

# THE PUBLIC MATTERS

## How Americans View Education, Health & Psychology

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TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

### AMERICANS' VIEWS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GOOD

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Erratum:

After publication of the original report, it came to the authors' attention that there was an error in Figure 3.4. The percentage for moderates who said that colleges and universities contribute a lot to scientific advances that benefit American society was incorrectly reported as 17% when in fact it is 32% (31.7). The updated figure is included in this version of the report.

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# **AMERICANS' VIEWS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **AS A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GOOD**

### **1. Why this study?**

American higher education sets itself apart from higher education in other countries based on its mission to contribute to the common good of society. Since their inception, American colleges and universities have been charged both with enabling talented individuals to advance through higher education and with enhancing the quality of American life through scientific discoveries and the invigoration of the American economy. Do Americans believe these promises have been met? Over the past decade, researchers have found a diversity of opinions across the political spectrum, but the evidence comes from a narrow set of public opinion questions.

This research brief seeks to extend our understanding of public views of American universities and colleges. We build on previous studies by distinguishing the role of colleges and universities in advancing our collective well-being from the contributions of going to college for the particular students who attend. Americans may believe that college is good for society, but does not transform individual students and their life chances. Or, perhaps, they may believe that colleges and universities help their students get ahead, but don't do much for the rest of us. These views about how higher education contributes to the public good and to private interests may shape their willingness to support public investment in higher education.

We consider three related issues: (a) Americans' views towards public investment in higher education; (b) perceived contributions of higher education to American society (a public good) and to graduates (a private benefit); and (c) attitudes towards public spending on 2- and 4-year institutions.

### **2. Views towards public investment in higher education**

Overwhelmingly, American adults see public spending on higher education in the United States as a good investment. More than three-quarters of respondents (76%) say public spending on higher education in the United States has been an excellent or good investment, with nearly half viewing public spending as an excellent investment (see Figure 2.1). Some 17% say public spending on higher education has been a fair investment, and only 7% say it has not been a good investment.

There are significant differences across gender, race/ethnicity, age groups, parental status, and political ideology in respondents' views towards public investment in higher education (see Figure 2.2).

1. **Women are more likely than men to view public spending on higher education as an excellent investment.** About half of women (48%) and approximately two-fifths of men (39%) say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment.
2. **Black and Latinx respondents are more likely than Whites to view public spending on higher education as an excellent investment.** More than half (52%) of Blacks and about half (49%) of Latinx say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment. Among Whites and Asian Americans, this figure drops to 41%.
3. **Younger adults are more likely than older adults to view public spending on higher education as an excellent investment.** Approximately half (48%) of adults aged 18-44 say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment. Among respondents aged 50-65, this figure drops to 40%.
4. **Liberals are more likely than conservatives to view public spending on higher education as a good investment.** More than half (56%) of liberals say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment, compared to 32% of conservatives and 45% of moderates.
5. **Respondents living in urban communities are more likely than respondents living in rural communities to view public spending on higher education as a good investment.** More than half (52%) of residents of urban communities say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment, compared to 41% of residents of suburbs and 32% of residents of rural communities.

### **3. Perceived contributions of American colleges and universities**

Similar to their positive view of public spending on higher education, the majority of respondents believe that American colleges and universities benefit both society-at-large and individual graduates. This section examines Americans' perception of five possible contributions (Figure 3.1). More than four-fifths of respondents (83%) say higher education institutions contributed to scientific advances that benefit American society, with about half (47%) indicating "some" and more than one-third (36%) indicating "a lot." In other words, respondents view higher education as contributing to the public good.

Approximately three-quarters of respondents say higher education institutions contributed to graduates' personal enrichment and growth (76%), to national prosperity and development (73%), and to advancing graduates' wealth and success (72%). Comparatively, fewer respondents say higher education institutions contributed to graduates' civic participation (61%). Although the majority of respondents recognize the contributions of higher education to public and private good, it is important to note that close to half of the sample indicate "some" contribution. That is, respondents are cautiously optimistic about the specific benefits of American colleges and universities to society overall and to the lives and careers of college graduates.

There are significant differences across race/ethnicity, education, political ideology, and household income in perceived contributions of American colleges and universities.

1. **Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than Whites to say higher education institutions contributed to both the public good and private interests** (see Figure 3.2). This pattern is evident across all types of contributions, except for “scientific advances that benefit American society.” For example, one third of minorities say higher education contributed a lot to “their graduates’ personal enrichment and growth” whereas less than one-fourth (24%) of Whites say so.
2. **College educated respondents are more likely than others to say higher education institutions contributed to both public good and private good** (see Figure 3.3). The gap between the groups is largest when respondents are asked about the contributions of higher education institutions to “scientific advances that benefit American society” (a lot – 48% vs. 32%), and smallest when respondents are asked about the contributions of these institutions to “their graduates’ civic participation” (a lot – 20% vs. 16%).
3. **Liberals are more likely than conservatives to say that higher education institutions have contributed to both the public good and to individual college-goers** (see Figure 3.4). The gap between liberals and conservatives is the largest when respondents are asked about the contributions of higher education institutions to “scientific advances that benefit American society” (a lot – 47% vs. 31%), and smallest when respondents are asked about the contributions of these institutions to “their graduates’ wealth and success” (a lot – 26% vs. 20%) and “their graduates’ civic participation” (21% vs. 15%).
4. **Respondents in high income households are more likely than others to say higher education institutions contributed to both public good and private good** (see Figure 3.5). For example, about half of respondents in household making more than \$100K/year (47%) say higher education institutions contributed a lot to “scientific advances that benefit American society.” This figure drops to 32% among respondents in household making less than \$50K/year.

Respondents’ age, household income, and whether they are parents are not consistently related to their perceived contributions of American colleges and universities.

#### **4. The implications of views towards public investment in higher education to policy preferences**

Views towards public investment in higher education have implications for policy preferences. In this section we focus on respondent's attitudes toward increased government spending on two-year community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Three-fifths (61%) of respondents say they support increasing governmental spending on post-secondary education (either community colleges or four year colleges and universities.) Specifically, 52% of

respondents support for increasing spending on community colleges, and 50% of respondents support for increasing spending on four year colleges and universities.

Half of respondents support for increasing governmental spending on post-secondary education (52% for community colleges; 50% for four year colleges and universities).

As illustrated in Figures 3.6 and 3.7, respondents who say public spending on higher education has been a satisfactory investment are more likely than others to support for increasing governmental spending on post-secondary education. For example, among respondents who say public spending on higher education has been an excellent investment 71% support for increasing public spending on two-year community colleges and 70% support for increasing public spending on four-year colleges and universities.

## 5. Methodology

Results are based on online survey conducted August 28 – September 6, 2017 among a national sample of 3,117 adults 18 year of age or older using the Qualtrics Panel. Qualtrics, a marketing research firm, partners with a variety of online panel providers to supply a nationally representative sample. The sample is compiled using overall demographic quotas based on census percentages for representation (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, and census region). To allow greater power for analysis, we over-sampled people who identify as Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and/or Latinx. The sample is weighted to represent the U.S. adult population living in households or group quarters. For socio-demographic composition of the sample see Technical Note (available on <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/thepublicmatters/>)

The survey included several quality assurance measures, including attention checks and a speed check. Attention checks asked respondents to mark a specific answer. Respondents who failed one or more of these checks were removed from the final sample.

Most of the survey items were developed by the research team and colleagues at Teachers College. Other survey items were adapted from the General Social Survey (GSS), Gallup and Pew. The survey also included a detailed battery of survey items on sociodemographic characteristics. In addition to close-ended items, the survey asked several open-ended questions, allowing respondents to contextualized and explain their responses in greater detail.

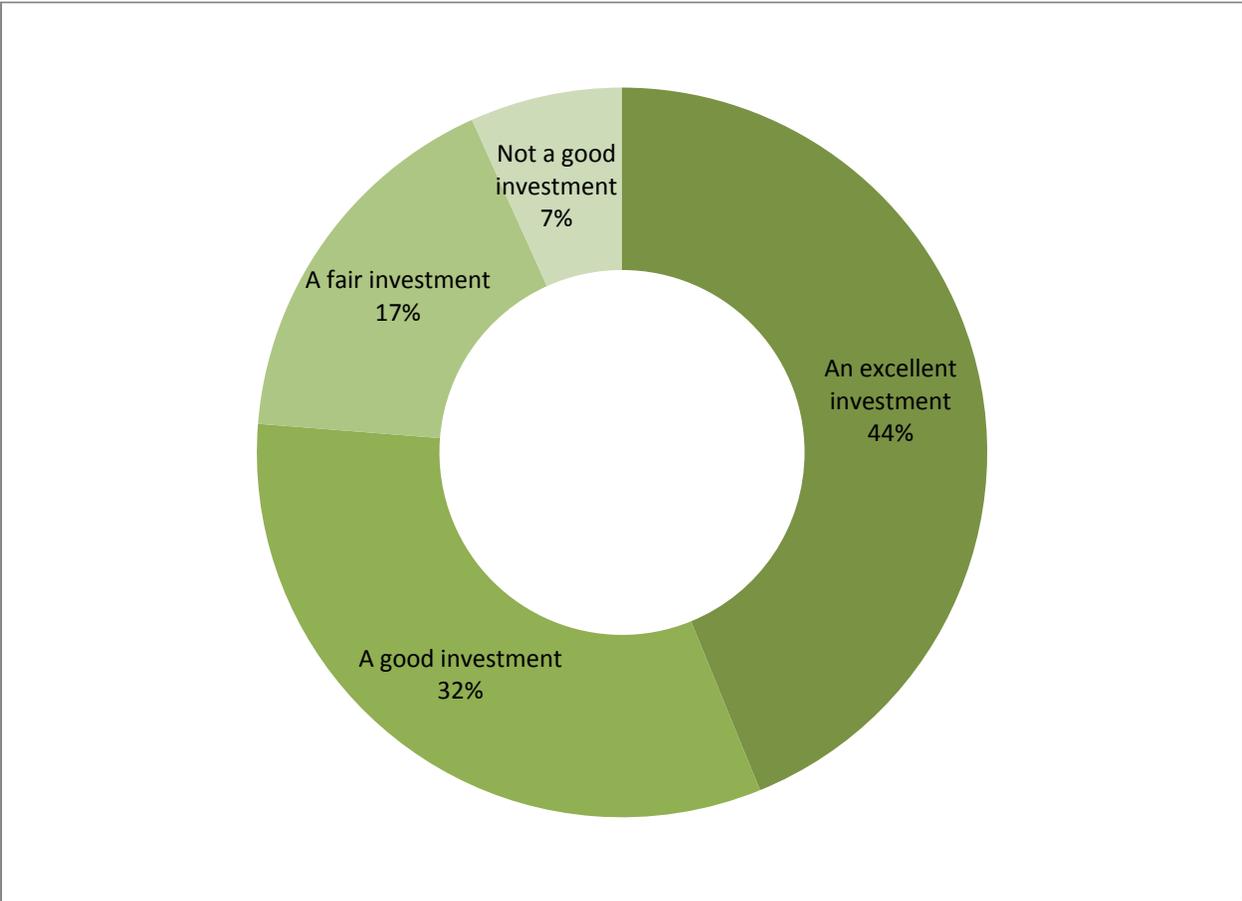
All surveys are subject to various forms of error. One form is sampling error: the variation in results that is attributable to chance in which members of a population are randomly selected to participate in the survey. For percentages based on the entire sample, the approximate margin of error is +/- 1.8%. For subgroups, the margin of error is larger. For example, the margin of error for Black respondents is approximately +/- 4.5%.

### Variables used in this brief:

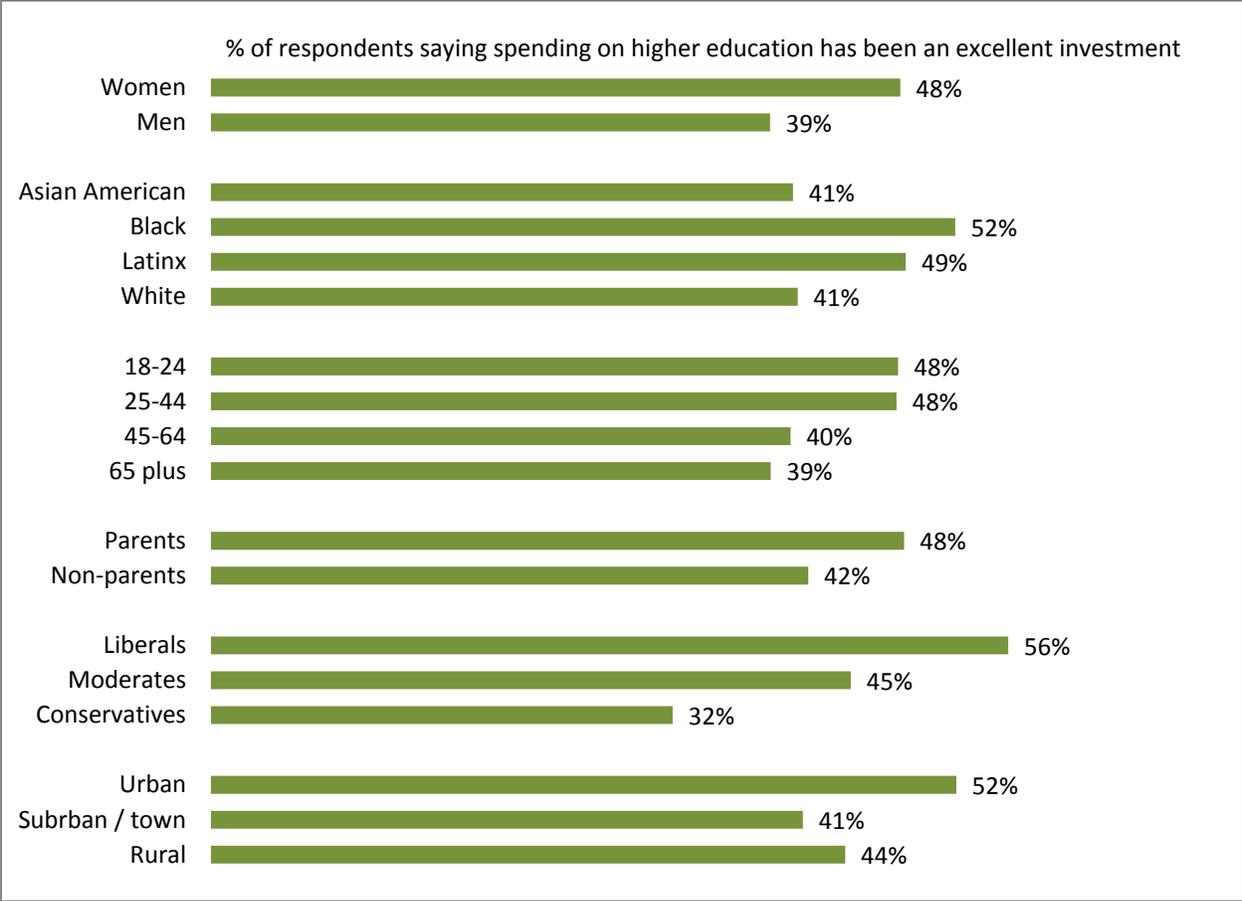
1. Views of government investment in higher education. The survey asked respondents: “In your opinion, would you say that public spending on higher education in the United States is an excellent investment, a good investment, a fair investment, or not a good investment?”
2. Perceived contributions of American colleges and universities. The survey asked respondents: “Thinking about higher education more generally, how much do American colleges and universities contribute to...?” The survey included five statements describing possible contributions of higher education institutions: (a) scientific advances that benefit American society; (b) America's national prosperity and development; (c) their graduates' civic participation (voting, volunteering, etc.); (d) their graduates' wealth and success; and (e) their graduates' personal enrichment and growth. Responses are on a 4-point scale: 1 = nothing at all, 2 = not much, 3 = some, and 4 = a lot.

3. Attitudes towards public spending on higher education. The survey asked respondents: "Listed below are various areas of government spending on education. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say "much more," it might require a tax increase to pay for it." The survey included five sub-sectors: (a) pre-kindergarten; (b) K-12 schools; (c) 2-year community colleges; (d) 4-year colleges and universities; and (e) vocational education and training. Here, we examine only the post-secondary sub-sector (items c and d). Responses are on 5-point scale ranging from 1 = spend much less to 5 = spend much more. One advantage of this question is that it asks respondents whether they favor increases in government spending and reminds them that a tax increase might be needed. This is important as some surveys ask questions about spending, yet do not present the realistic reminder that an increase in taxes might be necessary for an increase to go into effect.

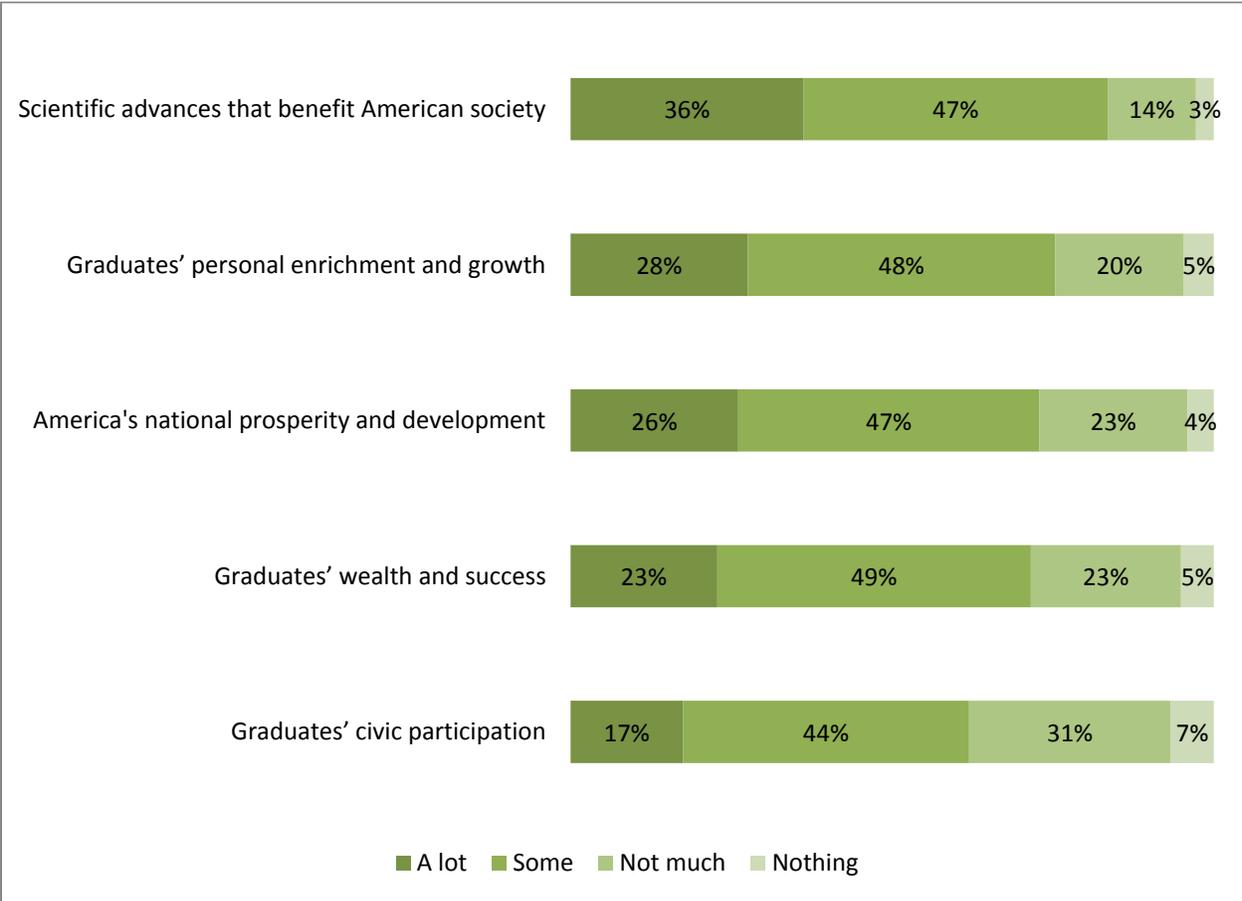
**Figure 2.1:** Views towards public investment in higher education



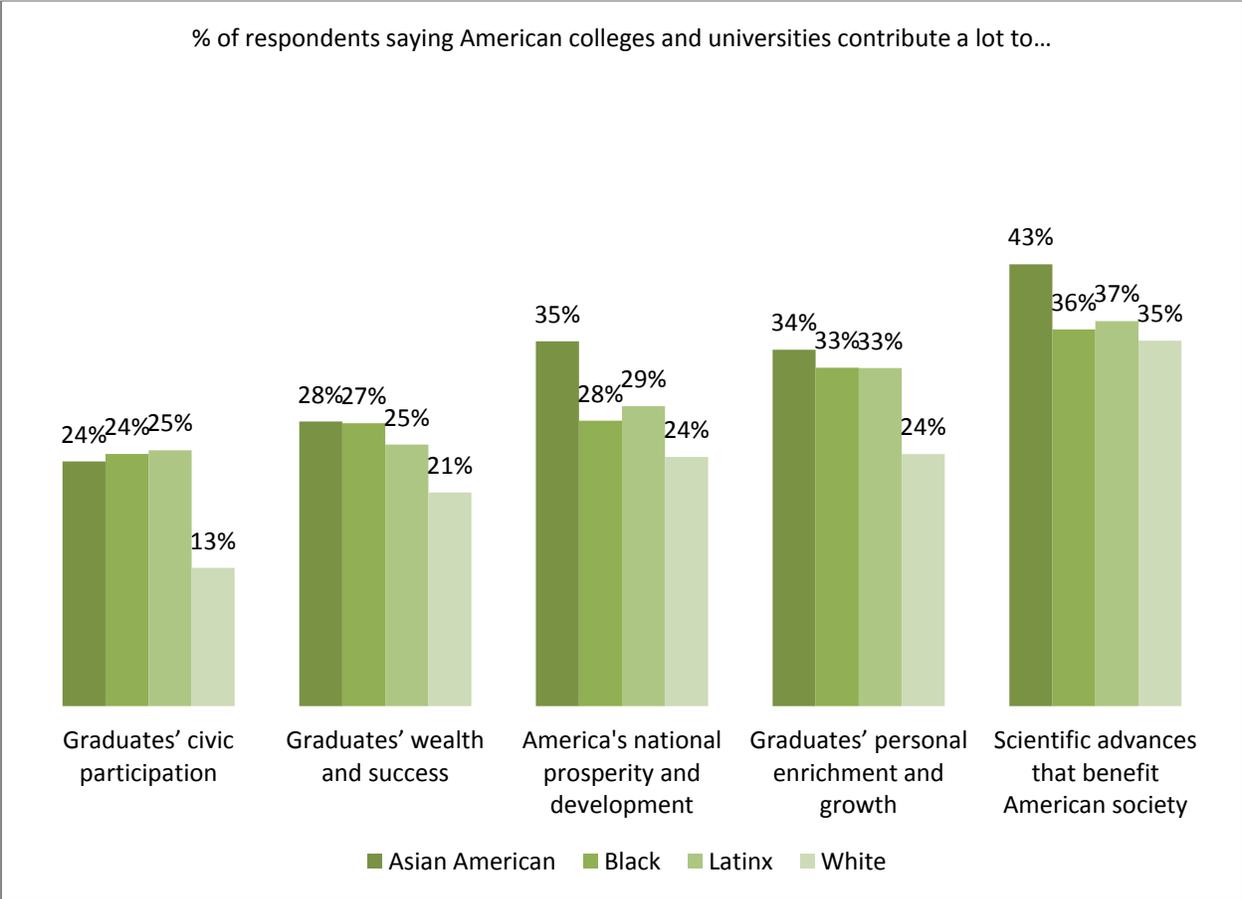
**Figure 2.2:** Views towards public investment in higher education, by key demographics



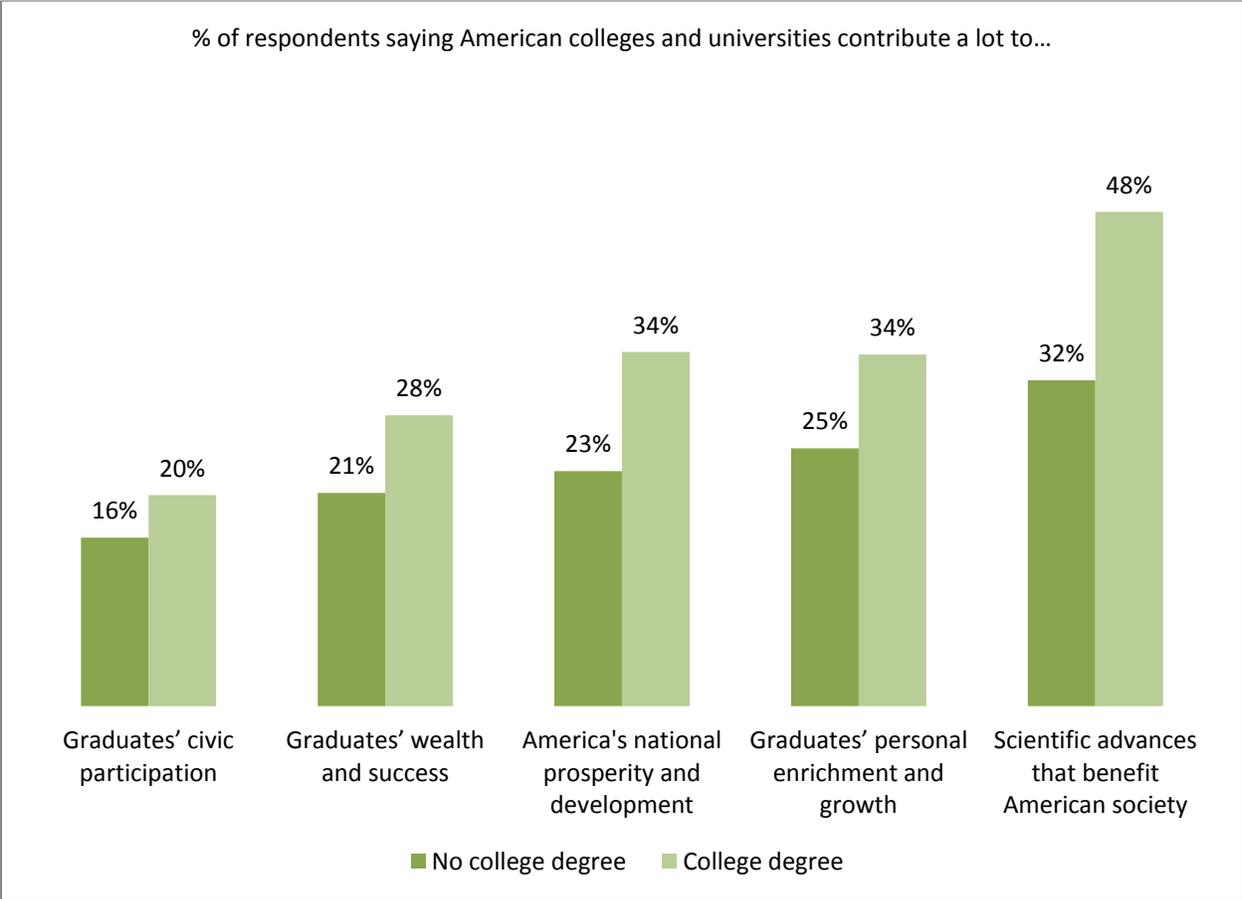
**Figure 3.1:** Perceived contributions of higher education to American society and graduates



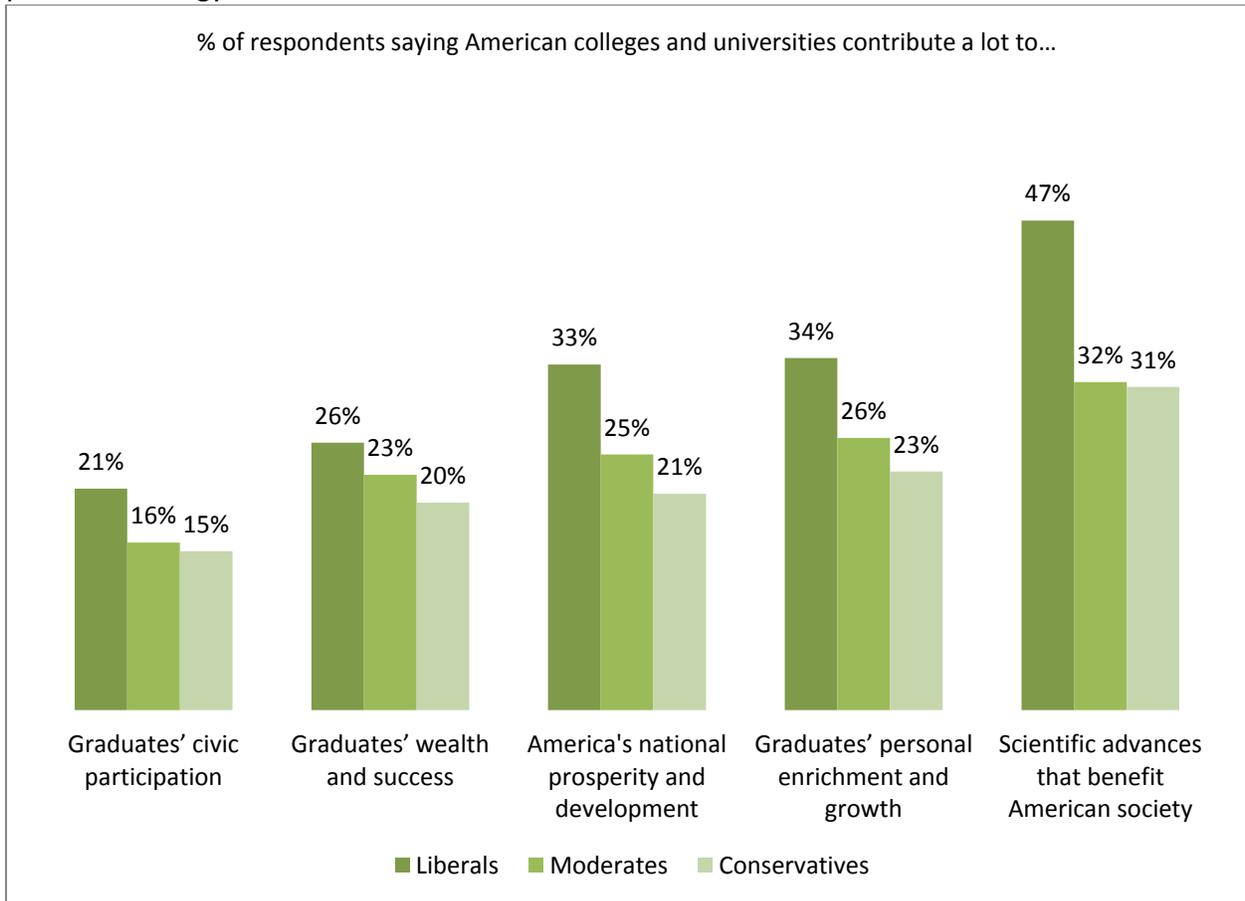
**Figure 3.2:** Perceived contributions of higher education to American society and graduates, by race and ethnicity



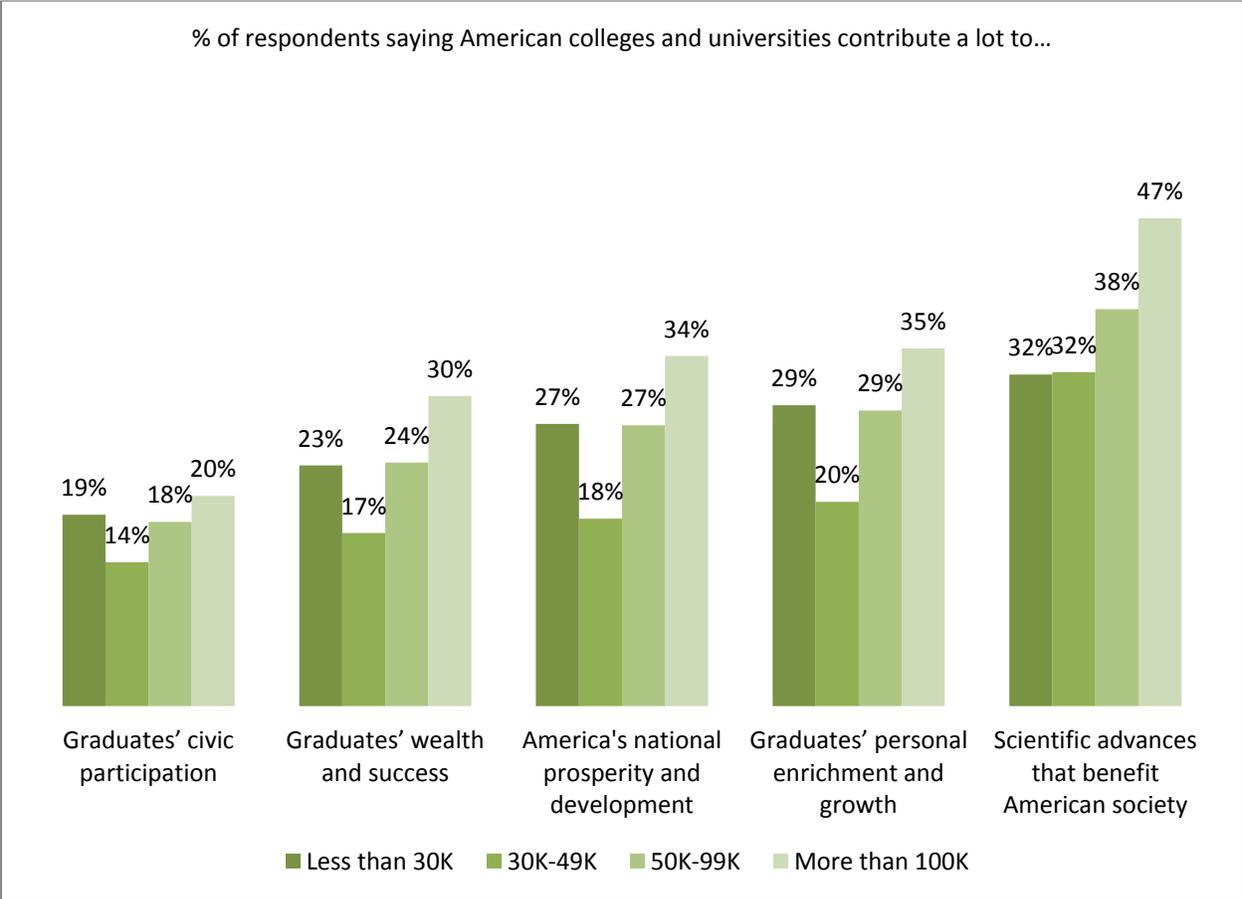
**Figure 3.3:** Perceived contributions of higher education to American society and graduates, by education attainment



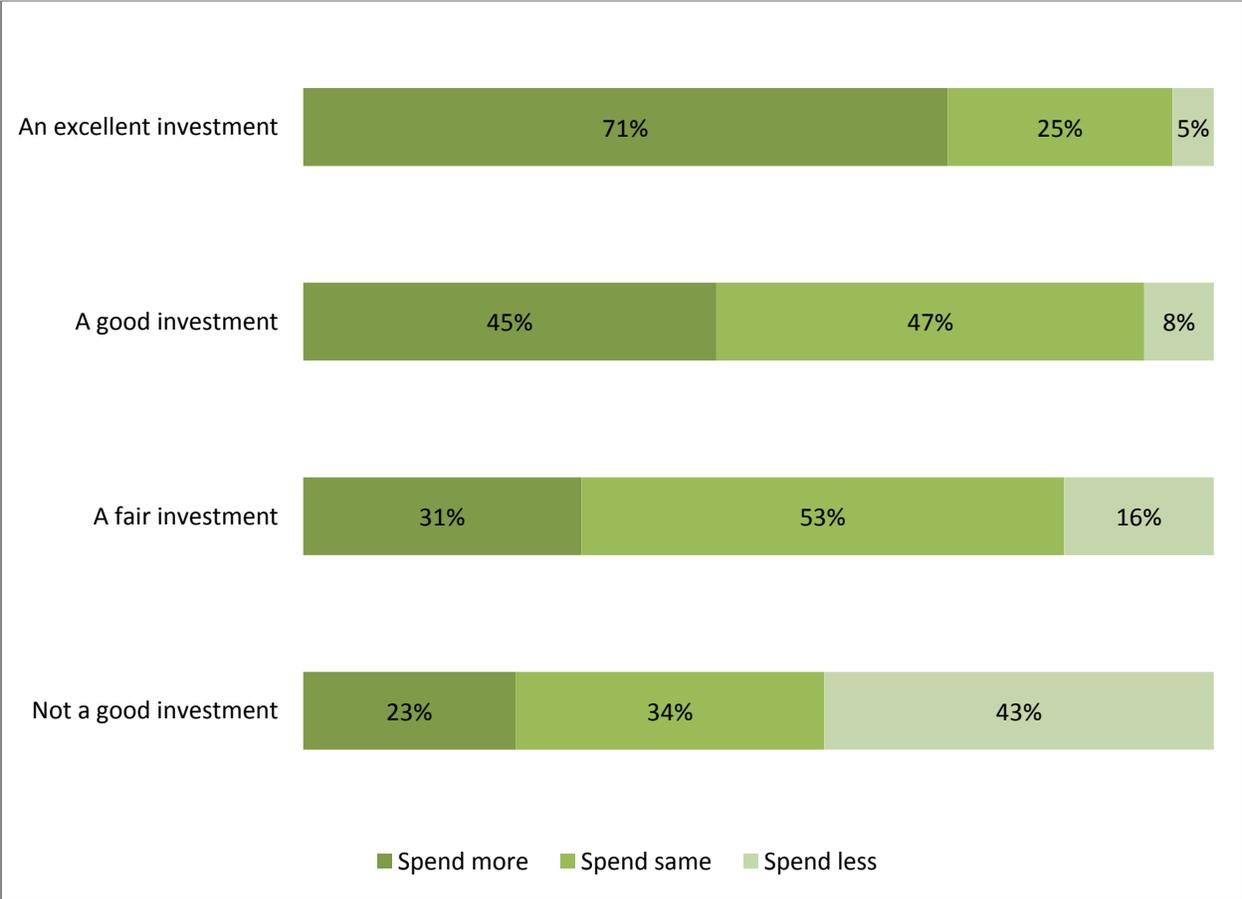
**Figure 3.4:** Perceived contributions of higher education to American society and graduates, by political ideology



**Figure 3.5:** Perceived contributions of higher education to American society and graduates, by household income



**Figure 3.6:** Association between views towards public investment in higher education and public attitudes towards public spending on two-year community colleges



**Figure 3.7:** Association between views towards public investment in higher education and public attitudes towards public spending on four-year colleges and universities

