

# Sustaining a Nonrepresentative Democracy: How Academic Inequality and Civic Preparation in High School Shape Voting in Midlife

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## Introduction

One of the biggest predictors of voting is educational attainment. Over 80% of the population with any graduate education reports voting in presidential elections, compared with about 50% of the population with only a high school diploma (Figure 1)<sup>i</sup>. Figure 2<sup>i</sup> displays what this inequality in voting means for our country; the education level of people choosing our representatives is not representative of the overall education level in the U.S. population. In this project, we examine the early determinants of this gap to better understand how educational institutions structure inequalities in political participation.

## Background

Research has long pointed out that the experiences students have in civic participation in high school shape their voting patterns in early adulthood. Individuals who were club leaders are more likely to vote in early adulthood, potentially because of the motivations to participate in politics and the skills in navigating political institutions instilled in them. Additionally, research finds that the academic experiences students have in high school shape their future educational attainment. Individuals who were in the college preparatory track have higher math and reading skill gains during high school and are more likely to go to college and reach high status positions after high school. In this paper, we examine how these two elements of high school interact to shape long-term voting behaviors. We investigate the role of club leadership and college track placement in predicting voting in midlife, an age group with the highest rates of voter turnout. We additionally examine the role of voting and educational attainment in early adulthood in explaining the link between college and civic preparation in high school and voting in midlife.

## Data

We use the High School & Beyond Sophomore Cohort (HS&B:So) linked with voting records from Catalist, Inc. Of the original 14830<sup>ii</sup> sample members, we were able to link 9800 to valid voting records in Catalist. Our models use an inverse Mills ratio to correct for bias in sample selection. Our final sample size is 8400, which excludes high school noncompleters.

## Measures

**Voting in Midlife:** Catalist records of whether or not the individual voted in the 2012 presidential election or the 2014 midterm election.

**Club Leader:** Coded from student self-reports of whether or not they held a leadership position in newspaper, student council, debate, youth organizations, achievement clubs or service clubs.

**College Track:** Coded from student self-reports of whether they were in the college preparatory track (coded as 1) or in the general or vocational track (coded as 0).

**Combined Preparation:** We created a categorical indicator to combine the above two measures into the following categories: neither a club leader or in the college track, only a club leader, only in the college track, and both a club leader and in the college track.

**Early Voting:** Combined self-reports from the 1984, 1986 and 1992 surveys of whether an individual reported voting in any election.

**Degree Attainment:** Combined self- and transcript-reports of the highest degree earned by 1992, when respondents were about 28 years old. Categories include high school diploma, associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and graduate degree.

**Controls:** We control on race, gender, parents' highest level of education, family income, school type, party affiliation, church-going, the number and types of clubs participated in, and civics and math test scores to isolate the role of high school experiences from background, skills, and prior civic preparation.

Figure 1: Voter Turnout by Education Level

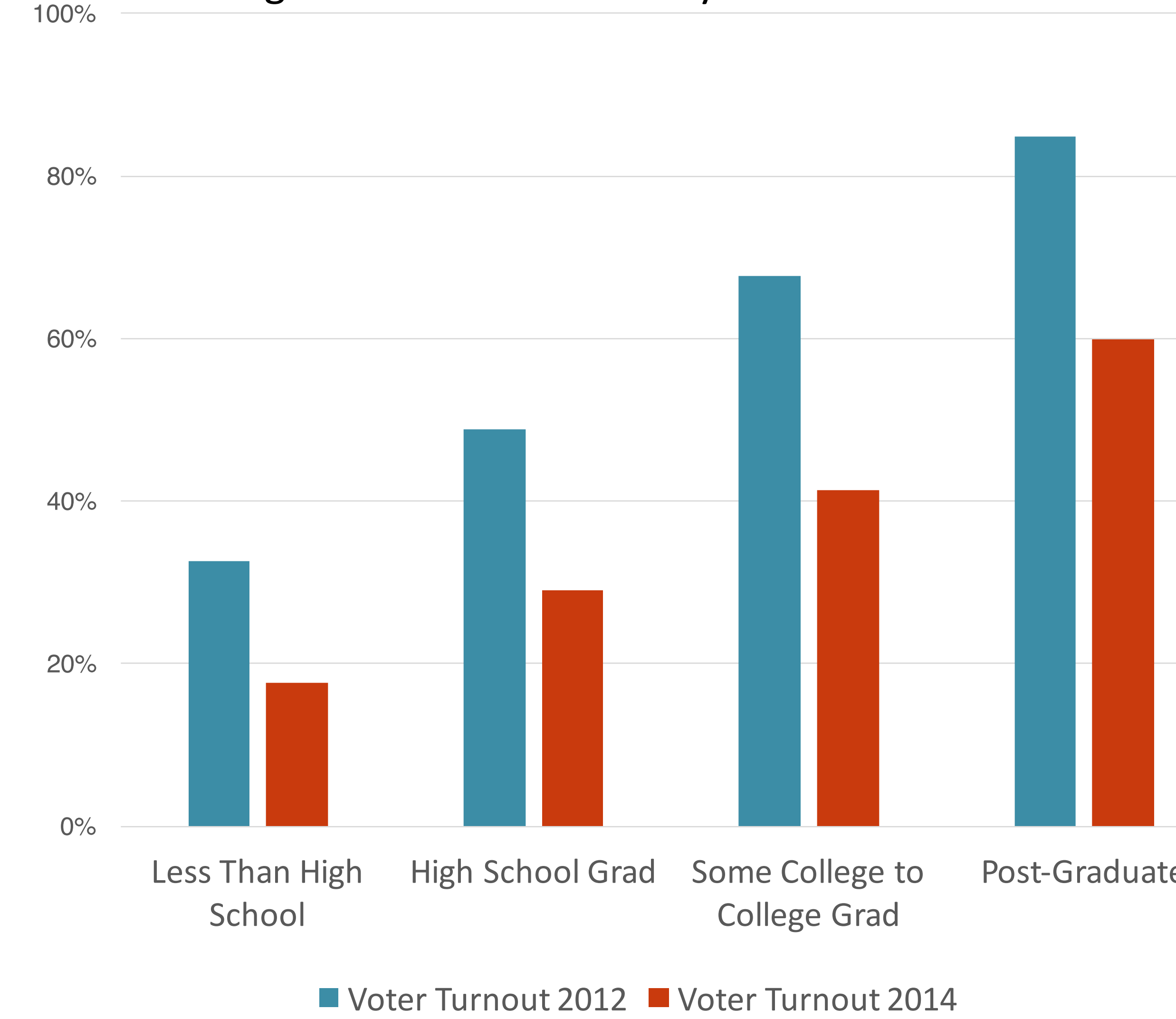
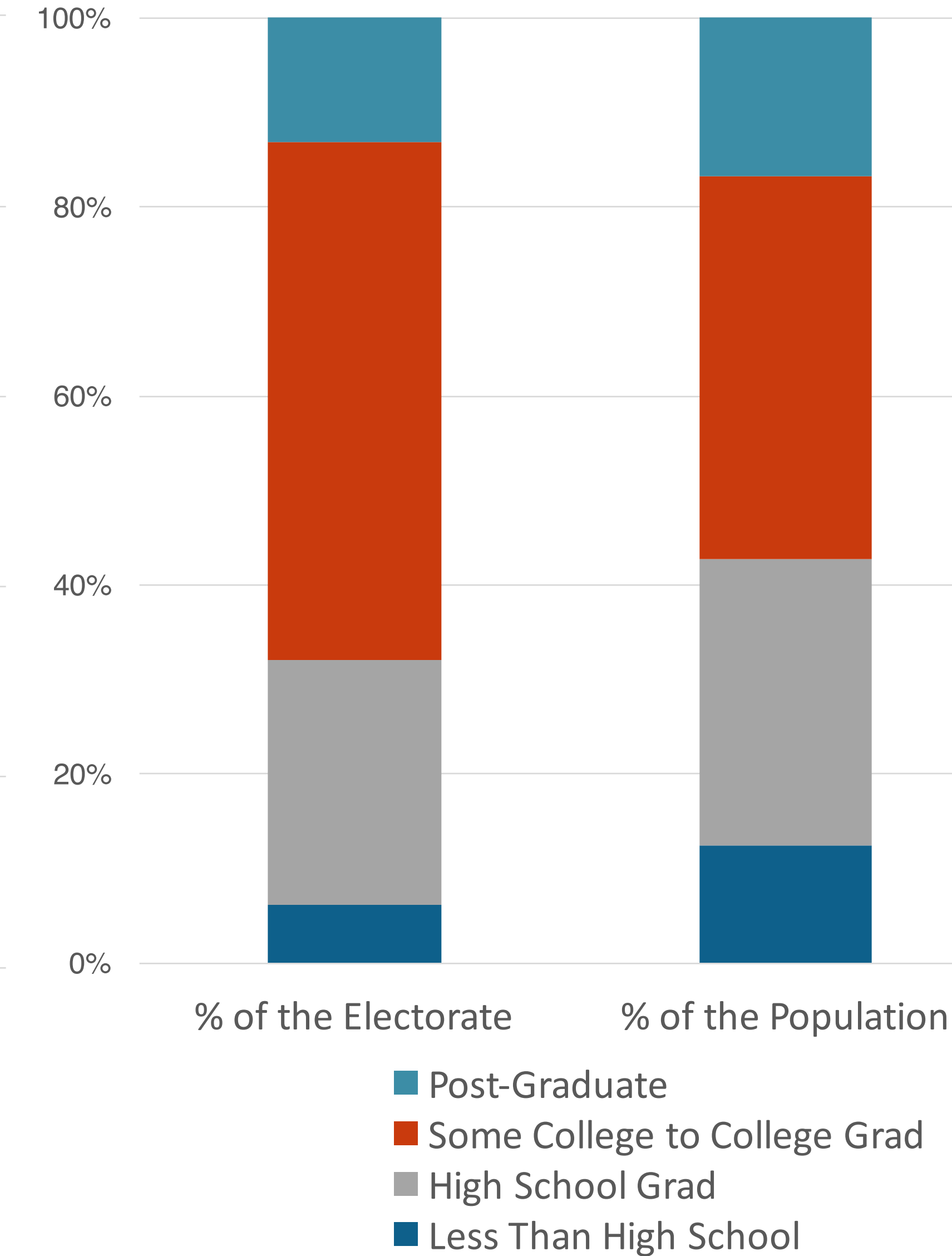


Figure 2: Level of Education in 2012



## Analyses

We perform logistic regression and report average marginal effects to predict voting in 2012 and 2014. We nest our models, first investigating the independent roles of club leadership and college track, respectively, then the combined measure. We then perform an analysis of mediation by voting and degree attainment in early adulthood, respectively. We present results graphically as the predicted probability of an average sample member voting in each election by their high school civic and college preparation.

## Findings

Figure 3 displays the bivariate relationship between high school civic and college preparation and voting in 2012 and 2014. The proportion of those who were neither a club leader nor in the college track in high school is higher for nonvoters than voters, yet the proportion of those who were only a club leader is similar across voters and nonvoters. Table 1 displays results from logistic regression predicting voting in 2012 and 2014. The first model for both outcomes shows that club leadership alone only marginally significantly predicts voting in midlife. Although being in the college track does predict voting in presidential elections, it does not predict voting in midterm elections. Only those who were both in the college track and in a leadership position are more likely to vote in midlife. Figure 4 displays the predicted probability of voting in midlife by high school college and civic preparation. The gap in probability of voting in a presidential election between those without college or civic preparation and those with both civic and college preparation is about .09, whereas the gap for midterm elections is about .06. Degree attainment in early adulthood does significantly mediate the association between civic and college preparation and voting in both elections in midlife. Self-reported of voting in early adulthood does not.

Figure 3: Composition of Voters and Nonvoters by High School Leadership and Track

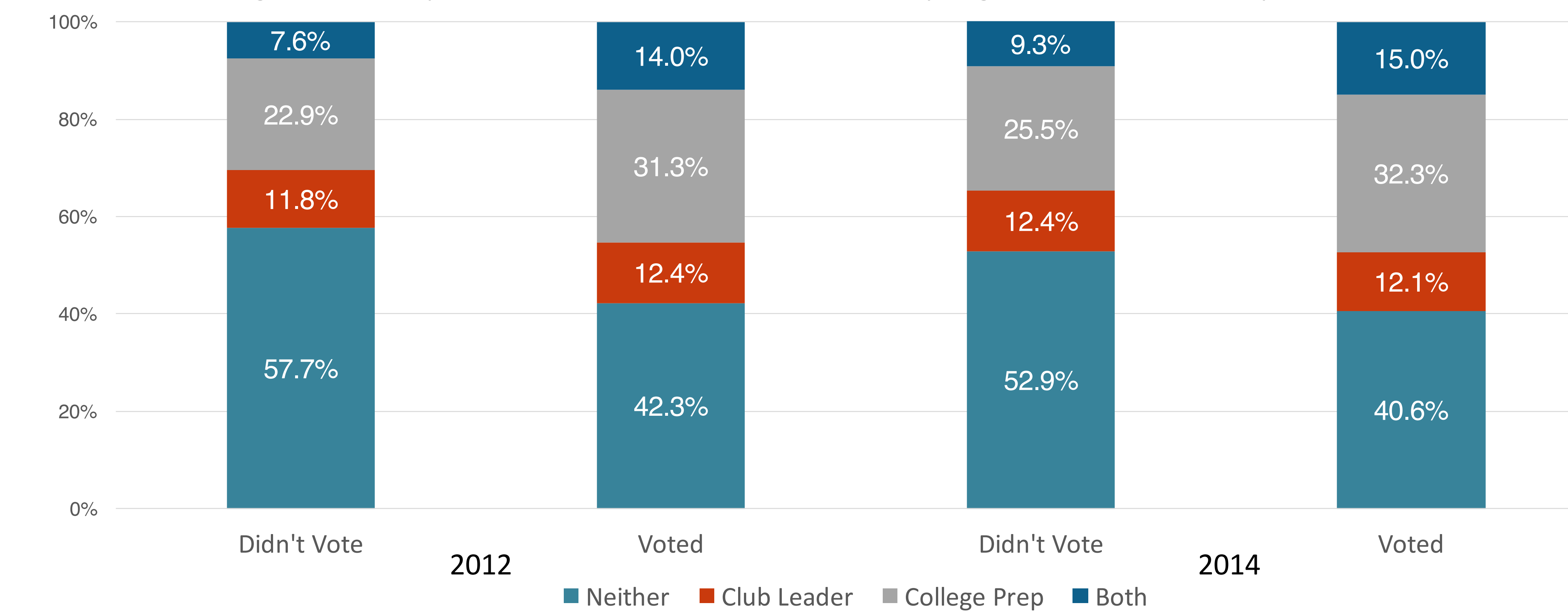
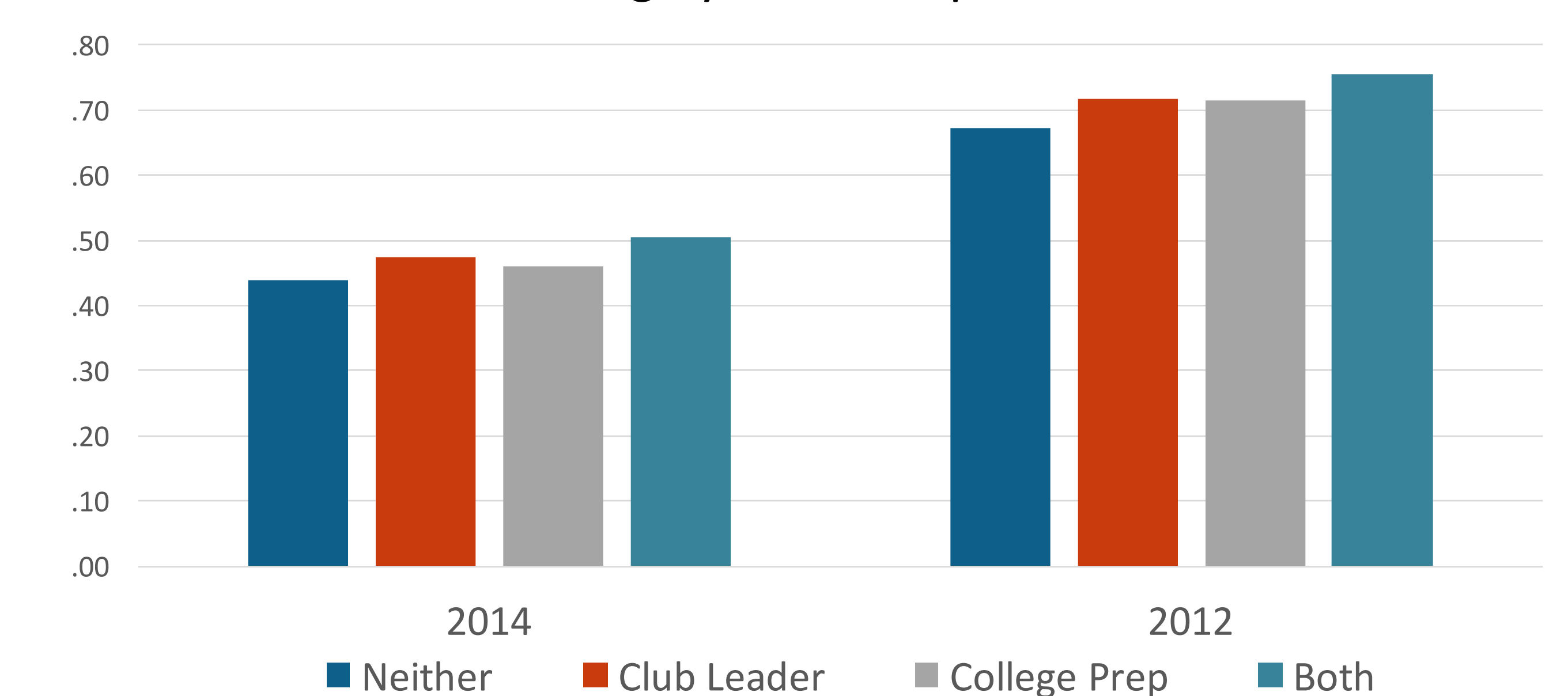


Table 1: Logistic regression predicting voting in midlife, reporting average marginal effects (N=8400)

		2012				2014			
Club Leader	Yes	.03~				.04~			
[ref. No]		(.02)				(.02)			
College Track	Yes	.04*				.02			
[ref. No]		(.02)				(.02)			
Combined	Club Leader	.04	.03	.04	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03
		(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)
	College Track	.04*	.03	.02	.02	.02	.01	-.00	-.01
		(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.01)	(.02)	(.02)	(0.02)
	Both	.07**	.07*	.06*	.05~	.06*	.06*	.04	.03
		(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)
Early Adulthood Reported Voting	Yes		.15***		.14***		.15***		.15***
	[ref. No]		(.02)		(.02)		(.02)		(.02)
Degree Attainment	Associate's			.05**	.05**			.06*	.05**
				(.02)	(.02)			(.02)	(.02)
	Bachelor's			.09***	.09***			.11***	.11***
				(.02)	(.02)			(.02)	(.02)
	Graduate			.10**	.09**			.15***	.14***
				(.03)	(.03)			(.04)	(.04)

Note: ~p<.1, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001. All models include control variables listed in the methods section.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of an Average Student Voting by Leadership and Track



## Implications

Our results suggest that students who have both civic and college preparation in high school are more likely to vote in midlife, partially because of their higher likelihood of going to and graduating from college. Most of the research on secondary schooling and civic participation focuses on club participation and club leadership, while controlling on academic preparation. Our findings suggest that students who only have these civic experiences in high school are not more likely to vote in the long run. The composition of the electorate, which decides who will represent us and what issues are important for our country, is skewed towards more advantaged individuals. Our results suggest that part of the stratifying process occurs during high school, where unequal learning and leadership experiences shape long-term voting behaviors.

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<sup>i</sup> Data Source: United States Election Project estimates from the Current Population Survey.

<sup>ii</sup> All sample size numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10 per NCES Standards.

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