

# “The spending interests always want more money.”

**G**rover Norquist is president of Americans for Tax Reform, an advocacy group that supports making taxes “simpler, flatter, more visible, and lower than they are today.”

He has been described as one of the most powerful conservative voices in Washington, D.C., and was considered highly influential in the debate over raising the debt ceiling that played out in August. His Taxpayer Protection Pledge to oppose any and all tax increases has been signed by 1,263 state legislators, 236 members of the U.S. House and 41 U.S. senators.

Norquist spoke with State Legislatures about state budgets, taxes and public education.

**State Legislatures:** Do you think there is a situation where states would need more revenue?

**Grover Norquist:** Need, no. Want, yes. And by states, we mean politicians who are in power in a particular state. The spending interests always want more money.

**SL:** Does keeping up with education funding justify a tax increase?

**Norquist:** The goal is not to see how much money you can spend on something. The goal is to actually get education. The one thing we know from the last 30 years is that spending more money and calling it education, when you are just keeping the teachers’ union happy, obviously has nothing to do with education. I live in D.C. We spend a lot of money, and they write education over the top of the check, but it doesn’t have anything to do with anyone learning how

to read. People who want to measure how much you are spending—rather than what you are doing—have created the mess we are in. Throwing more money at failed systems doesn’t make any sense. There isn’t a state in this nation that isn’t spending a lot more money

compared to what it is getting and compared to what its taxpayers want. Certainly, we should have full school choice. Parents should have complete control of where their kids go to school. Public, private, Jewish day schools, whatever parents want. The state could give them some sort of stipend and let people make their own decisions. There is no reason not to. We don’t have Soviet collective farming, but we do have the mentality of collective farming in state-run education, and it doesn’t work much better.

**SL:** How successful do you think your organization has been in terms of preventing tax increases?

**Norquist:** We’ve had a great deal of success, but not as much as we’d like. Some states, such as Illinois, had very few pledge takers. They just raised the income tax. On the other hand, this year we stopped a \$12 billion tax increase that Governor [Jerry] Brown was lusting after in California. The governors of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Oklahoma are people who’ve committed never to raise taxes and who are, as a result, reforming government.

**SL:** We hear lawmakers say again and again that they’ve cut the fat, they’ve cut into the bone, they’ve found all the efficiencies they can.

**Norquist:** Anyone who says that is delusional or



lying to you. That is obscene that any elected official in any state would tell you they are spending all the money efficiently. They wouldn't pass the laugh test. State and local government gets less effective and less productive each year. That is not very reasonable.

**SL:** Are you concerned federal spending cuts will shift costs and responsibilities to states?

**Norquist:** Certainly the Ryan plan gives states more resources and more control. Competent governors want that control and want the resources. Incompetent governors want the federal government to run their lives for them. The Medicaid block grant and that effort, for example, is tremendous. That is a win/win. It costs less per total taxpayers, and it gives the states the capacity to make those decisions. Everything that is means-tested we should do that way. Just like welfare reform.

**SL:** What would the ideal state government look like to you?

**Norquist:** Anyone with get up and go is going to get up and

go to states with jobs, opportunities, right-to-work laws and pro-growth policies. And retirees with assets will do the same thing. The ideal state government would have lower taxes, no income tax, and provide those limited services only the state can provide and other people can't.

**Editor's note:** This interview is one in a series of conversations with opinion leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewee and not of NCSL. You can read previous interviews at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine) with:



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**Next month:** Richard Ravitch, former lieutenant governor of New York, talks about the new Task Force on the State Budget Crisis that he is co-chairing with Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve. 