



HOW TO TALK: TAXES

At their core, when we talk about taxes we are talking about our government – what we want it to do, what it’s doing well or not well, and how much money it needs to do what we want it to do.

Conversations about taxes often become fights about who pays taxes and how much we each pay. As a result, they rarely help us see taxes as a necessary part of how we achieve shared goals. So, we can help our friends and neighbors see taxes as more than a drain on our pocketbooks – they’re how we pay for things that build a high quality of life for everyone.

Here are 5 recommendations for converting potentially heated conversations about taxes into productive ones.

1. Connect taxes to the common good by explaining how we all benefit. First and foremost, we have to connect taxes to our widely shared goals and values. Essentially, we have to connect them to the big ideas, like thriving communities, quality of life, and community well-being that tap into a positive vision for government and taxes. These big ideas help people who feel disconnected to see why government and taxes matter to them and helps to explain how we all benefit from paying taxes, even though we don’t benefit directly from each and every service or program. Here’s an example of how to insert a big idea:
 - “We can’t get something for nothing. If we want a community with a great quality of life we have to invest in the things that makes that possible – like schools and parks public health – and taxes make those things possible.”
 - “The building blocks of thriving communities are public structures like good schools, firefighters, and parks. Our taxes make those things a reality.”
 - “Our state’s prosperity requires a strong foundation – good schools, drivable roads, and a modern health care system. Taxes are key to keeping our foundation healthy.”
2. Offer specific examples of what taxes make possible: Make it real and tangible. Terms like “government,” “public services” and “public sector” mean something to those of us who think about this topic a lot but not much to everyone else. Instead, we can mention things that government does, ideally things that are familiar to most people, like roads, highways, schools, parks, Social Security, health inspectors, the minimum wage, NASA, etc. Here are a couple of examples of how to use specific examples to make people feel personally connected to the outcomes of paying taxes.

- “I noticed that the restaurant we usually eat at had its safety rating downgraded. With what happened at Chipotle, last year I’m glad our taxes are paying for people and programs that are making our community as safe as possible.”
 - “I loved reading about how NASA is planning our next mission to Mars. It’s fun to know that my taxes help me make that possible.”
3. Lengthen the time horizon. Conversations about taxes tend to stay in the moment – the sales tax on my latest receipt, the withholdings line on my last paycheck, or how much the governor says our state can “afford” to spend THIS year. But taxes are as much about yesterday and tomorrow as they are about today. Past generations invested in public structures such as universities, roads, and social services so we could have better lives today. We have to ask ourselves what we must do to build the best possible future for the generations after ours. Here are examples for how to connect to the future and the past when talking about taxes:
- “I don’t like paying taxes any more than the next person, but it’s amazing how much better off we are today because our parents and grandparents paid to build our roads and the community colleges that train the workers I hire. I want to do my part for our kids and grandkids.”
 - “The future of our community depends on building and maintaining strong public structures like schools, roads and clean water. Our taxes make those things possible.”
4. Give people civic agency. People tend to think about government as a vending machine: they put their money in and they’ll get back only those services that they believe they personally benefit from. That’s just not how government works. So, we have to help our friends see their larger role in the picture of government, including taxes. We can do this by talking about taxes as the way we come together to accomplish big things or that they’re how we pay for things that make our communities strong. And we can remind people HOW to participate in the debate – like working with an outside group that aligns with their interests, meeting with public officials, writing letters to the local paper, speaking at an upcoming public hearing, etc.
- “I saw that the Mayor’s proposed budget for next year doesn’t include more funding for road repairs. I’m planning to go to the next public hearing and speak out because I know that we can’t get something for nothing. We’re all going to have to pay more taxes to improve our roads and that’s money I’m willing to spend. You should come with me.”
 - “Our legislature is once again not prioritizing education in the budget for next year. Most of us are willing to pay more taxes for education but they’re not listening. So I just joined Citizens for Good Schools and I’m planning to attend their rally next week.”

5. A word on what NOT to say. It's always better to focus on what to say rather than what not to say, but taxes is an especially challenging topic. Sometimes, if we start out on the wrong foot, triggering an idea, it can be hard to recover and have a productive conversation. A couple to look out for in particular are:

1. Don't talk about taxes as a "burden" or something from which we need "relief." These are inherently negative and they cue up the dominant thinking that taxes are bad. Instead, talk about taxes as "loads" to be carried or shared; and
2. Don't call people "taxpayers" - it limits the conversation to only one side of the ledger (costs, not benefits). Instead, talk about people as "residents" or "citizens" or "member of our community" - it highlights that we are all people who both contribute to and benefit from public systems and structures.

Here are some examples of how to stay positive when talking taxes.

- "I just got my property tax bill. Did you? I saw an article in the paper about all the property tax breaks the big box store on the edge of town gets. That's not right. Everyone needs to carry their share of the tax load for paying for schools and health clinics and the like. Having strong public structures in our community helps businesses to thrive as much as they help residents."
- "As a member of this community, I feel proud when I see my taxes at work, ensuring that all residents, including me and family, can benefit from good roads, schools, and public safety. There's always room for improvement but I can see our tax dollars at work when I drive around our town."