



Unpleasant returns

Websites provide a look at the mechanics of America's tax policies, which are not working

Taxes. According to Ben Franklin, they are one of life's two certainties. Death is the other.

Most people don't look forward to dealing with either of them. Death often shows up unannounced, so there's no time to dread it and you can't put off dealing with it.

Taxes, on the other hand, are rigidly scheduled every year, quarter, month and paycheck. When you see that guy dressed up like the Statue of Liberty waving his sign, you know that tax time is right around the corner. You can't avoid it and you're penalized if you miss the deadline.

The indignity of being gouged every payday by dysfunctional governments at the national, state and local levels is bad enough. But then these same government entities — who can't even come close to keeping their own houses in order — make us file an annual report using forms and instructions that make the SATs seem like a pleasant diversion.

Of course there's not much you can do. Taxes are a necessary evil if we want to live in a society. Most people just grumble, file their taxes, grumble some more and move on with their lives.

We need to pay more attention to tax policies and elect representatives who work for honest tax reform. After all, taxes are among the most intimate encounters we have with government. That return we file every year tells them how much we earn, who pays us, what our investments are and who everyone in your household is. And if you itemize, it gives information on your medical history, causes you support and more. We don't share this much information with our next door neighbors or even on Facebook. Well, maybe some people do.

Follow the money

The way a government collects and spends money is a direct indication of its priorities. Who gets taxed and how much they get charged in America is not straightforward and fair. It's a convoluted mess of bizarre regulations, subsidies and loopholes that often favors special interests over the

working people who keep the economy running. And the spending of all of that tax revenue is just as messed up.

Right, left, center

So how do you make sense of such a complex subject as taxes so you can vote for intelligent solutions? A couple places to start are [TaxFoundation.org](#) and [CTJ.org](#) (Citizens for Tax Justice). The Tax Foundation is a nonprofit tax research organization that claims to be independent, but has a distinct tilt to the right. Citizens for Tax Justice is a tax research and advocacy organization that makes no bones about its leftward tilt.

Republicans and Democrats have wildly opposing views on taxation. As with most issues they disagree on, the truth is usually found somewhere in the middle. Both of these websites, despite their different leanings, often hover towards the center.

Both sites offer breakdowns and analysis of the presidential candidates tax plans. They both cover national and state tax policies. They both contain links to numerous articles on all sorts of tax policies. Both also have numer-

ous blogs with current analysis and opinion of the latest tax trends. And they both have reams of data on all sorts of tax issues.

All of that data is what makes these sites valuable. Even if they nudge their analysis of the facts and figures to the left or right, you can still draw your own conclusions based on the hard data. Despite the opposing allegiances of the sites, there is considerable overlap on their conclusions.

The Tax Foundation site is the better designed of the two, and it has a lot more content. Most people are familiar with its annual Tax Freedom Day, the date when the nation has earned enough money to pay off its tax bill for the year. Last year it was April 24th. It gets later every year.

Of course educating yourself on complicated issues like taxation is a lot like doing your taxes. It takes a lot of time and effort, can be very confusing and doesn't necessarily make you feel better when you're done.

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