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# THE LIBRE INITIATIVE:

The Koch Brothers' New Focus on Winning Latino Voters



In September 2011, the Center for Public Integrity reported that former Bush administration official Daniel Garza had launched the Libre Initiative, a new group dedicated to bringing Latino voters back into the fold of the Republican Party. Garza declined to say where he found the funding for his new group, but he did mention that he had approached “representatives of the Koch family.”

That seems to have been an understatement. When tax records became available, the Center for Responsive Politics found that by late 2012, Libre had been the beneficiary of \$3.8 million from two Koch front groups. This makes up at least half of the \$7.1 million in revenue that Libre brought in in the 2011 and 2012 fiscal years.

But the Kochs’ influence in Libre doesn’t end with funding it. In an investigation earlier this year, ProPublica found that Libre not only receives millions of dollars of funding from the Koch network but appears to be controlled by it as well.

Using a strategy common to Koch groups, Libre was organized as a trust, with Garza as trustee. But a group with the enigmatic name of THGI has the power to remove Garza from his post. There is little public information about THGI, except that it was formed by the same attorney who formed a number of other Koch-connected groups with mysterious strings of letters for names.

Thanks in part to the generous backing of the Kochs, Libre has expanded quickly. According to the group’s website, it now has offices in eight states, including in Nevada, where it is positioning itself to try to woo Latino voters away from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in 2016. (Latino Decisions estimated that Reid won 94 percent of the Nevada Latino vote in 2010, helping to cement his victory in a close reelection race.)

In Nevada, Libre originally shared an office with the Koch-backed group Americans for Prosperity but later moved in an apparent effort to distance itself from AFP, which in 2010 honored fiercely anti-immigrant Arizona state Sen. Russell Pearce as its “legislator of the year.”



*Groups backed by conservative mega-donors David and Charles Koch (left) have provided millions to the Libre Initiative, a Latino outreach group run by Republican operative Daniel Garza (right).*



## **Libre promotes a stable of issues dear to the Corporate Right: eliminating many business regulations, opposing a hike in the minimum wage, attacking investment in green energy, opposing the extension of unemployment benefit and busting unions.**

### **Trying to Repair the Republican Brand With Latinos**

So what are the Kochs paying for with Libre?

One of the biggest stories coming out of the 2012 election was the role that Latino voters played in reelecting President Obama. Latinos voted for Obama over Mitt Romney by a 71-27 point margin, cutting back on the large gains that George W. Bush had made among Latinos, which began to slip when Sen. John McCain ran against Obama in 2008.

Polls after the 2012 election showed that Latinos left the Republican Party en masse both because they agreed with Democrats on important issues and had developed strongly negative feelings about the GOP after years of racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric. The post-election “autopsy report” commissioned by the Republican National Committee recommended that Republicans “carefully craft” a more inclusive “tone” when speaking about Latinos and even recommended that the party back comprehensive immigration reform. (Neither recommendation seems to have caught on.)

Libre was perfectly positioned to be what the Associated Press called a “shadow GOP,” helping to carry this supposedly kinder and gentler Republican message to Latino voters while continuing to push the GOP’s economic policies — many of which disproportionately hurt Latinos.

The group bills itself as a “non-partisan, non-profit grassroots organization” that is “dedicated to informing the U.S. Hispanic community about the benefits of a constitutionally limited government, property rights, rule of law, sound money supply and free enterprise through a variety of community events, research and policy initiatives that protect our economic freedom.”

In practice, that means that Libre promotes a stable of issues dear to the Corporate Right: eliminating many business regulations, opposing a hike in the minimum wage, attacking investment in green energy, opposing the extension of unemployment benefits and busting unions.

The group has spent much of its energy and funding pushing one central Republican strategy: attacking the Affordable Care Act and trying to use the issue to bring down Democratic elected officials. In January 2014, Libre reported that it had spent \$700,000 running anti-Obamacare ads against two vulnerable Latino Democratic congressmen in Florida and Texas. In April 2014, it rolled out an additional \$700,000 in ads attacking two Arizona Democrats for their Affordable Care Act support.

Meanwhile, Hispanics make up a disproportionate number of the uninsured in the United States.

In September 2014, Libre launched a bilingual online ad campaign attacking Democratic senators Kay Hagan in North Carolina and



Mark Udall in Colorado as well as vulnerable U.S. House members in Florida, Texas and Arizona. The officially “nonpartisan” ads featured Latino voters from several states remarking on the “disaster” of the economy, then show an unflattering photograph of the elected official in question with the message: “Vote against wasteful spending in the continuing resolution.” In one North Carolina ad, a woman standing in a kitchen said, “Kay Hagan’s votes have hurt our families. Tell her to stop working against us.” Libre launched a website with each of the ads mentioning the officials’ votes for the Affordable Care Act.

In June 2014, the group acted as a GOP attack dog when it went after Florida Rep. Joe Garcia for sardonically remarking that “communism works.” Although it was clear from the context of the remark that Garcia meant the absolute opposite, conservatives desperately tried to use it against him.

Libre is also making an effort to reach out to the Religious Right to encourage the movement to appeal more to Latino voters. Libre spokeswoman Rachel Campos-Duffy spoke at a prayer breakfast hosted by Ralph Reed’s Faith and Freedom Coalition in 2013, where she criticized school breakfast programs for low-income students, saying that they infringed on

family bonding. Later in the year, Campos-Duffy made an appearance at a women’s Religious Right event in Florida alongside activists like Star Parker, Anita Staver and Jan Morgan.

Libre has also hired former National Association of Evangelicals official John Méndez to direct its outreach to the pastors and faith groups. In an interview with the Pacific Justice Institute last year, Méndez said that he was working to push conservative economics to Latino pastors, stressing the frequent Religious Right claim that such principles are found in both the Constitution and the Bible:

*We’re trying to teach the Hispanic community on what are the principles of economic freedom and free enterprise. Especially in the church: The Hispanic pastor will teach his congregants on the prosperity of God, but won’t necessarily teach them on how to manage, maintain, uphold that prosperity. So, we come in and inform them and teach them on those principles of economic freedom and free enterprise from not only a constitutional perspective, but also a biblical perspective.*

Many of Libre’s top staff members have origins in the establishment GOP. Garza worked for the Bush White House, as did Libre’s national

strategic director, Jose Mallea; the group's communications director, Brian Faughnan, has held a series of positions with Republicans on Capitol Hill; and its national spokeswoman, Rachel Campos-Duffy, is a conservative pundit who is married to Republican Rep. Sean Duffy (both were cast members on "The Real World" and met while filming the 1998 season of "Road Rules: All Stars").

Libre also occasionally allies with sitting Republican elected officials, including hosting a Republican gubernatorial debate in Arizona and a prayer breakfast in Texas attended by Gov. Rick Perry.

Although a good portion of its budget goes to ads hammering Democrats, Libre has attempted to make its public face one of community service and outreach. The Associated Press reported on a 2014 event at which Libre distributed Easter baskets at a San Antonio school — packed inside were candy and a bilingual pamphlet about the national debt. The group has also held events handing out school supplies to children, has offered free health clinics and English classes, and has set up shop at Latino community events throughout the country.

These activities have provoked some skepticism. After Sen. Reid pointed out Libre's funding and goals, one Nevada activist told Politico, "A lot of us were already asking questions, because we're all out there in the community, and when a new group shows up and has a lot of money and passes out triple-color T-shirts and throws a grand opening, people start questioning where that money came from."



Libre's national spokeswoman Rachel Campos-Duffy has said that, when it comes to Latinos, Republican have a "tonal problem."



## “Supporting” Immigration Reform

One issue on which Libre varies from the GOP party line is immigration.

On its website, Libre backs immigration reform but stops just short of endorsing a path to citizenship for those living in the country without documentation. Instead, it backs a more ambiguous “legal path” for some undocumented immigrants, including for DREAMers (Americans who were brought to the country without documentation as children).

In April 2013, Garza endorsed the Senate “Gang of Eight” proposal for immigration reform, which included a path to citizenship. But just the previous month, speaking on a panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Garza said that “getting citizenship ... may not be politically viable, and I think we need to be politically astute about this.”



Notably, every Democratic lawmaker whom Libre launched an ad against in September 2014 voted for or expressed support for the Gang of Eight bill. But the candidates whom the ads were meant to help have not all been so supportive. Some of Libre's ads attacked Sen. Kay Hagan of North Carolina, who voted for the Gang of Eight bill; her Republican opponent, Thom Tillis, said he would have voted against it. Likewise, Libre ran ads against Democratic Rep. Pete Gallego of Texas, a supporter of comprehensive immigration reform whose opponent had indicated that he would oppose reform. Another candidate helped by Libre's ads, Andy Tobin of Arizona, not only opposed comprehensive reform, but he also voted for Arizona's draconian anti-immigrant bill S.B. 1070 and hyped unfounded fears that Central American children fleeing to the southern border could be carrying Ebola.

Libre has tried to play both sides of the debate by giving political cover to anti-reform Republicans, but not going so far as to alienate Latino voters,

full-blown crisis this past summer, Garza echoed the unsubstantiated right-wing talking point that the DACA order was responsible. Then, when the House GOP voted to roll back DACA, Garza accused "both sides" of "playing politics" and said that while he disagreed with the DACA order, it couldn't "be undone without affecting hundreds of thousands of lives."

In May 2014, Libre issued a press release touting House Speaker John Boehner's vague remarks about his desire to take up immigration reform, although Boehner had prevented the Gang of Eight bill from getting a vote in the House. Libre also echoed the House GOP's line that Republicans won't take on immigration reform because the president has "made it difficult to build trust between Congress and the White House."

At the same time, Garza has been trying to sell the issue of immigration reform to Tea Party Republicans. In a speech to an Arizona Tea Party group captured by Yahoo News, Garza made the case for reform but also told the audience that they could start with changing their "tone" in talking about immigration.

"I respectfully submit that we can make real progress advancing our shared values in this community, but we have to be sure that we can talk about an emotional subject like immigration without turning back prospective support," he said.

Campos-Duffy has made the same appeal in her speeches to conservative groups, telling a Minnesota audience in October 2013 that when it comes to Latinos, Republicans have a "tonal problem," especially in how they talk about immigration. "Some of the harsher voices within this party have been able to sort of hijack [the immigration debate], in a way, and I think present a face that doesn't really I think reflect the way so many of us feel about immigrants, about Hispanics," she said.

**Libre has tried to play both sides of the debate by giving political cover to anti-reform Republicans, but not going so far as to alienate Latino voters, a large percentage of whom support immigration reform.**

a large percentage of whom support immigration reform. This means that while Libre says it supports a path to legal status for DREAMers, it has criticized President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program granting deportation relief to DREAMers in the face of congressional inaction.

When thousands of Central American children fleeing to the U.S. southern border became a





Libre has attempted to build connections between GOP candidates and Latino voters. In 2013, Florida Governor Rick Scott appeared at a Libre prayer breakfast in Orlando alongside Libre Executive Director Daniel Garza.

But even in denouncing the GOP's inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric, Garza has walked a narrow line. Garza has bemoaned the GOP's tendency toward anti-immigrant rhetoric and flat-out condemned Rep. Don Young's use of an anti-Latino in March 2013, calling it "distasteful" and "insulting."

At the same time, he has bristled at Democratic characterizations of Republicans as too anti-immigrant. "This notion from the liberal side, or this picture that they've painted that conservatives do not care about minorities is defamation of the worst kind. It's almost evil," he said at the CPAC panel.

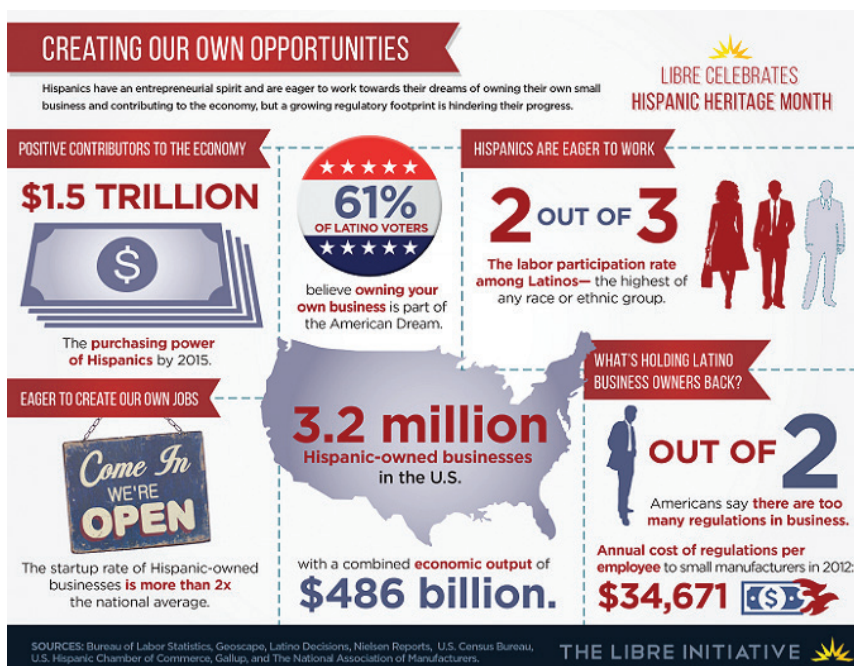
Libre has collaborated with the far-right Media Research Center to accuse Spanish-language media of having a liberal bias.

Libre's support for immigration reform, or something resembling immigration reform, seems to be less a mandate from its funders than a political necessity.

The Koch brothers don't seem particularly concerned with immigration reform, as evidenced by the many anti-immigrant GOP candidates who benefit from the outside spending of the Kochs' wide network of groups. For instance, the Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity alone spent nearly \$35 million opposing President Obama's reelection bid against Mitt Romney, who promised to veto the DREAM Act and embraced the extreme anti-immigrant doctrine of "self-deportation."

Libre's efforts reflect the Republican Party's plan to increase its outreach to Latinos without alienating its members who oppose immigration reform or have a penchant for making offensive anti-immigrant or anti-Latino remarks. The party has been hiring Latino outreach staffers, even as its national platform defends notorious anti-immigrant bills in states like Alabama and Arizona.

Libre, like the GOP, may find that nods toward immigration reform on top of a platform that alienates working Americans will fool nobody.



The Libre Initiative holds up government regulation as the single most powerful force blocking the Latino community's advancement.

In an effort to bring Latino voters into the conservative fold, the Koch brothers have built **the Libre Initiative**. The organization, designed to spread “free market principles” within the Latino community, has offices in states across the country and has spent lavishly to attack Democrats and push a far-right economic agenda.

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