

Alabama

Highlights

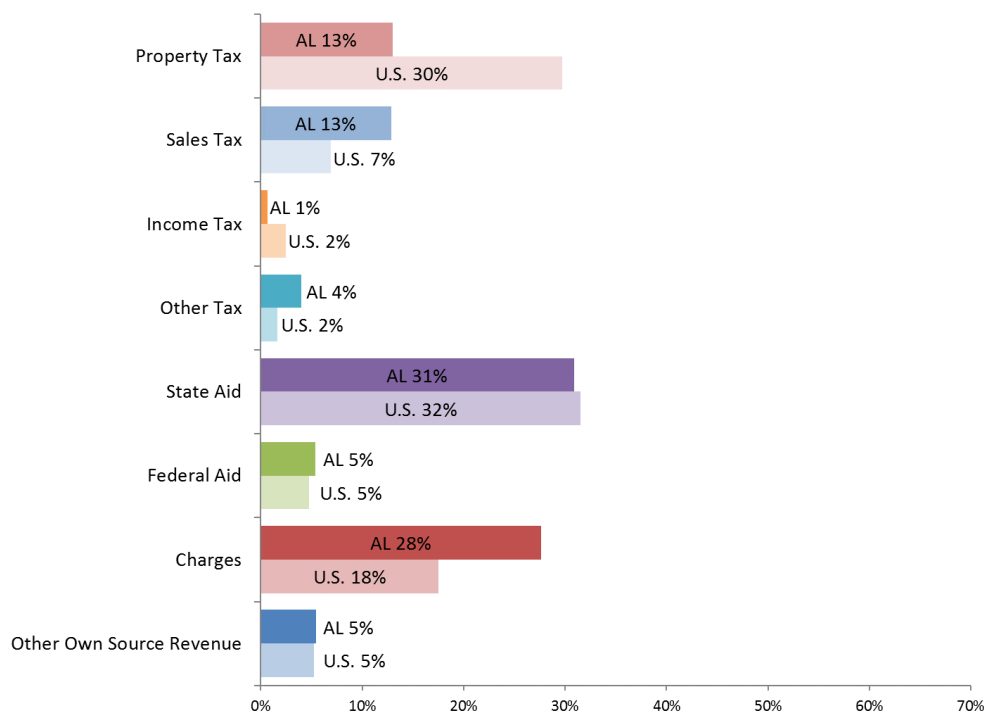
Local government reliance on the property tax is very low in Alabama, compared to that of the rest of the United States. After state aid, Alabama's local governments rely most heavily on charges, followed by sales taxes and property taxes, which both comprise 13 percent of Alabama's local general revenue (figure AL-1).

Alabama has a classified property tax system, with four different classes of property that have different assessment ratios. Residential property, which is included in Class 3, is assessed at 10 percent of market value. This means that a home valued at \$100,000 would be assessed at \$10,000.

Constitutional limits play a major role in the state's property tax policy. Provisions that would be state statutes in many other states are part of Alabama's constitution. Alabama's *Constitution of 1901* is the longest in the United States (including 895 Amendments); and in reaction to the excesses of Reconstruction, it severely limits actions of local governments. Property tax classification is part of the state's constitution, as are the various property tax rate and levy limits.

Figure AL-1

Sources of Local General Revenue, Alabama and U.S., 2013



Source: U.S. Census via Significant Features of the Tax

Property Tax Reliance

Alabama ranks either fiftieth or fifty-first among the states in property taxes per capita, property tax as a percentage of personal income, property tax as a percentage of state-local revenue, and the effective tax rate on a median-value owner-occupied home (table AL-1).

Table AL-1
Selected Alabama Property Tax Statistics, 2013¹

	Alabama	U.S. Average	Rank (of 51) <i>1 is highest</i>
Per capita property tax	\$547	\$1,441	51
Property tax percentage of personal income	1.5%	3.2%	50
Total property tax as percentage of state-local revenue	7.6%	16.9%	51
Median owner-occupied home value ²	\$122,500	\$176,700	45
Median real estate taxes paid for owner-occupied home ²	\$528	\$2,107	45
Effective tax rate, median owner-occupied home ³	0.4%	1.2%	50

Sources: U.S. Census via Significant Features of the Property Tax, American Community Survey

¹ All revenue numbers in this table include the state government as well as local governments.

² The statistics for median owner-occupied home value and median real estate taxes paid for owner-occupied home are five-year average statistics for years 2009–2013.

³ Calculated as the median real estate tax paid on owner-occupied homes as a percent of the median owner-occupied home value.

Administration and Assessment

Property taxes are levied by the state government as well as by counties, municipalities, and school districts.

Assessment is primarily conducted by the state's 67 counties (table AL-2). The state's classification system employs four different classes: utilities; residential, agricultural, forest and historic; private cars and trucks; and all other, including business personal property. Class 3 (residential, agricultural, forest, and historic) has the lowest assessment ratio (10 percent), while utilities have the highest assessment ratio (30 percent).

Property eligible for current use includes not only agricultural and forest but also residential and historic property.

The Alabama Department of Revenue directs all tax assessors to reappraise property values annually at their "fair and reasonable market value" (Compton, Grisom, and Thistle 2015).

Limits on Property Taxation

Alabama employs various property tax rate limits and a levy limit. All are part of the state's constitution.

Detailed property tax limits apply to property taxation by the state, counties, municipalities, and school districts. State property taxation is limited to 6.5 mills, which includes 3 mills for the Educational Trust Fund, 2.5 mills to the State General Fund, and 1 mill for the Department of Human Resources. Counties are limited to 5 mills for general purposes; 2.5 mills for public buildings, roads, or bridges; and smaller mill amounts for other special purposes. Cities may levy 5 mills and an additional 7.5 mills only by referendum, all for general purposes. An additional 0.5 mills may be approved for cities for public libraries by referendum. School districts are required to levy a minimum of 10 mills (Harvey 2012).

The levy limit applies to properties by class. For example, Class 3 property, which includes residential property, cannot be subject to total property taxation of more than one percent. If taxation initially exceeds these limits, the amount of each taxing jurisdiction shall be reduced proportionately.

Tax Relief and Incentives

Alabama has several property tax relief programs, but no circuit breaker. There is a standard homestead exemption on the 6.5 mill statewide property tax of \$4,000 of assessed valuation, meaning a homestead appraised at \$40,000 and assessed at 10 percent pays no state property tax. State exemption is also granted at 100 percent for homeowners over 65 years of age, or who are retired due to permanent and total disability, regardless of age, or who are blind. Local property tax exemptions are also available.

Abatements of property tax are statutorily authorized for purposes of economic development and can be granted by multiple authorities for up to 10 years. These include, but are not limited to, municipal industrial boards, downtown redevelopment authorities, county industrial development boards, county industrial development authorities, tax increment financing authorities, and municipal medical clinic boards. The granting of these abatements reduces the ad valorem tax revenue to the state as well as to local governmental entities. Such abatements are authorized only for noneducational millages.

Table AL-2
Alabama Property Tax Features, 2013

Feature	Alabama	Count for 50 states plus DC
Statewide classification of real property	Yes	25
Assessment of property primarily by county	Yes	30
Limits on property tax rates or levies	Yes	45
Limits on the rate of growth of assessed value	No	19
Circuit breaker property tax relief program	No	34

Sources: Significant Features of the Property Tax

Key Tax History

State taxation in Alabama has two distinct historical periods. The first period, spanning from statehood through Reconstruction (1819 to 1874), was characterized by traditional reliance on the property tax as controlled by statute. The second period, from 1875 to the present, has been characterized by constitutional limits on both state and local property taxation and debt.

Major changes to the property tax occurred in the twentieth century to gradually erode yield. These changes included reducing the assessment ratio, creating homestead exemptions and economic development abatements, and introducing current use. Most of the changes have been constitutional amendments. There are some 100 constitutional amendments pertaining to the right to hold a referendum on a local property tax, as no property tax can be levied without specific constitutional authorization.

In the 1970s, a class action suit was brought in federal court challenging Alabama's variable assessment of property values for tax purposes, with assessment ratios ranging from near zero to 30 percent. In *Weissinger v. Boswell*, the court agreed that this was a deficiency by U.S. constitutional standards and ordered uniform statewide assessment. But in 1978, Amendment 373 created four statewide classes of property. This was accepted by the court and procedures were set in place for uniform administration statewide. The net effect was that the assessment ratio had been reduced to around 15 percent on average. In addition, Amendment 373 implemented current use for Class 3 property. By statute, current use may be granted to a homeowner whose dwelling has unreasonably increased in value; to cropland, pastureland, and timberland; and to historic buildings and sites. Amendment 373 was also referred to as "the Lid Bill" because it placed a maximum yield that could ever be collected as property tax by class of property from any combination of state and local millage rates.

Recent Developments

Lynch v. Alabama, filed in 2008, charged that underfunding of the state's K–12 public education system was based on clauses of the constitution written after reconstruction with the specific intent to limit funding for schools attended by black children. The suit was dismissed, as the court ruled that plaintiffs did not prove violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution or of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. U.S. District Judge C. Lynwood Smith Jr.'s ruling concluded that "Plaintiffs have proved a disparity in funding among the state's public school systems, but not a disparity along racial lines" (ACCESS).

Resources

ACCESS. 2011. "Alabama Judge Dismisses Lawsuit on Property-Tax Question."

<http://schoolfunding.info/2012/02/alabama-judge-dismisses-lawsuit-on-property-tax-system>

Alabama Department of Revenue. "Frequently Asked Questions."

<https://revenue.alabama.gov/advalorem/faqs.cfm>

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