

CASE STUDIES ON ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

**BUILDING CIVIC POWER +
PRACTICING CO-GOVERNANCE:**

**Equitable Access to Flood Recovery
in Harris County, TX**



March 2022

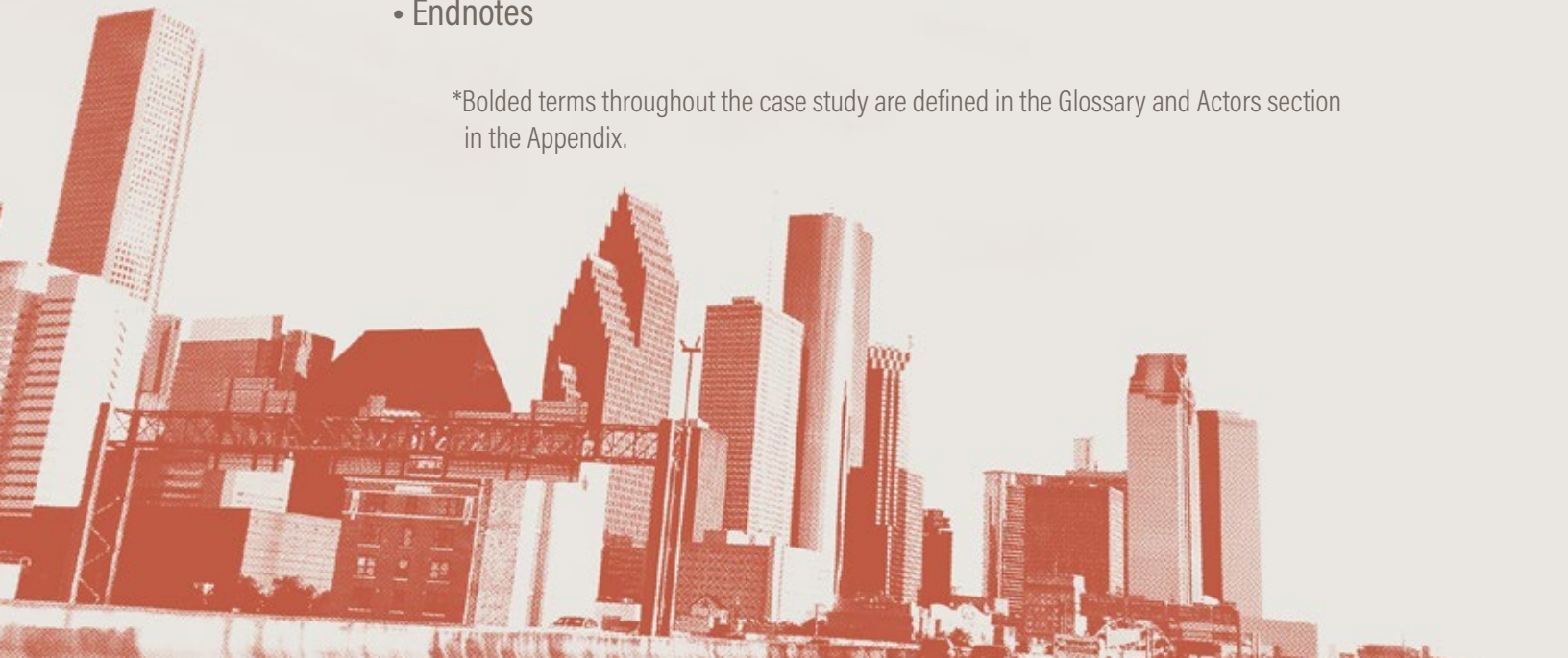
TOP
Texas Organizing Project

Demos

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*Bolded terms throughout the case study are defined in the Glossary and Actors section in the Appendix.



Introduction

Hurricane Harvey struck Harris County, Texas—which includes the city of Houston—in August 2017, and a year later many residents still had blue tarps draped over gaping holes in their homes.¹ Particularly for poor African American, Latinx, and immigrant residents of neighborhoods like Houston Gardens and Kashmere Gardens, it was a nightmarish déjà vu. They had suffered years of disinvestment and prolonged disaster conditions after Hurricane Ike, in 2008.

Immediately following Hurricane Harvey, community organizers from the grassroots nonprofit organization **Texas Organizing Project (TOP)** went door-knocking in Harris County's hardest hit neighborhoods.² Founded in 2009, TOP organizes Black and Latino communities in Dallas, Harris, and Bexar counties with the goal of transforming Texas into a state where working people of color have the power and representation they deserve.³ The organization already had deep relationships and a base in these neighborhoods from work in the aftermath of previous hurricanes. TOP had also organized to improve housing conditions, increase voter turnout, and mitigate impacts of climate change.

Organizers could smell the mold ravaging homes up and down so many city blocks. Even people with respiratory problems were simply living with this mold or staying in temporary trailers outside their homes. Many people had no savings or government help such as housing

vouchers or cash assistance; thus, they had no choice but to stay. TOP organizers distributed food and water and provided grants to smaller grassroots organizations that were helping gut people's homes. They also formed the HOME Coalition, a broad effort to advocate for housing and infrastructure rights, which is still active.

Over \$4 billion in federal recovery aid was funneled to Texas after Harvey, but inequitable distribution of relief left many communities without needed support.⁴ Top organizers and members realized that they would need to push to change the allocation of disaster recovery funding in order to properly assist their Black and brown members. So they began to strategize as to how to shift the way Harris County spent flood prevention money since members could have more influence on local decision making in terms of spending. They were thinking about how to resist the status quo, in which wealthier, whiter communities had greater decision-making power and had always received the lion's share of relief and assistance. TOP determined that the answer was to secure seats for low-income people of color on the local boards and commissions that decide where resources should go. They then embarked on an electoral strategy to ensure that the area's most vulnerable communities had decision-making power within these historically exclusionary institutional bodies—in the process, unseating a long-time incumbent county judge and electing an equity-minded successor, and implementing a racial equity-based governing framework.

What is Economic Democracy at Demos?

This case study is part of Demos' new **Economic Democracy** project, which asks how poor and working-class people, especially in Black and brown communities, can exercise greater control over the economic institutions that shape their lives. This framework has 3 goals:

1. Break up and regulate new corporate power, including Amazon, Google, and Facebook.
2. Expand the meaning of public goods and ensure that services are equitably and publicly administered.
3. Strengthen "co-governance" strategies so that people and public agencies can collectively make decisions about the economy.

With the accelerating frequency of climate disasters, it is especially important to build the power of those most impacted by disasters—often Black, brown, and Indigenous communities—to ensure they have equitable access to the resources needed to recover and move forward.

This case study tells the story of how the Texas Organizing Project pursued an "inside" strategy after Hurricane Harvey. TOP worked with the Harris County Judge they helped elect to create new ways to allocate resources, and trained members to be able to serve on local boards and commissions. At the same time, organizers applied pressure from the "outside," using electoral and issue-based campaigns to ensure equitable distribution of county flood bond funds.

Timeline

June 2001 - Tropical Storm

Allison damages large swaths of North Downtown Houston.

June 2006 - Heavy rainfall floods

3,370 homes, 561 apartments, and 1 nursing home, largely along Berry and Sims Bayous.

September 2008 - Hurricane

Ike causes more than \$28 billion in damage.

July 2012 - Heavy rainfall results in

more than 70 flooded structures in northern Harris County.

August 2014 - Extensive rain floods

109 structures in the Greens Bayou watershed.

December 2015 - Nearly every nation adopts

the Paris Climate accord, vowing to address climate change and its negative impacts.

May 2015 - Memorial Day

flooding devastates more than 6,000 structures, resulting in 7 fatalities. Highest rainfall recorded in Buffalo and Brays Watersheds.

April 2016 - Tax Day Flood in northern

and western Harris County kills 7 people. An estimated 9,820 structures are flooded.

May 2016 - Memorial Day Flood damages

more than 1,300 structures in between Harris County and the Spring Creek watershed in Montgomery County.

June 2017 - President Trump

announces that the United States will withdraw from the Paris Agreement.



August 2017 - Hurricane Harvey causes 36 reported deaths. In hard-hit Harris County, an estimated 154,000 homes and 300,000 vehicles are flooded. Damages total \$125 billion.

August 2018 - Harris County voters approve \$2.5 billion in bonds to finance flood damage reduction projects, including funding for channel conveyance improvements, stormwater detention basins, floodplain land acquisition, floodplain mapping, and improvements to the flood warning system.

November 2018 - Lina Hidalgo elected to lead Harris County Commissioners Court in the role of county judge.

August 2019 - County Commissioners Court passes the Harris Thrives Resolution, committing to evaluate existing flood bond projects based on a new equity-based prioritization framework.

September 2019 - Tropical Storm Imelda floods 3,990 homes in Harris County, the third-largest number ever flooded in a single event in the county.

August 2020 - Harris County Commissioners Court transforms the Harris County Flood Control District Task Force into the Harris County Community Flood Resilience Task Force to focus on equity, health, safety, community engagement, and increased transparency.

November 2020 - The Trump administration officially pulls the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement.

Feb 2021 - Winter Storm Uri overloads Texas' power grid, costing an estimated \$195 to \$295 billion.

April 2021 - Harris County Commissioners Court votes to establish the Office of Boards and Commissions, which is charged with improving the appointments process, expanding the pool of eligible applicants to boards and commissions, and raising public awareness of governance bodies.

September 2021 - The United Nations warns that the global average temperatures are rising along a "catastrophic pathway" and that "climate change is dangerously close to spiraling out of control."³²



The Problem

Climate crisis and inequitable access to disaster relief

As the climate crisis worsens, Black, brown, and Indigenous communities face dire impacts from natural and human-made disasters. Time and again, the federal government's response has deepened racial and income disparities, making it difficult for low-income people of color to participate in our economy and our democracy.

The aftermath of natural disasters diminishes basic economic choices for low-income people of color. Low-income communities and communities of color have less access to money needed to recover, making it harder to bounce back in all areas of their economic lives, from employment to education to wealth building to sustainable economic development. As climate disruption increases the frequency and severity of natural disasters, including superstorms and hurricanes, urban flooding is projected to be one of the most costly and damaging forces in places like Houston.⁵

Hurricane Harvey was a stark example. The damage was extensive and heartbreaking: more than 30,000 Texans were displaced, more than 200,000 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, and at least 68 people were killed, 36 of them in Harris County. The total cost of the recovery was a record \$125 billion.⁶

Immediate, short-term federal relief came through the **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** after Harvey, yet funds were distributed unequally based on race and income. According to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, an average white resident of a higher-income Houston neighborhood received \$60,000 in FEMA assistance, compared to just \$84 for an average Black resident in a low-income neighborhood.⁸ An investigation by researchers at the University of Colorado found that "homeowners who lived on blocks with a greater share of nonwhite residents, as well as lower incomes and credit scores, had a lower chance of getting approved for FEMA grants."⁹

While race and income inequality in government funding has many causes, a significant one is the use of antiquated tools and metrics to calculate how funds should be distributed.¹⁰ The largest share of federal disaster funds pass through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which distributes those funds based upon FEMA's damage assessments. However, FEMA's assessments use a benefit-cost analysis that tends to prioritize neighborhoods with higher property values, which are often white and wealthy, while undervaluing lower-wealth, often Black and brown neighborhoods with low property values.¹¹

Inequity in funding can also be traced to a lack of community voice. The city of Houston alone has 152 boards and commissions that oversee issue areas such as economic development,

building standards, public safety, regulation and licensing, and the environment.¹² Texas boards and commissions that make decisions about disaster-relief policies and funding are often stacked with wealthy, white representatives who are the beneficiaries of political favors.¹³ These entities are often structured in ways that make it difficult for poor people, immigrants, and Black and brown people to participate. Meetings are held during working hours, no childcare or stipends are offered, and there is no translation or accommodations for people with disabilities.



“

We needed to find a way to intervene on the money and organize resistance against the usual way that Harris County spends money, which is in wealthier, whiter communities—places where the houses are worth more money. We wanted to influence the funding, how much money was in those programs, where they spent the money, who they spent the money on, and how they spent the money.

- Celesté Arrendondo-Peterson, Texas4All organizing director (former)



The Solution

Organizing towards equity and democracy in recovery spending

TOP organizers determined that they needed to change how Harris County allocated funds and ensure that the people most impacted by the climate crisis have a seat at the table. To accomplish this, they implemented a 3-part inside-outside strategy: establish a leadership development program, campaign to elect a county judge who shared their values, and conduct co-governance work with bureaucrats to develop an “equity framework” for funding.

Strategy 1: Develop leaders through the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute

In 2017, TOP established the **Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI)**, which trains members and community allies who are women of color to join local governance bodies. This was modeled after a program started by **Urban Habitat**.

“BCLI seemed like a good fit, like a good next step of something that’s stewarding public processes and public dollars,” said Alpa Sridharan, the director of TOP’s BCLI program. “And our members and leaders have on the ground experience, they know where the problems are, what people overlook, because they’ve been overlooked for so long.”

TOP’s leadership development model is designed to grow a cadre of low-income women of color who are equipped to serve in elected or appointed positions.¹⁴ The program provides multilingual training in public speaking, resume writing, and networking for change. Debra Walker, a BCLI alumna and board member of TOP, was part of the first cohort of the BCLI. “We had to get up and stand in front of our own members and talk. And that’s where it gives you strength to move forward,” she said. “Once you can speak, you have a voice—and you didn’t realize you had a voice.” Carmen Ivonne, another BCLI alumna and TOP leader, also described a sense of power: “I learned a lot from all of this training—how to make more power, how to make solutions—because we already know what problems we have in the system. I love to do all this for my community, for my people.”

TOP continues to make BCLI more accessible and effective. They are developing a website that profiles people who have been appointed to boards, with the goal of identifying where the program should focus its efforts. TOP leaders also plan

to organize for more accessible meeting times, so that members and community allies can attend and better keep track of the actions that local boards and commissions are taking.

Strategy 2: Conduct get out the vote organizing to elect an accountable county judge

On the electoral side, TOP organizers understood that they needed to replace the Harris County Judge, the elected chief executive of the county and head of the **Harris County Commissioners Court**. That position holds considerable power over disaster relief, so it was particularly important to push for an ally candidate. Organizers believed that Ed Emmet, the county judge at the time Harvey hit, did not advocate for equitable spending or increased representation of Black and brown communities in decision-making. And so, when he came up for re-election in 2018, TOP got out the vote for his opponent, **Lina Hidalgo**. After Harvey, Hidalgo had been an outspoken critic of resource allocation, thus demonstrating her alignment with TOP’s values. In November 2018, Hidalgo won the election.



Carmen Ivonne, a TOP board member, feels proud of TOP's role in shifting the political landscape of Harris County. "Lina Hidalgo is the only Latina immigrant on the County Commission Court without money in her pocket. Before it was nothing but white people. We changed that," she said.

TOP did not stop at the election but continued to work with Hidalgo through her first term. As Celesté Arredondo-Peterson, the former Texas4All organizing director for TOP, observed, "Once people are on the inside, I, as an advocate, have a tendency to be like, 'Okay, good, we're set, on to the next one, on to the next commission or elected role.' But we have to continue talking with them and enabling them to bring their connection to the community to the work."

Strategy 3: Co-govern to develop an equity framework with the new county judge

Once Hidalgo was in office, TOP worked with bureaucrats in her administration to develop more equitable metrics and processes for allocating funds. A few months before the election, Harris County voters had approved \$2.5 billion in bonds to finance a range of projects that would mitigate storm damage and reduce flooding. TOP leaders pressed the Hidalgo administration for details on which projects would take priority. County leaders did not have a firm answer, but said that they were open to working with community advocates to develop a process.

TOP members embraced the difficult, sometimes tedious work of giving feedback on flood bond funding proposals and built a strong partnership with government officials along the way. TOP leaders pushed county officials to adopt a precise equity framework, despite loud opposition from whiter, wealthier communities that were happy with the status quo.

The result of TOP's co-governance strategy was the passage of the Harris Thrives Resolution in 2019. This resolution included a new equity-centered framework that prioritizes projects for low-income residents who are least able to rebuild on their own.⁷

"The idea was, our folks who live in these neighborhoods know these communities better than you do, so you should listen to them when they tell you where it floods," said Arredondo-Peterson. "The housing department and the county listened to the knowledge that exists in our neighborhoods, and it made our members feel like somebody was taking all of their feedback, then rolling it into actual policy."

The framework was also a direct response to shortcomings in the **cost-benefit analysis** used by the federal government. It evaluates spending using a **Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)** that assesses a community's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster. The factors considered include an area's percentage of residents who are elderly, have limited English proficiency, and live in households without a vehicle.



In addition to advocating for the new prioritization framework, TOP helped the county rewrite the bylaws of its flood task force. Both TOP and representatives from Judge Hidalgo's office strived to make sure appointments to the **Community Flood Resilience Task Force (CFRTF)**—and to future advisory groups—would be done in a timely manner, and would result in members who held a vested interest in the long-term wellbeing of the community. The redesigned CFRTF better represented different segments of the community and will oversee application of the equity framework as well as future flood planning. The bylaws spelled out processes for nominating members, running meetings, and making decisions.

Ripple Effects: A new, community-based approach to disaster-relief spending

In implementing a new prioritization framework and new bylaws for the flood commission, Harris County developed an equity framework for other pots of federal money—a sign of the lasting impact of TOP's work.

In 2020 and 2021, when \$2.3 billion in federal funding came to Harris County and Houston for COVID relief through the **CARES Act** and the **American Rescue Plan**, government officials used an equity metric to evaluate how to spend this money. Additionally, in 2021, Harris County established an Office of Boards and Commissions charged with improving the appointments process, expanding the pool of eligible applicants, and raising

public awareness of governance bodies. This came directly out of TOP's work to help establish the Community Flood Resiliency Task Force and push for more inclusive, accountable boards and commissions.

"The housing department and the county listened to the knowledge that exists in our neighborhoods, and it made our members feel like somebody was taking all of their feedback, then rolling it into actual policy."

- Celesté Arrendondo-Peterson,
Texas4All organizing director
(former)



Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute

The Texas Organizing Project's Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute was formed in 2017. Its creation was inspired by a framework established by Urban Habitat in 2009 to advance equitable policy campaigns, which has proven successful and been replicated in regions like Nashville and the Twin Cities. The BCLI's priority is training low-income women of color to serve on boards and commissions, and it provides ongoing support to graduates who join governance bodies. This pipeline-to-leadership program serves as a channel for people who are directly

impacted by policy choices to have a seat at the decision-making table.

In trainings, participants collaborate with advocates in their communities, including grassroots leaders and policy experts, to develop relationships that can help them advance solutions. After the trainings, BCLI staff help participants get appointed to serve on public boards or commissions and assist new commissioners during their terms of service. Debra Walker, a member of TOP's first BCLI cohort who later founded the Sunnyside Community

Redevelopment Organization, explained, "They gave us the skills. We had to figure out the people we had to deal with and the people we had to go to to speak with. And they showed us how to strategize... I never knew I had that skill set until I met TOP. "

"They showed us how to strategize...I never knew I had that skill until I met TOP."

- Debra Walker, member and President of the Education Fund Board at Texas Organizing Project





Q&A with Christina Quintero

Christina Quintero is 36 years old and a mother of 2. She has been a member of Texas Organizing Project since 2017, when her home and neighborhood were severely damaged by Hurricane Harvey. She assumed a leadership role in providing aid and relief to her community and fellow TOP members, and recently participated in TOP's Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute. Quintero was born and raised in East Houston.

How were you and your community directly affected by Hurricane Harvey?

There are a lot of neighborhoods in Houston that are predominantly Black and brown, that are mostly ignored. Being a new parent, I felt the pain and anguish of what others were experiencing. Even though I lost everything, I knew I was capable of rebuilding it. For some people, this was uncertain. And it wasn't just flooding in their homes, it was them not being able to get help because they lost their paperwork. It was not being able to access medicines because the majority of places were either flooded or the pharmacies weren't open, and they were still recovering from Harvey. It really brought that understanding that it wasn't just a flood, it was the aftermath of a flood—medically, physically, and emotionally—that our people needed to recover from.

How did you get involved with the Texas Organizing Project?

I joined TOP as a member because an organizer knocked on my door, encouraging me to raise my voice for my community and to have a say in how our neighborhood would be treated. TOP staff and members communicated with me every day throughout the aftermath of Harvey, so we had that connection. They called people, checking up on us. That's where I think engaging in community work starts, to see that someone actually cares and to be able to speak up for our neighborhood that has been ignored the majority of the time. When I engaged with TOP, I saw the care and concern they gave us through Harvey, and I found a way to turn the traumatic experience into something positive.

What inspired you to fight for more equity in the Harvey recovery?

When TOP came to our neighborhood, they were giving out food and water kits, and for the first 2 weeks post-Harvey, after I came back from being evacuated, I made myself available whenever I could to help others. It drove me to want equity and accountability for what happened in my neighborhood. It drove me to want answers for why there was so much flooding in Houston. It wasn't just one area, this was a mass flood, so understanding how we deal with a 500-year flood is really understanding the development of our city, and how much overdevelopment was part of the issue. The county judge at the time was adamant about repairing things, but the communities that were highlighted with urgency were those where people had the funds and the insurance to repair their homes.

How did you get involved with the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI), and how was your experience?

Alpa Sridharan, the BCLI director, had mentioned to me back in 2018 that there was a program TOP had to push people in their leadership: the BCLI. She says, "Christina, you've been advocating in Washington, you've been doing a lot of the training for organizing in our communities regarding the floods." After a couple years of her encouraging me, I agreed in 2020 because, during the pandemic, they made it flexible and offered the program virtually. By this time, I'd already had in my mind that a few years from now, once I get an understanding of what it is to be on a board, I want to run for school board. So definitely, this was an opportunity for me to understand power mapping, and what are some of the laws we have to consider when going into these boards.

What has been most impactful to you about the BCLI?

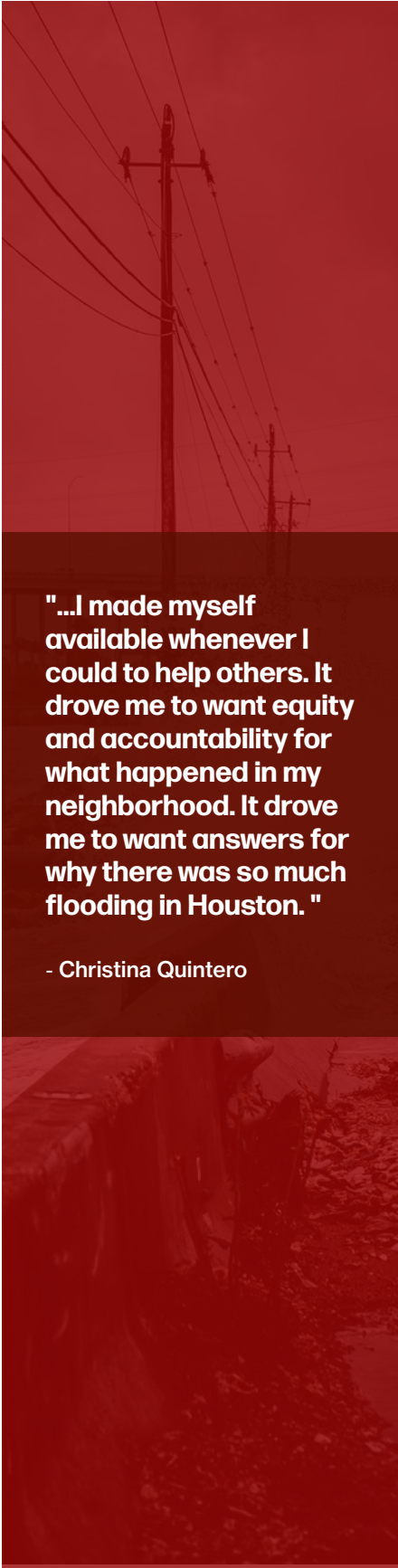
I've really valued being able to connect with other women with the same drive. We do so much training on how we're able to carry ourselves in these boards. But we've also focused on the spiritual and emotional part of it. That's what's going to give us the drive to decide to go to these meetings, to invest time in that. I had to let someone else be my daughter's baseball coach and miss her games so I could go to these meetings, but I understood the grander picture of it.

What do you think are the barriers to participating in local boards and commissions?

The financial aspect plays in for everybody. Definitely having transportation and, for me, it's childcare because I have a special-needs child. And when you go to these board meetings, you see people that are dressed a certain way, they have business-casual clothing, and on the majority of these boards, you're sitting with lawyers, engineers, so it's a bit intimidating. And we had training in Spanish, but we need more Black and brown speakers in other languages, and also the boards are only held in English, so that's a problem for people to access.

What board do you serve on now and how is it going?

I applied for and got a spot on the San Jacinto Regional Flood Board. They really liked the way I interviewed. I was very passionate about flood issues and I had already done some of the work with Judge Hidalgo, so I understood certain aspects of it. This is something that will help my family, it'll help other families, not just in our county. But a lot of the boards still have mostly white members. They are people that know people, that know people, that know people. And I think that culture has to change.



"...I made myself available whenever I could to help others. It drove me to want equity and accountability for what happened in my neighborhood. It drove me to want answers for why there was so much flooding in Houston. "

- Christina Quintero

Opportunities + Lessons

While disaster funding from all levels of government went to housing and preventive infrastructure after Harvey, TOP saw that the communities hit hardest by climate disasters were the least likely to have access to that funding.²¹ A lack of representation on the committees responsible for distributing those funds meant that Black and brown people in the region were consistently overlooked and underfunded during recovery efforts. TOP pressured local officials to adopt equity-driven relief distribution processes, ensuring that future relief efforts would explicitly address the community's infrastructure needs and prioritize those with the greatest need and at the highest risk. TOP's approach to revamp the disaster-recovery system—through electoral organizing and base building, government reforms, and leadership development—suggest a number of lessons about economic democracy:

Use inside and outside strategies to influence policy and empower community members. By simultaneously working alongside government leaders while continuing to push for accountability, TOP was able to build trust between the community and the elected officials tasked with making the federal funding distribution process more transparent. For example, TOP organizers developed a relationship with the director of the city's Housing and Community Development Department, and were able to leverage that connection to get members of the community—who testified to the barriers they faced in accessing relief programs—into meetings with department heads who were in a position to act but who otherwise had no frame of reference for how deeply impacted those communities were by the flooding. TOP members still meet with Harris County staff on tenant/eviction issues, COVID-19 vaccination efforts, and more. Further, the county continues to get requests for more task forces and advisory councils on workers' rights, emergency management, and more.

Local boards and commissions offer ordinary people a chance to take part in local governance to combat the climate crisis—and training can help increase representation. In a large city like Houston, there are many ways for members of the community to shape decisions about disaster response and other issues that affect their well-being. While civic engagement is usually discussed in terms of elections, TOP recognized that local governance bodies could be just as important in increasing civic engagement and democratic participation, and in shaping meaningful policies. In creating BCLI, TOP designed leadership development programs fit for the needs and goals of the community as they sought to build climate resilience.

Community members need comprehensive support to get involved. Through BCLI, TOP learned that working people need material help to engage with boards and commissions. Stipends for participation, childcare, and transportation are essential. So are convenient meeting locations and times as well as language interpretation. BCLI modeled other supports: assisting with the application process for board candidacy and training candidates in administrative procedures.

Community members should not only design but also implement equity frameworks for government programs. After TOP convinced Harris County to develop new equity-based tools for disbursing funds, it continued to demand a role for the community in implementing and testing these tools. For example, TOP organizers suggested creating monitoring committees made up of advocates and community members to review the use of the Harris County Equity Framework in future recovery projects, and provide oversight and feedback on its application.

Employ better indicators to measure need and deliver emergency response to those most in need.

TOP identified the problems with cost-benefit models and pushed Harris County to instead use the Social Vulnerability Index in its flood bond prioritization framework. This policy change acknowledged that poor Black and brown people are harmed most by natural disasters and provided a fairer, more accurate way of allocating funds.

One financial reform can lead to many others.

Already, TOP has seen ripple effects from the flood bond prioritization framework it helped install in Harris County. Government officials have extended this framework to manage spending under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. More recently, the Commissioners Court voted to apply the framework to address funding gaps and finance new recovery projects through the creation of a Flood Resilience Trust.²²



Appendix



The Actors

Harris County Commissioners

Court: As the main governing body of Harris County, the Commissioners Court has administrative, legislative, and judicial responsibilities that include adopting and overseeing an over \$3-4 billion budget; setting tax rates; calling for votes on new bonds; building and maintaining roads and bridges; and overseeing county courthouses, jails, libraries, parks, and the Harris County Flood Control District. The Court consists of a presiding county judge (elected countywide) and 4 county commissioners (elected by district).

County Judge Lina Hidalgo:

Judge Hidalgo was elected in 2018 to lead the Harris County Commissioners Court. She is the first woman in the position of county judge and only the second to serve on the Commissioners Court. By state law, the county judge is also the county's director of emergency management.

Harris County Community Flood Resilience Task Force (CFRTF):

A body established in 2018 by the Commissioners Court to develop and implement flood-resilience planning that takes community needs and priorities into account. The 17 members of the CFRTF are required to represent the geographic, gender, age, racial, and ethnic diversity of Harris County.

Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA):

The federal government's short-term disaster management and assistance agency. FEMA allocated \$119 million to Houston for relief and recovery after Hurricane Harvey, including reimbursement for water extraction and mud clearing, removal of damaged building materials, shelter for city residents, and food and medical supplies.

Texas Organizing Project:

A nonprofit with more than 285,000 members, TOP organizes Black and Latino communities in Harris, Dallas, and Bexar counties through direct action, grassroots lobbying, and electoral organizing. TOP campaigns have focused on everything from climate justice and disaster relief to housing, healthcare, criminal legal reform, immigrant rights, voting rights, and education.

Boards and Commissions

Leadership Institute (BCLI):

This project of TOP, established in 2017, trains Black and Latina women leaders to apply for and serve on local governance bodies, such as the Harris County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, City of Houston Commission on Disabilities, and the Harris County Parks Precinct Steering Committee.

Glossary

American Rescue Plan

A \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus and relief bill signed into law on March 11, 2021 by the Biden administration to help the United States recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. [Key elements of the bill](#) include stimulus checks, increases in the Child Tax Credit, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, an extension of unemployment insurance benefits, as well as \$350 billion in emergency recovery funds for state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments.

Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute

A [leadership program](#) that trains and helps place people of color and other underrepresented community members on local governance bodies. The program was first established in 2009 by Urban Habitat in Richmond, California.

CARES Act

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, or CARES Act, was a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus and relief bill signed into law on March 27, 2020 by the Trump administration. [Key elements of the bill](#) include an extension of unemployment benefits, the creation of a [Paycheck Protection Program](#), stimulus checks, and the establishment of a \$150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund to help address budget gaps that were emerging in states and localities.

Cost-benefit analysis

A methodology measuring all of the direct benefits of a policy or business decision against the costs, often in [dollar terms](#). This calculation has a significant [status quo bias](#) and is not effective in quantifying distributional effects, often creating steeper costs for historically marginalized communities.

Co-governance

A strategy designed to ensure that elected officials are [actively working with communities](#) to draft policies and move them forward in innovative ways such that the people who are most harmed by structural racism and our economic system are part of [co-creating the solutions](#). It encompasses a broad range of approaches that allow people outside and inside the government to [work together to design policy](#).

Inside-outside strategy

A form of activism in which advocates can fight for desired societal changes [within the existing dominant institutions](#) themselves ("inside") and concurrently pursue activism and organizing outside of institutions ("outside"), including through protests, raising public demands, and [other ways](#) of engaging in long-term organizing and movement building work.

Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)

An [index](#) which uses a variety of Census variables often left out of traditional cost-benefit analyses, including poverty rates, lack of vehicle access, and crowded housing, to help local officials assess a community's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster.

Economic democracy

Part of Demos' [new Economic Democracy project](#), which interrogates how poor and working-class people, especially in Black and brown communities, can exercise greater control over the economic institutions that shape their lives. While Demos defines Economic Democracy as a framework that prioritizes the deconcentration and redistribution of power over our economy from the billionaire financier and monopolist class to the multi-racial, multi-ethnic majority, it is also framework used by a number of other advocacy organizations and grassroots groups who may have different interpretations and definitions. For example, the Center for Economic Democracy defines it as an [emerging framework for ways of life that prioritize people and planet over private profits](#) in which communities can collectively decide on how to use land, labor and capital to serve the public good.

Basics on Harris County

- According to the Harris County Flood Control District, a major flood occurs in Harris County approximately every 2 years.²³
- When looking across race, ethnicity and birthplace, Harris County ranks among the most diverse counties in the country:²⁴ 44 percent of residents are Hispanic/Latinx, and 20 percent are Black or African American.²⁵ (Nationally, 18.5 percent of the population is Hispanic/Latinx and 13.4 percent is Black or African American.)²⁶
- Harris County has an overall poverty rate of 15 percent, but the rate for Black and Hispanic/Latinx people is 20 percent.²⁷ By comparison, non-Hispanic white people in the county face a 6.2 percent poverty rate.²⁸
- Harris County has among the highest rates of income inequality in the country (measured by the average income for the top 20 percent of earners divided by the average income of the bottom 20 percent).²⁹
- According to FEMA, Harris County is one of the areas most at risk of natural disasters in the United States.³⁰ Many neighborhoods within the TOP coalition have very high or relatively high rates of disaster risk, including Houston Gardens, Kashmere Gardens, Greens Bayou, and Halls Bayou. Sims Bayou, another TOP neighborhood, is at moderately high risk.³¹



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* Bolded names indicate people interviewed for this case study.



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