

SPR

VOLUME 31

Issue 1

In This Issue

Virginia's Gas Tax Tanked? 2

The governor of Virginia recently laid out a plan to make big changes to his state's transportation funding structure. The proposal would eliminate the state motor fuel tax on gasoline, increase the state sales and use tax, and dedicate more of that revenue source to transportation infrastructure funding. After suffering from highway maintenance deficits since fiscal year (FY) 2002, the governor's proposal is intended to increase Virginia's overall transportation funding levels and shore up funding to meet the future needs of the state's transportation systems.

Technical Notes 7

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STATE

POLICY

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VOLUME 31

ISSUE 2

STATE POLICY REPORTS

In This Issue

Quality Counts 2013

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As it does every year, *Education Week* has published its most recent *Quality Counts* report on states' K-12 education policies and outcomes. This year's report includes updated data for three of the six measures: school finance, transitions and alignment, and chance for success. The results from these measures highlight some of the key differences in state education reforms, especially as efforts to enact more sweeping changes on the federal level through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have stalled. As states continue to enact their own changes to K-12 systems, the *Quality Counts* data are likely to become more important in gauging the success and progress of these individual state reforms until Congress takes up the issue on a federal level.

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ISSUE 3

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In This Issue

Diverging Incomes: The New Normal?

2

It has been well-publicized that analysis of income trends over the last several years shows that those with the highest incomes have seen gains while those with the lowest incomes have seen stagnation or even losses. The result of these trends is a large and growing gap between the two groups. In a recent analysis, two liberal-leaning research and advocacy groups examine the results on a state-by-state basis and propose a host of state policies that might reverse or at least mitigate this trend. That said, economics tells us that income is most efficiently and effectively redistributed at the national level of government, so state actions can only go so far. Moreover, many of their recommendations run contrary to recent state actions and face an additional hurdle of scarce government resources.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 4

FEBRUARY 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

The Limits of State Business Climate Rankings

As it has in many previous years, *Reports* had every intention of writing about the various components and scores for the 2013 rankings of state business tax climate released by the Tax Foundation last autumn. After reading the report, a more compelling assignment emerged: explaining why such rankings are of limited value and sometimes raise more questions than they answer.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 5

MARCH 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Massachusetts Takes the Long View on Sequestration

Over the last several months, states have been understandably preoccupied with the potential effects of federal budget sequestration on federal programs that operate through the state-federal partnership. While the ultimate budgetary impact of sequestration was estimated to be much smaller than many initially feared, it nevertheless introduced a degree of uncertainty that made planning for and running the affected programs extremely difficult. In the midst of this worry, officials in Massachusetts stepped back to take the long view, focusing not only on the impacts of sequestration on the budget, but on the longer-term impacts of sequestration and federal budget retrenchment on the economy.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

VOLUME 31

ISSUE 6

MARCH 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Index of State Economic Momentum

The condition of state economies continues to improve, with personal income and employment inching up while housing prices show marked signs of recovery. The states hit hardest by the housing collapse—Arizona, California, Florida and Nevada—all show encouraging signs of recovery in that sector and more generally. A handful of small states have unemployment rates that are the envy of the larger states, but those low rates may also indicate labor shortages that could constrain growth going forward. On balance, the economic signals are positive, with some large and important state economies helping to lead the way.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 7

APRIL 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

We Didn't See *That* Coming

Representatives of state and local governments were caught by surprise when the Senate decided to take up legislation that would allow states to collect sales and use taxes on Internet transactions. While the issue has been percolating at the state-local level for decades, Congress has typically shown scant interest in it. Surprise turned to delight when the bill passed the Senate resoundingly. It now heads to the House, where its fate is uncertain. In thinking about why this legislation suddenly has legs, implicit trade-offs come to mind. Specifically, is the federal government compensating states for ongoing cuts in federal aid? Or for federal tax reform that could eliminate tax preferences that benefit state and local governments?

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 8

APRIL 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

The 2013 Camelot Index

The Camelot Index was developed by *Reports* founding editor Hal Hovey. It is based on the premise that most people share a common set of preferences: fewer taxes are better than more, small class sizes are better than large, low death rates are better than high, less crime is better than more and so on.

Many studies incorporate such preferences, but they often focus on just one area. For example, a study may attempt to identify the “healthiest” state but ignore the fact that health care isn’t delivered in a vacuum; it may be traded off with something else.

The Camelot Index brings together measures of economic vitality, health, education, crime, society and government. In the current Index, many states rank consistently across measures, while others do quite well on some measures but not on others. Plains states continue to do well, with four states (two different this year) still ranking among the top five.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 9
MAY 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Gee Whiz: Median Versus Per Capita Income

States are typically ranked by their per capita personal income. An alternative measure is median household income, which focuses on the household that occupies the income level at which half the state's households are higher and half are lower. Most states rank similarly on the two measures, but there are a few outliers.

An April Surprise?

The word on the street is that April tax returns brought unanticipated revenues to many states' coffers. The federal results were stellar, and many income tax-levying states link to the federal tax code. So far, state tax-collection data are too incomplete to paint a clear picture, and a number of states have raised or lowered taxes legislatively, which complicates the picture. Of particular note is Kansas, which is tweaking the significant changes to its tax code that were enacted last year.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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MAY 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Laboratories of Democracy: Arkansas, Oregon and Medicaid

States must decide whether to expand their Medicaid programs in the manner prescribed in national health care reform legislation. Unlike traditional Medicaid, states have more flexibility in covering the new population under the Affordable Care Act, and some are taking advantage of that flexibility to deliver health care in new and different ways. Their experiences, in turn, may influence the actions of states that have not yet opted for such an expansion.

Gee Whiz: State Reliance on Sales Taxes

States vary in their reliance on sales taxes, with a few states using it as a main source of tax revenues while others don't use it at all.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 11
JUNE 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Continuum of State Fiscal Stress

Based on the most recent *Fiscal Survey of the States*, the condition of state budgets is stable. More states are doing well than are struggling, and there isn't any particular state, region or industry that appears at risk of collapse. That said, there also isn't much evidence of a widespread boom outside of those few natural resource-dependent states that have dominated the headlines in recent years.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 12
JUNE 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Index of State Economic Momentum

The national and state economies encountered a bump in the road in this update. Personal income growth slowed markedly, the effect of income being shifted into the final quarter of 2012 for tax purposes, and the expiration of the payroll tax holiday. The rate of job growth also declined. The inability of Congress and the administration to enact long-term policies that would provide certainty to financial markets and consumers contributes to an uneven recovery. Unfortunately, the coming months are likely to bring more of the same.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 13

JULY 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

States and immigration Reform

Federal immigration reform may or may not happen. The Senate has passed a bill; the House has not. The Senate bill is not likely to be considered by the House, and any bill the House might adopt would probably differ significantly from the Senate bill. But there is a lot of buzz around the issue, and states are rightfully concerned about where any type of immigration reform would leave them.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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JULY 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Fiscal Stress Revisited

In Issue 11, *Reports* presented its semiannual “Continuum of State Fiscal Stress.” A few states had concerns about how they fared on the measure, and submitted letters explaining these concerns. Those letters appear here.

Moody’s on Pensions

Moody’s Investors Service recently changed the way it evaluates state pension liabilities, making adjustments to the liabilities themselves and then comparing them to a state’s ability to meet the obligations, rather than comparing them to assets.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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JOINT ISSUE 15-16
AUGUST 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

A Q&A on Municipal Bankruptcy

Frank Shafroth has served at every level of government and he was working on Capitol Hill when the federal municipal bankruptcy legislation—Chapter 9—was enacted. *Reports* asked Shafroth to shed some light on recent developments in Detroit and other localities, and to address the lessons these developments hold for other governments.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 17
SEPTEMBER 2013

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State K-12 Funding Slow to Rebound

A recent analysis of state per pupil funding for K-12 education finds a majority of states spending less in FY 2014 than they did in FY 2008, even accounting for inflation. How can that be?

A Picture Worth a Thousand Words

Most state fiscal analysts expected states to see a personal income tax windfall stemming from tax planning that occurred in late 2012. They were right.

States and Hunger

Recent federal data show the prevalence of food insecurity by state. The imminent reduction in the federal program that addresses this problem may make matters worse.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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ISSUE 18
SEPTEMBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Index of State Economic Momentum

Little has changed. Calendar year 2013 has been remarkably static in terms of state economic momentum, and that isn't a good thing. Personal income and employment growth have been tepid in most states, unemployment rates have changed little, and the majority of the nation's population resides in states with above-average unemployment rates. In short, political gridlock in Washington, DC, is taking its toll on the national economy, with no end in sight.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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OCTOBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

The End of Welfare as We Knew It

There are recurring themes in state budgeting and fiscal policy: Medicaid has grown vigorously, squeezing out spending for other programs; college tuitions have increased dramatically, partly reflecting the stagnation of state aid; states have begun to partner with the private sector to meet transportation and other infrastructure demands in the face of scarce resources; alternatives to “life without parole” and other sentencing policies have taken hold to combat the rising cost of incarceration. The theme that isn’t often raised in such discussions—but could be—is that states have nearly exited the cash assistance business.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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OCTOBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Poverty Redefined

If it sometimes seems as though federal benefit programs fail to take adequate account of differences in the cost of living across the country, rest assured that someone already thought of that. In fact, a more robust poverty measure exists; it just doesn't get used for anything.

Variations in Property Tax Burdens

Differences in the role of the property tax among states is typically shown by reporting a given state's reliance on the tax as a component of its state-local mix. A new study instead looks at the burden imposed by the tax on households, and finds significant variation among states.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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NOVEMBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

A Tale of Two Vices

A recent study prepared by researchers at the University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Labor, Employment, and the Economy examines the various methods by which states regulate the sale of alcohol. Among the findings is that state ownership of alcohol sales equates with lower consumption, and that state control over alcohol wholesaling generates much higher revenue than a licensing system. The research also reveals the diminishing importance of state alcohol taxes, which leads *Reports* to examine why alcohol is treated differently than tobacco.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

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NOVEMBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Continuum of State Fiscal Stress

It's getting better all the time. The most important finding of this update of the continuum is that many states ended fiscal year (FY) 2013 on more secure footing than they anticipated at mid-year. This was largely foreseen, as changes in federal tax law led many high-income filers to claim capital gains and businesses to accelerate bonus and dividend payments. As a result, state tax collections were unusually strong. While those developments were of a one-time nature, they have the benefit of putting states in a stronger fiscal position going forward.

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STATE POLICY REPORTS

VOLUME 31

JOINT ISSUE 23-24

DECEMBER 2013

IN THIS ISSUE

Index of State Economic Momentum

Timing is everything. The personal income data in this update show improvement, while the employment data show stagnation. Why? Because the former capture activity prior to the federal government shutdown in October and the latter capture activity in its wake.

Is Universal Preschool a Good Deal for States?

In the last few years there has been increased attention to early childhood education policies. At the federal level, one proposal would provide matching grants to states for universal preschool programs, but that money would come with a number of financial and regulatory requirements. Moreover, the broad range of existing state early childhood education programs would make the federal proposal more beneficial and easier to implement for some states than others.

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