



Need for a Conservative Spending Limit

Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee on HJR 1

by Vance Ginn, Ph.D.

Chairman Zerwas and Members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Vance Ginn, and I am an economist in the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan free market think tank based here in Austin. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on [HJR 1](#).

Although Texas has done better economically and fiscally than most states during much of the [last two decades](#), the state's weak appropriations limit needs to be addressed to consistently restrain excessive government spending so Texans can have more money in their pocket. The 2016-17 budget is up an estimated [11.8 percent](#) above the pace of compounded population growth plus inflation since the 2004-05 budget. As a result, a Texas family of four pays \$1,600 more on average in taxes this year than if the budget had increased each biennium by population growth plus inflation since then. With government spending ultimately being paid for by taxation, limiting spending growth is essential for a competitive economy to support prosperity. And there is room for improvement. For example, the Mercatus Center ranks Texas [23rd in fiscal condition](#) and the Fraser Institute ranks Texas [25th in taxes](#).

Fortunately, the 2016-17 budget and 2018-19 budget meet the needs of Texans while potentially keeping two consecutive state budgets below population growth plus inflation, a historic milestone. For the 2018-19 all funds appropriations to remain a conservative budget, supplemental appropriations in the 2017 special session and 2019 regular session must be below \$2.79 billion.

Texas needs to keep past excessive budget cycles from repeating by passing a conservative spending limit that corrects the following current [design flaws](#):

- **Limit covers less than half of the budget.** In Article VIII, Section 22(a) of the Texas Constitution, the only appropriations subject to the limit are those derived from “state tax revenues not dedicated by this constitution,” which was about 45 percent of the 2016-17 total budget. By only capping less than half of the budget, legislators are left with perverse incentives to constitutionally dedicate funds thereby pushing them outside of the appropriations limit and excessively growing the budget.
- **Personal income is not a reliable indicator for the limit's growth rate.** The Texas Constitution requires that the limit be based on the growth in the state's economy, which is statutorily defined as projected growth in personal income. This measure is highly volatile and not reliable.
- **Growth rate limit relies on practically impossible projections.** Since several groups submit estimates of personal income growth to the Legislative Budget Board in November before a regular legislative session for the next two fiscal years, the projections are for about 33 months. The difficulty of accurately predicting this growth rate leads to large discrepancies between actual and projected growth rates that are never reconciled.
- **Legislators can exceed the limit with a simple majority vote in each chamber.**

With so many hindrances to budgetary prudence, Texas' appropriations limit fails to effectively limit growth in the state budget. The Foundation's **recommended appropriations limit**, which was adopted by the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) as model legislation and outlined in [SB 943](#) during the 2017 regular session, includes:

- **Limiting the total budget.** This would avoid perverse incentives and budget gimmicks.
- **Basing the limit's growth rate on the lowest of three metrics.** These metrics include the growth rate of the Census Bureau's measure of state population plus the Bureau of Labor Statistics' measure of inflation for the consumer price index for all items, the Bureau of Economic Analysis' measure of total state personal income, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis' measure of total gross state product.
- **Calculating growth rate with past data.** The growth rate limit would be calculated for the two fiscal years immediately preceding a regular legislative session when the budget is adopted.
- **Requiring a supermajority vote of two-thirds in each chamber to exceed the limit.**

Historically, state population growth plus general price inflation has often been the lowest metric and relatively more stable over time than the other two metrics. However, we are mindful of the Great Inflation during the 1970s and do not find it appropriate to excessively burden taxpayers by growing government spending at that pace, which is why we suggest the lowest of the three metrics.

Population growth and price inflation are two economic measures of the state's economy that would keep taxpayers from being excessively burdened by government spending. Specifically, these measures hold budget growth to no more than the means of taxpayers as more Texans pay taxes and wages are often tied to general price inflation. Capping appropriations by these measures provides more flexibility for legislators to appropriately fund different spending categories instead of limiting each category to that population served and costs of representative goods and services, which are primarily government-driven and difficult to calculate.

[Research](#) finds that changing the appropriations limit to population growth and inflation could lead to tax relief and accelerated economic growth. Adding these measures accounts for economies of scale whereby the average cost of providing many government provisions declines over time. Moreover, the appropriations limit growth rate's current measure of personal income can be represented as population growth plus inflation plus productivity. However, a more productive private sector signals that the marginal return per dollar would be greater in the private sector, meaning that more dollars should remain there instead of being taxed to pay for higher government spending. If government productivity is considered in this calculation, it would be practically impossible to measure and would likely be zero over time, thereby leaving population growth plus inflation.

The current appropriations limit has contributed to excessive government spending and taxation. A conservative spending limit based on the Foundation's recommendation should be considered so taxpayers have more opportunities to prosper. Thank you for your time, and I welcome questions.



Vance Ginn, Ph.D., is an economist in the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He is an expert on Texas' state budget, franchise tax, tax and expenditure limit, and other fiscal issues. Before joining the Foundation in September 2013, Ginn was a Koch Fellow, and taught at three universities and one community college in Texas. He has published peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, as well as commentaries in major media outlets across Texas and the nation.

About the Texas Public Policy Foundation

The Texas Public Policy Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan research institute. The Foundation's mission is to promote and defend liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas and the nation by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreach.

Funded by thousands of individuals, foundations, and corporations, the Foundation does not accept government funds or contributions to influence the outcomes of its research.

The public is demanding a different direction for their government, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation is providing the ideas that enable policymakers to chart that new course.

