

Julián Castro, first Hispanic President?

It has been noticed that the appointment of Julian Castro as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the current Obama Administration has been very well received by American society in general, but especially by the Hispanic community. Castro, formerly a mayor of San Antonio, Texas, is the twin brother of Joaquín Castro, also a politician, son of Rosie Castro, an activist in the Mexican-American community in Texas, and grandson of Victoria Castro, an orphan Mexican immigrant without any formal education, who came to the United States to work as a maid and a child caretaker and taught herself to write both in English and Spanish. Of course it is not necessary to mention all these background details to recognize someone as a good Hispanic politician, but it may help us understand why Julián Castro cannot speak Spanish fluently.

There are biographical facts that fully explain Castro's quasi-monolingualism in English. He is a third-generation Hispanic—a particularly revealing fact—who attended school in English since childhood, and received a college education at the universities of Stanford and Harvard, where English is the only language used in the classrooms. In addition, his meteoric political success, although forged in the state of Texas, where 30 % of the population can speak Spanish, is due in large part to his oratorical skills in English, praised by President Obama himself and indispensable for political struggle at the national level. It is rather difficult to find individuals, in any profession, who can successfully show a full range of oratorical skills in two languages. These facts, of course, are just part of a linguistic biography, and they are not meant as excuses, which, in any case, would be totally unnecessary.

The observer should consider that in the United States high-profile national politics unfolds in the English language. This is why it is still more meaningful that a Latino politician was able to gain access to it, relying precisely on his roots, displaying a willingness to speak and learn the Spanish language, and showing a positive attitude towards the Hispanic language and culture—if only as a recognition to the efforts of a Mexican grandmother, who made it possible for the Castro brothers to live the American dream. Julián Castro may end up being the first Hispanic to reach the White House, but there is no doubt that in order to achieve this goal he will strive to improve his command of Spanish. That is what would be expected by millions of voters who believe that, even after three generations, the Spanish language remains useful and socially relevant.