

# **ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Meeting The Demands Of A Changing Electorate: The political Rhetoric Of Julian Castro And Marco Rubio**

*Abstract:* Rapid demographic changes in the United States have made American Hispanics an increasingly powerful force in American politics. This paper examines the argumentative strategies of two rising Hispanic stars of American politics: Democrat Julian Castro of Texas and Republican Marco Rubio of Florida. This paper analyzes the argumentative strategies that Castro and Rubio use in their 2012 party convention speeches to build political coalitions with Hispanic and non-Hispanic voters.

*Keywords:* American Dream, American Hispanic politicians, identification, Julian Castro, Marco Rubio, narrative, political argumentation, political rhetoric.

## *1. Introduction*

Rapid demographic changes within the United States mean that the country will soon have a majority-minority population. One group that has gained prominence during this demographic shift is American Hispanics, who are becoming a critical political population and are challenging the demographic hegemony held by white Americans. This demographic change has also created more opportunity than ever before for Hispanic politicians on the national stage. While many scholars of political rhetoric have studied the argumentative strategies used by non-Hispanic political rhetors to gain support from Hispanic voters, this paper examines how Hispanic politicians reach out to Hispanic and non-Hispanic audiences in their political arguments.

This paper examines the argumentative strategies of two rising Hispanic stars of American politics: Democrat Julian Castro of Texas and Republican Marco Rubio of Florida. Castro represents a state that is already majority-minority and Rubio represents a state that soon will be. Both politicians made strong national debuts as prominent speakers for their respective parties during the 2012 presidential campaign. Both Castro and Rubio have parlayed this success into national

political recognition. Julian Castro, as the youngest mayor of a major American city, is frequently mentioned as a possible Democratic vice presidential or presidential candidate. Meanwhile Marco Rubio has become an important conservative Republican voice in the U.S. Senate and is viewed as a potential Republican vice presidential or presidential candidate. This paper analyzes the argumentative strategy of identification that Castro and Rubio use in their public arguments in order to build political coalitions.

In this paper we first provide a snapshot of the rise of the Hispanic voter in the United States. Second we discuss how narrative provides opportunities for identification in political rhetoric. Then we analyze the 2012 convention speeches of Marco Rubio and Julian Castro, in each case examining their narratives recounting their personal stories, their relationship to the Spanish language and Hispanic culture, and their respective tellings of the American Dream narrative. Finally, we consider some implications of Rubio and Castro's identification strategies.

## *2. The rise of the hispanic voter*

Hispanic politicians, like all politicians, must adapt to heterogeneous audiences in order to garner enough support to win elections and serve broad constituencies in large and diverse settings. Stuckey (2000) described "political leadership in a campaign context" as the process of "crafting a political coalition large enough [and] diverse enough" (p. 453) to win office and govern. Major demographic changes mean that political rhetors must adapt to a rapidly changing political landscape. The dramatic increase of Hispanic voters gives Hispanic politicians a ready constituency; it also means that non-Hispanic politicians must now seriously consider strategies for garnering Hispanic support. Bowler and Segura (2012) pointed out that "Latinos are undermobilized by the parties," which suggests that "the sky is the limit" in terms of the political power they could potentially wield (p. 136).

As of now, the Democratic Party has made more inroads in attracting Latino voters than has the Republican Party. The Democratic Party has long relied on a coalition of minority voters, which includes Latinos. In fact, minority voters have been fundamental to Democratic electoral success. As Bowler and Segura (2012) observed, "Republicans usually win a majority of the white vote . . . suggesting that minority votes are essential to Democratic competitiveness" (p. 3). While Democrats thus need to continue to attract minority voters in order to remain

electorally competitive, Republicans face the challenge of trying to expand their base beyond white voters. Bowler and Segura (2012) also noted that the Republican Party's "whites-only strategy will become electorally unviable over time as demography takes its toll" (p. 67). In this context the continuing growth of the Hispanic population is potentially good news for the Democratic Party. Both political parties, however, are highly motivated to obtain support from Hispanic voters.

### *3. Narrative and identification*

Scholars of political science and political communication have been studying the increasing Hispanic demographic within the U.S. and the ways in which political rhetoric has changed in order to reach Hispanic voters. Much of this literature analyzes the arguments non-Hispanic (primarily Anglo) political rhetors have made in order to gain support from Hispanic voters (Connaughton, 2004; Connaughton and Jarvis, 2004; Cisneros, 2009). Many of these analyses describe the strategy of identification. Rhetors using identification try to build explicit or implicit connections between themselves and their audience members (Connaughton, 2004; Connaughton and Jarvis, 2004). Political speakers may try to foster an audience's sense of identification with experiences, values, or self-image. Rhetors may try to articulate these connections overtly in their arguments or may try to invoke this sense of connection through forms of address, use of pronouns, or choices of examples. Political communication theorists "have long viewed identification as central to understanding the dynamics of American politics" (Connaughton, 2004, p. 132).

One of the ways of achieving identification is through narrative. MacIntyre (1981) famously argued that humans are "essentially story-telling" animals (p. 201) and claimed, "we all live our narratives in our lives and we understand our own lives in terms of narratives" (p. 197). Fisher (1984) challenged communication scholars to consider the power of narrative not only as a discursive strategy but as a mode of reasoning that shifted focus away from the formal argumentation, emphasis on rationality, and claims of technical expertise that Fisher said characterized the "rational world paradigm." In the "narrative paradigm" that he outlined, people could make and judge arguments according to "good reasons" and according to inherently understood standards of narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984). Fisher (1987) argued that narrative relied on Burke's idea of identification. Fisher (1987) wrote, "the principle of narrative rationality is

identification rather than deliberation” (p. 18). Burke (1969) described identification as the basis of persuasion. He wrote, “You persuade a person only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (Burke, 1969, p. 55). Thus, people judge narratives based on the degree to which they can identify with the narratives, or feel that the narratives have expressed some aspect of their essential truth. McClure (2009) contended that identification is even more important in the function and assessment of narratives than Fisher had explicated. McClure (2009) argued that the process of identification can account for “the rhetorical viability of the narratives of identity, subjectivity, and ideology” (p. 202).

At key points of the American electoral process, such as the political parties’ conventions, the strategy of identification is especially salient. Stuckey (2005) described how political rhetors seek to create personal points of connection with voters and why that is significant. She noted, “When we choose a particular sort of person to represent us collectively, we are declaring more than that we trust this person to walk our dogs or attend our backyard barbecues. We are also saying that we see ourselves reflected in him or her” (Stuckey, 2005, p. 654). Through the use of narrative and identification, Rubio and Castro positioned themselves as reflecting American society rather than the Cuban-American or Mexican-American communities. One narrative that American political rhetors commonly use is the American Dream. Presumably, Americans of all ethnicities and political affiliations can identify with aspects of the American Dream, which stresses political freedoms, an egalitarian economic and political system based on meritocracy, and the expectation that immigrants can improve their lot for themselves and their descendants. Rowland and Jones (2011) discussed the unique properties of American Dream narratives, arguing that the focus of the American Dream is “not on perfection found in the past, but on gradually achieving a more perfect future” (p. 131-132). Moreover, they noted, “the heroes present in such stories are not larger than life but thoroughly ordinary men and women who do extraordinary things in the society” (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 132). In their convention addresses, Rubio and Castro sought to create identification through their respective American Dream narratives. Furthermore, in order to foster identification, both elevated their humble forebears to the status of hero.

#### 4. *Marcio Rubio*

Marco Rubio was born on May 28, 1971, in Miami, Florida, to Cuban immigrant parents who later naturalized as American citizens. He graduated from South Miami Senior High School in 1989 and attended Tarkio College for one year on a football scholarship. He attended Santa Fe Community College before finishing his B.S. in political science from the University of Florida in 1993. He earned a law degree from the University of Miami School of Law in 1996. At the age of 28 Rubio, a Republican, was elected in a special election to the Florida House of Representatives. He served in the Florida House from 2000 to 2009 and as Speaker of the Florida House from 2007 to 2009. Rubio ran successfully for the U.S. Senate in 2010 and began serving his term in January 2011.

Late in 2011, *The Washington Post* and the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that Rubio had been telling audiences an inaccurate version of his parents' emigration to the United States. While Rubio had maintained that his parents were forced to leave Cuba in 1959, after Fidel Castro had come to power, in actuality they had left Cuba in 1956. Rubio (2011) responded, "the Post story misses the point completely. The real essence of my family's story is not about the date my parents first entered the United States. . . . Or even the date they left Fidel Castro's Cuba forever and permanently settled here." Instead, he claimed, "The essence of my family story is why they came to America in the first place; and why they had to stay" (Rubio, 2011). Rubio's response signalled that the American Dream narrative has vital functions apart from relating accurate information.

Rubio addressed the Republican National Convention on Thursday, August 30, 2012. While his speech was not billed as a keynote speech - there was not an official keynote speech for the convention - Rubio spoke immediately before Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, which was a coveted slot. The media coverage of Rubio's speech treated it as a keynote speech and many compared it explicitly to Castro's Democratic keynote speech.

In his speech, Rubio used personal narratives featuring his grandfather and his parents. He introduced his speech by saying, "In 1980, I watched my first Republican convention with my grandfather" (Rubio, 2012). Rubio (2012) said his grandfather "was born to a farming family in rural Cuba. Childhood polio left him permanently disabled. Because he couldn't work the farm, his family sent him to school, and he became the only one in the family who could read." Rubio (2012) continued the narrative of his family's rise from poverty by describing his parents'

immigration to the United States: “They emigrated to America with little more than the hope of a better life.” Rubio (2012) added, “They never made it big. . . . And yet they were successful. Because just a few decades removed from hopelessness, they made possible for us all the things that had been impossible for them.” These descriptions of his grandfather and parents reinforced the American Dream’s emphasis on ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

One of Rubio’s personal narratives concerned the family of Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. Rubio (2012) said the American Dream was represented by “the story of a man who was born into an uncertain future in a foreign country. His family came to America to escape revolution. They struggled through poverty and the great depression.” Rubio (2012) explained that this man, George Romney, nevertheless “rose to be an admired businessman and public servant. And in November, his son, Mitt Romney, will be elected President of the United States.” This narrative showed Mitt Romney in a more personal light by describing the struggles of his father. The story also made it possible for Americans of all backgrounds to identify with the affluent Romney because of the Romney family’s humble beginnings.

We hypothesized that Rubio and Castro would take time in their speeches to articulate their understandings of their Hispanic identities and how they fit into the larger American society. It is notable that in these speeches they did not. Instead they invoked a distinctly Hispanic identity by occasionally speaking in Spanish or quoting Spanish remarks made by family members. This is an efficient way to self-identify as Hispanic and invite identification with other Hispanic citizens while not excluding non-Hispanic voters. Rubio (2012) recalled, “My Dad used to tell us: ‘En este pais, ustedes van a poder lograr todas las cosas que nosotros no pudimos.’ ‘In this country, you will be able to accomplish all the things we never could.’” This Spanish phrase and its English translation invited both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking audience members to identify with Rubio. In this anecdote Rubio also connected his use of Spanish to his personal narrative and to the narrative of the American Dream.

Finally, Rubio in his speech shared several variations of the American Dream narrative. Often these narratives reinforced the importance of his personal narratives about his family. As he remembered his grandfather, Rubio (2012) said, “I don’t remember everything we talked about, but the one thing I remember, is the one thing he wanted me never to forget . . . there was no limit to how far I

could go, because I was an American.” He also used the story of his father to express the American Dream. Rubio (2012) recalled, “A few years ago during a speech, I noticed a bartender behind a portable bar at the back of the ballroom. I remembered my father who had worked for many years as a banquet bartender.” Rubio (2012) reflected that his father “stood behind a bar in the back of the room all those years, so one day I could stand behind a podium in the front of the room.” He continued, “That journey, from behind the bar to behind this podium, goes to the essence of the American miracle—that we’re exceptional . . . because dreams that are impossible anywhere else, come true here” (Rubio, 2012). It is also critical that the American Dream be accessible to everyone. Rubio (2012) stressed this accessibility, arguing, “That’s not just my story. That’s your story. That’s our story.” Toward the end of his speech he said, “America is the story of everyday people who did extraordinary things. . . . Their stories may never be famous, but in the lives they lived, you find the living essence of America’s greatness” (Rubio, 2012). Rubio emphasized the ordinary nature of the characters of the American Dream narrative and thus explicitly sought to establish identification with every member of the audience.

### 5. *Julian Castro*

Julian Castro was born on September 16, 1974, along with his twin brother Joaquin, in San Antonio, Texas. His family was Mexican-American. His mother, Maria Castro, was a political activist in San Antonio who helped found the political party La Raza Unida. Her politics instilled in Julian a sense of social responsibility to his community. Castro’s father, Jesse Guzman, was also a political activist and a retired math teacher. After completing high school at Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Castro and his brother attended Stanford University where he majored in communications and political science and graduated with honors and distinction. After graduating the brothers attended Harvard Law School. Castro ran for City Council after returning to San Antonio from law school and served on the council from 2001 to 2005. He ran for mayor in 2005 but was defeated, and then ran again and won in 2009. He was re-elected in 2011 with 82 per cent of the vote.

On September 4, 2012, San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. At 37 years old, Castro was the youngest and the first Hispanic speaker to deliver a keynote address to the Democratic National Convention. Political observers and

journalists noted the significance of his speech. The *Guardian* reported that Castro was “breaking one more glass ceiling for this rapidly rising demographic force in American politics” (Pilkington, 2012).

Like Rubio, Castro shared personal narratives that invited the audience to identify with the speaker. Castro’s first narrative detailed his “unlikely journey” to the convention floor and the influence of his grandmother (Castro, 2012). He told the story of how his grandmother moved from Mexico to the United States as an orphan to live with relatives in San Antonio. Her formative years were difficult and she only went to school through the fourth grade because, as Castro (2012) explained, “She had to drop out and start working to help her family” and that she “spent her whole life working as a maid, a cook and a babysitter, barely scraping by.” Castro told how she managed to teach herself to read and write in English and Spanish. He reminisced, “And I can still remember her, every morning as Joaquin and I walked out the door to school, making the sign of the cross behind us, saying, ‘*Que dios los bendiga.*’ “May God bless you” (Castro, 2012). Later Castro explained that he used that phrase to send his daughter off to school. Castro’s second personal narrative detailed what he had accomplished as mayor. He described programs that were implemented to help four-year-olds have access to pre-K school programs and he explained his concept of Café College, “where students get help with everything from test prep to financial aid paperwork” (Castro, 2012). He continued, “We’re investing in our young minds today to be competitive in the global economy tomorrow” (Castro, 2012). In this way Castro indicated that he shared and supported Americans’ quest for betterment through education.

Castro used a personal narrative about Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney to underscore how the American Dream works. Castro told the Democratic delegates that Romney advised a group of college students to start their own businesses by borrowing money from their parents. Castro chided Romney for assuming that all Americans could pursue the American Dream by relying financially on their parents. Castro remarked, “I don’t think Governor Romney meant any harm. I think he’s a good guy. He just has no idea how good he’s had it” (Castro, 2012). This narrative highlighted the Democratic criticism that Republicans underestimate the work required to attain the dream.

Castro also addressed his relationship to the Spanish language and Hispanic culture. As mentioned previously, we expected both speakers to use more Spanish



in their speeches. Castro used only one Spanish phrase three times in the speech. The phrase "*Que dios te bendiga*" or "God bless you" is used once in the beginning of the speech and twice at the end of the speech. It is interesting to note that Castro, who is second generation American, did not speak Spanish growing up. His mother spoke English to them in the home and he took Japanese and Latin in high school. In fact, he had to have a tutor to teach him Spanish (Gates, 2012). There is an expectation that politicians who identify as Hispanic automatically speak Spanish. This assumption is incorrect.

Castro also used narratives to convey that the American Dream is obtainable. The dream narratives functioned argumentatively in the speech by illustrating how ordinary individuals achieve the dream. The narratives also created identification with Democratic supporters by associating the dream with the Democrats and Obama. In his first example, Castro's explanation of his grandmother's plight reaching the United States provided one illustration of the dream:

*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 (Castro, 2012).*

Castro (2012) concluded:

*My grandmother didn't live to see us begin our public service. But she probably would have thought it extraordinary that just two generations after she arrived 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.*

This personal illustration evolved into a generalized version of the American Dream. Castro (2012) noted that his family's story was not unique or "special" but that America made the "story possible." America facilitated Castro's grandmother's achievement of the dream. Castro (2012) said that his grandmother "believed that opportunity created today would lead to prosperity tomorrow" and would provide "the chance for your children to do better than you did." Additionally, he believed that the attainment of the dream was not immediate but took time and perseverance. He argued, "In the end, the American dream is not a sprint, or even a marathon, but a relay" where "each generation passes on to the next the fruits of their labor" (Castro, 2012). Castro (2012) also

indicated that the American Dream was not just an American dream, but a “human dream.” He argued, “The dream is universal, but America makes it possible” (Castro, 2012). Indeed, that opportunity provided a bridge for Castro to achieve his own dream. Finally, the dream required responsibility and dedication to the nation. It needed the American spirit to move from the reality of the narrative to an emotionally charged dream.

## 6. *Conclusion*

Both Rubio and Castro are rising young Hispanics who must attract non-Hispanic as well as Hispanic voters to further their political careers. Although they represent different political parties and would likely argue that their political philosophies are incompatible with each other’s, there are many similarities in the strategies of narrative and identification that both speakers used in their political convention speeches. Both relied on personal narratives that invited Hispanic and non-Hispanic audience members to identify with them. Rubio and Castro also used Spanish in their speeches to signal their Hispanic identity, but made the Spanish understandable to non-Spanish-speaking audience members by using only short Spanish phrases and by translating them into English. And both speakers also shared narratives that personified the American dream. This dream resonates with the Hispanic and non-Hispanic population.

We note some additional similarities between Rubio and Castro’s strategies in their speeches. First, while the reasons for their families’ immigration and their families’ countries of origins were different, Rubio and Castro describe their respective grandparents as having the same reasons for coming to America. According to their speeches, Rubio’s Cuban grandfather and Castro’s Mexican grandmother wanted future generations of their families to experience the availability of opportunity. Both forebears believed that their descendants would be able to improve their lot through hard work and thereby participate in the American Dream.

Another similarity between the speeches was that Rubio and Castro argued that the American experience was unique. Rubio (2012) noted, “For those of us who were born and raised in this country, it’s easy to forget how special America is. But my grandfather understood how different America is from the rest of the world.” Castro (2012) claimed, “My family’s story isn’t special. What’s special is the America that makes our story possible.” In both cases, the speakers expressed the belief that their personal success was possible only in America. To audience

members whose families have recently emigrated to the United States, including many Hispanic Americans, this message could be especially persuasive.

A third common theme was that the success promised by the American Dream would take more than one generation. According to Rubio, his family's experience started with his disabled and uneducated grandfather's vision of opportunity, which led to his parents working in low status retail and food service jobs. But it was the dreams and hard work of those generations that made it possible for Rubio to achieve his success. Castro's multi-generational narrative was comparable. His grandmother also had no formal education and worked as a domestic labourer. While she "didn't live to see us begin our lives in public service," said Castro (2012), his grandmother "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 . . . to the United States Congress." Castro (2012) characterized this multi-generational phenomenon by saying, "In the end, the American Dream is not a sprint, or even a marathon, but a relay."

Both Rubio and Castro also described the American Dream in terms that were consistent with Rowland and Jones's (2011) observation that American Dream narratives feature ordinary people who work toward a more perfect future. Rubio recounted how the Rubio family moved symbolically from the back of the ballroom (his father serving as bartender) to the podium in the front of the room (Rubio himself speaking to an audience). And Castro (2012) recounted that his mother "fought hard for civil rights so that instead of a mop, I could hold this microphone." In these invocations of the American Dream, all people who work hard and believe in the dream are participating in the dream, no matter how humble their circumstances are. Audience members can see themselves as participating in the American Dream regardless of their own status. This creates more opportunities for people to identify with the speakers' narratives.

Finally, in their narratives, both Rubio and Castro presented themselves as the embodiment of the American story. Stuckey (2005) argued that political rhetors want to connect with voters on a personal level and that voters want to see themselves "reflected" in their politicians (654). Rubio and Castro shared their personal narratives and linked those narratives to the universal American experience. In the way they shared these personal narratives, Rubio and Castro conveyed that they are representative of all Americans, regardless of ethnicity,

country of origin, or generation. Potentially all Americans can identify with them. These political rhetors thus positioned themselves not as “Hispanic” politicians, but as “American” politicians. From this rhetorical standpoint, they can make the broadest appeal to American voters.

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