policies, many of which Joe Biden has embraced and has proposed that we do.

Abby Disney: So, what's the right immigration policy? If you could get in there and write the legislation specifically. And I understand the impossibility we're talking about right now, but if you could do such a thing, what would it look like?

Julian Castro: It would, in part like what President-elect Biden has already sketched out. He's uh, he has said for instance, that, you know, there's not going to be another inch of wall that is built, uh, in his administration. I think that that's been a boondoggle that wall, a waste of money. It would look like putting the 11 million undocumented immigrants who are here on a pathway to citizenship, as long as somebody has not committed a serious crime, it would look like giving security, uh, and a pathway to citizenship, to the 800,000 dreamers that we have in our country who were, you know, oftentimes very talented bright, and helping to move our economy forward.

It would include doing away with things like that Muslim travel ban and also something called the Migrant Protection Protocols or MPP, or remain in Mexico, which has subjected people seeking asylum to kidnapping violence on the other side of the border, because now they're forced to wait on the Mexican side of the border.

We've never done that before. That was new and it's turned out very badly for a lot of folks. Think we should undo that. Uh, and also we need to improve the legal immigration system. People often-- look, I understand people often ask, hey, look, you know, why are you talking about undocumented immigration? Why don't people try and come in the legal way?

Well, you know what, too, oftentimes these days it takes people like 10, 12, 15 years to actually, or more to actually become a citizen through that system. We need to improve that legal immigration system, and that will help. Um, then last two things, it would also include something that Joe Biden I know has embraced, which is raising the number of refugees that we take in, in the United States, uh, it used to be about 110,000 in the Obama era. And now I think it went down to 20,000 or in that range under Trump. And he has said Biden has said that he wants to take that up to 130,000.

And then the final thing is, and what I made one of the centerpieces of my immigration policy is, look, we need essentially a Marshall Plan for Central America you know, I don't mean it in the original sense of post WWII. What I mean is, uh, a partnership and

strong investment in Central America that involves private sector partnerships, um, but also public sector and nonprofit partnerships and to bring a humility and respect to the way that we do it.

Abby Disney: Well, you know, we can't really foster better relationships in Latin America without a consciousness of our history in Latin America. I mean, we've set it up to be that way.

Julian Castro: Well, I, yeah, I certainly think the United States should not use its policy and support its corporations in a way that is simply set to take advantage of people in other nations. Um, and that's what we've been doing not only in Latin America, uh, in many ways, but in other parts of the world. And, I think that Joe Biden as president is going to have an opportunity to pivot in Latin America to a more positive, constructive, and ultimately I think in a good way mutually beneficial relationship with Latin America and Mexico.

And that also helps um, to ensure that we don't have thousands and thousands of people, um, migrating to the border, uh, the way that they have in 2014, 2017 and, you know, and that's a good thing.

Abby Disney: We could radically change life for people in Central America tomorrow if we just changed our drug policy. What do you think, is there a way for us to change our drug policy?

Julian Castro: Well, yes. And I hope we do. And I think that we have been, um, little by little too slowly, but still, I mean, you think about where we were 20 years ago when it would have been political suicide for somebody to say let's legalize marijuana. And, I just had C-SPAN on right now and in the house of representatives, they have a piece of legislation in front of them. So decriminalizing marijuana, right? On top of that, as part of criminal justice reform, some communities have embraced, um, a different approach on lower level usage of other types of substances. Right? And so little by little things are changing the United States and that will have an impact. I do think that we need to go in that direction. There's a lot to unravel there, but yeah, I'm at least encouraged that there have been courageous policymakers over the last 10, 15 years who have stepped up and begun to make changes mostly at the local level. And sometimes the state level.

Abby Disney: Right, right, right. That well, that's a question. I mean, I do think that the visible failures of the federal government, especially over the last four years, but not just over the last four years have kind of caused a lot of people to start to refocus a lot of their energy on local leadership.

And I have to say, or a lot of local election officials, many of them Republican, who I think maybe saved this election, um, by stepping into their personal integrity. I mean,

how much should we be looking--refocusing our, our attention on what is local in terms of leadership?

Julian Castro: Yeah, local government, uh, was my original passion in politics. I started out as a city council member in San Antonio then served as mayor for five years. Um, and it was the reason that I originally went into politics because I wanted to be the mayor of my hometown and, and help steer the city in a good direction.

What I found is that, uh, number one at the local level, people still come together in a spirit of community. People of different parties, different etiologies, folks know one another more, they work with one another professionally, and also see each other socially. I mean, you're just physically in the same place. Now of course COVID has scrambled everything, but we're going to get back to normal at some point. But because of that, folks roll up their sleeves and they actually get to work on things that will help the community and are able to lay down their arms of partisanship much more easily than at the federal level. I like that. The other thing is that at the local level, people measure your results much more easily.

If you're a council member, mayor, or county executive, you know, and because of that, you have politicians in those seats that are more responsive, I think, to their communities that they serve. Uh, and then finally, I do think that, you know, the Obama administration set a blueprint in place for how you can work with local communities to get some of the policies that we'd like to see at a federal level done, but at a local level, in a way that adds up.

So for instance, raising the minimum wage, there were a number of cities that did that, right. Or before we had marriage equality, providing domestic partnership benefits, more paid sick leave. And if you start adding up, if you get that done whatever policy it is in, take any, you know, Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, Austin, San Antonio, a number of other places, all of a sudden you have tens of millions of Americans that are under that new policy without Washington lifting a finger. So you can do an end run around Mitch McConnell and the log jam in DC because you have supportive, basically democratically led city councils in the biggest communities.

Abby Disney: Right, right. Well, we know that a lot of local legislatures got more conservative in this election. And we also know that the apportionments are going to start happening and the gerrymandering is going to get really ugly and partisan. Like, how do you picture that going? Especially in Texas. How do you picture that going? Cause I remember 2010, it was dark.

Julian Castro: I have no doubt that, um, that Republicans will try the same playbook that they used in 2010. They have been very shrewd, very clever about gerrymandering to their best benefit. I think what's different in 2020 is that I think we're a little smarter to

it now and going to fight it, uh, in a more effective shrewder way ourselves as Democrats. And then on top of that over the last decade, you've had more states go to bipartisan commission style or some type of neutral redistricting. That's a good thing.

My hope is that eventually all redistricting will be done in a bipartisan or nonpartisan way so that you don't have the politicians picking their people instead of the people picking their politicians.

Abby Disney: Yeah, exactly. Well, you know, when we talk about the local governments and local leadership, um, one of the most important. Parts of that is, is the grassroots. And your mother was a grassroots organizer and she participated in founding La Raza Unida in Texas, which is, um, does it still exist?

Julian Castro: No, no, it existed uh--and she, she didn't have found it, but she was the chairperson for Bexar County, which is in the San Antonio area and very involved in it for sure. Uh, but it existed, pretty much through the late seventies. And this was a third party that started in 1970 in Crystal City, Texas, and then grew, so they ran slates of candidates in local communities in Texas, in California, Colorado, New Mexico, I think Arizona. The idea here was that at the time neither the democratic party nor the Republican party were adequately serving the Mexican-American community of the Southwest. And so they said, okay, well, in this democratic process, what do you do if your needs are not being met at all by either of the two big parties? Well, uh, you know, start a third party and basically run your own candidates who will ensure that those needs are met. And, yeah, it's fascinating. Third-parties in general, right? Hardly-- never succeed in our system. Hardly ever succeed.

Abby Disney: Well, but they succeed in that strategy all the time.

Julian Castro: Yeah. I mean, they don't succeed in the bottom line, usually of winning an election, but I'm very proud of her work and the work of many other activists, because I do think that it caused both parties, mostly the democratic party, but both parties to take notice and to make some of changes and elevate. Elevate voices that were just being dismissed before. And I can't believe that this year in January it marked 50 years since the founding of La Raza Unida party and my mom was involved mostly, uh, like from, I don't know, uh 72 through maybe 78, something like that.

Abby Disney: Right. I mean, do you think the time is right for another such effort? I mean, the Democrats clearly were, were gobsmacked by the fact that the constituencies they think are most loyal to them, didn't really turn out in the same kinds of numbers or in the same percentages for them, especially what we call the fabled Latino voter. Do you think it's time for some kind of third entity, maybe not a party that would do a better job of organizing around the interests of grassroots people?

Julian Castro: Well, I would agree that it's time for better organizing for sure. And, sometimes people will fall toward Republicans or fall toward an ideology because you're not doing what you need to do to compete for their vote. And that's in the face of a lot of disinformation being piped into their Facebook feed or YouTube feed or other things. And, you know, we just, we can't take it for granted.

Abby Disney: Well, and, and to what extent, just lumping all Latinos into one category of voter, to what extent does that undermine your ability to reach out to Latino voters? I mean, they're not a monolith by any stretch of the imagination, but the pundits and especially the political parties, don't do the work of figuring that out.

Um, what's a better way to talk about the Latino votes--voting blocks?

Julian Castro: And I think the aftermath of this election, there 's been a lot of conversation, uh, and more of the nuance about distinctions within, you know, the Latino/Latinx community. Cuban-Americans in South Florida, Venezuelan Americans, they're in Florida, you know, the largely Mexican American Southwest and the distinctions, you know, I mean their histories, the issues that are most important to them, what moves them?

So my hope is that we can build on what happened during this election to be more nuanced, to incorporate the leadership of people on the ground in those communities, you know, so that it's authentic and, and then make sure that we're elevating folks of different backgrounds who get elected to local leadership, statewide leadership, and even to Congress.

Abby Disney: Right, right. So you and me, we're both in the podcast business now. Why'd you start a podcast?

Julian Castro: You know, when I went to college, I thought that I was going to go into journalism. I majored in communication. I thought I was going to go into broadcast journalism. It's still kind of a second passion that I have. I follow the media. So this is probably the closest that I'm going to get to journalism.

And over the last six years as HUD secretary, and then as a presidential candidate, I traveled to more than 40 States, like over a hundred different communities. And I met so many different people who, uh, are struggling, who are reaching for their dreams and the struggles that they're facing are common struggles for a lot of people.

I wanted to put some of those stories into an audio format in a podcast and be able to, to really bring those to a wider audience.

Abby Disney: That's great. And stories are why we live. Right. Stories are what, what keeps me going every day. Um, what, what do you think is going to be your next move in your future?

Julian Castro: You know, I'm at this odd point where for the first time in a long time, I'm not aiming at any office.

When I got out of the Obama administration, I pretty much knew that I wanted to run for president in 2020, and I've been at it, uh, since I was 26, when I first got elected to the city council. So, I'm going to continue to use my voice to support candidates and causes that I think will make our country stronger and more prosperous. I'll continue to do the podcast and then, you know, be looking out for opportunities that come along.

I've really enjoyed, you know, the only silver lining of this, of these last few months with the pandemic, which is getting to spend a lot more time at home because I was spending 75% of my time over the last two years away from home. Uh, so we'll see.

Abby Disney: So are you in San Antonio right now?

Julian Castro: I am San Antonio. My family and I live here and during the day I manage my five-year-old's remote learning. So, uh, it's been quite an adventure.

Abby Disney: How's that going?

Julian Castro: It's going well, all things considered, I mean, obviously like a lot of, like probably most parents, I wish that all kids could be back in school, if they could do it safely along with teachers and staff, of course, that's not possible right now, but everybody's trying to make do, and, my son Christian, I think is, you know, he's moving along in terms of his kindergarten experience.

Abby Disney: Good. Good, good. It must feel nice to be quiet for a minute.

Julian Castro: It does. It's a welcome change.

Abby Disney: Julian Castro's *Our America*, is a wonderful podcast from Lemonada Media and you can get it wherever you find your podcasts. He can also be found on Twitter at @juliancastro and at home in San Antonio. Thank you so much.

Julian Castro: Thanks a lot. Yeah, I really appreciate it. Good to talk to you.

Abby Disney: It was good fun.