

Fault Lines in Our Democracy

Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior,
and Civic Engagement
in the United States

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Preface

When researchers report on gaps in educational attainment and income among different segments of the U.S. population, the most immediate concern is usually the long-term social impact that such gaps imply. As this year's national elections quickly approach, authors Richard J. Coley and Andrew Sum suggest in this report that these gaps pose another, perhaps equally concerning, threat to the nation's well being: They indicate fault lines in our democracy, because they reliably predict which groups are most or least likely to participate in the most fundamental activities of a representative democracy — voting and civic engagement.

Beginning with the dismal state of the civics knowledge of our nation's students, the cornerstone of a strong democracy, the authors document the strong association between individual characteristics — such as age, education, and income — and important civic activities, such as voting and volunteering. Their analyses reveal a startling level of stratification at the nation's

polling stations, from a voting rate of 3.5 percent for voting-age high school dropouts to 80.5 percent for well-off, advanced-degree holders between the ages of 55 and 64. “This,” they write, “represents a serious civic empowerment gap for our nation.”

At ETS, this gap concerns us because we are dedicated to measuring knowledge and skills, promoting learning and educational performance, and supporting education and professional development for all people worldwide. We hope that readers will consider not only the authors' thoughtful analysis of the data, but also their recommendations for addressing the educational needs that the data imply.

Ida Lawrence
Senior Vice President
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Executive Summary

Civic knowledge is a cornerstone of a strong democracy. It promotes support for democratic institutions and values, builds trust in government and elected officials, and contributes to greater civic involvement in important areas including voting and volunteering.

This report, however, finds there is reason for growing concern about the civic engagement of U.S. adults and, consequently, the health of the country's democracy. Several organizations have raised similar concerns, including The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a national group established about 10 years ago. The group recently issued a report called *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, which laid out the consensus on the extent of the problem and recommended solutions. Our aim is to complement the Civic Mission of Schools report by taking an in-depth look at civic knowledge, voting, and civic engagement and examining how they differ across important segments of our population.

Civics does receive significant attention in most U.S. schools, according to data from the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which provides rich statistical information on the nation's classrooms and the instruction that goes on inside them. Data collected from students and schools show that almost all eighth and 12th graders study civics in school. Yet there is a disconnect between what students study and what they learn; only about one-quarter of students in fourth, eighth and 12th grades score at or above *Proficient*, the level at which students demonstrate solid academic performance.

The lack of civic knowledge provides ample concern for the future of our democracy, as it has an effect on civic participation and one of the most critical civic acts — voting. The data presented in this report show that voting is becoming increasingly associated with individual characteristics: age, education, literacy levels, knowledge of public affairs, and income. Data from the November 2008 election present this stratification clearly:

- Age: While less than half of 18- to 24-year-olds voted, nearly three-quarters of those between the ages of 55 and 74 went to the polls.
- Educational attainment: The voting rate for high school dropouts (39 percent) is less than half the rate of those with advanced degrees.
- Household income: More than 90 percent of individuals in households with incomes of \$100,000 or more voted, compared with only 52 percent in the lowest-income households.

The differences are apparent over time as well. The data for presidential elections from 1964–2008 show a decline in voting overall, but the decline is particularly steep for those with lower education levels. And the gap is widening.

To illustrate the combined effect of age, education, and income on voting rates, estimates were calculated for nearly 300 age, income, and education subgroups in the 2010 congressional elections. At the bottom of the distribution with a voting rate of 3.5 percent were young high school dropouts with a low household income (under \$20,000). At the top with an 80.5 percent voting rate were 55- to 64-year-old adults with a master's degree or higher and an annual income between \$100,000 and \$150,000. This degree of stratification — the top group's rate is 23 times higher than that of the bottom group — is historically unprecedented. The nation's less-educated, lower-income, and young adults have voluntarily disenfranchised themselves from the voting process. This represents a serious civic empowerment gap for our nation. The decline in voting in recent years, especially among the young, less-educated, and lower-income groups, should be viewed as a fault line in the bedrock of our nation's democracy that must be addressed.

Rates of civic engagement are strongly related to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well. Using a measure of civic engagement composed of five voting and volunteering activities — the Civic Engagement Index (CEI) — this report documents a

tremendous gap in civic participation among segments of the population. The CEI of the oldest, most highly educated, and highest-income group was nearly seven times higher than the index for young, low-income, high school dropouts.

Young adults' attention to public affairs also was related to their educational attainment and achievement levels. Overall, while more than half of young adults reported paying considerable attention to public affairs, large proportions of young adults with low test scores and low levels of education reported paying attention to public affairs "hardly at all." Analyses of international data on adolescents' political attitudes also reveal a disconnect between many adolescents and their societies. Across U.S., Western European and Australian adolescents surveyed, about half could be characterized as "indifferent," "disaffected," or "alienated."

This combination of the limited civics knowledge of the nation's students and the low overall rates of voting and civic engagement — which vary significantly across key socioeconomic groups defined by age, educational attainment, and level of affluence — should be viewed as a major concern by policymakers, our elected leaders, and the general public. Political and educational philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Robert Maynard Hutchins have warned in the past that civic apathy may lead to the ultimate death of democracy, or the moral and social decline of the state.

Improving the civic engagement of the U.S. population will require concerted efforts on many fronts. Improvement in the civic knowledge of potential future voters is one key area. In addition to data for the nation as a whole, NAEP could expand the assessment of civics knowledge to the state level to provide more information to state and local educators and policymakers. Our nation's high schools also can play a positive role by boosting graduation rates, increasing knowledge of political issues and civics, expanding opportunities for

students to participate in civic activities, and encouraging those of voting age to register before graduation.

Policymakers may want to consider requiring voting-age youth to register to vote as a prerequisite of graduation. Broad improvement efforts are needed in the nation's de facto segregated urban schools as well, as they typically provide fewer and lower-quality civic opportunities. The nation's universities can play a role by encouraging voting and civic participation, including through community service, while the nation's adult education system needs to be revamped to strengthen its role in improving citizenship skills and civic behavior of native and immigrant learners.

Reforms such as easier voting-by-mail rules, early voting, and weekend voting deserve consideration as well, though recent research findings on the impact of these reforms, especially among those least likely to vote, are mixed. A significant obstacle to increasing civic engagement is declining confidence in America's political leaders. The lower voter turnout may be due in part to the public's declining trust in key governmental institutions and the current American system of government, which has been accompanied by a growing polarization of politics.

We recommend that a National Commission on Civic Engagement be established to seek solutions to the low levels of voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement by America's younger, less-educated, lower-income, and immigrant populations.

Sustained efforts on the part of parents, the public, schools and colleges, and local and state leaders to boost the involvement of our citizens in voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement are critical. They are necessary steps that could help ensure that the fault lines don't widen to the point of inflicting long-term damage on our democracy's bedrock.

Introduction

The most serious danger Americans now face — greater than terrorism — is that our country's future may not end up in the hands of a citizenry capable of sustaining the liberty that has been America's most precious legacy. If trends continue, many young Americans will grow up without an understanding of the benefits, privileges, and duties of citizens in a free society, and without acquiring the habits of character needed to live responsibly in one.

– William Damon¹

Recent headlines announcing the results of the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment sounded an alarm about the state of civics knowledge among U.S. students. *The New York Times*, for example, carried the headline “Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a Crisis” and led with the findings that “Fewer than half of American eighth graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights ... and only one in 10 demonstrated acceptable knowledge of the checks and balances among the legislative, executive and judicial branches ...”² This warning about fault lines in the bedrock of U.S. democracy, along with many others, suggest a situation of potential weakness both for democracy in the United States itself and for this country's effective support of other nations that are attempting to move toward democracy.

Several other organizations recently raised similar concerns. In September 2011, The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a national group established about 10 years ago, issued a report titled *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* in cooperation with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the University of Pennsylvania.³ This document,

developed by a team including major political figures, curriculum specialists, political scientists, and policy specialists, presented the results of extensive consensus development around topics such as current challenges and shortfalls of civic education, benefits of civic learning, proven practices, assessment strategies, and policy recommendations. This report aims to complement the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools report by taking an in-depth look at civic knowledge, voting, and civic engagement, and examining how they differ across segments of our population.

Why does it matter that many students lack important knowledge about their country and government? That many students cannot define “melting pot” or are unable to give examples of the effects of the women's rights movement?⁴ According to noted political scientist William Galston, it matters a lot. Galston summarizes research documenting important links between basic civic information and important civic attributes. Several are listed below:

- Civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values. The more knowledge we have of the working of government, the more likely we are to support the core values of democratic self-government, starting with tolerance.
- Civic knowledge promotes political participation. All other things being equal, the more knowledge people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic and political affairs.
- The more knowledge we have of civic affairs, the less likely we are to have a generalized mistrust and fear of public life. Ignorance is the father of fear, and knowledge is the mother of trust.

¹ William Damon, “The Core of Civic Virtue,” *Hoover Digest*, 2011, No. 3. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/84221>, accessed July 21, 2011.

² Sam Dillon, *The New York Times*, May 4, 2011.

³ <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>

⁴ For earlier views on the shortcomings of the history and literature skills of America's youth, see Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature*, New York: Harper & Row, September 1987.

- Civic knowledge can alter opinions on specific issues. For example, the more civic knowledge people have, the less likely they are to fear new immigrants and their impact on our country.⁵

The lack of civic knowledge also is believed to contribute to more limited civic involvement in key domains like voting and volunteering.⁶

This report provides a brief overview of the civics knowledge of U.S. students and highlights several aspects of civics instruction in our schools. The report then looks at who votes in this country and who does not, and examines trends in this critical aspect of civic participation.

The civic engagement of the U.S. population is described next, illustrating how civic involvement has become unequally distributed — a phenomenon some describe as a “civic empowerment gap.”⁷ This section examines the increasing influence of educational

attainment (level of schooling completed), literacy skills, age, and income on civic involvement, arriving at a stark reality: Older adults, those with the most education and highest levels of reading and mathematics skills, those with the most active interest in political affairs, and those with the highest incomes have much higher levels of civic engagement and carry far more weight in the nation’s voting booths.

The interest in public affairs and political attitudes of the nation’s young people are described in the next section of the report, moving beyond group averages to look at small groups with distinctive patterns of attitudes. After a brief section taking an international perspective on adolescents’ political attitudes, we present a summary and conclusions outlining several strategies that might be explored to increase the civic engagement of the U.S. population across all strata of society and restore a more participatory democracy.

⁵ William A. Galston, “Civic Education and Political Participation,” *Political Science Online*, April 2004.

<http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/CivicEdPoliticalParticipation.pdf>

⁶ Data and analysis providing compelling evidence for the individual and collective benefits of civic knowledge and a politically informed citizenry can be found in Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Yale University, 1996.

⁷ Meira Levinson, “The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions,” in Lonnie R. Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, and Constance A. Flanagan, *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, August 2010 (pp. 331–361).

The Status of Civics Knowledge and Education in Our Schools

Knowledge of our system of government is not handed down through the gene pool.... The habits of citizenship must be learned.... But we have neglected civic education for the past several decades, and the results are predictably dismal.”

– Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice
Sandra Day O’Connor⁸

The 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) included an assessment on civics, opening a window into the nation’s schools by providing a rich set of data on the nation’s classrooms and the instruction that goes on inside them. Nationally representative samples of more than 7,000 fourth graders, 9,000 eighth graders, and 9,000 12th graders were assessed on their civics knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are critical to the responsibilities of citizenship in America’s constitutional democracy.

The results of the assessment are summarized here along with data from questionnaires that were administered to students, teachers, and schools to learn about the nature of civics instruction in the nation’s schools. The results are for all three grades assessed — 4, 8, and 12. Selected data on civics instruction is provided for grades 8 and 12. Readers are encouraged to use the NAEP Data Explorer and other NAEP tools to gain further insight into this rich source of data, including examples of questions from the assessment.⁹

To attain the level of *Proficient*, students needed to be able to demonstrate some of the following skills (further examples are shown in Table 1):

- At fourth grade, identify the purpose of the U.S. Constitution

- At eighth grade, recognize a role performed by the U.S. Supreme Court
- At 12th grade, identify the effect of U.S. foreign policy on other nations.

The results showed that relatively few students were *Proficient* — only 27 percent of fourth graders, 22 percent of eighth graders, and 24 percent of 12th graders.

Table 1:
NAEP Skills Typical of Proficiency Levels in Civics, by Grade, 2010

Grade	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
4	Identify taxes as the main source of government funding (77%)	Identify the purpose of the U.S. Constitution (27%)	Identify two ways countries can deal with shared problems (2%)
8	Identify a right protected by the First Amendment (72%)	Recognize a role performed by the U.S. Supreme Court (22%)	Name two actions citizens can take to encourage Congress to pass a law (1%)
12	Identify the meaning of a Supreme Court opinion (64%)	Identify the effect of U.S. foreign policy on other nations (24%)	Identify differences in the citizenship process between the United States and other countries (4%)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: Civics 2010* (NCES 2011-466), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

Very few students performed at the *Advanced* level, which represented superior performance, with 4 percent (of 12th graders) as the high point across the grades tested. The vast majority, ranging from two-thirds to three-quarters of students in the grades tested, were at the lowest level (*Basic*), denoting partial mastery of the relevant knowledge and skills.

Scores on the NAEP civics assessment can be compared to earlier assessments in 1998 and 2006.

⁸ Reported in *Education Week*, May 11, 2011, p.6.

⁹ <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/naeptools.asp>

Overall, students' average scores increased from both periods at grade 4, stayed the same as both earlier assessments at grade 8, and decreased from 2006 but were not different from 1998 at grade 12.¹⁰

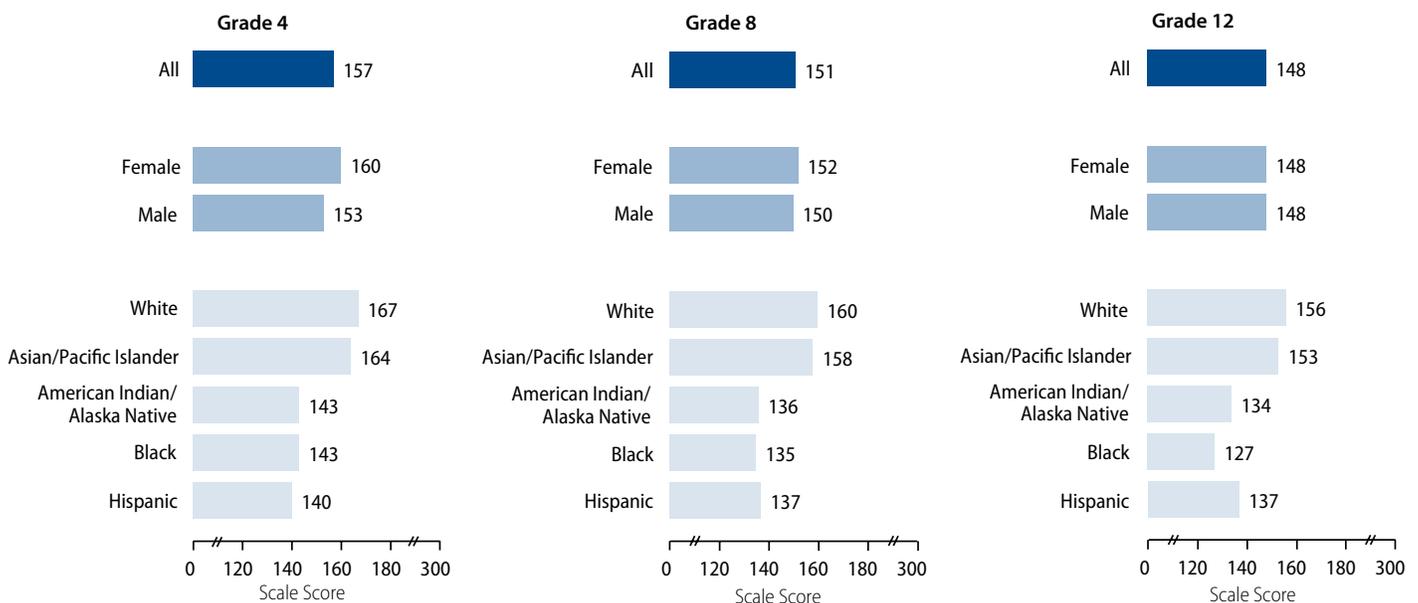
The results also can be disaggregated by racial/ethnic group and gender, as shown in Figure 1. At grade 4, females scored higher than males. There was no gender difference at grades 8 and 12. At all three grade levels, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students scored higher than Black and Hispanic students. They also scored higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students at grade 4; the difference at grades 8 and 12 was not statistically significant. The differences between White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were not large enough to be statistically significant.

What Do We Know About Civics Instruction in U.S. Schools?

NAEP does more than open a window into U.S. classrooms. It lets us peer inside and take a detailed and valuable look from various levels: the student, the teacher, and the school.

Student questionnaires collect information on students' demographic characteristics, classroom experiences, and educational support (completed by students). Teacher questionnaires gather data on teacher training and instructional practices (completed by teachers at grades 4 and 8; NAEP typically does not collect teacher information for grade 12). School questionnaires gather information on school policies and characteristics (completed by the principal or assistant principal).¹¹

Figure 1:
NAEP Civics Average Scores by Gender and Racial/Ethnic Group, 2010



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010* (NCES 2011-466), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

¹⁰ For more detailed results, see National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010*, NCES 2011-466, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2011.

¹¹ These questionnaires can be viewed at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/bgquest.asp>

Collectively, these questionnaires provide a view of the classrooms of a nationally representative sample of students as they interact with their teachers.¹² This view can help educators, researchers, and policymakers develop a better understanding of the nature of civics instruction in our schools. Below, we provide some highlights, including:

- How much time is designated for civics instruction?¹³
- What are the characteristics of teachers who provide instruction on civics-related topics?
- What topics are addressed?
- What types of instruction are provided?

Civics Instruction at Grade 12

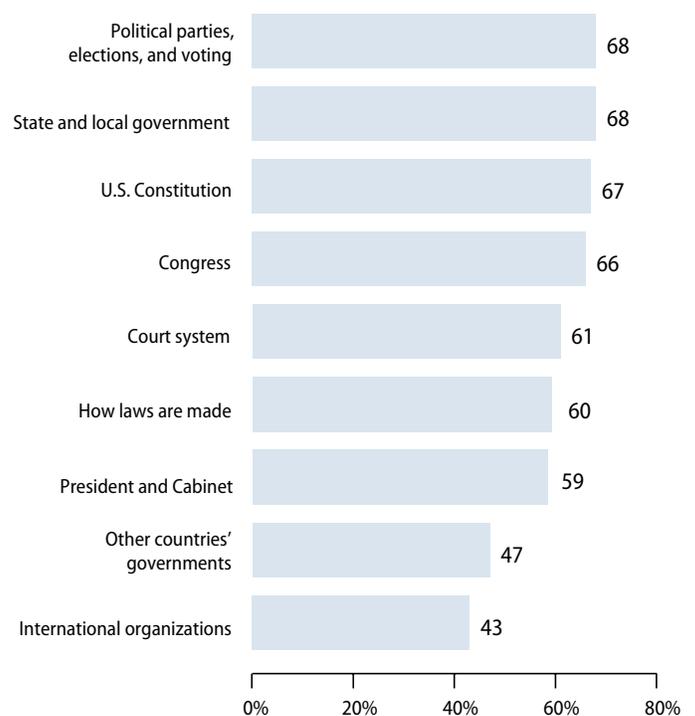
The data show that most 12th graders were exposed to a civics course during high school and more than half reported studying civics or government throughout their high school years, probably as part of social studies courses in history or other civics-related areas.

Nearly all 12th graders attended schools that required students to take either a one- or two-semester civics course (about evenly split). More than two-thirds of schools reported that civics is typically taken in the 12th grade and only about 5 percent reported that civics is not offered. Most students attended high schools that reported that their civics or government curriculum covered:

- Politics and government
- Foundations of the U.S. political system
- U.S. Constitution
- Role of citizens in U.S. democracy
- World affairs

Figure 2 shows the percentage of 12th graders who reported that they studied various civics topics. More than two-thirds reported studying political parties and elections, state and local government, the Constitution, and Congress. More than half studied how laws are made and the president and cabinet. Fewer students reported studying international topics. This pattern has been maintained over time.¹⁴

Figure 2:
Civics Topics Studied by 12th Graders, 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2010 Civics Assessment.

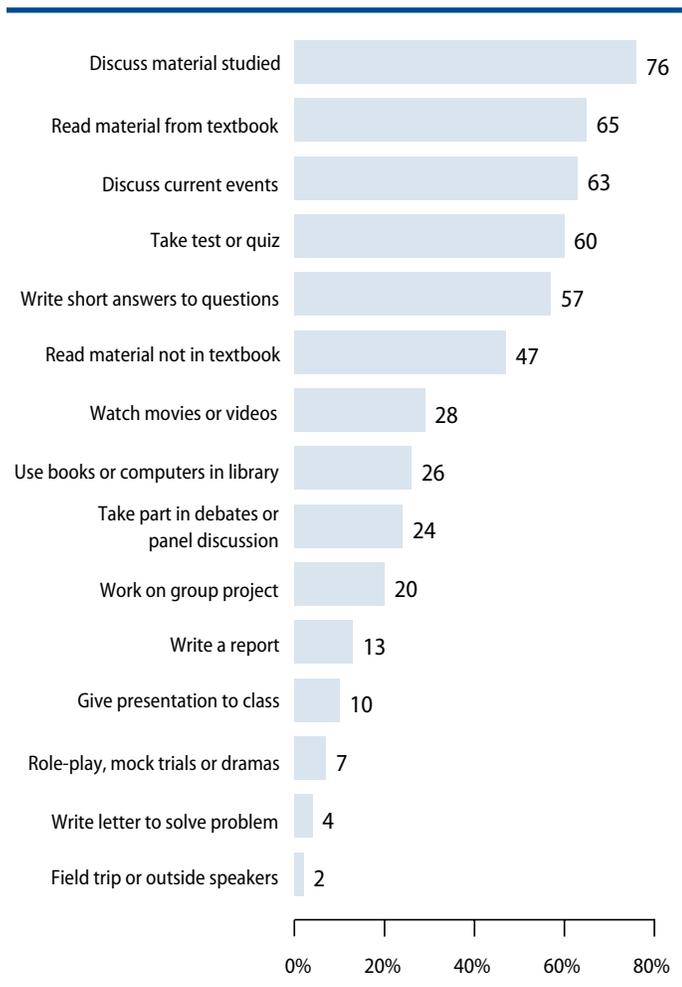
¹² NAEP is based on a nationally representative sample of students, not teachers. Thus, the information and data presented here pertain to the characteristics and practices of teachers of a representative sample of fourth-grade students, not teachers. Therefore, the percentages reported should be interpreted as the percentage of students whose teachers possess that characteristic or use that practice.

¹³ For the purposes of the questionnaires, civics was defined as “the study of basic concepts about the theory and practice of constitutional democracy in the United States.” Also included is “the development of intellectual and participatory civics skills, as well as the disposition to assume the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society.”

¹⁴ Stephanie Baldi et al., *What Democracy Means to Ninth Graders: U.S. Results from the International IEA Civic Education Study*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2001.

Students also were asked how often they participated in various classroom activities when they studied civics. Figure 3 shows the percentage of students who reported a classroom activity either “once or twice a week” or “almost every day.” Students indicated that they spent more time discussing and reading material and taking tests than they did on more hands-on activities such as giving a presentation or participating in activities like role playing or mock trials.

Figure 3:
Frequency of 12th-Grade Classroom Civics Activities (Percentage of Students Reporting “Almost Every Day” or “Once or Twice a Week”), 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2010 Civics Assessment.

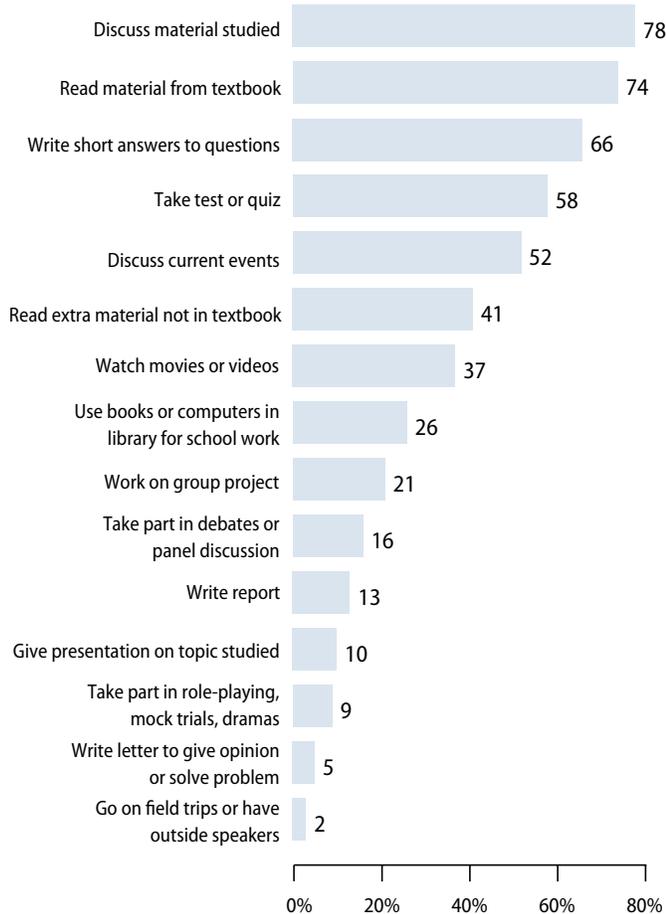
Civics Instruction at Grade 8

Eighth graders also experience considerable exposure to civics instruction. Eighty-five percent reported learning about civics or government in eighth grade. Many also reported learning about civics in grades 5, 6, and 7 as well. When schools were asked to indicate the grade at which students take a course primarily focused on civics or government, however, only 37 percent reported that students were attending a school that offered a course at eighth grade and 42 percent of students attended schools that responded that such a course was not offered.

The different perspective provided by student- and school-reported data may have resulted from students reporting learning about civics topics in a history or social studies course that did not have the name “civics” associated with it.

Eighth graders were presented with a list of 15 activities and asked to estimate how often they engage in each activity when studying social studies, civics, or government in school. The patterns are very similar to patterns observed at 12th grade. Reading from a textbook, discussing the material studied along with current events, and taking tests or quizzes, and writing short answers to questions were cited by more than half of the students as frequent activities. Activities like role playing, field trips, writing reports and giving presentations were much less frequent. These activities are listed in Figure 4; the percentages represent students who reported the activity “once or twice a week” or “almost every day.”

Figure 4:
Frequency of Eighth-Grade Classroom Civics Activities
(Percentage of Students Reporting “Almost Every Day”
or “Once or Twice a Week”), 2010



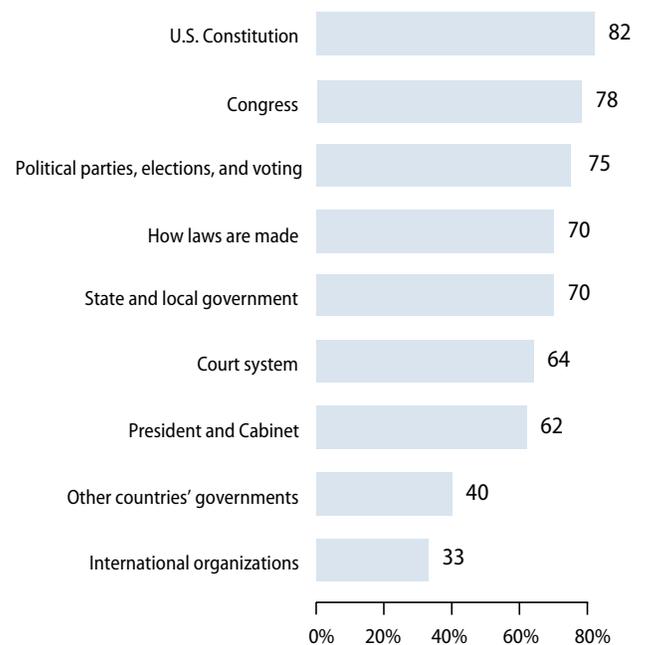
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2010 Civics Assessment.

Eighth graders also were asked to indicate whether they studied certain topics during the school year. These data are shown in Figure 5. Most students reported studying a range of topics covering the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Seventy-five percent or more reported studying the Constitution, the Congress, and political parties, elections and voting. International topics were less likely to be studied.

Finally, while many students’ attitudes about civics were positive, there was much room for improvement. Almost half said that social studies or civics or

government work was interesting “often” or “always or almost always.” Only 17 percent of the eighth graders agreed “a lot” that social studies or government is one of their favorite subjects.

Figure 5:
Civics Topics Studied by Eighth Graders, 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2010 Civics Assessment.

Grade 8 Civics Teachers

Eighth-grade teachers can be characterized as experienced and highly qualified in terms of their certification status and educational credentials. Nearly two-thirds had more than 10 years of experience and one-quarter had more than 20 years. Eighty-eight percent held standard or advanced certification; 48 percent held a master’s degree; and 4 percent held a specialist or professional diploma based on work beyond the master’s degree. Undergraduate majors in education and in history or history education accounted for half of the majors. Another quarter majored in general social science or social studies education. Education was the most common graduate major (44 percent) followed by history or history education (16 percent).

Eighty-three percent of the students' teachers reported that social studies was the only subject they taught. In reporting the amount of time devoted to social studies instruction in a typical week, the most commonly reported estimates were between 3 and 4.9 hours per week (48 percent) and between 5 and 6.9 hours (28 percent).

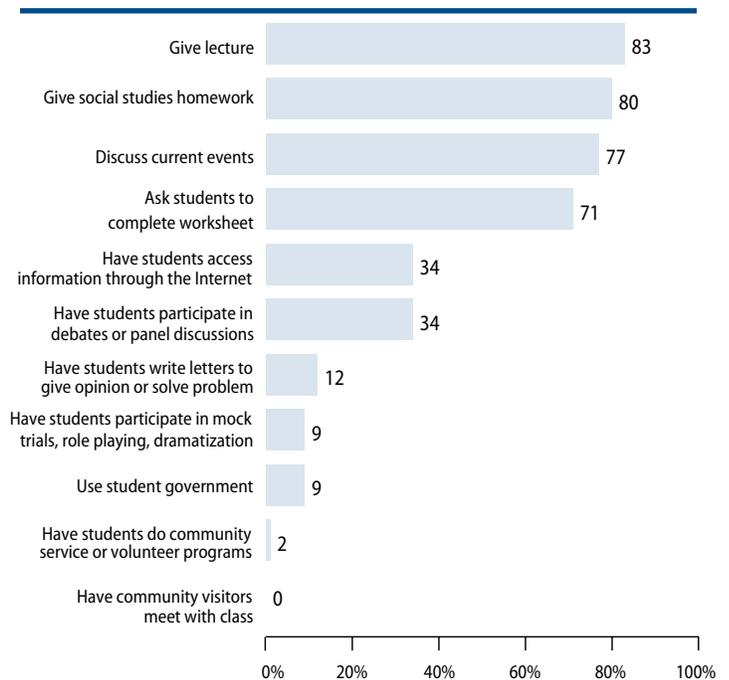
Teachers also were asked to indicate the amount of social studies instruction time that was primarily focused on U.S. history, geography, and civics/government. Clearly, most focus is on U.S. history, with nearly two-thirds reporting it as the primary focus. However, many civics-related topics, such as the separation of powers and the nature of the Constitution, were taught in history class. Yet, about one-quarter of students' teachers reported spending less than 10 percent of class time on civics.

Finally, eighth-grade teachers were presented with a list of class activities and asked to estimate the frequency of use as part of social studies instruction (Figure 6). The most common activities ("once or twice a week" or "almost every day") were lecturing, giving out worksheets and homework, and discussing current events. Activities more related to active civic engagement, like community service or volunteering, were much less frequent.

The data presented in this section indicate that, despite a good amount of exposure to civics instruction by highly qualified teachers, the state of civics knowledge of U.S. students can be described as showing fault lines for the future of informed citizenship. While many 12th graders were old enough to vote, just one-fourth reached a level of civics knowledge deemed *Proficient* by NAEP. Results for eighth graders were no better. On the other hand, most students attended schools that required civics and most students reported studying civics topics in school. Students reported studying a variety of civics topics including government, elections, voting, Congress, and the Constitution, but fewer students reported studying international topics. The most frequent types of classroom activities were reading material from a textbook, discussing current events, and taking tests or quizzes. Fewer students reported activities like going

on a field trip, writing a report or letter, or working on a group project. When policy experts and engaged members of the public look at this area, a question is usually raised about the extent to which instruction that emphasizes textbook reading and tests and quizzes is likely to motivate young people toward civic involvement. In fact, a recent report concludes that for most civic competencies, the most effective type of instruction is a combination of traditional (using textbooks and lectures) and interactive teaching (emphasizing respectful class discussion of issues).¹⁵

Figure 6:
Frequency of Eighth-Grade Classroom Social Studies Instructional Activities (Percentage of Students Whose Teachers Reported "Almost Every Day" or "Once or Twice a Week"), 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2010 Civics Assessment.

The limited amount of civic knowledge displayed by our students does not bode well for the likelihood that they will be civically engaged as adults. Next, we examine data that will help explore this important connection.

¹⁵ Judith Torney-Purta and Britt Wilkenfield, *Paths to 21st Century Competencies Through Civic Education Classrooms*, Chicago, IL: American Bar Association, 2009. <http://www.civicyouth.org>

Who Votes and Who Doesn't?

Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves — and the only way they could do this is by not voting.

– Franklin D. Roosevelt (1934)

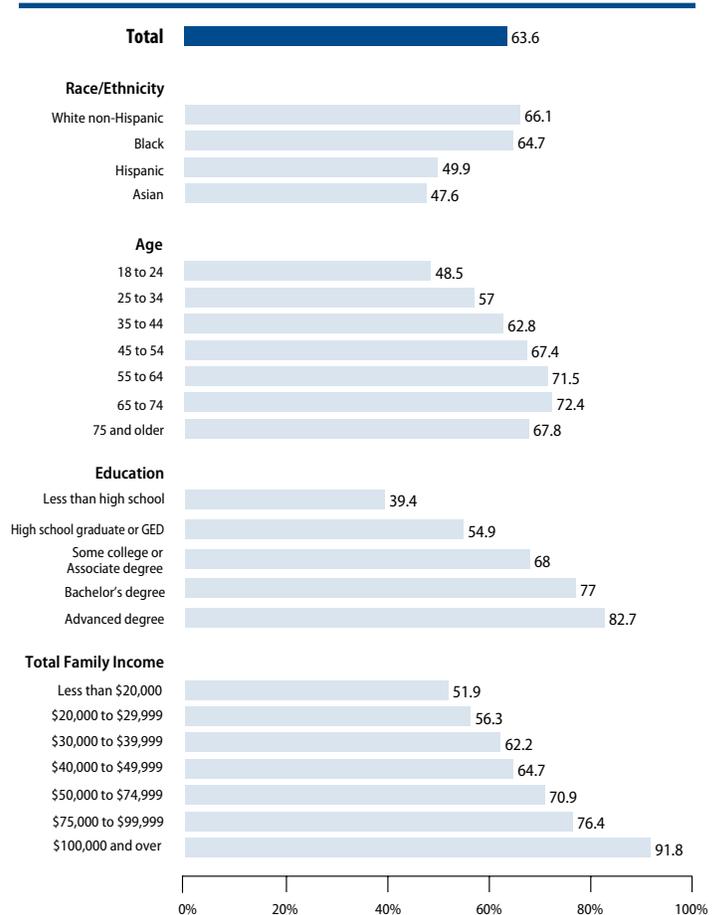
The limited civic knowledge of U.S. students provides ample concern for the future of our democracy. It is believed to contribute to decreased civic involvement, less support for democratic institutions and values, and lower levels of trust in government and local officials. One of the most important acts of civic participation by adults is their willingness to vote and participate actively in political campaigns. But who votes? Do different segments of the population vote at different rates? What are the reasons for not voting?

The data in this section show that voting is becoming increasingly associated with individual characteristics including age, education, literacy levels, and income, creating immense stratification in this society. We will summarize some of the data available on who voted in national elections between November 1966 and November 2008, focusing on differences by race/ethnicity, age, educational level, and household income. We also will analyze more recent data from the November 2010 election to examine the relationship among age, educational attainment, income, and voting behavior. To determine if young adults are more likely to go the polls if they have voted previously, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) are analyzed to identify how voting behavior in the 2004 election may have influenced the probability of voting in 2006. Finally, data on those who did not vote in the 2010 election are summarized to see why potential voters don't vote and how those reasons differ by age and educational attainment groups.

Who Votes?

Figure 7 provides a snapshot of major differences in voting among key demographic segments of the population in relation to their race/ethnicity, age, education, and family income. Among racial/ethnic groups, Whites and Blacks were the most likely to vote in the 2008 election (about two-thirds). Their rates were slightly higher than the percentage of the overall eligible population who voted. Hispanic and Asian participation was far lower, with fewer than half of Hispanics and Asians voting.

Figure 7:
Reported Rates of Voting by U.S. Citizens, by Selected Characteristics, 2008



Source: Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," U.S. Census Bureau, P20-562, issued May 2010.

There was also a strong relationship between the likelihood of voting and age. While fewer than half of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in this election, nearly three-quarters of those between ages of 55 and 74 voted. The rate falls off somewhat after age 75.

Furthermore, voting was strongly related to educational attainment. The highest voting rates were seen among the most educated. The rate for high school dropouts (39 percent) was less than half the rate for those with advanced degrees (83 percent). For individuals who obtained at least some postsecondary education, the rates exceeded two-thirds.

The relationship of household income to voting was strong as well. Individuals with family incomes in the upper ranges were much more likely to vote than those in poorer households. More than 90 percent of individuals in households with incomes of \$100,000 or more voted in the election compared with only 52 percent in the lowest-income households. Voting rates exceeded 70 percent for households with incomes of \$50,000 and up.

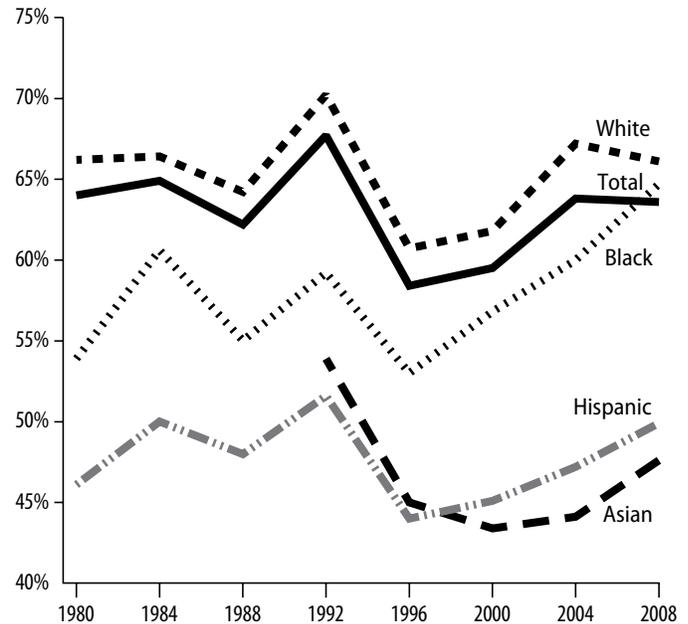
Trends in Voting Behavior

While Figure 7 provided a snapshot for the 2008 national election, it is important to look at voting behavior over time to examine trends. Figure 8 shows trends in voting in national presidential elections for all eligible voters and for voters grouped by racial/ethnic group between 1980 and 2008. To put the trends by various groups in perspective, it is important to note that while the 64 percent of voting-age citizens who voted in 2008 was higher than in 2000 and 1996, it was not unprecedented — the rate was similar in 2004. Going back in time, the 2008 rate was little different from that of 1988 (62 percent), 1984 (65 percent), and 1980 (64 percent).

What changed in 2008 was the voting rate by race/ethnicity. The voting rate for Blacks in the 2008 national election, when Barack Obama became the first Black

elected president, was higher than any year examined. Hispanics and Asians also voted at higher rates in 2008 than in any national election since 1992.

Figure 8:
Voting Trends by U.S. Citizens in Presidential Elections by Race/Ethnicity

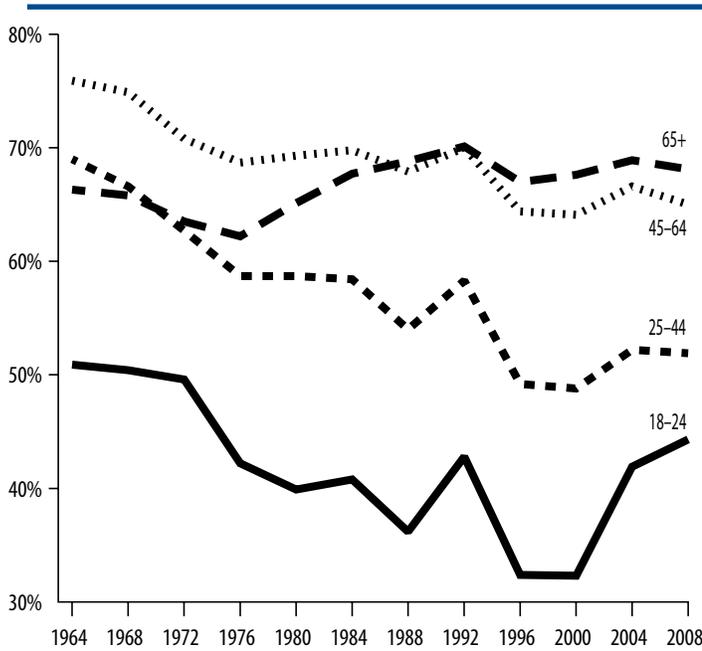


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 and earlier reports. Internet release data: July 2009. Table A-1. Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2008.

Next, we examine trends in voting by age. Data are available to take a longer look back in time — from 1964 to 2008. As shown in Figure 9, older adults are more likely to vote, but the trend lines appear to head downward somewhat, particularly for younger voters.¹⁶ In the 2008 national election, about two-thirds of the population age 45 and over voted, with the lowest rate of 44 percent registered by the youngest segment of the population. There was a jump in the voting rate of the youngest group for the two most recent national elections, but whether this trend will continue is unclear.

¹⁶ Unlike Figures 7 and 8, voting trends by age (Figure 9) are for the total population (including noncitizens).

Figure 9:
Voting Trends for the Total Population in Presidential Elections by Age

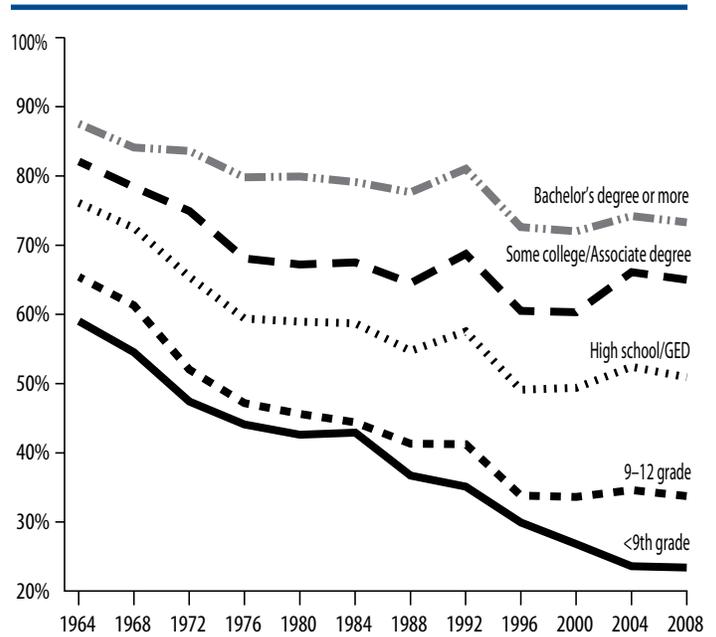


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 and earlier reports. Internet release data: July 2009. Table A-1. Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2008.

Figure 10 shows trends in voting in presidential elections among the total population by level of educational attainment.¹⁷ The relationship between educational attainment and voting is strong. The data show a decline in voting across all educational attainment levels since 1964. But the decline is particularly steep for the population with lower education levels. For those with nine to 12 years of school but no diploma or GED, the voting rate fell by nearly half between 1964 and 2008, from 65 to 34 percent. The decline was even steeper for those with less than a ninth-grade education, dropping from 59 to 23 percent. Among the U.S. population with at least some college, the decline in voting was less steep. The values for the data points in Figure 10 are shown in Appendix Table 1.

The differences in the rate of decline among educational attainment groups indicate that the stratification is increasing, particularly between those with less than a high school education and those with a high school diploma. The gap in voting between those with less than a ninth-grade education and those with a high school diploma increased from 17 percent in 1964 to 27 percent in 2008. Similarly, the gap between those with nine to 12 years of school but no diploma and those with a high school diploma increased from 11 to 17 percent during that same period.

Figure 10:
Voting Trends in Presidential Elections by Education Level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 and earlier reports. Internet release data: July 2009. Table A-2. Reported Voting and Registration by Region, Educational Attainment and Labor Force for the Population 18 and Over: November 1964 to 2008.

¹⁷ Unlike Figures 7 and 8, voting trends by level of educational attainment (Figure 10) are for the total population (including noncitizens).

A Closer Look at the Voting Behavior of Young Adults in the 2010 Election

Next, we examine data from the most recent election to look more closely at the relationship among voting and age and educational attainment.¹⁸ We also provide the results from a set of models on path dependency in voting behavior (i.e., examining whether those who vote in one election are more likely to vote in the next). These data are drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97).

First, we examine voting rates in 2010, when there were congressional elections but no presidential race, to look at age groups in relation to educational attainment (Table 2).

Table 2:
Voting Rates in the November 2010 Election by Educational Attainment and Age Group, All Native-Born U.S. Citizens (18 and over)

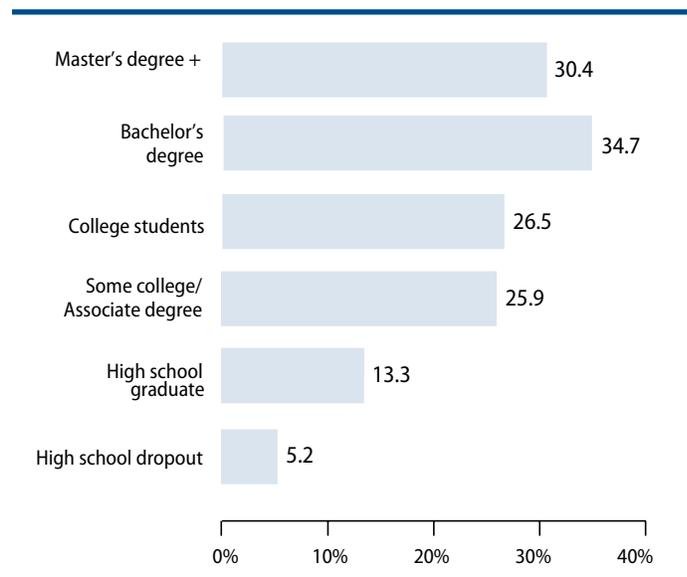
Educational Attainment	Age							All
	18–24	25–29	30–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	
High school dropout	5.2	11.1	13.7	17.4	21.1	29.7	40.0	25.5
High school graduate/GED	13.3	18.3	22.4	31.4	42.0	49.3	59.3	39.1
Some college, including Associate Degree	25.9	29.1	36.9	44.1	55.5	62.4	68.7	49.7
Bachelor's degree	34.7	37.2	47.4	58.0	66.7	74.1	76.3	59.8
Master's or higher degree	30.4	48.6	52.0	63.7	69.5	78.9	79.7	69.1
All	21.4	28.2	35.6	44.2	51.8	60.2	62.2	46.3

Source: November 2010 CPS supplement, public use files, tabulations by authors.

Overall, just 46 percent of all native-born U.S. citizens voted in the November 2010 elections. Voting rates rose consistently across age and educational attainment groups. Only 25 percent of U.S. adults lacking a high school diploma voted versus 39 percent of high school graduates, and from 60 to 70 percent of adults with a bachelor's or more advanced academic degree. Voting rates also rose steadily across age groups, ranging from a low of 21 percent among young adults 18 to 24 years old to a high of 62 percent for those 65 and older, a relative difference of 3 to 1 from oldest to youngest.

There also were strong positive links between educational attainment and voting behavior within each age group. For example, as shown in Figure 11, among 18- to 24-year-olds, voting rates ranged from a low of 5 percent among high school dropouts to a high of just under 35 percent for bachelor's degree holders, a relative difference of 7 to 1 between the top and bottom voting groups.

Figure 11:
Voting Rates of U.S. Native-Born Citizens 18 to 24 Years Old by Educational Attainment, November 2010 Election

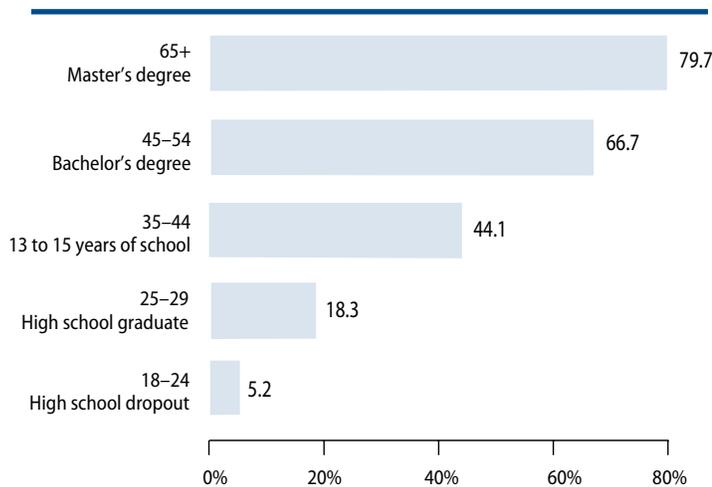


Source: November 2010 CPS supplement, public use files, tabulations by authors.

¹⁸ For another recent study looking at the links between various forms of civic engagement and the educational attainment of 20- to 29-year-olds, see Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten, *Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood*, CIRCLE, Tufts University, 2009.

By focusing on selected combinations of age and educational attainment levels in Figure 12, we can document the large gaps in voting behavior across selected groups of adults. At the bottom of the voting rate distribution are young high school dropouts, of whom only 5 percent voted in the most recent election. In contrast, 44 percent of 35- to 44-year-olds with one to three years of college voted, and 80 percent of the oldest group of voters with a master's degree or more. The relative difference between the top and bottom voting groups was more than 15 times.

Figure 12:
Voting Rates of U.S. Native-Born Citizens in Selected Age and Educational Attainment Groups in the November 2010 Elections



Source: November 2010 CPS supplement, public use files, tabulations by authors.

The story is much the same when income is added to the analysis. Voting rates rise steadily with household income, ranging from a low of 32 percent for households

with less than \$20,000 in annual income to 59 percent for those with a household income of \$150,000 or more. The links between income and age were quite strong within each of the income groups. The oldest age group within each income group was typically three times more likely to vote than the youngest.

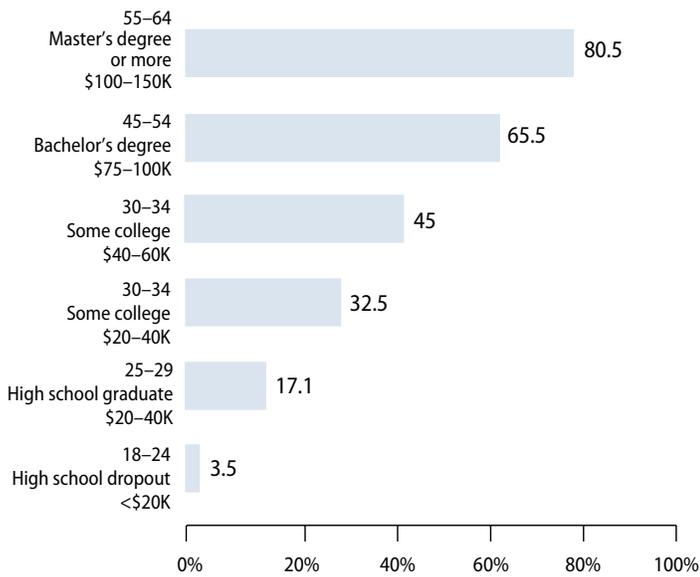
Voting rates also were strongly related to combinations of household income and educational attainment. Within each income group, the probability of voting in the 2010 elections rose steadily and fairly strongly with educational attainment.

To illustrate the joint effect of age, education, and income on the voting rates in the 2010 elections, voting rates were estimated for nearly 300 age, income, and education subgroups. Examples of the wide variations are shown in Figure 13. At the bottom of the distribution with a voting rate of 3.5 percent were young high school dropouts with a low household income (under \$20,000). In the middle were relatively young adults (30–34) with one to three years of post-secondary schooling and a mid-level income (\$40,000–60,000). Their voting rate was 45 percent. At the top of the distribution was the 80.5 percent voting rate of 55- to 64-year-old adults with a master's or higher degree and an annual income between \$100,000 and \$150,000.¹⁹ The voting rate of this last group of adults was 23 times as high as that of our bottom voting group.

The degree of stratification in voting rates in recent years is a growing concern. The nation's less educated, low-income, and young adults have voluntarily disenfranchised themselves from the voting process.

¹⁹ Findings of a series of linear probability models on voting behavior in the fall national elections from 1998 to 2010 are available from the authors. These models include age, education, marital status, and income as independent variables. All of the income variables are statistically significant.

Figure 13:
Voting Rates of U.S. Native-Born Citizens in Selected Age, Educational Attainment, and Income Groups in the November 2010 Elections



Source: November 2010 Current Population Survey (CPS) supplement, public use files, tabulations by authors.

Path Dependency in Voting Behavior

To determine if voting is path dependent (i.e., those young adults who actively vote in their late teens and early 20s may be more likely to vote in their mid 20s), data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY 97) were analyzed to identify how voting behavior in the 2004 election may have influenced the probability of voting in the 2006 election. Two models were estimated. The first aimed to estimate the independent effect of 2004 voting on 2006 voting; the second also included the impact of the degree to which respondents paid attention to political affairs in 2004 on their voting behavior during 2006.

In the first model, better-educated adults were significantly more likely to vote in 2006, and the older members of this cohort were more likely to vote than the younger members. Voting in 2004 had a very large,

positive, independent effect on voting in 2006. A young adult who voted in the 2004 fall election was nearly 30 percentage points more likely to vote in 2006.

Based on results of the regression model, the probability of voting in 2006 was estimated for various subgroups of 26-year-old, native-born, White males with various levels of educational attainment and academic skills. Table 3 shows the predicted probability for selected groups.²⁰

The first individual in the table is a high school dropout with low test scores who did not vote in 2004. The likelihood of this hypothetical individual voting in 2006 is less than 6 percent. If we raise his educational attainment to that of a high school graduate and raise his test scores into the second quintile, and with no voting in 2004, his chances rise to only about 10 percent. If he had voted in 2004, his chances of voting would have risen to close to 40 percent. At the top of the predicted probabilities of voting in 2006 are young men with a bachelor's or higher degree, with high test scores, who voted in 2004. They have predicted voting rates of about 50 to 51 percent.

Table 3:
Predicted Probabilities of Voting in the 2006 Election for Hypothetical 26-Year-Old White Males with Different Levels of Educational Attainment, Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) Scores, and Voting Behavior in the 2004 Election

Hypothetical 26-Year-Old White Male	Probability of Voting
High School Dropout, Bottom Quintile Test Scores, Did Not Vote in 2004 Election	5.8%
High School Graduate, Second Quintile Test Scores, Did Not Vote in 2004 Election	10.2%
Some College, No Degree, Middle Quintile Test Scores, Voted in 2004 Election	42.7%
Bachelor's Degree, Fourth Quintile Test Scores, Voted in 2004 Election	50.0%
Master's or Higher Degree, Top Quintile Test Scores, Voted in 2004 Election	51.4%

²⁰ Full results of the regression analysis are available from the Center for Labor Market Studies.

The second model of voting in the 2006 election also includes an independent variable that represents how close the individual reported to have paid attention to public affairs in 2004. Even after controlling for voting behavior in 2004, educational attainment, and academic test scores, those who paid close attention to public affairs in 2004 were about 6 percentage points more likely to vote in 2006. Voting in 2004 played the most powerful role in voting in 2006, followed by educational attainment.

Results of the regression model were combined with hypothetical traits of individuals and their 2004 voting behavior and attention to public affairs to predict the probability of their voting in the 2006 election. The first individual was a 26-year-old, Hispanic, native-born male, who was a high school dropout, had bottom quintile Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) scores, did not vote in 2004, and did not pay close attention to public affairs in 2004. His predicted probability of voting in 2006 was less than 1 percent (Table 4). If his education is raised to being a high school graduate with second quintile AFQT skills but no changes in prior voting or attention to public affairs, his voting probability is increased to just below 8 percent. If, however, he voted in 2004 and had completed one to three years of postsecondary school, his voting probability would have risen to 33 percent. At the top of the estimated probabilities are White males with a bachelor’s degree or higher and top two quintile skills who both voted in 2004 and paid close attention to public affairs. Their estimated probabilities of voting were in the 50–52 percent range — 80 times higher than our first individual. A history of civic engagement, combined with the acquisition of postsecondary degrees, has an extremely powerful effect on voting among young adults in their mid 20s.

Table 4:
Predicted Probabilities of Voting in the 2006 Election of Selected Subgroups of Young Adults 23–28 Years Old with Selected Gender, Racial/Ethnic, Age, Educational Attainment Traits, AFQT Test Scores, Voting Behavior in the 2004 Election, and Attention to Political Affairs in 2004

Hypothetical Person	Probability of Voting
26-Year-Old, Hispanic, Male, Native Born, High School Dropout, Bottom Quintile Academic Skills, Did Not Vote in 2004, Did Not Pay Close Attention to Public Affairs in 2004	0.6%
26-Year-Old, Hispanic, Male, Native Born, High School Graduate, Second Quintile Academic Skills, Did Not Vote in 2004, Paid Close Attention to Public Affairs	7.6%
26-Year-Old, Hispanic, Male, Native Born, 1–3 Years of College, Middle Quintile Academic Skills, Voted in 2004, Did Not Pay Close Attention to Public Affairs in 2004	33.0%
26-Year-Old, White, Male, Bachelor’s Degree, Fourth Quintile Academic Skills, Voted in 2004, Paid Close Attention to Public Affairs in 2004	50.2%
26-Year-Old White, Male, Master’s or Higher Degree, Top Quintile Academic Skills, Voted in 2004, Paid Close Attention to Public Affairs	51.8%

In the following section, new data from the 2010 elections are analyzed to gain some understanding of the reasons people choose not to vote.

Why Not Vote?

Why don’t potential voters actually vote? In November of each national election year, the U.S. Census Bureau surveys the voting-age public about their registration status, voting behavior in the election, and reasons for not voting if they failed to do so. We lumped most of their alternative responses into two major categories: those indicating no interest in the election/my vote would not matter/did not like the candidates, and those indicating they forgot to vote or were too busy with other activities, suggesting a low priority for voting as a use of their time. Findings for all nonvoters, for those in two younger age groups, and for those with 12 or fewer years of schooling are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5:
Reasons for Not Voting in the November 2010
Elections, All Eligible Voters and Those in
Selected Age and Educational Attainment Groups

Reasons for Not Voting	All	18–24 Years Old	25–29 Years Old	H.S. Drop-outs, No GED	H.S. Diploma or GED, No Completed Years of College
Not Interested/ Vote Would Not Matter/Don't Like Candidates	25	20.2	24.3	25.9	29
Forgot to Vote/ Too Busy/ Conflicting Schedule	34.6	40.4	43.5	23.2	32.1
Total	59.6	60.6	67.8	49.1	61.1

Source: November 2010 CPS, Supplement on Voting Behavior, public use files, tabulations by authors.

About six of every 10 nonvoters cited one of the above reasons for not voting in the 2010 election. About one in four reported that they were not interested or that their vote would not matter. Slightly more than one in three claimed that they either forgot to vote or were too busy. Findings were quite similar for both of the youngest age groups (18–24 and 25–29), with those 25–29 being somewhat more likely to indicate either a lack of interest or being too busy (68 out of 100). The patterns of voting by educational attainment level also were quite similar. High school graduates were somewhat more likely than dropouts to express a lack of interest or lack of influence of votes (29 vs. 26 percent) or that they were too busy

to vote (32 vs. 23 percent). A restoration of greater confidence in our national government institutions, optimism in the ability of our political institutions to make a difference in the lives of voters, and actions to reduce the impression that wealthy interest groups are the actual source of most policy decisions by elected officials are some actions that might improve future voting rates.

In summary, this section of the report has documented that the voting behavior of Americans varies considerably across age, educational attainment, and household income groups. Older adults, adults with higher levels of formal schooling, and those living in households with higher incomes were considerably more likely to vote than each of their respective counterparts. The educational attainment of the nation's adults was strongly associated with their voting behavior in each age, racial/ethnic, and income group. Older adults with college degrees from more affluent families were the most likely to vote, while young, less-educated, low-income adults were the least likely to vote. And these relative differences in voting rates were large.

Voting behavior in our nation today has a very uneven distribution, which some might argue is inconsistent with true democracy and constitutes a real fault line in the bedrock of our democracy with implications for our nation's future. Older adults with the most schooling and the highest incomes carry the most weight in the voting booth.

The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

– Robert Maynard Hutchins,
The Great Books, 1954

Voting is not the only behavior increasingly associated with age, educational attainment, and income. So is volunteering. Young, poorly educated, and lower-income individuals are highly disengaged from active civic involvement, serving as a serious detriment to a democratic society. This section of the report integrates data on voting and volunteering behavior of adults age 18 and over to construct an index of civic engagement that provides a picture of how civic involvement relates to these factors.

The Civic Engagement Index (CEI) is composed of five voting and volunteering activities.²¹ CEI scores for an individual or group range from 0 (did none of the activities) to 5 (did all of the activities). The five activities in the CEI are listed below along with the percentage of adults (18 and over) who participated in the activity.

- Voted in the 2004 presidential election (63.8 percent)
- Voted in the 2006 congressional and state elections (47.8 percent)
- Volunteered with a nonprofit or government agency during a one-year period (26.2 percent)
- Volunteered with a civic/political organization during a one-year period (4.8 percent)
- Volunteered with an education- or health-related agency during a one-year period (8.3 percent).

The average score for all U.S. adults was 1.5, indicating that the average person participated at a rate

of 30 percent on these five activities. Next, we show how the CEI differs among U.S. adults grouped by their level of educational attainment, age, and income.

Educational Attainment

Table 6 shows the relationship between civic engagement and educational attainment. For each of the CEI measures, participation rose steadily and strongly with increases in educational attainment.²² For example, voting rates in the 2006 congressional election ranged from a low of 27 percent for those lacking a high school diploma or GED to 49 percent for those completing one to three years of college, to a high of nearly 70 percent for those holding advanced degrees. Adults with the highest educational attainment levels were 2.5 times as likely to have voted in the 2006 election as those with the lowest educational attainment levels. Volunteering was also strongly related to educational attainment. On each of the three volunteering measures, adults with master’s or higher degrees were five to six times more likely to do some volunteering as their peers with no high school diploma.

Age

The CEI index scores also tend to vary substantially by age group, as shown in Table 7. Voting rates in recent national elections have been lowest for those under 25, especially among those with lower educational attainment, and increase with age until individuals reach their mid- to late 60s. Very similar findings apply to the 2008 and 2010 elections. Volunteering rates among those ages 18 to 24 are relatively low and volunteering rates rise until adults reach the 45 to 64 age group. The CEI index tends to rise with age until the older population (65 and over) is reached, when modest declines are seen. The CEI was 80 percent higher for 45- to 64-year-olds than for the youngest group.

²¹ The Khatiwada-Sum Index of Civic Engagement that is used in this section is based on U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Surveys conducted in November 2004, November 2006, and September 2007.

²² Findings of multivariate statistical analysis of these civic engagement measures reveal that educational attainment had equally powerful independent effects on civic engagement after controlling for differences in the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of these adults.

Table 6:**Civic Engagement of U.S. Adults by Educational Attainment**

	CEI Index	Percent voted in 2004 Presidential election	Percent voted in 2006 Congressional and state elections	Percent volunteered with nonprofit or government agency	Percent volunteered with civic or political organization	Percent volunteered with education or health agency
12 or fewer years of school, no diploma/GED	.80	39.5	27.4	9.2	1.6	2.5
High school diploma/GED	1.24	56.4	40.5	18.2	3.2	5.2
13–15 years of school/Associate degree	1.62	68.9	49.4	29.2	5.3	9.4
Bachelor's degree	1.98	77.5	61.1	39.1	7.2	13.0
Master's degree or higher	2.24	84.2	69.6	46.5	8.6	15.6
Ratio of Master's or higher to 12 or fewer years	2.8	2.1	2.5	5.1	5.4	6.2

Table 7:**Civic Engagement of U.S. Adults by Age Group**

Age	CEI Index	Percent voted in 2004 Presidential election	Percent voted in 2006 Congressional and state elections	Percent volunteered with nonprofit or government agency	Percent volunteered with civic or political organization	Percent volunteered with education or health agency
18–24	.97	46.7	22.1	18.5	3.5	6.2
25–44	1.42	60.1	39.9	26.8	5.0	10.7
45–64	1.72	70.4	57.6	29.5	5.7	8.5
65+	1.67	71.0	62.5	23.9	5.4	4.1

The relationship between civic involvement and educational attainment also held true across each age group. In each age group, the CEI rose steadily and strongly with level of schooling. The relative gaps between the scores of the highly educated and least educated were quite large for each group under age 65. Among the youngest adults, the CEI of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher was three times that of adults lacking a high school diploma or GED. Among those 25

to 44 and 45 to 64, the CEI of those holding a master's or higher degree was three to four times as high as that of their peers lacking a high school diploma.

As measured by the index, well-educated, middle-age to older adults were five times as civically engaged as young dropouts. The economic, social, civic and fiscal consequences of dropping out of high school are substantial and growing over time, especially for men.²³

²³ See Andrew Sum et al., *The Labor Market, Income, Civic, Health, Social, and Fiscal Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Findings for Massachusetts Adults in the Twenty-First Century*, report prepared for the Boston Youth Transition Funders Group, Boston, MA, 2007.

Income

The CEI also is positively related to household income. Members of more affluent households are considerably more likely to volunteer and to vote. Table 8 shows the CEI by income group along with percentages for each of the CEI measures.

The average CEI in the seven income categories rose steadily with income levels. The average CEI for the most affluent was twice as high as the CEI of the least affluent. As seen earlier, historical trends in voting over the past 30 years indicate a widening of the gap in voting rates across socioeconomic groups.

The relationship between the CEI and household income held up even when educational attainment was considered. In each household income group, the CEI rose steadily and substantially with educational attainment level. Among the lowest income group, the CEI rose from .75 for dropouts to 1.41 to those with some college, to nearly 1.8 for those with graduate degrees. Even among the most affluent, the CEI rose

with educational attainment, increasing from 1.23 among high school dropouts to 2.44 for those with graduate degrees. In each income group, those with graduate degrees had CEIs that were 2 to 2.5 times higher than dropouts. Civic engagement in America has become strongly associated with the socioeconomic status of adults. The higher one's socioeconomic status, the more likely one is to be civically engaged.

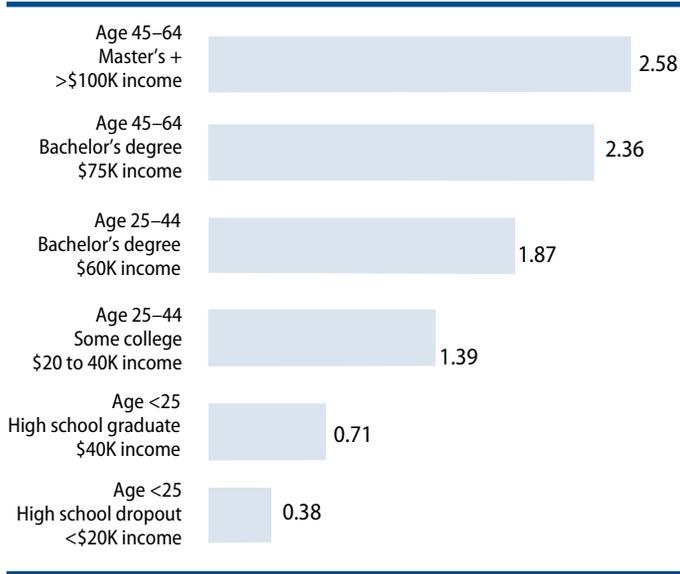
The Effects of Combining Age, Educational Attainment, and Household Income

We have seen that the civic engagement of U.S. adults is statistically associated with their educational attainment, age, and household income. Within each age and income group, the CEI rose with the level of schooling. Finally, we examine the CEI for combinations of adults based on age, education, and income (four age groups, five educational attainment groups, and seven income groups combine to produce 140 separate subgroups). Figure 14 shows key selected findings from this analysis.

Table 8:
Civic Engagement of U.S. Adults by Household Income

Household Income (in 1000s)	CEI Index	Percent voted in 2004 Presidential election	Percent voted in 2006 Congressional and state elections	Percent volunteered with nonprofit or government agency	Percent volunteered with civic or political organization	Percent volunteered with education or health agency
< \$20	1.08	50.6	34.0	15.8	3.3	4.5
\$20-\$40	1.36	60.8	45.2	20.3	3.8	6.0
\$40-\$60	1.60	68.8	51.3	27.6	5.0	7.7
\$60-\$75	1.80	73.6	56.3	33.4	6.1	10.2
\$75-\$100	1.88	77.0	56.6	36.0	6.4	12.3
\$100-\$150	2.02	80.7	63.0	38.5	6.2	14.1
> \$150	2.15	80.8	63.4	45.1	8.3	17.4

Figure 14:
Average Civics Engagement Index for Selected Age, Educational Attainment, and Household Income Groups



The average CEIs for these groups vary widely. The lowest average CEI (only .38) was registered by the nation’s youngest adults who lacked a high school diploma and lived in a low-income family. If the educational attainment of this group was raised to a high school graduate and household income to between \$20,000 and \$40,000, the value would nearly double to .71. Increasing the age of this group and their educational attainment would again double the index. Successive increases in age, education, and income produce substantial increases in the mean value of the index. The CEI of the oldest, most highly educated, and highest-income group was nearly seven times higher than that of the lowest-ranked group.

Clearly, the degree of civic engagement in U.S. society varies widely across age, education, and income groups. The rising degree of income inequality in the United States over the past few decades has been accompanied by a very high degree of inequality in civic engagement. Politicians, policymakers, and others should be deeply disturbed by these data. These findings call for a major strengthening of core democratic and civic practices among young, less-educated, and less-affluent members of our society.

Attitudes and Interests

We cannot expect our free society to long endure if large portions of its citizenry grow up ill-educated, oblivious to the world and current affairs, out of touch with other members of their generation, and displaying little concern for their responsibilities as American citizens ...

– William Damon²⁴

As described earlier in the report, recent national assessments of high school students' knowledge of civics have yielded disappointing results. Concerns over the future impact of this limited knowledge have been expressed by professional analysts of teen and youth culture and adolescent development.²⁵ But the purported decline in civic engagement and knowledge is not confined to less-educated and lower-income youth. In its 2002 assessment of the state of the nation's civic health, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reported data from the Higher Education Research Institute's American Freshman Survey revealing a steep decline in interest in political affairs among new college freshmen from 1966 to 2002.²⁶ Only 30 percent of the freshmen members of the college class of 2002 expressed an active interest in political affairs. More recently, only 13 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds indicated that they followed the news in 2008, dropping from 31 percent in 1972.²⁷

Another perspective on the degree to which young adults pay attention to public affairs is provided by the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97)

sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. The survey tracked an initial nationally representative group of 13- to 17-year-olds over time.²⁸ The 2004–2005 survey round, a time period when most of these youths were 20 to 24 years old, collected information that included the degree of attention that these young adults paid to public affairs. The survey also allows us to see if their degree of attention varied substantively with their level of schooling or their literacy and numeracy proficiencies.

The survey collected information from respondents on their degree of self-reported attention to public affairs. Responses were classified by the survey designers into the following three categories:

- All or some of the time
- Only now and then
- Hardly at all

The percentage of these young adults who reported that they paid attention to public affairs “all or some of the time” was strongly associated with their years of formal schooling and their scores on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Overall, as shown in Table 9, slightly over 56 percent of the weighted sample of respondents reported that they paid attention to political affairs “all or some of the time,” another 21 percent reported that they paid attention to such issues “only now and then,” and the remaining 21 percent claimed that they hardly ever paid attention to public affairs. No objective assessment of their actual political/civic knowledge was undertaken.

²⁴ William Damon, “The Core of Civic Virtue,” *Hoover Digest*, 2011, No. 3. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/84221>, accessed July 21, 2011.

²⁵ For a review and critique of the limited civic and historical knowledge of America's high school students as measured by various national assessments, see Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, NY: The Penguin Group, 2008; Richard Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*, Yale University Press, 1998; and Ravitch and Finn, 1987.

²⁶ See: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement 2002*, University of Maryland, College Park, 2002.

²⁷ American National Election Study.

²⁸ For a review of the purposes, design features, and findings from the early survey rounds of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, See: *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 36, Issue 4, 2001. See esp. Robert T. Michael and Michael R. Pergamit, “The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 36 (4), pp. 628–640.

The degree of attention paid to public affairs by youth was strongly associated with their ASVAB test score performance. Only 17 percent of those young adults with an ASVAB score in the lowest decile paid attention to public affairs “all or most of the time,” versus 54 percent of those in the fifth decile, and nearly 81 percent of those in the top decile. The relative difference between the performance of youth in the top and bottom deciles was nearly 5 to 1. A strong majority (60 percent) of those in the lowest decile of the ASVAB distribution reported that they seldom paid attention to public affairs versus only a fifth of those in the sixth decile, and fewer than 8 percent of those in the top decile, a relative difference of eight times. The nation’s least literate young adults were nearly completely uninterested in public affairs.

Table 9:
Percent Distribution of 20- to 24-Year-Olds by the Degree of Their Attention to Public Affairs by Their Position in the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Test Score Distribution

ASVAB test score decile	All or some of the time	Only now and then	Hardly at all
Lowest	17.3	22.3	60.4
Second	40.5	25.8	33.7
Third	49.5	26.1	24.4
Fourth	46.7	27.7	25.6
Fifth	53.8	21.1	25.1
Sixth	61.3	19.4	19.3
Seventh	59.2	20.9	19.9
Eighth	65.6	19.9	14.5
Ninth	71.8	17.2	11.0
Top	80.8	11.6	7.6
All	56.5	21.3	21.4

Source: 2004 Survey Round, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997.

Table 10:
Percent Distribution of 20- to 24-Year-Olds by the Degree of Their Attention to Public Affairs by Educational Attainment

Educational attainment	All or some of the time	Only now and then	Hardly at all
High school dropout	35.1	21.0	43.9
High school graduate	47.3	23.1	29.6
13–15 years of school	63.6	20.2	16.2
Bachelor’s or higher degree	75.8	17.0	7.2

Source: 2004 Survey Round, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997.

The percentage of young adults who paid attention to public affairs “all or some of the time” also increased steadily with their level of schooling. As shown in Table 10, only 35 percent of high school dropouts reported that they did so versus 47 percent of high school graduates and nearly 76 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. High school dropouts were the most likely (44 percent) to report that they paid hardly any attention to public affairs. Only 30 percent of high school graduates and 7 percent of college graduates expressed no interest in political affairs, a relative difference of 6 to 1 from top to bottom.

Finally, to identify the strength of the statistical links between combined schooling and test score performance groups and degree of attention to public affairs, combinations of 20 educational attainment and ASVAB score groups were analyzed.²⁹ Key findings of our analysis are displayed in Table 11 and Figure 15.

As shown in Table 11, in each of the four educational attainment groups, the percentage of young adults who reported that they paid attention to public affairs all or some of the time rose with their position in the ASVAB test score distribution. For example, among high school

²⁹ Due to limited sample sizes in two of these cells, we only provide estimates of the degree of attention paid to public affairs by 18 educational/skill subgroups. High school dropouts with top quintile skills and bachelor’s degree holders with bottom quintile skills were excluded.

graduates, the share of young adults paying frequent attention to public affairs rose steadily from 38 percent among those with bottom quintile ASVAB scores to just under 52 percent for those with middle quintile scores and to a high of 60 percent for those with top quintile scores. The range in interest in public affairs across these educational attainment/literacy-numeracy proficiency groups was quite extensive.

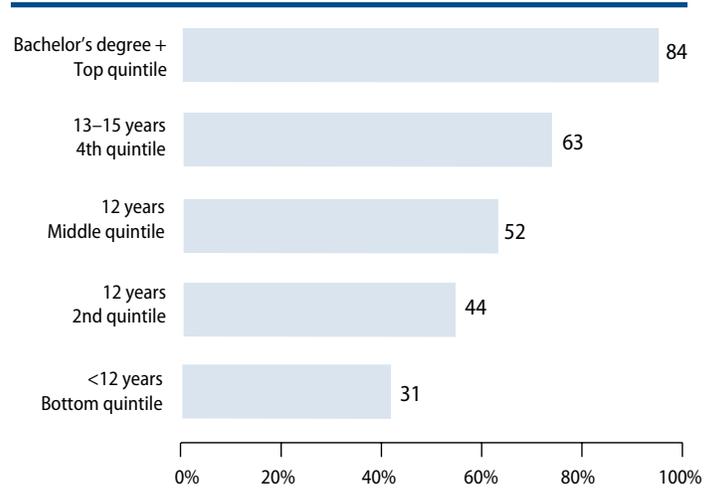
Table 11:
Percentage of 20- to 24-Year-Olds Who Reported They Paid Attention to Public Affairs All or Some of the Time by Educational Attainment and Quintile of the ASVAB Test Score

ASVAB Quintile	High school dropout	High school graduate	13–15 years of school	Bachelor’s or higher degree	All
Lowest	31.0	38.2	48.2	*	37.6
Second	32.5	44.1	56.9	53.5	48.0
Middle	45.0	51.5	61.2	70.2	57.6
Fourth	57.6	56.4	63.3	68.8	62.4
Top	*	59.8	74.8	83.9	76.4

Source: 2004 Survey Round, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997.

Figure 15 shows the differences in attention to public affairs among young adults in selected combinations of educational attainment and test scores. Among high school dropouts with bottom quintile skills, only 31 percent paid frequent attention to public affairs. The percentage rose to 52 percent for high school graduates with middle quintile skills and to a maximum of 84 percent for those holding a bachelor’s or higher degree and achieving top quintile ASVAB scores. The relative size of the difference in interest between the top and bottom educational/skill groups was nearly 3 to 1.

Figure 15:
Percentage of 20- to 24-Year-Olds Who Reported That They Paid Attention to Public Affairs All or Some of the Time by Selected Groups of Educational Attainment and ASVAB Scores



Source: 2004 Survey Round, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997.

The weak interest in political affairs by the least-educated/least-literate group of young adults was accompanied by an extremely low voting rate in the 2004 presidential election and in the 2006 election. Similar findings held true for their volunteering behavior, the intensity of their volunteering efforts, other forms of civic engagement (attending political/civic meetings), and donating to political causes. Their voting practices in both the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections were highly consistent with their daily behaviors in paying attention to political affairs. Apathy prevails in all civic domains for the less-educated and less-literate members of the young adult population. A political type of stratification takes hold in our voting booths among the younger members of the voting public. The voting behavior of the least-educated and least-literate members of the young adult population in 2004 was quite similar to what one would observe in a society that adhered to the political dictate “Those who do not know, shall not vote.”

We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.

– Sir Winston Churchill

Civic knowledge and civic or political behavior are of critical importance. However, attitudes, especially toward what are often called “out groups,” and beliefs about the kinds of participation that are important for citizens and whether government can be trusted also form a structure on which a healthy democracy is based. Instead of relying on comparisons of averages or percentages, this analysis looked at clusters of individuals who shared similar attitudes. This person-centered analysis often can be more compelling to policymakers or the general public than designations of “proficiency” achieved by percentages of students. Using cluster analysis of data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (CIVED), Judith Torney-Purta provides an interesting perspective of young people’s orientations to the institutions of their societies.³⁰ The data were collected in the second phase of CIVED on nationally representative samples of 14-year-olds in 28 countries. Here we summarize the cluster analysis for U.S. students and compare the results with students in three Western European countries (England, Finland, and Sweden) and Australia.

Torney-Purta identified five clusters that are described below, along with a “motto” that summarized the types of attitudes endorsed by the young people in each cluster.

- **Social justice** — “I believe in rights for everyone but do not feel obligated to do much about it.”

Members of this cluster, according to Torney-Purta, show high levels of support for the rights

of minorities, immigrants, and women. These individuals believe that the government has some social responsibilities but generally have below-average beliefs in the importance of citizen participation.

- **Conventionally political** — “I believe in my country and will support the status quo with positive political and civic actions that are expected of me.”

Members of this cluster show high levels of trust in governmental institutions, hold protectionist and patriotic attitudes, and believe that governments have social responsibilities. These individuals have relatively high levels of political self-efficacy and believe in the norm that adults should be active both in conventional politics and in more socially oriented activities.

- **Indifferent** — “I have better ways to spend my time than thinking about being active in politics, but I won’t do anything rash.”

Members of this cluster have strong protectionist and patriotic attitudes. These individuals are willing to do the basic minimum as citizens, primarily by voting and not breaking the law.

- **Disaffected** — same motto as **Indifferent**

Members of this cluster are similar to **Indifferent** but with more negative beliefs about the rights of women and minorities and about norms of citizenship related to community involvement.

- **Alienated** — “I’m angry about the immigrants and minority groups in my country, and I don’t trust the government; I have the right to do what I want.”

³⁰ Judith V. Torney-Purta, “International Psychological Research That Matters for Policy and Practice,” *American Psychologist*, November 2009, pp. 825–837; Judith Torney-Purta and Carolyn Barber, “Fostering Young People’s Support for Participatory Human Rights Through Their Developmental Niches,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(4), pp. 473–481; Judith Torney-Purta and Jo-Ann Amadeo, “The Contributions of International Large-Scale Studies in Civic Education and Engagement,” in Matthias von Davier, Eugenio J. Gonzalez, Irwin Kirsch, and Kentaro Yamamoto (Eds.), *The Role of International Large-Scale Assessments: Perspectives from Technology, Economy, and Educational Research*, New York: Springer, forthcoming.

Members of this cluster, according to Torney-Purta, are more negative than any other cluster group about rights of immigrants, minorities, and women. They do not believe in norms of citizen participation. They are alienated from both political culture and from belief in the rights of others. Other analysis showed that a striking 25 percent of this “alienated” cluster did not believe it was important to obey the law. This contrasted with less than 5 percent of the sample as a whole holding this belief.

The distribution of cluster membership for the United States is shown below.

- Conventionally political — 33 percent
- Social justice — 17 percent
- Indifferent — 9 percent
- Disaffected — 35 percent
- Alienated — 7 percent

In the United States and the other countries participating, according to Torney-Purta’s analysis, the most prevalent cluster type was “disaffected” (more than one-third). Another similarity across these countries was that about 7 percent of students were “alienated.” In the United States the second most prevalent cluster was “conventional” (33 percent). A smaller proportion (17 percent) fell into the “social justice” cluster, with the fewest students in the “indifferent” and “alienated” clusters (9 and 7 percent, respectively).

Among Swedish and English adolescents, according to Torney-Purta, the second most prevalent cluster (after “disaffected”) was “social justice,” with about one-quarter of students, with a smaller proportion in the “indifferent” and “conventional” clusters. Adolescents in Finland and Australia were more likely to be “indifferent” (more than one-fifth) with smaller proportions in “social justice” and “conventional” clusters. Across all of these countries there was a striking proportion who were “indifferent,” “disaffected,” or “alienated,” accounting for more than half of the adolescents surveyed, indicating a disconnect between the adolescent and his or her society. This “alienated” group’s strongly negative beliefs about immigrants and ethnic groups, along with a disinclination to obey the law, are of concern.

Summary and Conclusions

It is one of the beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

The findings of this report fuel growing concerns over the civic engagement of U.S. adults and the health of the country's democracy. We have seen that participation in important civic activities like voting and volunteering are strongly related to age, educational attainment, literacy levels, and income. In addition, the level of civic knowledge of the nation's students and young adults is troubling to many. Only about one-quarter of the nation's high school seniors scored *Proficient* in the 2010 NAEP civics assessment, meaning, for example, that they have the ability to define the term “melting pot” and argue whether it applies to the United States. According to the NAEP assessment data collected from students and schools, almost all eighth and 12th graders study civics in school and report studying civics topics that appear to overlap with the content of the assessment. The reasons for this disconnect between what students study and what they learn are unknown and should be explored.

Lack of civic knowledge represents a fault line that may contribute to more limited civic involvement, less support for democratic institutions and values, and lower levels of trust in government and elected officials. Indeed, this report has documented lower voting rates in recent years and limited civic engagement. Voting rates in recent national elections have become increasingly associated with the age, educational attainment, and household income of voting-age adults. The gaps between the voting rates of individuals in these subgroups have widened considerably over the past 40 years or so. Despite increases in the average educational attainment levels of adults as well as significant political and social reforms and changes including the civil rights revolution, the passing of voting rights legislation, the women's rights movement, and the passage of constitutional reform to

extend voting rights to 18-year-olds, voting rates are far from what would have been expected.

Older adults, adults with higher levels of formal schooling, and those in households with higher incomes were considerably more likely to vote than each of their respective counterparts. The educational attainment of the nation's adults was strongly associated with their voting behavior in each age, racial/ethnic, and income group. Older adults with college degrees from more affluent families were the most likely to vote, while young, less-educated, lower-income adults were the least likely to vote. And these relative differences in voting rates are large. Voting behavior in our nation today is stratified by age, education, income, and skills and represents a serious empowerment gap in our nation. Adults with the highest literacy levels, the most schooling, and the highest incomes carry the most weight in the voting booth. The decline in voting in recent years, especially among the young, less-educated, and lower-income groups, should be viewed as a fault line in the bedrock of our nation's democracy.

Rates of civic engagement are strongly related to background characteristics as well. Using a composite measure of civic engagement — the Civic Engagement Index (CEI) — this report has documented the tremendous gap in civic participation among segments of the population. The CEI of the oldest, most highly educated, and highest-income group was nearly seven times higher than the index for young, low-income, high school dropouts. Very similar results apply to the civic engagement of the nation's young adults.

Young adults' attention to public affairs was also related to their educational attainment and achievement levels. Overall, while more than half of young adults reported paying considerable attention to public affairs, large proportions of young adults with low test scores and low levels of education reported paying attention to public affairs “hardly at all.” Analyses of international data on adolescents' political attitudes also reveal

a disconnect between many adolescents and their society. Across U.S., Western European, and Australian adolescents surveyed, about half could be characterized as “indifferent,” “disaffected,” or “alienated.”

This combination of the limited civics knowledge of the nation’s students and low overall rates of voting and civic engagement that vary significantly across key socioeconomic groups defined by age, educational attainment, and level of affluence should be viewed as a major concern by policymakers, our elected leaders, and the general public. Political and educational philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Robert Maynard Hutchins³¹ have warned in the past that civic apathy may lead to the ultimate death of democracy, or the moral and social decline of the state.

Efforts to improve the level of civic engagement of the U.S. population will require concerted efforts on many fronts: improvements in the civic knowledge of potential future voters, a more highly educated and literate population, greater civic commitment by the voting public, increased economic and personal incentives to vote, and reforms to make it easier to register and vote. Results of the most recent polls described above represent a considerable obstacle to these efforts. Below we offer some recommendations.

Recommendations for Our Schools, Colleges, and Adult Education Systems

The weak civics knowledge of many of America’s high school students, as seen in the most recent NAEP civics assessment, does not bode well for near-term improvement. Several political analysts have argued that active civic behavior and support of democratic institutions is predicated on a strong base of civic knowledge.³² Students’ knowledge of history and civics

is influenced by exposure in elementary and secondary school. A bill recently introduced in Congress calls for NAEP results in civics and history to be available for states.³³ Such an effort would help each state determine how well their students are mastering civics and government and also see how different groups of students within each state are performing.

Our nation’s high schools can play a positive role in improving voter turnout by boosting graduation rates, increasing knowledge of political issues and civics, expanding opportunities for students to participate in civic activities, and encouraging those of voting age to register before graduation. Policymakers may want to consider requiring voting-age youth to register as a prerequisite for high school graduation.

Meira Levinson makes a compelling case for focusing on the nation’s de facto segregated urban schools to address the civic empowerment gap. These schools enroll a large proportion of the nation’s racial and ethnic minority students whose numbers will continue to grow along with the overall minority population. These schools also provide fewer and lower-quality civics learning opportunities than schools with more advantaged student bodies. Levinson recommends five specific actions: reducing the dropout rate, improving the state of civics education across the K–12 curriculum, helping students construct more empowering civic narratives, infusing more experiential civics education into the curriculum, and providing powerful civic learning and engagement opportunities for urban teachers.³⁴

The nation’s colleges and universities also can play a more active role in encouraging voting and civic participation at all levels by their students, including through community service. Many civic

³¹ For Hutchins’ thoughts on the death of democracy, see *The Great Books*, 1954.

³² William A. Galston, “Civic Education and Political Participation,” Political Science Online, www.apsanet.org, April 2004.

³³ The “Sandra Day O’Connor Civic Learning Act of 2011” was introduced by Congressmen Tom Cole and Mike Honda. The bill also would provide a competitive grant program to encourage innovation in civic education, stressing currently underserved inner-city and rural school populations.

³⁴ Levinson, 2010.

organizations and individual colleges are making these efforts already. One promising strategy is a course for first-year disadvantaged college students that helps civically engage them through service learning. Williams and Perrine conducted a one-year study of the impact of an introductory leadership development course on first-generation and low-income college freshmen.³⁵ The course included service learning and political advocacy to build leadership skills. Williams and Perrine found that those who completed the course “significantly increased in openness to diversity, political efficacy, political knowledge, and some political attitudes and behaviors.”

Our findings on the weak and declining civic engagement of adults with lower levels of educational attainment and poor reading and math skills have important implications for the nation’s adult basic education system. The case for a political crusade against ignorance was made many years ago by our founding fathers, including Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to George Wythe in 1786, Jefferson wrote:

*I think by far the most important bill in our code (in the state of Virginia) is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness ... Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people.*³⁶

Jefferson’s advice to his mentor more than two centuries ago is just as relevant to America today as it was then. If the nation truly wants to achieve a more broadly based democracy, a more egalitarian

political system, a more politically active citizenry, and a more assimilated society, then we need to take action. We must bolster the knowledge, literacy and civic proficiencies, and civic involvement of less-educated native-born adults. We also must bolster the formal schooling, English-language skills, and reading and writing proficiencies of recent immigrants. The naturalization process is significantly influenced by the educational attainment and English-speaking and-reading skills of immigrants. Voting behavior of naturalized citizens is favorably improved with higher levels of formal schooling and stronger literacy and numeracy proficiencies, but voting rates of naturalized citizens tend to lag behind those of U.S.-born citizens by about 9 percentage points, with even larger gaps at the upper end of the educational distribution. The nation’s adult education system needs to be revamped to strengthen its role in improving citizenship skills and civic behavior of native and immigrant learners.³⁷ This overhaul would include more intensive instruction in civic education and current political events, registering to vote, volunteering, and citizenship training. All national, state, and local adult-education agencies should assume responsibility to incorporate civics education and civic involvement into the curriculum, help learners become familiar with voting registration procedures, and encourage volunteerism. All adult learners should be asked to give back to their communities.

Potential Voting Reforms

Political scientists have studied the impact of institutional voting reforms to make it easier to vote. Proposed reforms include easier voting-by-mail rules, early voting, and weekend voting. Recent research findings on the

³⁵ Kate S. Williams and Rose M. Perrine, “Can Leadership Development Through Civic Engagement Activities Improve Retention for Disadvantaged College Students?”, *Opportunity Matters*, Vol. 1, 2008.

³⁶ See *The Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826*, “A Crusade Against Ignorance,” to George Wythe, from Paris, August 13, 1786.

³⁷ For a recent review of recommendations for strengthening the adult basic education system, see: National Commission for Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, June 2008. For a recent review of strengthening civic education, see *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics, University of Pennsylvania, September 2011. <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>

impact of these reforms, especially among those least likely to vote, are mixed. Gronke and Miller believe that easing restrictions on voting by mail could have a modest impact, but “voting by mail and early voting in general are not cure-alls for low levels of voter participation in the U.S.”³⁸ In a separate study on early voting, Gronke and Toffey find that early voters in the 2004 and 2006 elections were significantly older and better educated than those showing up on election day. They also find that those with more political knowledge and who were more actively politically engaged were more likely to vote early.

Adam Berinsky argues that making voting easier actually increases socioeconomic gaps in the voting rates of U.S. adults.³⁹ Berinsky suggests the focus should instead be on improving political interest and engagement. Another proposal is to make voting compulsory. Arend Lijphart suggests the benefits outweigh the costs and that it is the best way to reduce socioeconomic inequality in voting behavior.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, more than a dozen states recently passed laws requiring photo identification at polls, reducing early voting periods, or imposing new restrictions on voter registration drives. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law estimates that the 19 laws and two executive orders that were issued in 14 states in 2011 could make it harder for more than five million eligible voters to cast ballots in 2012.⁴¹

Strengthening Confidence in Government

A significant obstacle to increasing voting rates is declining confidence in America’s political leaders. The lower voter turnout may be due in part to the declining trust of the public in key governmental institutions and the current American system of government, which has been accompanied by a growing polarization of politics.⁴² In a June 2007 national public opinion survey by the Gallup organization, only 14 percent of respondents expressed a “great deal” or “quite a lot of confidence” in Congress while nearly 40 percent reported “very little or no confidence.”⁴³ In a more recent June 2011 survey, only 12 percent of respondents reported a “great deal” or “quite a lot of confidence” in Congress versus 48 percent who reported “very little or no confidence.” The 12 percent vote of confidence in Congress virtually tied a July 2010 survey finding only 11 percent confidence as being the lowest in the past 38 years. Of the 16 government, business, labor, health, and media institutions assessed in the June 2011 surveys, Congress received the lowest share of strong confidence votes.

The public’s views on the presidency in the June 2011 survey were more mixed. Only 35 percent of respondents expressed “a great deal or quite a lot of confidence” in the presidency, about the same as the share of those who reported “little or no confidence.” The degree of confidence in the presidency had fallen fairly considerably from 2009 when 51 percent voiced confidence. It was the fourth lowest reported in the last 26 years.⁴⁴

³⁸ Paul Gronke and Peter Miller, “Voting By Mail and Turnout: A Replication and Extension,” paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

³⁹ Adam J. Berinsky, “The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States,” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 33 No. 4, July 2005, pp. 471–491.

⁴⁰ Arend Lijphart, “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Mar. 1997), pp. 1–14.

⁴¹ Michael Cooper, “New State Rules Raising Hurdles at Voting Booth,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2011.

⁴² For recent views on the polarization of politics in the United States and its underlying causes and consequences, see Ronald Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2007 and Keith T. Poole, Nolan McCarthy, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008.

⁴³ For findings of recent Gallup polls on the public’s confidence in government, see Gallup, Inc. *Gallup’s Pulse of Democracy: Fixing Government*, January 2008. www.gallup.com/polls/27286/government.aspx

⁴⁴ See Gallup News Service, June Wave Survey 1, June 9–12, 2011.

America's optimism with respect to "our system of government and how well it works" also has been on the decline over the past decade. In a March 2011 public opinion poll sponsored by ABC News and the *Washington Post*, only 26 percent of respondents said they were "optimistic about the current system of government and its workings" versus 23 percent who expressed "pessimism."⁴⁵ The 26 percent "optimism" share was the lowest recorded in the past 37 years of such surveys and was well below the 54 percent "optimism" share reported as recently as 1999.

The extraordinarily low levels of confidence in national, state, and local leaders held by the general public should be viewed as deeply troubling by all who care about the nation's political and economic future, regardless of political affiliation. A significant share (35 to 40 percent) of nonvoters in recent national elections said they didn't vote for reasons including a lack of interest in the election, a dislike of the candidates, a lack of time to vote, and a lack of any perceived impact of their vote.⁴⁶ Increasing voter participation is difficult when confidence levels in our political leaders are low.

Focusing on Parents

Parents also can boost the civic participation of their children. In fact, recent analysis by the Center for Labor Market Studies has shown that the home may be a much more important influence than the schools. In the 2010 election, 18- to 19-year-olds were much more likely to vote if a parent voted (32 percent versus 4 percent). This large difference held across both gender and racial/ethnic groups. These data support the notion that good civic behavior is learned in the home, as well as in school.⁴⁷

The Role of the Media

The media can play an important role in increasing civic participation through public service announcements and campaigns, by publicizing and promoting opportunities for volunteering and civic engagement, and by informing the public about voter registration procedures and "get out the vote" messages. The media's coverage of political affairs can play an indirect role as well. Empirical evidence shows that individuals who pay close attention to political events through the media and more informal networks are significantly more likely to vote and volunteer. Perhaps if our media were not so polarized politically and provided more objective political coverage, the public might pay more attention to political affairs.

Establishing a National Commission

We recommend that a National Commission on Civic Engagement be established to seek solutions to the low levels of voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement by America's younger, less-educated, lower-income, and immigrant populations. The commission would include former political leaders, educators, representatives of foundations and civic organizations, and the general public. The commission would be funded by private foundations and would help support demonstration efforts across the country to improve voter turnout, volunteering, and civic engagement (town meetings, neighborhood associations, civic campaigns) and evaluations of such efforts to gauge their effectiveness. The commission would also organize ongoing public relations campaigns to inform the public of the need for a more active and participatory citizenry.

⁴⁵ See [ABCNews.com/Polling Unit](http://ABCNews.com/PollingUnit).

⁴⁶ In the 2006 election, nearly 50 percent of nonvoters in the CPS survey cited one of these three reasons for not voting.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Smith, "The Effects of Investments in the Social Capital of Youth on Political and Civic Behavior in Young Adulthood: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1999; Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatriwada, Neeta Fogg et al., *The Volunteering Activities of U.S. Adults*, report prepared for Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ, 2008; Sarah Mustillo, John Wilson, and Scott M. Lynch, "Legacy Volunteering: A Test of Two Theories of Intergenerational Transmission," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, May 2004, pp. 530–541.

Final Thoughts on Why Civic Engagement Matters

Bolstering voter turnout and increasing volunteering have important consequences for maintaining the nation's democratic values and ensuring the economic well-being of society. Benefits of such actions include a revitalized democracy, more faith and confidence in political leaders and institutions, more responsive government officials, and an increased flow of goods and services to the public through volunteering. In addition, benefits resulting from the kinds of civic engagement discussed in this report add to the psychological well-being and satisfaction of individuals themselves. Volunteering and charitable giving also appear to provide psychic benefits to the volunteers. National research by Arthur Brooks on the likelihood that a U.S. adult would report himself or herself as "very happy" in a 2000 survey found that being a volunteer and engaging in charitable giving significantly raised the possibility that he or she would report to be "very happy."⁴⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson's views expressed at the top of this section on the favorable feedback of volunteering on the person who volunteers are confirmed by this finding.

Recently, there has been an intellectual movement afoot both in the United States and elsewhere to broaden the array of measures used to gauge the general well-being of populations. In a recent book based on a report on economic and social well-being for the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Development and Social Progress, created by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the argument is made that countries need to go beyond aggregate measures of output, such as GDP and income, to capture well-being in other domains

like consumption, household income, employment, and the distribution of income. The authors also argue that we need to include nonmarket outcomes, including general health, active political participation, and other forms of community engagement.⁴⁹ Another recent book has argued for a set of human development capability measures that would include the right to acquire a solid education and core literacy/math skills, the right and capability to participate in the political process, to care about one's neighbors, and engage in activities to assist one's fellow community members (volunteering, donating time and resources).⁵⁰ These intellectual arguments bolster the case we make in this report for sustained efforts on the part of parents, the public, schools and colleges, and local and state leaders to boost the involvement of our citizens in voting and other forms of civic engagement that will help ensure that the fault lines seen in our democracy's bedrock don't widen to the point of inflicting long-term damage on our democracy.

⁴⁸ Arthur Brooks, *Gross National Happiness: Why Happiness Matters for America and How We Can Get More of It*, New York: Basic Books, 2008.

⁴⁹ Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up*, New York: The New York Press, 2010.

⁵⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

Appendix

Appendix Table 1:

**Percentage of Total U.S. Population Age 18 and Over
Voting in Presidential Elections, by Educational Level,
November 1964 to 2008.**

Year	<9th grade	9th to 12th grade, no diploma	High school graduate or GED	Some college or associate degree	Bachelor's degree or more
2008	23.4	33.7	50.9	65.0	73.3
2004	23.6	34.6	52.4	66.1	74.2
2000	26.8	33.6	49.4	60.3	72.0
1996	29.9	33.8	49.1	60.5	72.6
1992	35.1	41.2	57.5	68.7	81.0
1988	36.7	41.3	54.7	64.5	77.6
1984	42.9	44.4	58.7	67.5	79.1
1980	42.6	45.6	58.9	67.2	79.9
1976	44.1	47.2	59.4	68.1	79.8
1972	47.4	52.0	65.4	74.9	83.6
1968	54.5	61.3	72.5	78.4	84.1
1964	59.0	65.4	76.1	82.1	87.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 and earlier reports. Internet release data: July 2009. Table A-2. Reported Voting and Registration by Region, Educational Attainment and Labor Force for the Population 18 and Over: November 1964 to 2008.

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