



Reclaiming Public Discourse about Taxes
Taking Advantage of Tax Day and Tax Freedom Day

March 2011

Tax day is coming (on April 18th this year). Every year at this time, Americans are working to file their taxes while commentators fill the airwaves with negative opinions about taxes, taxation, and above all, the collector of taxes--government. Don't let this season pass by without weighing in. Advocates for public systems and services—and those who appreciate the role that government plays—need to make their perspectives heard. Changing the national conversation about taxes may be daunting but it's our job to add our voices to the mix. Most tax policy discussions happen separately from the bigger story about what taxes pay for. We need to tell that bigger story by focusing tax discussions on the public structures they make possible, linking taxes to the "common good," and emphasizing the role taxes play in helping us meet our goals for the future.



This guide and an accompanying webinar are designed to encourage you to take

advantage of tax season, including "Tax Day" and "Tax Freedom Day," as communications opportunities. We offer an overview of the typical anti-tax and anti government narratives that we will encounter this season; we include our recommendations for avoiding common pitfalls with tips for creating a better conversation about taxes; and we provide sample responses to hypothetical questions, op-ed intros, press releases, and real world examples from previous

years. Finally, we include links to outside resources for up-to-date facts about taxes.

Table of Contents
Strategies for Getting the Word Out 2
Breaking Down the Typical Tax Day and Tax Freedom Day Narratives 2
Framing & Messaging Recommendations..... 3
Tempting, but harmful, pitfalls to avoid..... 4
Reclaiming Freedom from Tax Freedom Day .. 6
Responses to Common Tax Season Rhetoric . 7
Real world examples of Tax Season and Tax Freedom Day Rhetoric 9
Sample Op-Eds 10
Sample Press-Releases..... 11
Get the Facts: Tax and Budget Resources 12
Sign up for Public Works Updates
Join Demos' email list and sign up for Public Works Perspective.

- Talking about Taxes: Do's and Don'ts
Do connect tax discussions to what taxes pay for and to the benefits that accrue to everyone from those activities.
Do use values that are supported by adequate taxes such as the "common good" and "community well-being".
Do call attention to the future implications of decisions made today.
Don't assume facts alone will win the day.
Don't rely on a fairness argument without first explaining shared benefit and shared responsibility.
Don't trigger consumerist thinking by focusing on the services people "buy with their tax dollars"
Don't reinforce stereotypes of government waste.
Don't reinforce negative frames: tax burden, tax relief, hard earned tax dollars, taxpayer, etc.

Strategies for Getting the Word Out

Be creative. Add your voice to the Tax Day discussion. Share the perspective that taxes matter because they pay for things we value.

Here are a few concrete ideas for engaging in the federal, state, and local conversations in the coming weeks.

- Find out which reporters and media outlets covered Tax Day and Tax Freedom Day last year and reach out to them in advance.
- Send out a media alert before Tax Freedom Day and/or Tax Day alerting reporters to call you for the facts and a compelling alternative perspective.
- Get out an Op-ed. Draft it now, send it to Public Works to review if you'd like, and then plug in the data when it arrives. You'll be first out of the gate and the most likely to get placed.
- Show up at a Tax Day Tea party event and speak to the reporters there. Don't let them find a random person walking down the road to get a different take.
- Give out good talking points to your allies and encourage them to speak out during tax season. One way for them to weigh-in is by writing letters to the editor on articles, stories or op-eds about Tax Freedom Day and Tax Day.
- Make it a point to call in to talk radio shows on Tax Freedom Day and Tax Day. Better yet, get yourself booked on one.
- Be creative about reconnecting taxes to their purposes: hold a press event in front of an important public good supported by taxes – parks, libraries, schools, public health care facility, community college, etc. Consider doing something like the [“Thank Taxes” campaign](#) done in 2010 by “A Better Minnesota.”
- And don't forget to use your social media tools (blogs, Twitter, and Facebook).

Breaking Down the Typical Tax Day and Tax Freedom Day Narratives

The basic Tax Day narrative in America, reinforced by the propaganda machine of anti-government interests goes something like this:

“I/you/we pay too much in taxes. Politicians and bureaucrats undoubtedly waste most of our hard-earned tax dollars. The super-rich use loopholes and fancy accountants to get out of paying their fair share. The poor don't pay anything but get the services. And all the money we send gets spent to benefit special interests, not people like you and me.”

The basic Tax Freedom Day narrative is related but slightly different and goes something like this:

Up until this point during the year all the money you have earned goes to pay your federal, state and local taxes. Working this many months to pay your taxes has usurped your liberty. In fact, only after this date, are you truly free to support yourself and your family. It doesn't matter that this day keeps arriving earlier (so allegedly you are much freer than your parents and grandparents) because the day is still way too late in the year (forget the fact that it falls much

earlier here than in the rest of the developed world). Therefore the only path to expanding our freedom is to reduce taxes."

The Tax Freedom Day narrative is best represented by this quote from the front page of the Tax Foundation's website:

"Despite all these tax reductions, Americans will pay more taxes in 2010 than they will spend on food, clothing and shelter combined."

It's no surprise that these basic narratives echo the [findings from our research](#) (in conjunction with [The Topos Partnership](#) and the [Frameworks Institute](#)) into dominant perceptions of Government and taxes in America. Americans are only dimly aware of what government does. They tend to view government as a large, wasteful bureaucracy and tend to forget the work of government that they depend on every day. As a result, their thinking about taxes is completely disconnected from what tax dollars pay for; they treat taxes as "legalized theft."



Not surprisingly, the typical tax season narratives serve to reinforce these dominant perceptions both in what they espouse as well as what they omit. For example: what tax dollars actually accomplish in the real world, how tax levels have changed over time, how our taxes compare with other countries, etc. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research and field experience to draw from in order to improve the public dialogue during this important season.

Framing & Messaging Recommendations

Keep taxes connected to the public structures they make possible. [Our research](#) has found that the concepts of taxes and budgets are disconnected in people's minds, and they find it difficult to link the two together in any meaningful way. Most tax policy discussions happen separately from the bigger story about what taxes pay for and from the public budgeting process that they are a part of. This leaves the impression that taxes are the ends themselves, as opposed to a means to the ends. When taxes are discussed as an isolated topic, people default to thinking of taxes merely as "taken money," and thereby become focused on who's paying how much. Framed this way the only logical conclusion is that everyone should pay less. To reconnect taxes to their purpose, we must lead tax discussions by talking about the public structures taxes pay for.

- Example: The public structures that underpin our communities - such as schools, roads, health care for children, police and fire protection, and health inspections - all depend on a system of budgets and taxes that supports them adequately now and into the future. Taxes are an important part of the equation; how they are raised and the level of resources they provide will affect our quality of life and our future prosperity.

Lead with values such as "common good" and "public good" to help answer "why taxes matter." Our [research](#) indicates that an effective overarching concept for redirecting tax conversations

is to frame conversations around the value of the common, or public-good. This helps establish the underlying purpose of taxes as a necessary means to achieving common goals and priorities. After establishing the true purpose of taxes, only then can we have practical conversations about who should pay how much and how the money should be spent.

Example: We all benefit from the improved community well-being and economic opportunity made possible by a good education system, public safety, and clean air and water – all of which are supported by our tax dollars. Tax Day represents a collective investment in the common good.



Keep an Eye on the Future. One challenge of Tax Day is that everyone is focusing on a deadline right in front of them, wondering if they are going to get a refund or have to send a check. It is an important communications element to provide a better context for taxes and emphasize the role taxes play in helping us meet future goals and objectives. Reminding Americans of the future benefits of today's investments can be a helpful approach.

As part of a set of research that Dēmos helped to sponsor, the Frameworks Institute [recently developed another "simplifying model"](#) for reframing budget and tax discussions. Called the "forward exchange" model, it describes how the benefits received from paying taxes are distributed over time, not in a one-time-only exchange.

Example: On Tax Day, millions of Americans will do what generations before have done: invest in our country's future. Just as our parents and grandparents paid taxes to build the schools, transportation systems, health clinics and parks we benefit from today, our tax payments this year continue this effective system of forward exchange.

Tempting, but harmful, pitfalls to avoid

Facts alone will not win the day. Data, no matter how compelling, falls on deaf ears if it is not packaged inside of a larger, compelling story. Research clearly shows that tax discussions that are not first primed with the overall purpose of taxes will not lead to the practical, solutions-oriented conversations we need to have. To engender support for taxes we must first remind Americans of the broader purposes of government and emphasize how everyone benefits. Then ask whether or not we are raising revenue adequately to achieve those goals. For example:

-  **Unframed fact:** "Federal income taxes are at their lowest level since the 1950's." Or, "The typical taxpayer will pay \$xxx less in taxes this year than last year."
-  **Framed fact:** "Budgets and taxes are tools we use to support the public goods that benefit us all and underpin a healthy economy. While lawmakers grapple with the best policy choices to get the economy moving, it's important to recognize that we are paying a smaller share of our income in federal taxes today than at any point since the 1950's. That trend continues this year as the typical taxpayer will pay \$xxx less in federal income taxes than last year. The question remains if this trend is putting our essential public structures at risk."

on “misplaced priorities” during tax season (as in we could save tax dollars if we did x, y, and z) reinforces the dominant perception that government is inherently wasteful. Getting side-tracked into such conversations is likely to sabotage the goal of having a practical conversation about government, including the need to set sound priorities and to raise adequate revenues.

👉 **Just more Government Waste:** "Tax Freedom Day would arrive even earlier if we ended huge corporate welfare payments and stopped waging unwinnable wars."

👍 **Calling Government to Live Up to its Mission:** "Investing in the public goods we share is the reason for the taxes we pay. When tax dollars are used inefficiently or ineffectively it means that there are fewer resources for things like our schools and our infrastructure. That's why it's important for our elected officials to set priorities based on common interests and work to make public systems operate as efficiently as possible."

Reclaiming Freedom from “Tax Freedom Day”

Freedom is a powerful American value and, not surprisingly, one that is widely invoked during tax season. Instead of ignoring this seemingly anti-government, anti-tax value, you might consider “reclaiming” it in creative ways. One idea for using “freedom” to make the case *for* taxes includes pairing it with another linked value – responsibility—as these historical quotes do:

- "Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility. For the person who is unwilling to grow up, the person who does not want to carry his own weight, this is a frightening prospect." –Eleanor Roosevelt.
- "Order without liberty and liberty without order are equally destructive." Theodore Roosevelt
- "Liberty means responsibility. That's why most men dread it." George Bernard Shaw
- "There are two freedoms; the false, where man is free to do what he likes; the true, where man is free to do what he ought." Charles Kingsley

Another strategy for incorporating freedom into an effective narrative is to pair it with notions of security (another level-one value). With respect to taxes, this is likely to mean economic security. These concepts, both of which are universally held, can be linked:

- "True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made." Franklin D. Roosevelt

Our suggestion for reclaiming “freedom” on Tax Freedom Day is to posit a new definition of freedom:

- **Example:** One of the things that promoters of Tax Freedom Day seem to forget is that freedom results from a society with good schools, safe neighborhoods, and clean air and water. The freedom to pursue personal goals, to start a business, to raise a family in a good community all rest on the public systems and structures that we have built and maintained for generations. The taxes we pay secure these basic freedoms for all of us.

Responses to Common Tax Season Rhetoric

Imagine a local radio show host saw your press alert indicating your willingness to engage in the tax season dialogue. On the radio it's important to be authoritative AND conversational – to translate complicated topics in which you have expertise into everyday language. Here are some examples of common tax (and tax freedom) season rhetoric that might be used by a radio host and hypothetical responses that effectively redirect the conversation.

Example 1.

Rhetoric: Remember the days when you didn't need software or an accountant to do your taxes? Most people, me included, would like to do away with the IRS.

Response: "When I'm doing my taxes I try to remember what our taxes are for; it helps take a little of the sting out of the process. We all want good education for our kids, firefighters and police, and clean air and water. Right now, with revenues down from the recession, we are being forced to cut back on things that our communities need, and our taxes are more important than ever. Making taxes simpler is a laudable goal, but we don't need less of the things they pay for."

- ✓ **Why this is a good response.** Quickly connects taxes to their purpose. Gives specific examples of public structures that are widely understood. Questions the future impact of budget cuts made today.

Example 2.

Rhetoric: It's great that Tax Freedom Day is earlier this year than last year. Maybe they are finally getting the message and letting us keep more of our hard-earned money.

Response: The real reason Tax Freedom Day is earlier this year is because we're spending less this year on things like schools, roads, and fire protection. These are the very things that underpin freedom in our country – the freedom to pursue an education, to create a business, to be safe and secure in our neighborhoods. I'm not sure we should be happy that Tax Freedom day is earlier. Instead we should be asking whether we actually need to be spending more on successful schools, good infrastructure and public safety that make us all better off.

- ✓ **Why this is a good response.** Quickly connects taxes to their purposes and gives examples. Uses the level one value of "freedom" to question a definition of freedom that assumes that less government makes us more free.

Example 3.

Rhetoric: If we all didn't have to spend so much time figuring out our taxes, we could be working more. We should just throw out the tax code and go with a flat tax so we can get back to what matters.

Response: Figuring out your taxes can be tricky, that's for sure. But that's mainly because of all the special preferences we've created over the years like special deductions, exemptions for corporations, tax credits and so on. We could and should make the system simpler but it's

important to recognize the ways in which the tax code is used to create opportunity and foster strong communities by rewarding social investments, helping families achieve economic security, and giving us all an incentive to donate to charities. If we go with a flat tax we'll treat all types of income and all types of expenses equally and that's not the way to go.

- ✓ **Why this is a good response.** Counters the value of simplicity with the values of the common good and opportunity. Gives examples of public spending/programs that are done through the tax code to show that we have used our tax policies to promote opportunity and the common good.

Example 4.

Rhetoric: I just finished doing my taxes and I ended up owing another \$500 to the state. It really stung to cut that check knowing that the legislature is just going to waste my money.

Response: Money is tight right now for many Americans which is why tax revenues are still way down. To balance the budget, the state has made some deep spending cuts to the things our tax dollars pay for like courts, public health programs, and community colleges. Your \$500 matters more now than ever as we all pitch in to keep our public systems as stable as possible through these tough times. Certainly, state leaders should always be looking for ways to make government more efficient so that the money we all pay is spent wisely.

- ✓ **Why this is a good response.** Reminds them that the cause of the current budget shortfalls is declining revenues. Links taxes to what they pay for and gives specific examples. Connects decisions made today to their potential future impact. Implies that tax dollars lost to inefficiency could be better used to invest in improving public systems so that they can meet their goals.

Example 5.

Rhetoric: Half of all Americans don't even pay income taxes and yet they are the ones that use the most services. How is that fair?

Response: Everyone benefits from the things that taxes pay for and that's why everyone pays taxes. Some Americans may not make enough to pay federal income taxes but they still pay payroll taxes as well as state and local sales, excise, and property taxes. Often these taxes require a greater share of the incomes of low-income taxpayers which is why it's also very important to have a good income tax system so that it all balances out and everyone pays an appropriate share for the public goods that we all use.

Why this is a good response. It quickly reconnects taxes to their overall purpose. It recommends a balanced tax system in which everyone contributes appropriately, which is another way of suggesting fairness that does not trigger the typical thinking (e.g. that the system is fairest when everyone pays the same amount or that the simplest system is always the fairest).

Effective Real World Examples of Tax (and Tax Freedom) Day Narratives

> [Excerpt from a press release last year](#) by the Oregon Center for Public Policy:

"Sheketoff also stressed that the Tea Party protestors ignore the public sector's "vital role" in enhancing Oregonians' quality of life and fostering economic opportunity for families and businesses.

'April 15 — Tax Day — is a day to celebrate how Oregonians pool their resources to advance the common good, as reflected in our schools, courthouses and other public structures,' said Sheketoff. He noted that tax dollars created, and continue to maintain, the public spaces at the State Capitol that will host the Tea Party protest on Tax Day."

- ✓ **Why this is a good example?** Leads with values such as "quality of life" and "opportunity." Gives specific examples of public structures. Focuses on pooled resources as opposed to "what individuals buy with their tax dollars."

> [Excerpt from Dave Johnson commentary](#) in Huffington Post:

"By gathering together into a community that is jointly managed (i.e. government) people can pool their resources and accomplish great things that cannot be accomplished by people who are on their own. Roads and bridges are examples of things that people cannot accomplish individually. Police, firefighters, public schools are other examples. Law and courts and a monetary system are still more. And then there are benefits like Social Security and the "safety net" of programs for people who lose jobs to food programs for those of us without enough to eat.

The reason we have almost everything that we value as a society, our education and (until recently anyway) jobs, the internet, buildings that don't easily burn down or blow away, drinkable water coming to our houses and sewage systems leaving them and (until fairly recently, anyway) a health care system that stops epidemics *is our government*. All of the businesses we see around us exist because of our government -- a corporation cannot even exist without the government that establishes it and the legal system that maintains it."

- ✓ **Why is this a good example?** Inserts notion of interdependence (community). It's about pooled resources as opposed to what individuals buy with their individual tax payments. Gives specific examples of public structures. Asserts that public structures are the foundation of a good economy and pave the way for business success.

> [Excerpts from a blog posting by the Commonwealth Institute of Virginia](#):

"[Tax Freedom Day] ignores the benefits that we all receive from a functioning and adequately funded public sector: benefits like clean water and air, roads to get us from our home to the grocery store and to work, and school systems that equip us with the knowledge and skills that allow us to be productive members of society.

As we approach the tax filing deadline this Thursday, I challenge you to think about all the ways public services have shaped your life for the better. And when you hear politicians and noisy protestors try to convince you that government is too big and taxes are too high, ask yourself:

Are our children’s classrooms too small? Is the Chesapeake too clean? Is tuition at VCU or Virginia Tech too affordable? Do too many Virginians have access to quality health care?

Take pride in your contribution to society. You are doing your part to promote the prosperity of your nation, your state, and your community. Your children and grandchildren will thank you.”

- ✓ **Why is this a good example?** Asserts that public systems benefit everyone and gives examples. Uses values language such as pride, prosperity, and community. Connects the decisions of today with the legacy we are leaving for future generations.

Sample Op-Ed Introductions

1. **(Main point: benefits of paying taxes)** Commiserating our way through tax season is a national past-time in America - so much so that major retailers like Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts offer customers free comfort foods to help ease the collective anxiety. And who can blame Americans for needing these creature comforts, especially in a year like 2011 when the economy continues to sputter and so many middle class families are struggling to make ends meet? And yet it is precisely because families are struggling that we need to make sure that our public systems have the resources to respond. Times like these call for government to play an active role, both in meeting emergency needs and in supporting a strong economic recovery. The central question that should drive our nation’s fiscal decisions is “how do we make sure that we are keeping the foundations of our economy sound and paving the way to future prosperity?” Making sure we have the means to achieve this shared goal is the real challenge.



2. **(Main point: taxes are low)** April 15th is upon us. Millions of Americans are frantically reconciling their final tax payments for the 2010 tax year. While it is a season in which we are, understandably, focused on our own individual finances, it’s also important to reflect on our collective pursuits. In 2010 the share of our incomes that we will have paid in federal income taxes is actually at its lowest point since the 1950's. At that time our nation chose to invest in its future through bold steps like the GI Bill (that supported veterans through periods of unemployment and offered them loans to buy homes and start businesses) and the interstate highway system (a project that cost \$114 billion in today’s dollars and took 35 years to complete). And we raised the taxes necessary to pay for these tremendous improvements that paved the way for a vibrant middle class. The reality of today’s comparatively low taxes should make us ask what we are doing today to build a robust economy for tomorrow in which opportunity and prosperity can be available to all Americans. (Then insert solutions, facts, etc.)

3. **(Main point: wealthy not paying fair share)** It’s that time of year. Two American pass-times – baseball season and tax season - are heating up. One of these seasons, baseball, is about competition and team allegiances. The other, tax season, is about the common good. This is the time of year we make those final 2010 payments to the federal and state government to pay for the public sector’s activities: the public structures that keep us safe, promote healthy communities and ensure opportunity for all. Because these public systems serve as the foundation of our nation’s economy, it’s important that everyone shoulder an appropriate share of these costs. Our nation was built on the notion that those who have benefitted the most from our country’s public investments should also pay the most for

their upkeep. For some time now this basic principle has been eroding away. Over recent decades the share of taxes paid by high income earners and large corporations has been reduced while middle class families have paid more and our public systems have declined. This great American tax shift is undermining the foundations our economy and our society.

Sample press releases

1) Media Release: Tax Freedom Day presents a misleading picture of tax responsibility and misses the larger story

The Tax Foundation has declared April x, 2011 to be Tax Freedom Day - the first day of the year in which the country as a whole has theoretically earned enough income to fund its annual tax responsibility.

Jane Doe, director of the Prosperity Policy Center, asserts that Tax Freedom Day undermines the public dialogue by presenting a one-sided equation, ignoring the good things that our taxes pay for. According to Doe "We pay taxes to support the common good...provide for the common defense, educate our workforce, and keep our environment clean. The things our taxes support make a vibrant economy possible. Having fewer of them will not make us freer. In fact it undermines our quality of life and our future prosperity."

It's important to note, says Doe that Tax Freedom Day is occurring earlier this year despite the continued economic troubles. Moreover, Tax Freedom Day occurs earlier in the United States than in almost all other industrialized nations. According to Doe, "The fact that our collective tax responsibility is declining and is already well behind other nations should cause us to question whether or not low taxes makes for a vibrant economy." Says Doe, "Taxes pay for public structures like schools, roads, and courts, which form the foundation of a good economy. The Tax Foundation's figures point to the fact that we are in fact under-investing in the building blocks of a strong economic recovery."

Call Director Jane Doe to get the facts about taxes, including how the money is spent and whether or not current policies and others under consideration are putting the economy back on solid ground.

2) Media Release: Tax Day is not just a payment deadline, it's also the day we pool our resources to build a better tomorrow

Today millions of Americans are rushing to meet the tax filing deadline. Those same Americans are also contributing to the common good. Opportunity Now, a statewide organization working to ensure economic security and opportunity for the state's 10 million residents, is issuing a fact sheet on government taxes and spending. According to the center's analysis, this year the typical tax filer will pay \$x in federal income taxes, which is \$y less than in 2010. According to John Q. Public, director of Opportunity Now, "Our state's residents will pay lower taxes now than in recent years but that comes at a high price - weakened public structures like schools and universities, health and human services programs. Lower taxes means that these important public systems are not able to respond to the ongoing economic crisis facing so many of our state's families."

Get the facts: Links to national organizations providing tax data and analysis

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: <http://www.cbpp.org> (also see www.statefiscal.org to find a state level fiscal policy organization in your state)

Citizens for Tax Justice/ Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy: www.ctj.org and www.itepnet.org

Brookings Institute Tax Policy Center: www.taxpolicycenter.org

Congressional Budget Office: www.cbo.gov