
Exploiting the American Dream: The Political Rhetoric of Julian Castro

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Produced in Angela Rounsaville's Fall 2012 ENC 1101

Before even stepping on stage, San Antonio mayor Julian Castro became a prominent part of the 2012 Democratic National Convention that was held on September 4, 2012. Not only was he the first Latino to deliver the Keynote Speech at a DNC, but he also had a great hurdle to overcome in the eyes of many. This convention—as well as the presidential election itself—came at a time when the United States was facing the worst economic slump since the Great Depression, and voters were looking for a candidate to get the nation back on track. Speaking for the incumbent, President Barack Obama, Julian Castro had to find a way to avoid the stigma that the state of the economy is more often than not the responsibility of the current president. The president had four years to improve the economy, yet it was still a considerable problem in the country. So how could Castro not only drum up support for the president, but also get listeners to want to vote again for the man many believe is to blame for the disastrous economy? This paper will analyze how Castro uses narratives and rhetoric to accomplish what may seem like a far-fetched objective.

Despite the objective, Obama is not mentioned in Castro's keynote speech until much later. The first goal Castro has is to establish the basis that will allow him to gain supporters for the incumbent at all. He is going to use a series of narratives to instill a version of the American Dream (specifically, the journey and successes of a first-generation immigrant) in the minds of listeners.

The subsequent excerpt shows Castro creating a kind of summary of his entire speech, including the format, rhetoric, and strategies he will employ throughout his twenty minutes on stage. Specifically, about a quarter of the way into his speech, Castro describes how he believes his grandmother would feel about the successes of her grandchildren:

My grandmother didn't live to see us begin our lives in public service. But she probably would have thought it extraordinary that just two generations after she arrived in San Antonio, one grandson would be the mayor and the other would be on his way—the good people of San Antonio willing—to the United States Congress.

Knowing he is being heard by millions, Castro specifically mentions himself in a kind of “look at me now” sense— not only is he successful and making a name for himself, but he is now the mayor of the same city to which his grandmother immigrated so many years earlier. He uses the idea that he is the embodiment of the American Dream to promote the aims of himself and his brother in the political realm. The millions of people who previously didn't know of Julian or Joaquin Castro now not only know their names, but also view the success of the Castro brothers as being synonymous with the success of the American Dream.

This serves as an apparent example of the rhetorical strategy Julian Castro employs throughout his entire speech. He continues on with the American Dream theme established in his opening narrative and uses it to accomplish the goals of his speech, foregoing statistics or cold hard

facts. I argue that Julian Castro uses his narratives, one central, overlying theme (the American Dream of a first generation immigrant), and the presuppositions associated with that theme for an extensive variety of purposes, including promoting the Obama campaign and depicting governor Mitt Romney as someone who will harm the foundation of the country. This paper will analyze how Castro presents an effective keynote speech and uses narratives to embolden listeners and potential voters to think (and, in turn, act) a certain way.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the form of political rhetoric that Julian Castro employs throughout his speech, one must first understand the basics of the well-established theoretical framework called narrative criticism. Narrative criticism is a framework of analysis used by rhetoricians to consider the narratives or stories people build into their discourse, just as Julian Castro does in his keynote speech. The study of this form of criticism dates back to classical Greece and Rome, and it has been developed throughout the centuries. Scholar Sonja K. Foss argues, “Narratives are integral to the functioning of institutions such as courts of law, corporations, and government and nonprofit organizations” (*Rhetorical Criticism* 333).

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Narrative criticism begins by defining narratives as having at least two events in time order, including some kind of relationships among the events and being about some unified subject. Narrative criticism then aims to analyze the artifact by considering the setting of the story, the characters, etc. Increasingly, politicians are relying on narratives to relate to and paint a picture for the listening audiences. Foss writes, “Narratives induce us to make certain decisions...and also help us justify those decisions,” which is often done by evoking a certain feeling among listeners (*Rhetorical Criticism* 333). Narratives can make us feel happy and childlike, as in the work of Dr. Seuss, just as easily as they can pull on our hearts, like a story about a young child losing a parent. A large part of the way these narratives produce such a reaction is through the characters and setting of the story. A story that takes place in a haunted house with a ghastly old man as the central character will not promote the same feelings as a story centered on best friends frolicking in an open field. The characters and settings of these narratives are exceedingly significant, because they establish the tone for the narrative and, in cases like Julian Castro’s, a tone for the whole speech. In politics, the tone of a single speech can be the sole reason a voter views a candidate one way or another, which is why setting the desired character for the speech is exceedingly important. The fact that this specific speech is being given on a platform as large as the Democratic National Convention—which may serve as the one time many Americans hear a political speech about President Obama—only makes the tone (and, therefore, the selected narratives) that much more important.

Establishing the American Dream

By understanding the basis for narrative criticism, we can undoubtedly say that Julian Castro chooses the stories he tells very carefully. He selects stories that have the setting, characters, and imagery to create a version of the American Dream in the minds of those listening in order to lay the groundwork for the rest of his speech, which he will then use to relate to his audience and accomplish his desired goals, including promoting Obama and driving support from Governor

Romney. He begins his speech with a story about his grandmother, who—through rhetoric—he paints as a woman epitomizing the definition of the American Dream. In speaking about his grandmother in his opening narrative, Castro says,

She never made it past the fourth grade. . . . My grandmother spent her whole life working as a maid, a cook and a babysitter, barely scraping by, but still working hard to give my mother, her only child, a chance in life, so that my mother could give my brother and me an even better one. . . . By the time my brother and I came along, this incredible woman had taught herself to read and write in both Spanish and English.

In just the opening assertion, Castro recognizes and addresses a large presupposition among citizens of our nation—the American Dream stems from hard work. He purposefully begins by telling his audience that his grandmother “never made it past the fourth grade.” This gives listeners a very specific frame of mind when thinking about the rest of what he will tell them. Knowing his grandmother is what many consider to be undereducated makes her accomplishments seem infinitely more significant and inspiring than they would had she gone further in school. Just a few sentences later, Castro states that his grandmother worked her whole life as “a maid, a cook, and a babysitter.” These three labor-intensive, low-wage jobs are seen in our culture as livelihoods for the under-educated: pre-teens and teenagers serve as babysitters in their spare time and maids are often looked down upon in a hierarchical “master-to-servant” kind of way. Continuing on with the jobs Castro unambiguously chose to list, it is important to note that he described his grandmother as a “cook” as opposed to a “chef.” While chefs are usually depicted as successful, admired, and respected, cooks are stereotypically viewed as dirty, sweaty and, often times, as non-English speakers (largely because being a cook requires little to no communication outside of the kitchen). Not only do the specific job types help Castro set up a basis for the hard work aspect of American Dream, but the fact that one has nothing to do with the others gives listeners the “odd job” feel typically associated with those trying to build a better life from very little. As though detailing these odd jobs his grandmother lived off of isn’t enough, Castro then uses his grandmother’s actions to exemplify a different kind of hard work. Describing how his grandmother taught herself English and how she only “scraped by” shows that she was willing to put as much effort into her personal American Dream as necessary. Castro’s rhetoric and narrative works to paint his grandmother as hardworking, a core feature of those who we, as United States citizens, see as achieving the American Dream.

Having established his grandmother as a hardworking woman, Castro looks to further the already half-developed idea among listeners that his grandmother can serve as the face of the American Dream. He does so by turning his focus to another noted and fundamental presupposition about the American Dream: it requires a great deal of family sacrifice. In setting up the background of his narrative, Castro declares,

My brother Joaquin and I grew up with my mother Rosie and my grandmother Victoria. My grandmother was an orphan. As a young girl, she had to leave her home in Mexico and move to San Antonio, where some relatives had agreed to take her in. . . . My grandmother never owned a house. She cleaned other people’s houses so she could afford to rent her own.

Through the use of just one word, Castro depicts his grandmother as a woman who sacrificed a great deal in pursuit of the dreams America is known to provide to those who immigrate here. Castro, in a very deliberate rhetorical choice, tells of how his grandmother had to leave her home in Mexico. He doesn’t say she had to leave her house or her country—he says she had to leave her “home.” Home is a word that has an incredibly positive connotation for most people. Not only is our home where we sleep, eat, and feel safe and warm, but also it is where our loved ones are. Thus, in using this word to describe what his grandmother left behind in Mexico, he implies that she left behind her safe haven and loved ones to better the family she didn’t even have yet. She sacrificed her own

comfort and safety to pursue a life for daughters and grandsons she didn't even know. Castro also clearly articulates that his grandmother is an orphan, a rhetorical choice that lets voters know that she was alone on this journey. She had no one to lean on or go to when she made the journey to a new country, a country where she didn't even speak the language (as shown by his earlier declaration that she taught herself English). The courage and sacrifice that Castro depicts in his rhetorical choices only furthers the idea that his grandmother lived and succeeded at the American Dream.

At this point in his speech, Julian Castro has depicted his grandmother as a woman who can symbolize the American Dream in the minds of listeners. Through his narratives, Castro presents his grandmother as someone who personifies hard work and sacrifice, key qualities we see in all "American Dream chasers." Castro now needs to make the American Dream—usually seen as existing solely for immigrants—one that everyone can relate to and benefit from. He must move from the American Dream for one (his grandmother) to the American Dream for many; this will work to move the overlying idea of his speech from a single "Cinderella" story to an idea seen as an exceedingly vital part of this nation.

With this final goal in mind, the remaining aim of Castro's speech is to highlight the availability of the American Dream to everyone. Castro does not want to exclude anyone in his story about the successes that can be achieved by means of this amazing "rags-to-riches" ideal that only America can provide. Especially in an election as close as the one in 2012, excluding any one group of people from a dream that unites us all as citizens could be fatal. Castro concludes his narrative by addressing this very point:

My family's story isn't special. What's special is the America that makes our story possible. Ours is a nation like no other, a place where great journeys can be made in a single generation. No matter who you are or where you come from, the path is always forward. . . . The dream of raising a family in a place where hard work is rewarded is not unique to Americans. . . . The dream is universal, but America makes it possible.

This section of Castro's speech provides the feeling that the American Dream makes anything possible to anyone, provided he or she works hard and sacrifices like his grandmother did. He purposely gives hope to those who may be struggling, saying that it only takes one generation to be on your way to a better life. "No matter who you are or where you come from" also is used to relate the hope of the American Dream to anyone and everyone. The American Dream doesn't discriminate and it is there for anyone to grab hold of and use to better themselves and their families. He then duly notes that this "universal dream" is one that only America makes possible. Castro's speech, at this point, has not only given a face to the American Dream, but has convinced listeners that it is the foundation of this country.

The previous quotes and analysis serve as clear examples of the implicit attempts by Julian Castro to set up the American Dream notion without ever explicitly stating the two words together. This is a direct example of scholar Edgar C. Snow's idea that those who use narratives make "an effort to let a text speak for itself as much as possible" (96). Castro uses the narrative about his grandmother to give a face to this idea, and does so by painting her as a woman who embodied all the qualities of someone who pursues the American Dream—hardworking and willing to sacrifice whatever necessary to build a better life. Castro then uses rhetoric to depict the American Dream as

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something attainable by all and emphasize the fact that it is the *American Dream* (something available only in America). By setting up the characters of his narrative (his grandmother) and the very specific setting (America), Castro provides himself with an incredibly strong base to continue on with his speech. More specifically, by establishing the American Dream as the heart of the United States and his grandmother as the embodiment of that very idea, Castro is able to use this basis to accomplish the overlying purposes of his speech: support President Obama while labeling Governor Romney as someone who will demolish what Castro has just established as the foundation of the country.

Using the American Dream

Having set up the basis for his version of the American Dream and all that it provides, Castro then uses the foundation of his narrative to make various claims to the audience, such as promoting one presidential candidate over the other. Foss says, “[Narratives] allow us to interpret reality because they help us decide what a particular experience ‘is about’” (*Rhetorical Criticism* 399). This is precisely what Castro begins to do; he uses the American Dream foundation he has set up to tell listeners what this presidential election (the experience) “is about.” Castro is working to convince us that this specific presidential election is about the American Dream and its future success or failure. With this purpose in mind, Castro turns the focus of his powerful narratives to the Romney campaign. He paints Governor Romney as someone who will destroy and dismantle said dream. As a result of Castro’s previous work in establishing the American Dream as the foundation of this nation, he implies that Governor Romney will demolish the basis of the United States:

We know that in our free market some will prosper more than others. What we don’t accept is the idea that some folks won’t even get the chance. . . . Mitt Romney and the Republican Party are perfectly comfortable with that America. The Romney-Ryan budget. . . doesn’t just pummel the middle class—it dismantles it. It dismantles what generations before have built to ensure that everybody can enter and stay in the middle class.

In this segment of his speech, Castro begins to hint, indirectly, that Mitt Romney is on his way to taking away the availability of the American Dream. Castro does so by establishing Romney and the Republican Party as being “comfortable” with the idea that many won’t get the “chance.” The decision to use the word “chance” is a powerful one, considering that in the opening sentences of his narrative, Castro said his grandmother “[worked] hard to give my mother, her only child, a chance in life.” The use of the word chance in both instances relates the taking away of a chance by Romney to the chance Castro’s grandmother—who he has painted as the face of the American Dream—worked to give his mother. This provides a specific example of Foss’s idea regarding symbolic action in rhetoric: “in the simplest sense, a sign communicates when it is connected to another object” (“Theory of Visual Rhetoric” 144). In this case, the word “chance” is being connected to Castro’s grandmother and, as a result, communicates the feelings surrounding her story to the audience. Castro goes on to describe how the Romney-Ryan budget will “dismantle” what generations before have built. The use of the word “generations” brings listeners back to the section of the speech when Castro assumed his grandmother “would have thought it extraordinary that [in] just two generations. . . one grandson would be the mayor.” This rhetorical choice results in the association of Romney’s “dismantling what generations before have built” to the success achieved by Julian Castro. Therefore, circuitously, Castro is proposing that Governor Romney is going to take away the American Dream, which Castro established as the foundation of our country’s growth, as well as all the successes that come with it (himself being one example).

Ultimately, Castro’s final purpose for the American Dream narrative he so extensively established is to promote the campaign of the incumbent President Obama. Having portrayed

Governor Romney as a man threatening our nation's greatest source of pride, Castro then starts the conclusion of his speech, ending with the promise that Obama will protect what Romney will not. This begins Castro's strategy of contrasting the "characters" of Obama and Romney in a different kind of narrative regarding the future of the nation. He draws on varying traits of the two men in an attempt to shape the listener's way of thinking. His whole purpose is to paint Obama's "character" as the more favorable choice:

Barack Obama gets it. Just a few years ago. . . the dream my grandmother held, that work would be rewarded, that the middle class would be there, if not for her, then for her children—that dream was being crushed. But then President Obama took office—and he took action. This is the choice before us. And to me, to my generation and for all the generations to come, our choice is clear. Our choice is a man who's always chosen us. A man who already is our president: Barack Obama.

Being more direct, Castro specifically mentions his grandmother in his closing arguments in favor of President Obama. He brings this woman he established as the face of the American Dream to the front of listeners' minds once again, before speaking about how her "dream" was saved by President Obama taking action. He purposefully uses the word "dream" in describing his grandmother's hopes of a better life to hint more directly at the underlying theme of the American Dream (two words that he does not directly put together until the final minute of his speech and, even then, only uses once). Castro also reuses "middle class" to bring his audience back to the idea of Governor Romney dismantling the same middle class his grandmother strived and worked so hard to join. This creates a stark and obvious contrast between Romney's wanting to "dismantle" the middle class and Obama's saving it by taking action. Castro then uses personal endorsement to promote the Obama campaign, once again, using the word "generation" to indirectly bring back the idea of people working to better the lives of future generations. He specifically says "my generation" supports Obama; this implies that if you are a part of his generation, the one who has been bettered by immigrants and the American Dream—and we all have because immigration is the foundation of the United States—then you, too, should choose Barack Obama.

Conclusion

In the end, Julian Castro was able to promote a variety of purposes in his speech and encourage voters to think a certain way by means of his deep-rooted and recurring narrative about the American Dream. The rhetoric used in Castro's narratives led listeners to associate much of what he said with the American Dream, which he established early on as the foundation of the United States. In political rhetoric, when a narrative is set up as deeply and powerfully as Julian Castro's, it can provide a basis for the whole speech, bringing listeners back to the overlying theme with a simple word (such as "generation" in this case brought back underlying ideas of the American Dream). It is also important that the apparent audience to which the politician is speaking is as broad as possible, so as not to exclude anyone from what should be a unifying speech meant to rally listeners together for a common purpose or goal (in this case, that being supporting presidential candidate Barack Obama). Narratives in politics can oftentimes seem as simple tools to make candidates more personable or relatable; this analysis, however, shows that narratives can have much deeper goals and can even set the foundation for politicians to accomplish the widest range of purposes for the broadest audience.

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