



2012
A Year of Progress



Creating More Voters and Better Citizens

Vision

The Annette Strauss Institute envisions a democracy where all citizens are informed, vote, and are actively involved in improving their communities.

Mission

Through nonpartisan research, education, and outreach, the Institute seeks to understand and overcome obstacles to civic engagement.

A Letter from our Director

To our friends and supporters,

When UT College of Communication Dean Roderick Hart first approached me about coming to UT to become director of the Annette Strauss Institute, I was delighted and somewhat daunted by the prospect. Dean Hart is, after all, the very definition of a tough act to follow.

Since Dean Hart founded the Institute 12 years ago, he has lead it admirably, inspiring us with his eloquence, vision, and good judgment. It is my deep honor to do all I can to pursue the Institute's reinvigorated commitment to creating more voters and better citizens.

The past year has been an exciting one of renewal and growth at the Institute. Through strategic planning, we have clarified our vision and our unique mission: To understand and overcome obstacles to civic engagement. By seizing opportunities to hire new staff, we have added to our intellectual strength and our development capacity. By revising our name to the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, we better conveyed the encompassing reach of our mission. And by refashioning our printed materials and website, we improved our communications and outreach.

Opposite: Students discuss current issues at White House Youth Town Hall.

Accomplishments of which we are particularly proud this past year include expanding UT Votes, which has already registered 100,000 young Texans, to a state-level Texas Votes initiative. We were honored to be approached by the White House this spring to host a nonpartisan town hall meeting for young Americans to identify problems in their communities and work together toward solutions. Meanwhile, our successful *Speak Up! Speak Out!* program reached 500 high school and middle school students around Texas this year. And this fall, we launched a promising partnership with KUT and KLRU to host a series of public dialogues on the problems of political and civic disengagement in Texas. These and other new and expanded programs are described further in the pages ahead.

On the research front, our assistant director for research, Dr. Talia Stroud, won the International Communication Association's Book of the Year award for *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (Oxford University Press, 2011). And Dean Hart has a new book coming out soon, called *Political Tone: How Leaders Talk and Why* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) — the latest installment in his multi-volume collection of systematic data on how America's civic voice has evolved over time.

The Annette Strauss Institute has always attracted the brightest, hardest-working people who demonstrate every day their passionate commitment to enhancing civic engagement. This year we are very pleased to have added to our staff the talented Cathryn Seymour Dorsey as our new associate director for development and the dynamic Ann Beeson as our newest senior fellow.

Looking ahead, we see reason for renewed commitment to our mission. Many obstacles to civic engagement loom large, including the lack of civility in political discourse and citizens' lagging attention to public affairs. In an era of widespread civic apathy and political disaffection, our mission is more vital than ever. With every young person who gains a sense of himself or herself as a citizen, we all gain a better foothold on our country's future.

Thank you for your continued support. I welcome your thoughts and suggestions as we move forward toward our vision of a more engaged America, and I look forward to working with you in the years to come.



Dr. Regina G. Lawrence
Director, Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life



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for Civic Life

Dr. Regina Lawrence is a nationally recognized authority on the role of media in public discourse about politics and policy.

Lawrence holds the Jesse H. Jones Centennial Chair in Communication in the UT Austin School of Journalism, where she teaches courses in political communication, women and the news, and media, youth, and civic engagement.

Her two latest books are *Hillary Clinton's Run for the White House: Gender Politics and the Media on the Campaign Trail* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009) and *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Lawrence holds a PhD in political science from the University of Washington and an MA in political science from the University of Colorado. She has served as a research fellow at Harvard University, chair of the Political Communication section of the American Political Science Association, and book editor of the journal *Political Communication*.

She has written numerous articles analyzing media coverage of politics, high-profile news events, and policy issues. Articles she has authored and co-authored have appeared in *Journal of Communication*, *Political Communication*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*.



UT students register to vote at Hook the Vote Rally.

Research

This past year, faculty affiliated with the Annette Strauss Institute published research, received grants, and initiated projects that furthered public understanding of media, politics, and civic life. Programs housed at the Institute, including the Office of Survey Research, Project Vote Smart, the Campaign Mapping Project, and the Patricia Witherspoon Awards, generated exciting new research.

Dean Roderick Hart, along with University of Kansas Assistant Professor Jay Childers and University of Texas doctoral candidate Colene Lind, has a forthcoming book, *Political Tone: How Leaders Talk and Why* (University of Chicago Press, 2013). The book stems from the Campaign Mapping Project, a multi-year comparison of presidential campaign discourse. The Campaign Mapping Project continued this fall as the closely fought presidential election unfolded.

Director Dr. Regina Lawrence traveled to New Hampshire and South Carolina to observe and interview campaign reporters about how they use social media. The interviews provided the basis for a paper called “Campaign News in the Time of Twitter,” prepared for the annual American Political Science Association meeting. Lawrence then

launched the second leg of that study, examining news during the presidential general election season.

Assistant Director Dr. Talia Stroud received a grant from the Omidyar Foundation to analyze how to cultivate news audiences online. Her research promises to help news outlets discover how to make political news more engaging while encouraging news consumers to consider political perspectives different from their own.

Project Vote Smart's Legislative Research Internship Program offered 30 undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity to conduct legislative research on some of the most exciting and divisive issues of our time. Based on research done by the students, Project Vote Smart has just released the 2012 presidential and congressional version

of its interactive VoteEasy tool, which helps voters learn where candidates stand on important issues.

The Office of Survey Research has conducted focus groups and surveys for clients ranging from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to the Killeen Independent School District. OSR's research on behalf of UT's Bureau of Business Research and the Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce was featured on the UT Austin homepage.

The Annual Patricia Witherspoon Awards support graduate student research on public service, civic life, and citizenship.

Journalism graduate student **Angela Lee** used funding from her Witherspoon Award to conduct a survey on why people seek out news. Lee's research demonstrated that having positive beliefs about news motivates people to consume more news about politics and public affairs. This research suggests that attention to news could be encouraged by building positive beliefs about the value of news.

Joshua Scacco, a graduate student in the Communication Studies Department, conducted an experiment examining the influence of citizens' expectations of the president on their levels of civic engagement. The results suggest that news reports of younger voters being disengaged during the 2012 election because of unmet expectations from President Obama may be overstated.



Top: Dean Roderick Hart and Speaker Joe Straus at Careers in Politics event.
Bottom: Assistant Director Dr. Talia Stroud.



Joshua M. Scacco

Communication Studies doctoral student studying political communication

“At the Annette Strauss Institute, I have been able to apply what I have learned in class to my research on how presidents use public rhetorical appeals to set expectations of their policy performance.”



UT Votes encourages students to register to vote.

Outreach

In addition to researching the barriers to civic engagement, the Institute works directly with the community to put its findings into practice. Over the past 12 years, the Institute has learned that citizens are disengaged and cynical about civic life for a host of reasons. The Institute takes this complicated challenge seriously and works to address it in partnership with the public.

Election 2012 Fever

Presidential elections are an especially important time because they shine a light on the effects of a disengaged electorate and rally democracy's supporters to its cause. Some of the initiatives the Institute has undertaken to strengthen our democracy and engage more voters include:

Students Creating Messages about the Importance of Voting. The TexElects contest invites middle and high school students to design and create messages about the importance of voting. Approximately 3,000 student-created posters were distributed through the Institute's coalition of campus voter registration organizations, teachers, schools, and the media.

Students Taking on Voter Education and Registration. Building on our proven success with UT Votes, a nonpartisan, student-led voter registration and education

organization, the Institute launched a bold new initiative to create a statewide coalition of campus voter registration efforts called Texas Votes. Texas Votes is now active on nine university campuses from San Antonio to Dallas, with the potential to reach more than 200,000 students.

Training the Next Generation for Civic Leadership.

Funded by a grant from the Hatton W. Sumners Foundation, the New Politics Forum presented an exciting series of events including the Careers in Politics Conference, Campaign Bootcamp, and the 2012 Post-Election Debriefing. These events featured guests as diverse as Texas Speaker of the House Joe Straus and PBS NewsHour Politics Editor Christina Bellantoni. Close to 300 students participated in NPF events this year, and exit surveys indicate that participants showed dramatic gains in their political knowledge and their belief that they can make a difference.

Building Awareness of the Civic Engagement Crisis

This fall, the Annette Strauss Institute hosted two events to call attention to declining rates of civic involvement and to consider causes and solutions.

News and Dialogue Series: Why Bother? In partnership with public broadcasters KLRU and KUT, the Institute is co-hosting a news and dialogue series, “Why Bother? Engaging Texans in Democracy Today.” Beyond raising awareness, these dialogues aim to get people talking — the skeptics and the true believers — about why they participate and why they don’t. Simultaneously, the Institute and its partner organizations are broadcasting, live streaming, and generating radio stories about why Texans have one of the lowest voting rates nationally and what we can do about it.

Harvard Institute Partners to Address Political Polarization. More than 180 students and community members participated in an October forum with the Harvard Institute of Politics’ director, Trey Grayson, and political strategists Mark McKinnon and Linda Moore Forbes. The conversation explored what drives political polarization and what citizens can do to bring our political system back from the brink.

Overcoming Obstacles to Civic Engagement

More than ever, the Institute is trying to increase the reach of our programming by inviting more people to participate and supporting those who have an interest but limited means.

Engaging Emerging Citizens. Students in the *Speak Up! Speak Out!* (SUSO) civic education program are working hard in their communities to research and advocate for local and school-based community needs. This year, more than 500 students and 50 community leaders will have



Dallas *Speak Up! Speak Out!* students prepare their exhibit.

participated in the program. In addition, the Institute has created a promotional and instructional video and added a series of standards-aligned lessons for coaching middle school grades (6-8) through the SUSO process.

Supporting Hands-on Civic Learning. The Theodore H. Strauss Civic Internship Program encourages young people considering careers in public service by awarding stipends to undergraduates conducting internships in government, political, or nonprofit work. This year’s winners, Natasha Ahmed, Sparkle Grueso, Micaela Neumann, and Alisha Patel, interned with U.S. Representative Michael McCaul, Texas State Representative Ryan Guillen, Hospice Austin, LIVESTRONG, and the Texas Historical Foundation.



Naomi Brisco-Rhone

Burnet Middle School History Teacher, Former *Speak Up! Speak Out!* student and mentor

Teacher of the Year 2011

“*Speak Up! Speak Out!* gives my students a voice and a realization that they can have a voice in their communities. The whole experience is empowering for them.”

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The Strauss Legacy

The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life is named for Annette Greenfield Strauss, former Dallas mayor, community leader, and philanthropist. Mrs. Strauss was an extraordinary woman whose accomplishments and commitments were legion. By the time she became Dallas’ first woman mayor, Mrs. Strauss had spent 40 years as a volunteer, community activist, and city council member. As mayor, she brought together the city’s diverse communities during a time of great change and challenge. A fervent fundraiser, she raised millions of dollars for education, the homeless, health care, and the arts. It is our honor to further her legacy.

How You Can Help

The Annette Strauss Institute has a number of opportunities for your involvement. From program endowments and scholarships to individual gifts and sponsorships, your support can have a lasting impact on individual lives and the quality of civic life in Texas and the United States. Every gift is important, no matter its size.



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