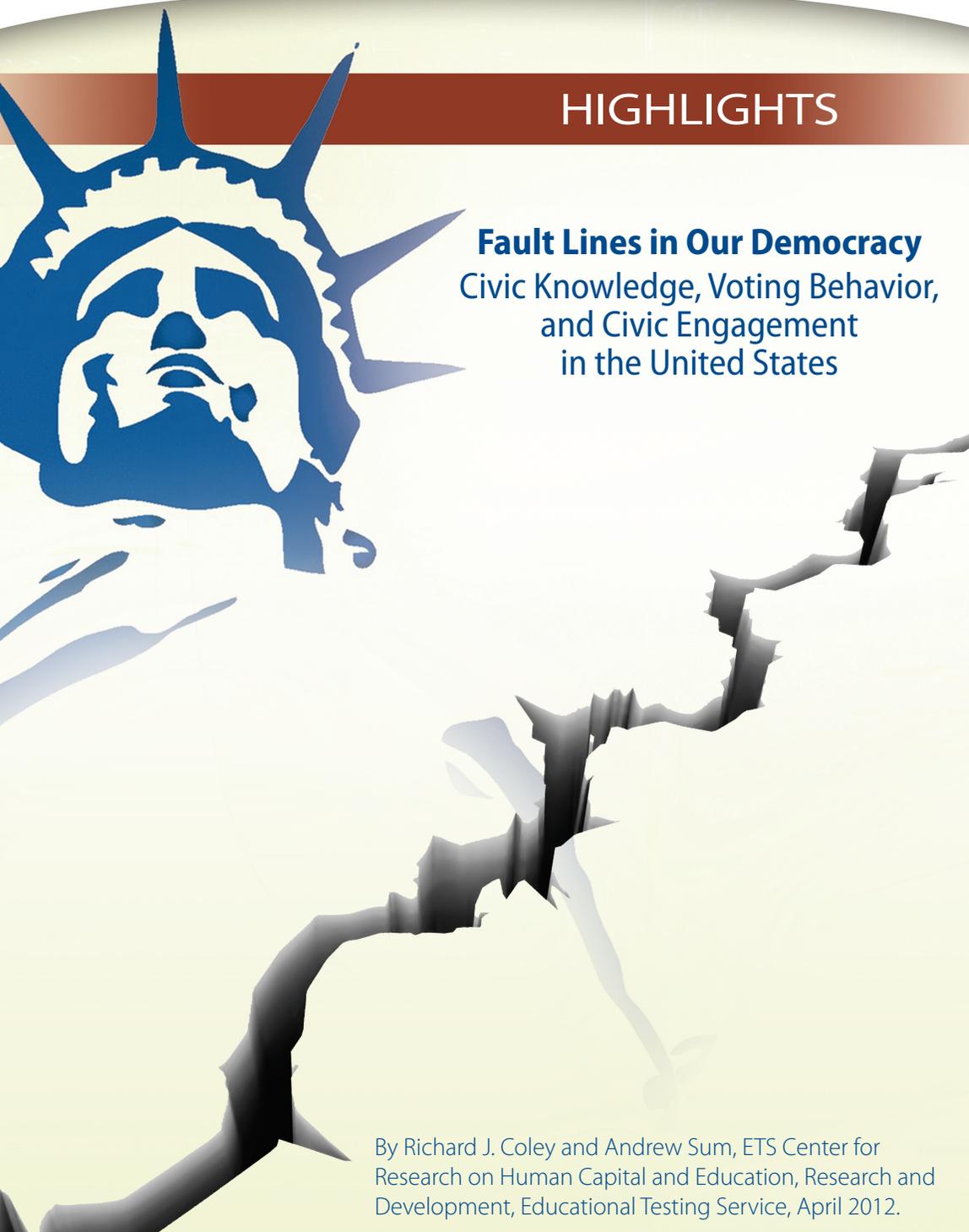


## HIGHLIGHTS

A stylized graphic featuring a blue silhouette of the Statue of Liberty's head and crown on the left. To the right, a map of the United States is shown with a jagged, cracked line running through it, symbolizing 'fault lines'.

### **Fault Lines in Our Democracy** Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior, and Civic Engagement in the United States

By Richard J. Coley and Andrew Sum, ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education, Research and Development, Educational Testing Service, April 2012.

For the full study and much more data, download the report from  
[www.ets.org/faultlines](http://www.ets.org/faultlines)

## INTRODUCTION

As the 21st century unfolds, the United States faces challenges of historic proportions, including a struggling economy, budget deficits and growing debt, an aging infrastructure, global terrorism, and a host of other problems. While there is much disagreement on solutions to these problems, many would agree that solutions will have to come from an educated and skilled citizenry who:

- Understand how our democratic system works;
- Participate in our democracy by voting, volunteering, and being civically engaged; and
- Have positive attitudes and believe that our democratic system is meaningful and important.

Americans will respond to the challenges the way we always do: through the power of our democratic government. But our democracy is only as strong as its citizens.

The dismal state of civics knowledge among our youth, along with the likelihood of voting and volunteering being strongly related to one's age, education, literacy and numeracy skills, and income, represent fault lines in the bedrock of our democracy. Each of these fault lines is highlighted here. Some ideas about what to do about this problem are offered at the end.

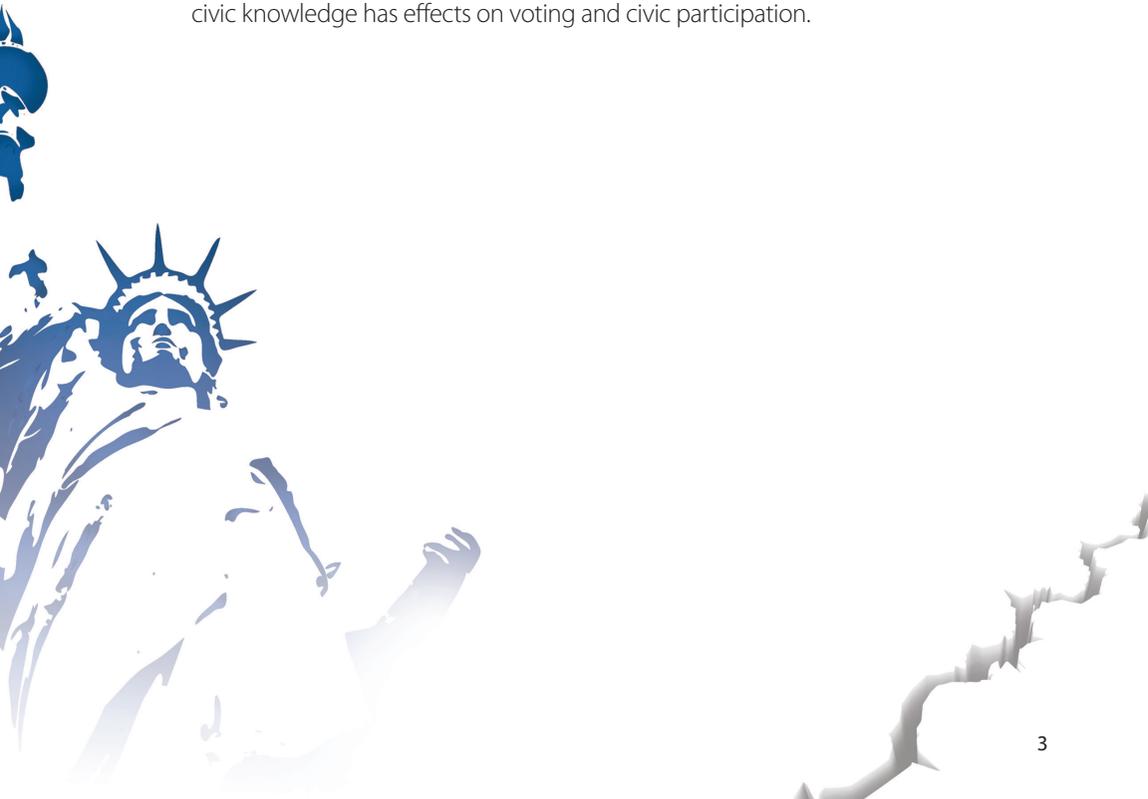
## CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

*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'Connor

- In the most recent national assessment of the civics knowledge of our nation's students, only about one-quarter reached the "proficient" level, demonstrating solid academic performance.
- Only 27 percent of fourth-graders could identify the purpose of the U.S. Constitution.
- Only 22 percent of eighth-graders could recognize a role played by the U.S. Supreme Court.

This lack of knowledge provides ample concern for our future because civic knowledge has effects on voting and civic participation.

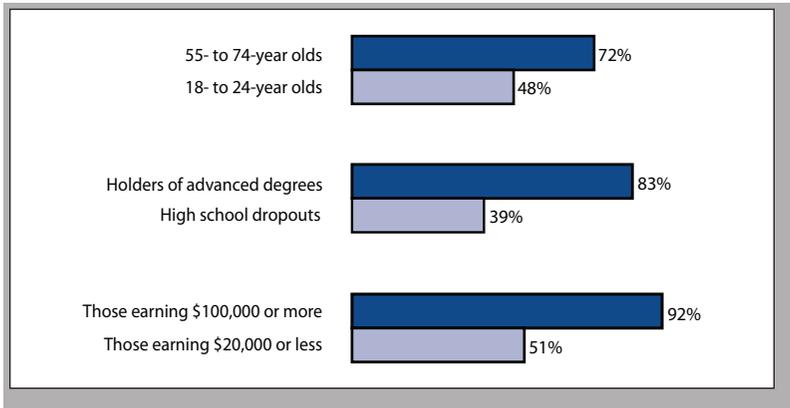


## WHO VOTES AND WHO DOESN'T?

*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)

Older adults with the most education and the highest incomes carry the most weight in the voting booth. Here's a profile of who voted in the past presidential election.



Voting is not the only civic activity associated with age, education, and income. So is civic engagement.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ATTITUDES

*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

- The Civic Engagement Index 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.
- Large proportions of young adults with low levels of skills and education report paying attention to public affairs “hardly at all.”
- About half of U.S. 14-year-olds’ political attitudes were classified as “indifferent,” “disaffected,” or “alienated.”

Improving the civic engagement of our citizens will require concerted efforts on many fronts.



## WHAT WE SHOULD DO?

Efforts to increase the civic engagement of our citizens will require efforts on many fronts and include efforts like the following:

- Work to close the educational achievement and attainment gaps
- Increase exposure to civic knowledge and experiences in
  - Elementary and secondary schools
  - Higher education
  - Adult basic education programs
- Increase motivation and incentives to vote
- Facilitate access to voting
- Work to strengthen confidence in government
- Emphasize the roles of parents and media

*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 Damon (2011)

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