



Hobby School of Public Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Civic Engagement Boot Camp Agenda

Friday, Oct. 2, 2026

10 a.m.-3:15 p.m.

9:30 a.m.-10 a.m.:	Check-in	
10 a.m.-10:03 a.m.:	Welcome	Jessica Ruland , MPP <i>Program Director, Internships Lecturer, Public Policy Hobby School of Public Affairs</i>
10:03 a.m.-11 a.m.:	Opening Keynote & Civic Storytelling “What is Your Civic Why?”	Annie Benifield Johnson , Ph.D. <i>CEO & President Houston Voting Initiative</i>
11 a.m.-12:15 p.m.:	Representation & Solving the Issues “The Ultimate Civic Escape Room”	Tanisha Manning , J.D. <i>Founder & Executive Director Engaged Voters</i>
12:15 p.m.-1 p.m.:	Get Vote Ready Lunch “Bookmark Your Voting Game Plan”	Helen de Sampaio <i>Field Organizer BakerRipley</i>
1 p.m.-2:15 p.m.:	Writing & Delivering Public Testimony “Say It for the Record: The Civic Mic Drop”	Leticia Ortega <i>Texas Field Manager Mi Familia en Acción</i>
		Alejandra Cajero <i>Texas Program Manager Mi Familia en Acción</i>
2:15 p.m.- 3:15 p.m.:	Ballot Ready: Midterms, Mock Votes & More	Billy Nguyen <i>Election Coordinator Harris County Clerk’s Office</i>

Meet the Fall 2026 Speakers



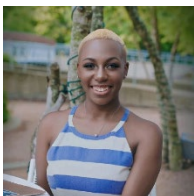
Jessica Ruland O'Connor, Program Director, Hobby School of Public Affairs

Jessica Ruland O'Connor directs the undergraduate internship programs in Houston, Austin and Washington, D.C. at the Hobby School. She also leads civic engagement initiatives and student-centered special projects designed to expand access to experiential learning and strengthen democratic participation. Since 2025, O'Connor received national recognition for the Hobby School's nonpartisan voter engagement efforts through the Students Learn Students Vote Ask Every Student grant, which aims to increase college student participation in the democratic process. She earned a Master of Public Policy and a bachelor's degree in political science. Her public service journey began as a Civic Houston Intern and as a Leland Fellow on Capitol Hill, transformative experiences that inform her work with students today. Before joining the Hobby School, O'Connor worked on the public policy team at the Greater Houston Partnership, coordinating policy committees and supporting initiatives on issues critical to Houston's economic growth and quality of life.



Dr. Annie Johnson Benifield, Ph.D., CEO and President, Houston Voting Initiative

Annie Benifield Johnson, Ph.D., is the CEO and president of the Houston Voting Initiative and a lifelong advocate for civic engagement. She was the first woman of color to serve as president of the League of Women Voters of Houston and has spent more than 30 years advancing civic education and voter outreach. A professor emerita at Lone Star College-Tomball, Johnson has led voter registration efforts at naturalization ceremonies and served in leadership roles on advisory boards and committees focused on equity and participation. She has received numerous honors, including the Yellow Rose Award from the Texas governor's office. Through education, advocacy and collaboration, Johnson Benifield remains committed to empowering communities and ensuring every eligible citizen has the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.



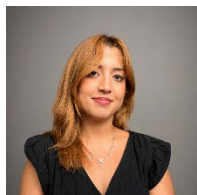
Tanisha Manning, Founder and Executive Director, Engaged Voters

[Tanisha Manning](#) is an attorney, civic engagement leader, and founder and executive director of Engaged Voters, a Houston-based nonprofit dedicated to developing informed, engaged, and empowered civic leaders, with a particular focus on young Black communities.

With a career spanning public policy, community engagement, criminal justice, and advocacy, Manning has worked to make government more accessible and responsive to the communities it serves. She

serves as director of external affairs for the Harris County District Attorney's Office and as an adjunct professor of criminal justice at the University of Houston.

Manning earned her Juris Doctor from Tulane University Law School and her bachelor's degree from Philander Smith University, a historically Black institution. Through Engaged Voters, she combines civic education, leadership development, and exposure to government and public policy to help equip the next generation to participate in the decisions that affect their communities.



Helen de Sampaio, Field Organizer, BakerRipley

Helen de Sampaio (she/her) is a field organizer at BakerRipley, where she supports civic engagement efforts that connect Houston-area residents with opportunities to participate in their communities. She has experience in grassroots organizing, voter engagement and community-building. Sampaio holds a bachelor's degree in political science, with a minor in phronesis from the Honors College at the University of Houston and is currently pursuing a master's degree in public policy at the University of Houston.



Leticia Ortega, Texas Field Manager, My Familia en Acción

Leticia “Letty” Ortega is a Houston-based organizer and advocate with more than a decade of experience advancing immigrant rights, civic engagement and community-led policy change. She serves as Texas Field Manager with Mi Familia en Acción, where she leads organizing, advocacy and leadership development efforts across the state.

In Houston, Ortega helped lead the coalition campaign that successfully secured a city ordinance strengthening protections for immigrant residents and limiting local involvement in federal immigration enforcement. Her work focuses on building community power and ensuring that immigrant families and working people have a meaningful voice in the decisions that shape their lives. Ortega holds a degree in sociology from Bryn Mawr College.



Alejandra Cajero, Texas Program Manager, My Familia en Acción

Alejandra “Ale” Cajero is the Texas Program Manager at Mi Familia en Acción, where she leads statewide initiatives focused on youth leadership, citizenship and environmental justice. A lifelong Houstonian and first-generation college graduate, she earned bachelor's degrees in political science and broadcast journalism from the University of Houston and was a 2019 Hobby Fellow. Inspired by her parents' immigration journey, Ale is dedicated to supporting naturalization efforts, strengthening civic participation and creating opportunities for residents to make their voices heard.



Billy Nguyen, Education Coordinator, Harris County Clerk's Office

Billy Nguyen is a Houston native and community engagement professional dedicated to expanding civic participation and helping young people understand the importance of elections. Through nonpartisan voter education and outreach, Nguyen works with students, first time voters and community members to make the voting process more accessible, relatable and less intimidating. At the heart of Nguyen's work is the belief that young people deserve the knowledge and opportunities to see themselves as active participants in their communities. Civic engagement does not begin at the voting booth. It begins with opportunities to learn, ask questions and understand that their voice matters.

Born and raised in Houston, Nguyen remains deeply rooted in the community they serve. As a parent of two sons, they are motivated by a commitment to build a generation that is informed, involved and engaged in civic life.