

CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT

- [Financing State and Local Governments](#)
 - [Active Citizenship](#)
-

Financing State and Local Governments

Taxes, of course, pay the expenses of most government activities at all levels. All working Americans file income tax returns, in which they figure out how much of their earnings the federal government requires in taxes. Most working Americans file a state income tax return at the same time. All workers and businesses must pay income taxes to the federal government, and most states now also tax workers and businesses.

The federal government gives some of its money to states through revenue sharing programs. States get the rest of their money through various other taxes. Driver's license and license plate fees are taxes that help support state government. Some states collect taxes for the right to own property in that state. Many states have sales taxes.

Tax money goes into the state treasury of the executive branch. No money from the treasury is spent until the legislature approves the amount and purpose. State legislatures must pass appropriations bills for the funding of schools, highways, hospitals, and all the other expenses of the state government.

State governments decide how local governments may collect taxes. More than three-fourths of all local government money comes from property taxes. Most of these taxes come from real estate taxes, or taxes on land, homes, and buildings. If a large municipality needs more money, it may create city sales taxes, telephone and electricity taxes, or even taxes on hotel rooms. The state government, however, must approve any such tax before a city can charge it. Parking fees, car stickers, and fees for other services like garbage collection and water are other sources of money at the local level.

[Back to Top](#)

Active Citizenship

Political leaders in the United States are very sensitive to **public opinion**. The views and wishes of the majority of voters on given issues generally make up public opinion. Since the voters decide who holds political office, it is easy to see why public opinion matters so much to elected officials. If they act contrary to public opinion, they may be voted out of office in the next election.

Americans form their opinions on the basis of the information they receive. Most people get most of their information from the **mass media**. Mass media include television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and other sources of information that reach great numbers of people. The mass media can present **propaganda**, or deliberate attempts to sway public opinion. Commercials, advertisements, and editorials are common forms of mass media propaganda. News reports, on the other hand, present mostly facts. Both kinds of mass-media presentations influence people's opinions on many subjects. They discuss the issues with friends, family members, and others. A democratic society requires that citizens keep informed.

On election day, of course, citizens have the last word. But Americans also make their wishes known through

political **pressure groups**, or special interest groups. Most people belong to one or more pressure groups. A pressure group is made up of people who have a common interest and try to get the government to act in ways that benefit them. Senior citizens organizations, labor unions, insurance companies, and hundreds of other special interest groups “pressure” government leaders to pass laws in their favor. They may write letters, hold demonstrations, circulate petitions, run ads in the mass media, or do many other things to get attention. Some pressure groups collect money and hire one or more **lobbyists**. A lobbyist goes directly to government officials, especially those at the national level, to argue for the group’s interests.

The bottom line in American democracy, however, reads something like this: Voting is every citizen’s most important and most direct way to participate in government.

[Back to Top](#)