

# THE PUBLIC MIND

## How Americans View Education, Health & Psychology

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TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

### AMERICANS' VIEWS OF STAKEHOLDERS IN EDUCATION

Oren Pizmony-Levy

Aaron Pallas

Chanwoong Baek

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## 1. Why this study?

Citizen preferences play a key role in a democracy, and there is a substantial body of work that tries to understand the role that public preferences play in the policy process. Despite the important role public opinion plays, there are only limited efforts to document public opinion about education, psychology, and health. The Public Mind project seeks to address this gap by providing reliable, valid public opinion data to inform public debate. The Project includes a series of public opinion surveys on a variety of issues related to governance, policies, and practice that have the potential to affect human development.

This research brief examines Americans' views of stakeholders in education: parents, teachers, teacher unions, academic researchers, business leaders, and think tanks. Whereas in the past only elected officials were considered legitimate policy actors, today there are more groups of people competing to shape education policy. But we know very little about which stakeholders are seen as credible by the public, and why.

## 2. Who is considered an expert on the problems facing our schools?

Stakeholders who are closer to the classroom – teachers, parents, and teachers' unions – are considered to be more informed about the problems facing U.S. schools than other stakeholders (see Figure 2.1). More than half of respondents (57%) view teachers as experts (i.e., they understand educational problems “very well”). Parents and teacher unions are the next two groups, with one-third of respondents viewing them as experts. These sentiments are reflected in the following comments by two respondents:

“[Teachers] are the people who know the problems the best. Teachers see how schools are functioning on a daily basis and know what works and what doesn't because they live it.” (White woman, 29 years old, Tennessee)

“[Teachers] are the ones most involved in the schools. Therefore, they would be the ones to know much better than others what the problem is and what the solution is.” (Black man, 33 years old, Arizona)

Compared to teachers and parents, academic researchers are not viewed as knowledgeable about problems facing U.S. schools. Approximately one-fourth of respondents (23.6%) view this group as well informed. Nevertheless, academic researchers are viewed as more knowledgeable than think tanks, business leaders, and elected officials.

Past research has demonstrated the growing influence of think tanks and business leaders in shaping education policy in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> According to most respondents, however, these

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<sup>1</sup> Swanson, C. B., & Barlage, J. (2006). Influence: A Study of the Factors Shaping Education Policy. *Editorial Projects in Education*. [https://www.edweek.org/media/influence\\_study.pdf](https://www.edweek.org/media/influence_study.pdf)

stakeholders are not viewed as knowledgeable. Less than one in ten Americans view these stakeholders as well informed (7% for each group). The following quote reflects this view:

“Business leaders do not have the knowledge to see that education is not a business deal. There are no profits or losses to see in this. Education should be a source of empowerment to the next generation.” (Asian-American mother, 48 years old, Illinois)

Surprisingly, elected officials are viewed as the least knowledgeable about education problems. Only 6% of American adults view elected officials as well-informed. Close to one-quarter of Americans (24%) believe that elected officials do not understand the problems facing U.S. schools.

The survey sought to identify differences across different groups of people in their perceptions about stakeholders' knowledge about the problems facing U.S. schools. We asked about their gender, race/ethnicity, age, level of education, political ideology, the type of community (urban/suburban/rural) in which they reside, and whether they are parents of school-aged children.

There are significant differences across gender, race/ethnicity, and political ideology in respondents' beliefs about the extent to which stakeholders are informed regarding the problems facing U.S. schools.

1. **Women are more likely than men to view stakeholders as well informed regarding the problems facing our schools** (see Figure 2.2). The pattern is clearly evident in views towards teachers (61% of women say teachers are well informed, whereas 52% of men say teachers are well informed), parents (39% vs. 25%), teacher unions (40% vs. 26%), and academic researchers (27% vs. 20%).
2. **Black and Latinx respondents are more likely than Whites to view stakeholders as well informed regarding the problems facing our schools** (see Figure 2.3). For example, close to two-thirds (64%) of Blacks view teachers as well informed, as do more than three-fifths (61%) of Latinx adults. Among Whites and Asian Americans, this figure drops to 55% and 54%, respectively.
3. **Liberals are more likely than conservatives to view stakeholders as well informed regarding the problems facing our schools** (see Figure 2.4). This pattern is particularly clear in their views about teachers (i.e., 63% of liberals say teachers are well informed, compared to 51% of conservatives), teacher unions (45% vs. 26%), and academic researchers (31% vs. 17%).

In contrast, other attributes of respondents—their status as parents of school-aged children, age, education, and community type (urban/rural)—were not consistently associated with perceptions of stakeholder knowledge about education problems:

1. Respondents who are parents themselves are more likely than others to view parents as well informed. Slightly more than two-fifths (44%) of parents view parents as well informed, as do 28% of non-parents.
2. Younger adults are more likely than their older counterparts to view academic researchers as well-informed. Among those between 18 and 24 years of age, 28% view academic researchers as well-informed, compared to 16% among those ages 65 and older.
3. College educated respondents are less likely than others to view parents as well informed. Among those who hold a college degree, about three in ten (29%) say parents are well informed, compared with 35% among those who don't hold a college degree.
4. Respondents living in urban communities are more likely than respondents living in rural communities to view teachers and academic researchers as well informed. Six in ten (59%) urban respondents view teachers as well-informed, compared to 41% of rural respondents. Slightly less than one-third of urban respondents (30%) view academic researchers as well informed, whereas only 12% of rural respondents do so.

### **3. Who should influence education policy?**

The previous section describes how well-informed stakeholders seem to the general public. This section examines Americans' perceptions of who should influence education policy. We might think that education policy should be crafted by those who are most knowledgeable about education problems, but the story is more complicated than that. Americans view some stakeholders as not very well-informed, and hence ill-suited for influencing education policy. But the perceived expertise of some stakeholders does not automatically translate into a belief that they *should* be involved in policymaking.<sup>2</sup>

Americans believe that stakeholders who are closer to the classroom – teachers, parents, and teachers' unions – should influence education policy (Figure 3.1). Three-quarters of respondents (74%) say teachers should have a great deal of influence on education policy. Only half of respondents (50%), though, say the same about teacher unions, which may reflect the belief that unions are self-interested in ways that rank-and-file teachers are not. Slightly more than three-fifths of respondents (63%) state that parents should have a great deal of influence on policy, as do slightly more than one-third of respondents (38%) for academic researchers.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Brien, T. L. (2013). Scientific authority in policy contexts: Public attitudes about environmental scientists, medical researchers, and economists. *Public Understanding of Science*, 22(7), 799-816.

In contrast, the public thinks that other stakeholders should have less influence over education policy. Only one-quarter (26%) say that elected officials should have a great deal of influence on policy, and even fewer believe that think tanks and business leaders should be driving education policy (14% and 10%, respectively). In fact, one in four respondents (24%) say business leaders should have *no* influence on education policy, as do one-fifth (18.7%) with regard to think tank influence. These sentiments are evident in the following comments by two respondents:

“Elected officials are first and foremost interested in being re-elected to office and topics that align favorably to this goal will be appropriately addressed. Once the issues no longer align, any advocacy will be terminated.” (White, man, 65 years old, California)

“I believe the system should be set up by a group diversified individuals. This should include; parents, teachers, business people and think tank people. In no way should our elected officials get involved and or dictate the direction of public education when they have other motives for what they want done.” (White father, 54 years old, Michigan)

There are significant differences across gender, race/ethnicity, political ideology, and community type (urban/suburban/rural) on who should influence education policy.

1. **Women are more likely than men to believe stakeholders should drive education policy** (see Figure 3.2). The pattern is clearly evident in views towards the policy influence of teachers: 79% of women say teachers should have a great deal of influence, compared to 70% of men.
2. **Black and Latinx adults are more likely than Whites to believe stakeholders should influence education policy** (see Figure 3.3). For example, a large majority (84%) of Blacks and a similar share (79%) of Latinx afford teachers influence over education policy. Both are higher than the percentages for Whites (72%) and Asian Americans (71%).
3. **Liberals are more likely than conservatives to believe that teachers, teacher unions, and academic researchers should influence education policy** (see Figure 3.4). For example, 60% of liberal respondents say teacher unions should have a great deal of influence, compared to 42% of conservatives.
4. **Conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe that parents and business leaders should drive education policy** (see Figure 3.4). For example, 69% of conservative respondents say parents should have a great deal of influence, whereas 57% of liberals do so.
5. **Respondents living in urban communities are more likely than their rural counterparts to believe that stakeholders should influence education policy** (see Figure 3.5). For example, approximately half of urban respondents living in urban contexts (48%) believe

that academic researchers should influence education policy, whereas only 27% of rural respondents do.

Respondents' age, educational attainment, and whether they are parents themselves are not consistently related to their views about who should influence education policy:

1. Parents are more likely than others to believe that teachers, parents, and academic researchers should influence education policy.
2. Younger adults are more likely than their older counterparts to believe that teacher unions and academic researchers should shape education policy. Among those between 18 and 24 years of age, 56% say unions should have a great deal of influence, compared to 41% among ages 65 and older.
3. College-educated respondents are slightly less likely than those with less education to believe that teachers, teacher unions, and parents should influence education policy. Among those with a college degree, 69% say teachers should have a great deal of influence, compared to 77% among those who don't hold a college degree.

#### **4. To what extent is perceived knowledge associated with who should influence education policy?**

In the final section we explore the *association* between Americans' views towards stakeholders' understanding of the problems facing U.S. schools and their views regarding who should influence education policy. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, respondents who view stakeholders as well-informed (high perceived knowledge) are more likely than others (low perceived knowledge) to say that stakeholders should have a great deal of influence on education policy. For example, among the high perceived knowledge group, 71% believe teachers should influence policy; this figure drops to 44% among the low perceived knowledge.

We find substantial variation across stakeholders in the association between views towards stakeholders' understanding and who should influence education policy varies. For example, among the low perceived knowledge group, both teachers unions and elected officials are granted influence on education policy by one-fifth of respondents (21% and 20%, respectively). Yet, among the high perceived knowledge group the figure for teachers unions increases threefold (65%) whereas for elected officials it increases twofold (43%). Substantial differences between low/high perceived knowledge are evident in the case of think tanks and business leaders (5% vs. 25%, 8% vs. 32%, respectively). Nevertheless, even among the high perceived knowledge group, these stakeholders are not given much influence on education policy.

## 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.

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). 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.

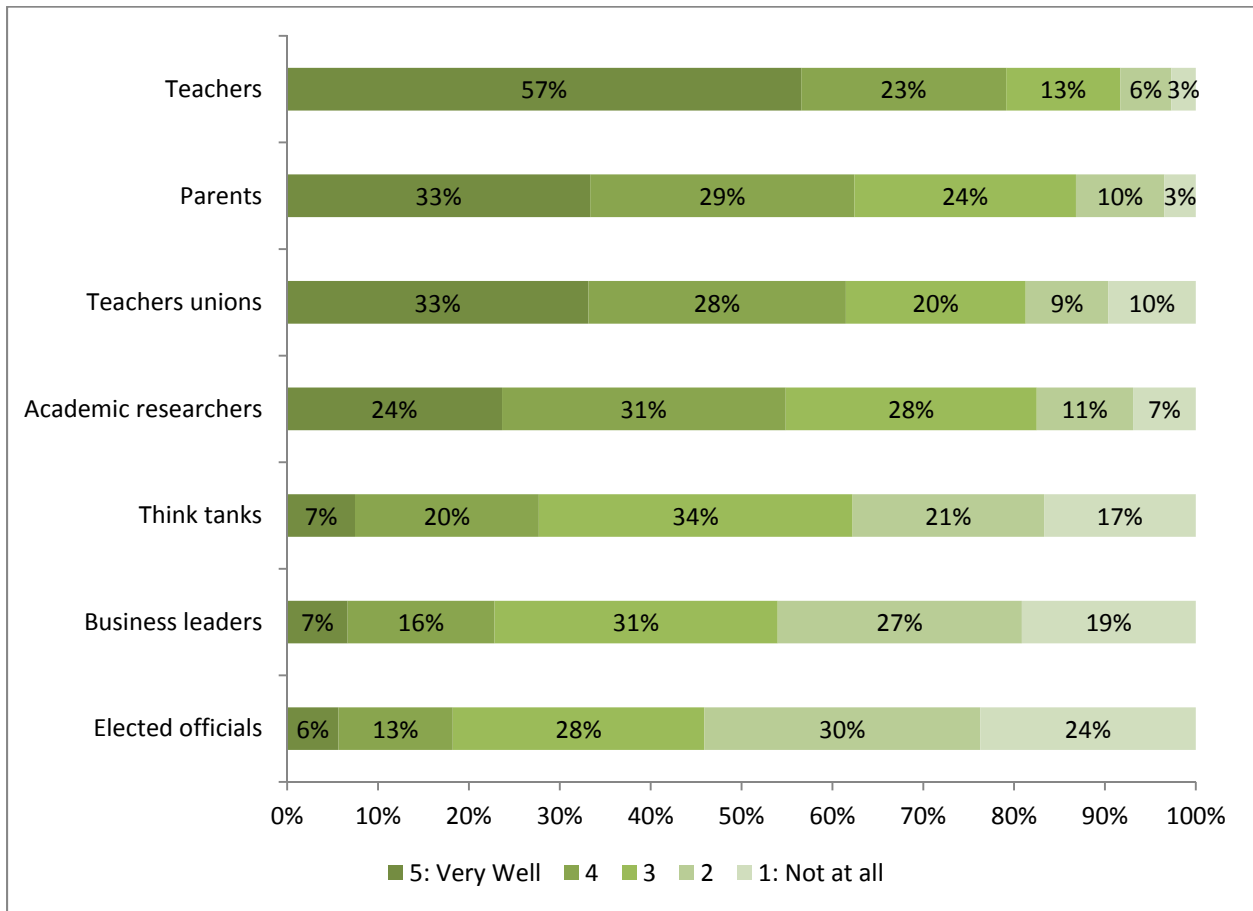
To test for framing/wording effects, the survey contained several experiments. For example, we vary the term used for describing educators as stakeholders in education. We used the term “teacher unions” to situate educators as an organized and political entity. And we used the term “teachers” as a more neutral reference. The experiment included a total of two conditions. Respondents were randomly assigned to each condition.

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:

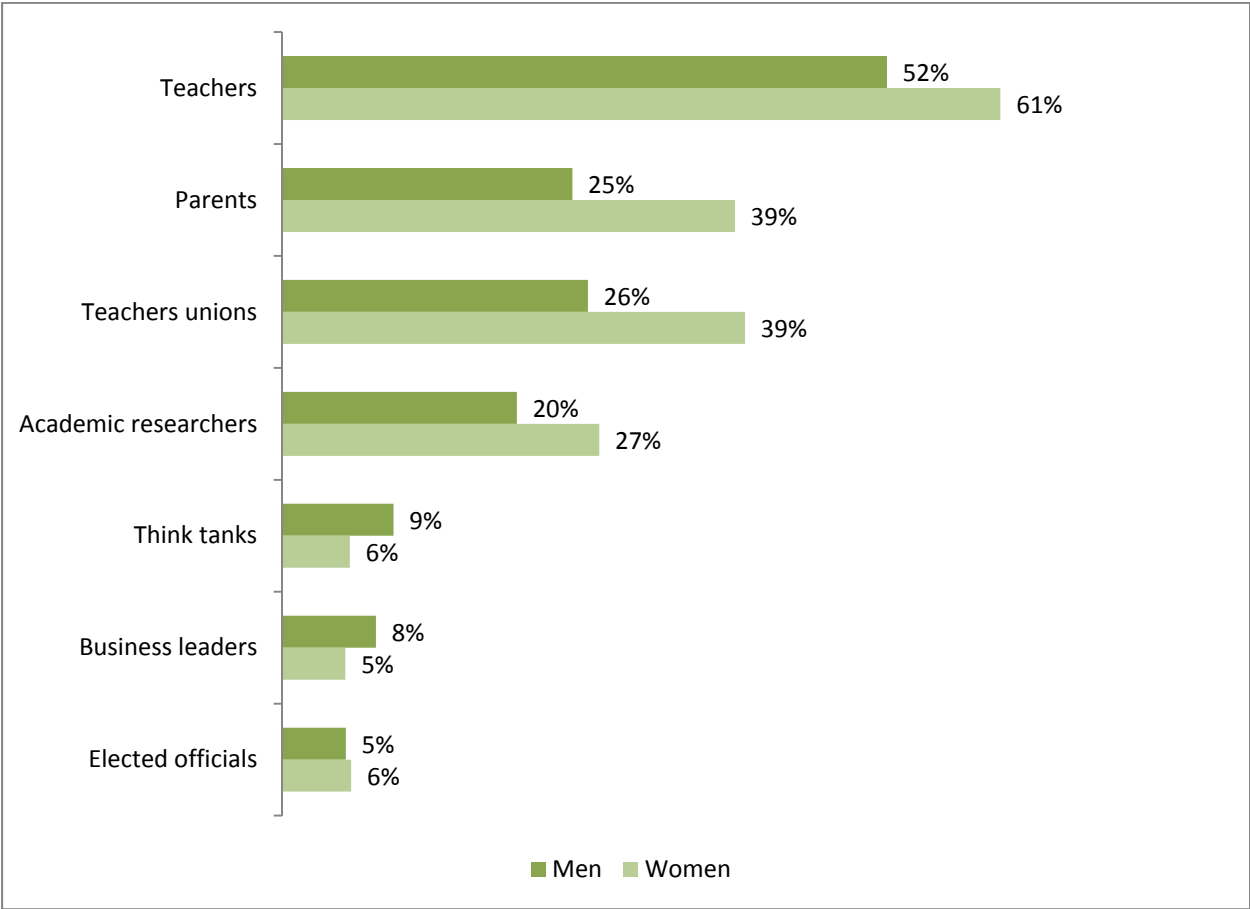
1. Perceived knowledgeable. The survey item asked respondents to rate the level of understanding each group of stakeholders in education had of the problems facing U.S. schools. It read, “On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means 'not at all' and 5 means 'very well,' how well do the following groups understand the problems facing our schools?” The item included six groups: (a) academic researchers, (b) teachers/teacher unions, (c) parents, (d) elected officials, (e) business leaders, and (f) think tanks. Stakeholders were presented in a random order.
2. Desired policy influence. Another item on the survey asked respondents about the level of influence that stakeholders should have in deciding what to do about problems facing U.S. schools. Specifically, it asked, “How much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding what to do about problems facing our schools?” Responses are on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = none at all to 4 = a great deal. Stakeholders were presented in a random order.

**Figure 2.1:** Perceived knowledgeability of Problems Facing Schools, by Stakeholders (n=3,074)

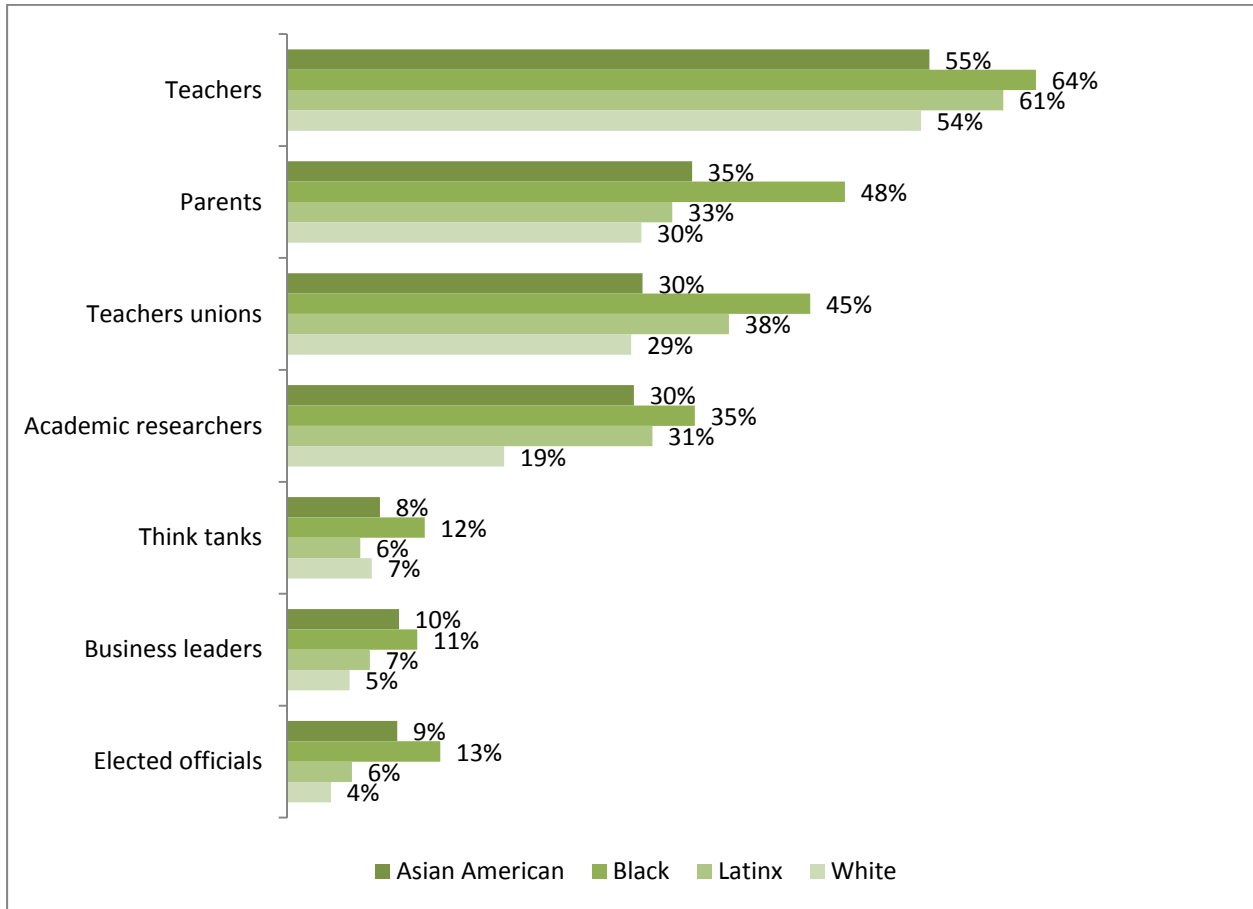




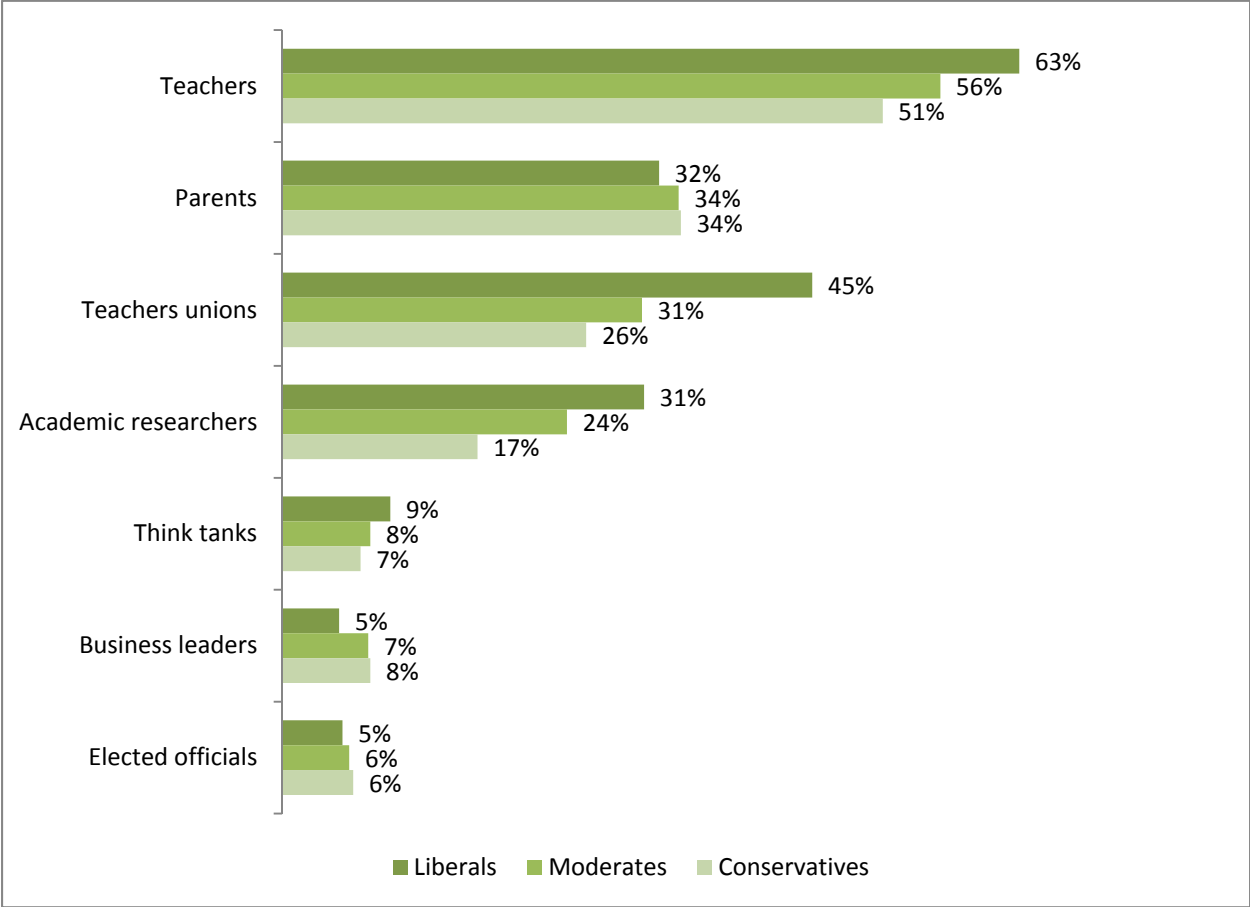
**Figure 2.2:** % Saying stakeholders are well informed, by gender (n=3,074)



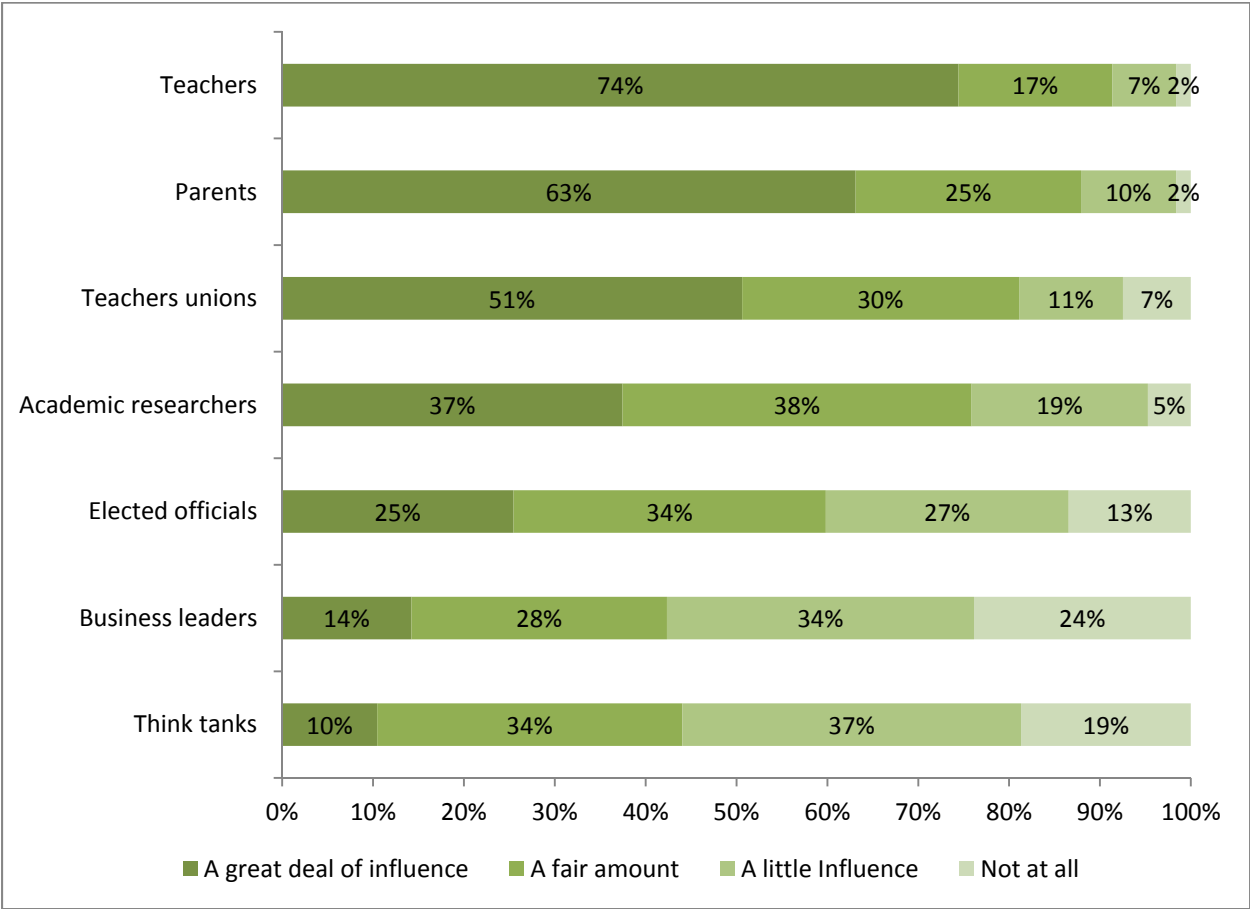
**Figure 2.3: % Saying stakeholders are well informed, by race/ethnicity (n=3,074)**



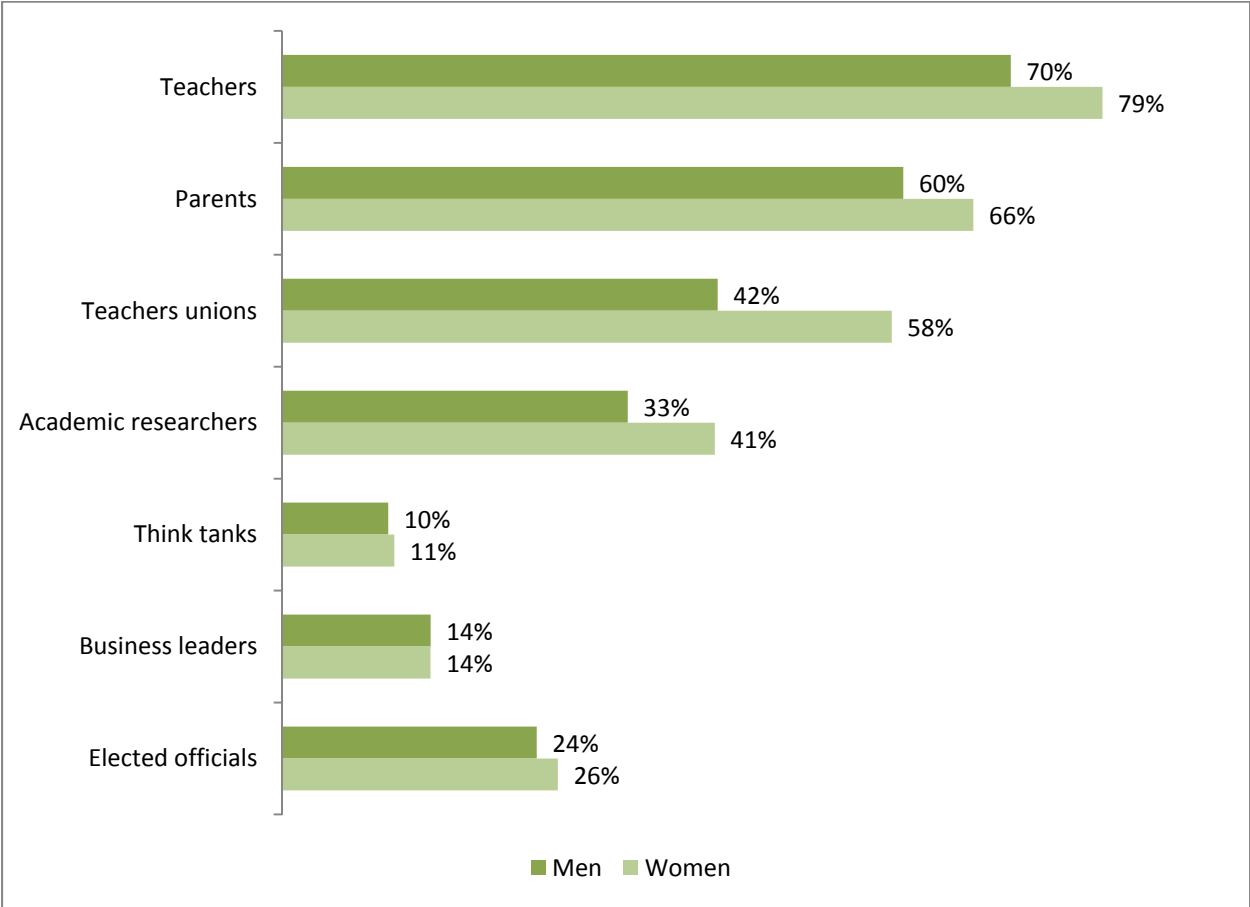
**Figure 2.4:** % Saying stakeholders are well informed, by political ideology (n=3,074)



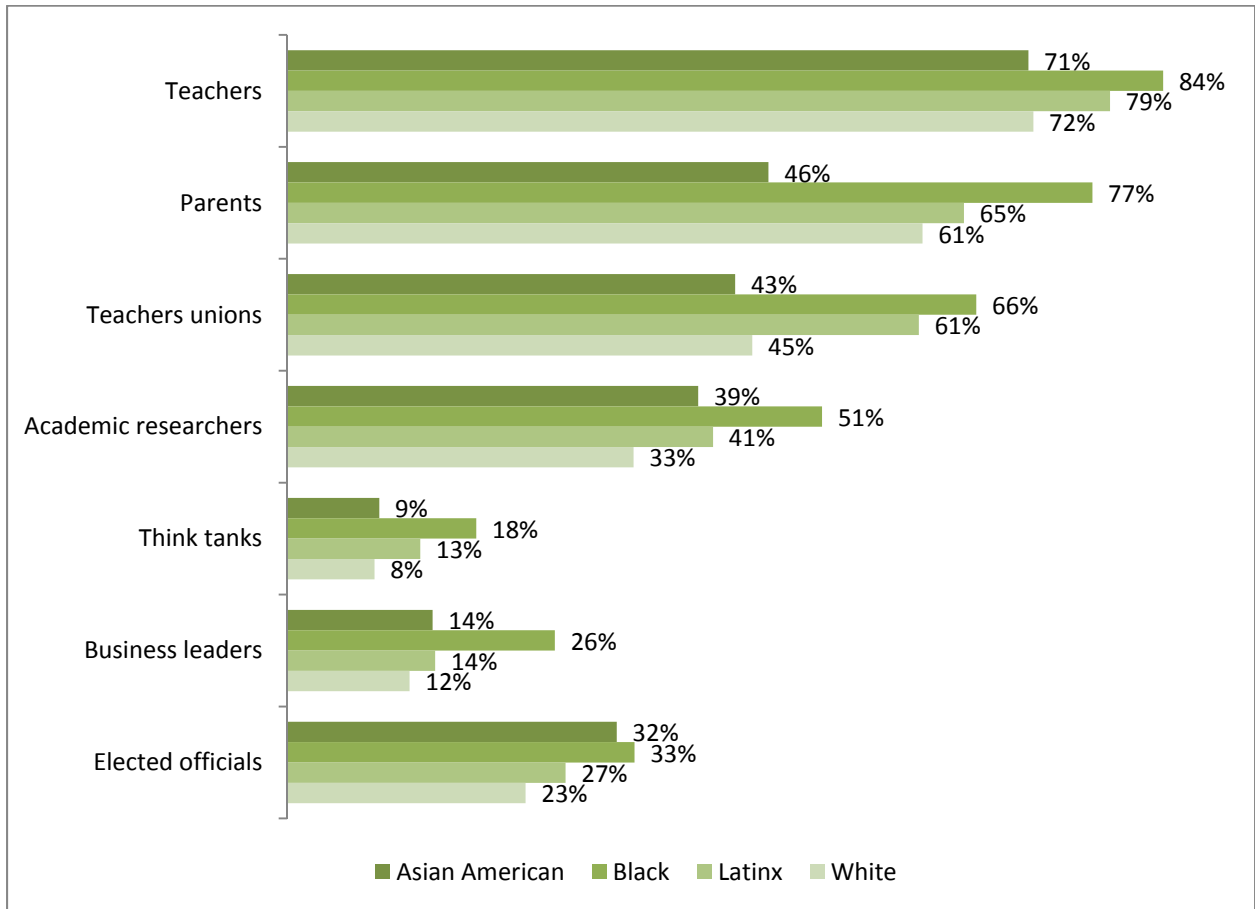
**Figure 3.1:** Desired Stakeholder Policy Influence on Education Policy (n=3,074)



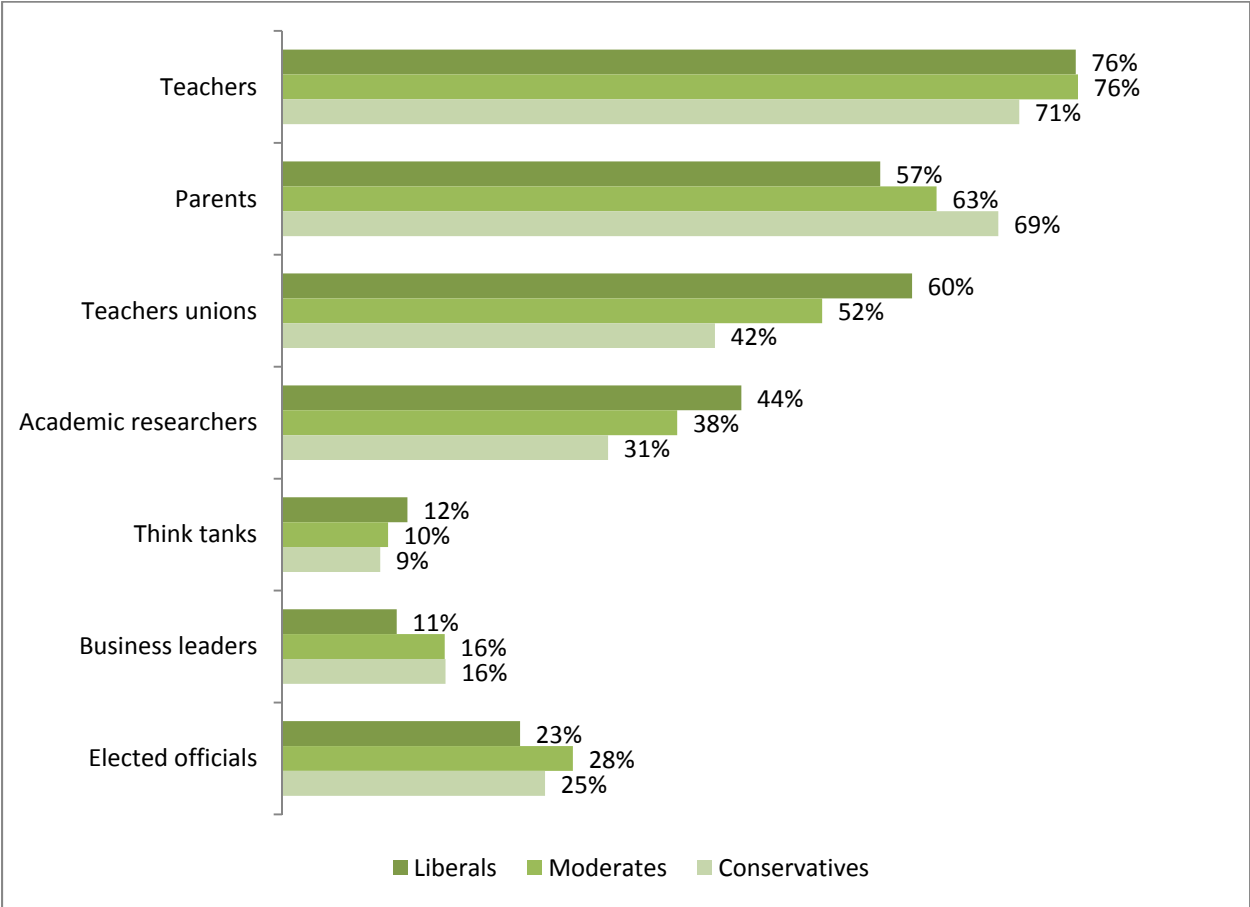
**Figure 3.2:** % Saying stakeholders should have a great deal of influence over education policy, by gender (n=3,074)



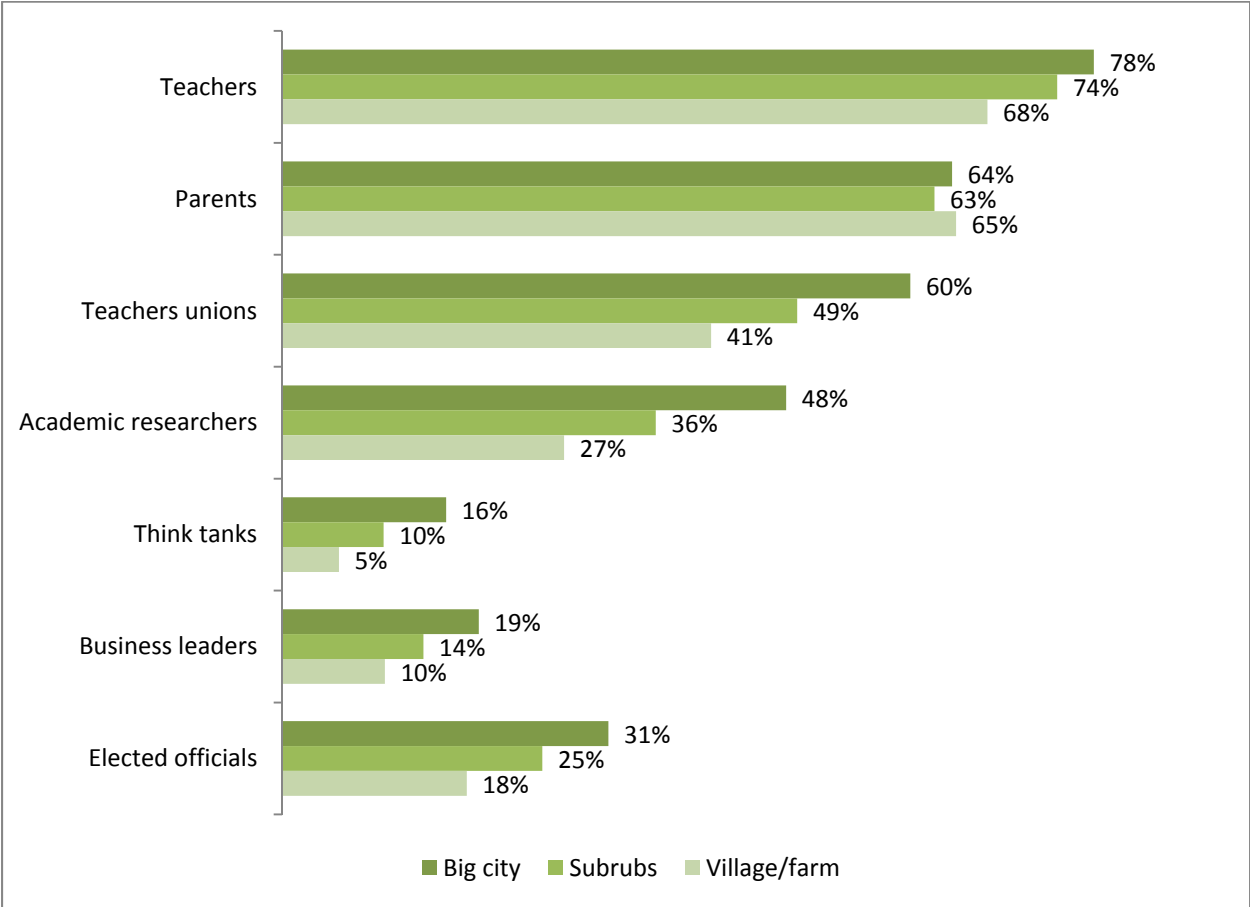
**Figure 3.3:** % Saying stakeholders should have a great deal of influence over education policy, by race/ethnicity (n=3,074)



**Figure 3.4:** % Saying stakeholders should have a great deal of influence over education policy, by political ideology (n=3,074)



**Figure 3.5:** % Saying stakeholders should have a great deal of influence over education policy, by community type (n=3,074)





**Figure 4.1:** % Saying stakeholders should have a great deal of influence over education policy, by perceived knowledge of problems facing U.S. schools (n=3,074)

