



## How Conservative Political Organizations Engage and Try to Recruit Left-Leaning Constituencies

**Angie Bautista-Chavez**, Johns Hopkins University

**Sarah E. James**, Gonzaga University

Following the Republican losses in the 2012 presidential election, Republican National Committee strategists recommended that the party invest resources in recruiting Latino, millennial, and female voters. Although many Latinos do not express strong partisan attachments, data on attitudes and voting show that they tend to support Democrats. Millennial partisanship reflects similar trends. To build support for the Republican Party among these demographic groups, GOP strategists proposed measures that the party should pursue, along with other approaches best handled through allied organizations that could fashion their own strategies to draw constituencies toward the Republican Party.

The Koch network – an assemblage of ultra-free-market oriented organizations that has grown to enormous prominence in U.S. politics under the direction of multi-billionaires David and Charles Koch and hundreds of wealthy political donors who work with them – has worked to answer this call to build conservatism through three organizations launched in 2011. The Libre Initiative and Generation Opportunity (GenOpp for short) target Latinos and millennials respectively. Meanwhile, a third organization called Concerned Veterans for America has sought to mobilize veterans, many of whom are already open to conservative messages. In our research we document and analyze the tactics deployed in these organized efforts to build support for conservative policies and politics.

### The Libre Initiative, Generation Opportunity, and Concerned Veterans for America

Libre, GenOpp, and Concerned Veterans for America all advocate for conservative values and policies. GenOpp's mission is to educate millennials on the value of economic deregulation and to hold policymakers accountable for conservative economic policies. The organizational mission of Libre is to develop a network of "pro-liberty" Hispanic activists to address economic disadvantages facing this community in the United States. Concerned Veterans for America aims to mobilize veterans to "preserve the freedom and prosperity" that they served to defend.

To reach out to constituencies not already clearly oriented to conservatives or the GOP, both GenOpp and Libre organize events to educate their target audiences about the principles of economic freedom. They conduct research and disseminate policy ideas through blogs, social media sites, and emails. All three Koch groups, including Concerned Veterans, target electorally significant swing states with their events and outreach. Given the small vote gaps between Democratic and Republican candidates in such states, small shifts in constituency support could significantly tip the balance toward the Republican Party. We compare the

strategies of Concerned Veterans for America to Libre and GenOpp to highlight differences in outreach strategies that depend on constituency characteristics and prior political leanings.

## Understanding How Organizations Conduct Outreach

To understand how civic organizations choose groups to contact and how they proceed, scholars have traditionally relied on self-reports surveys, ethnographies, and experiments. Although each of these empirical strategies offers useful insights, they do not allow for an examination of the varied approaches organizations pursue across time, groups, and places. Our approach relies instead on public organizational data. To examine how the three groups structure outreach efforts, we draw on descriptions of events between 2011 and 2016 as described on the websites of Libre, GenOpp, and Concerned Veterans for America. Using event descriptions in conjunction with organization mission statements, blog posts, and staff biographies, allows us to compile a comprehensive picture of outreach efforts. Our data reveal the distinctive approaches used these to reach varied target audiences:

- Each organization has crafted a **uniquely tailored message** to appeal to its target constituency. GenOpp emphasizes deregulation of the sharing economy and economic liberty, concepts that appeal to college students. Libre, on the other hand, appeals to Latinos and their immigrant backgrounds through messages that feature the pursuit of social mobility and the American dream. In turn, Concerned Veterans for America frames its mobilization requests as a continuation of veteran commitments to duty and service to their country.
- GenOpp and Libre **differentiate their outreach according to the target group's experience with conservatism**. Libre designs its events to expose Latinos to the Libre brand and to provide practical non-political information, such as how to obtain a driver's license. In contrast, most GenOpp events offer conservative policy information and try to draw millennials into political activism in favor of conservative policies. Relying on its target group's established political affinities, Concerned Veterans for America emphasizes political participation and mobilization on behalf of conservative candidates and policies.
- **Events are sponsored in different ways**. GenOpp and Concerned Veterans for America are the sole sponsors of almost 90 percent of their events – suggesting that they can attract people from their target groups. Libre, on the other hand, relies on partnering with already established Latino-serving institutions to gain access to new communities. Latinos may not actively seek out conservative-branded events, but they may engage with a Libre-run booth at a church-sponsored event. Or they may go to an event co-sponsored by a Hispanic business association. These approaches to event ownership may help each organization gain access in ways that open doors and further communication.
- The **products and opportunities offered at events vary according to what each group thinks its target audience cares about**. GenOpp advertises social opportunities and free food, alcohol, and branded merchandise, while Libre advertises assistance from experts about health care, family finances, small business ownership, and educational opportunities. Concerned Veterans for America runs patriotic themed events for veterans and their families, including shooting-range outings, sports leagues, and boot camp training sessions.

Our findings about Libre and GenOpp are especially important for understanding American politics today. Compared to political party outreach usually focused on winning the next election, partisan-aligned

organizations like GenOpp and Libre are investing in the longer term to reach new constituencies projected to grow in political relevance, especially in battleground states and regions. Understanding how such outreach efforts work provides important new insights in an era of sharp partisan polarization and fast-changing demographic realities.