

They cut the rate and your bill went *up*

One mechanism of local government — why a lower tax rate can still mean a higher bill, and how the levy, the rate, and the assessment interact.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to local government — city councils, counties, special districts, zoning, and local taxes. Unlike elections or federal law, local structure **varies by state and even by town**: the same title can carry different powers ten miles away. So each specimen names the pattern and the tell, then points you to the one authority that settles it — your own jurisdiction's charter and your state's code — rather than asserting a single national rule. Sources are cross-jurisdiction bodies and representative statutes, listed in full on the references page.

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Property Tax: Rate vs. Levy vs. Reassessment

Aestimatio Regit

Governing precedent / case Ad valorem property tax mechanics **Status** Varies by state; universal in structure

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

LOCAL PROPERTY TAX BILLS

*A property tax bill is, in essence, your **assessed value** times a rate (often a **millage**). A government can cut the rate and still collect more if assessed values rose in a reassessment — or hold the rate flat and reap a windfall from a hot housing market. Many states therefore separate the levy (total dollars raised) from the rate, and some require a “rollback” or truth-in-taxation notice when reassessment would otherwise raise the levy automatically. “We lowered your taxes” can be true of the rate and false of the bill; the assessment is doing the work.*

THE HOOK

‘Rate’ and ‘taxes’ are treated as the same thing, so a rate cut is read as a lower bill.

THE MECHANISM

Bill = assessed value × rate. Reassessment moves the value, so the levy (total raised) can rise even as the rate falls; the honest measure is dollars collected, not the rate alone.

Field mark: when officials say they ‘cut property taxes,’ ask whether the levy — total dollars raised — went down, or only the rate; after a reassessment a lower rate can still mean a higher bill.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

CROSS-JURISDICTION AUTHORITY · LINCOLN INSTITUTE

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, “50-State Property Tax Comparison Study” and property-tax basics.

<https://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/>

Nonpartisan reference on assessment, millage, levy vs. rate, and rollback provisions across states.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARD · IAAO

International Association of Assessing Officers, standards on assessment and the assessment-levy-rate relationship.

<https://www.iaao.org/>

The assessing profession's documentation of how assessed value, rate, and levy interact; specifics vary by state.

Reading a Property Tax Claim: A Gut Check

four questions before ‘we cut your taxes’ matches your bill

1 Separate rate from levy

The rate can fall while total dollars raised rise.

2 Check the reassessment

New assessed values change the bill even at a flat rate.

3 Look for a rollback notice

Some states require truth-in-taxation disclosure.

4 Measure the bill

Your dollars owed, not the millage, is the real number.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 7 of the Local Government section within Incognati Civics — the section built around the fact that local structure varies, so every plate ends at your own charter. It joins Elections, Federal Laws, Official Data Reporting, and Institutional Communications within Civics. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.