

Politics Hidden in Plain Sight - Pumping Gas

Pumping gas, from our personal perspective, is a simple, everyday routine. Bringing that ordinary act into a larger perspective shows government laws and regulations. These serve diverse purposes, such as balancing budgets, constructing roadways, protecting the environment, and assuring quality in citizens' purchases. This is Politics Hidden in Plain Sight-- Pumping Gas.

Included in the price per gallon are federal and state taxes. The first US tax on fuel was created as part of the Revenue Act of 1932. Intended as a temporary tax, it was designed to balance the budget during the Great Depression. It was last increased in 1993, bringing the US federal fuel tax at 18.4 cents per gallon for gasoline and 24.2 cents per gallon for diesel fuel.

The federal fuel tax goes into the Highway Trust Fund, which was established in 1956 to finance the US interstate highway system. It is responsible for surface transportation projects and mass transit. Additionally, and separate from the Highway Trust Fund, is the Leaking Underground Storage Tank Trust Fund, which receives 0.1 cent per gallon on gasoline and diesel.

The first US tax on fuel was introduced in 1919 in Oregon. The tax rate was \$0.01 per gallon. Today, Pennsylvania has the highest rates, at 58.2 cents per gallon on gasoline and 74.7 cents per gallon on diesel. Alaska has the lowest rate, 12.7 cents per gallon of gasoline and diesel.

States are free to spend the state gas tax as they see fit, though in most states, it goes to transportation projects. In Texas, the Constitution states that a quarter of motor fuel taxes must go directly to the Available School Fund, which funds instructional materials for schools.

How can you be sure you're getting the correct measurement and the proper octane rating? The state assures accurate rates and measures, though inspection rates vary from state to state. In Texas, the law requires the Texas Department of Agriculture inspect gas pumps at least every four years or, more often, in response to consumer complaints. The inspection includes both the pumps' accuracy and measuring and pricing as well as the accuracy of the octane rating of the gasoline dispensed.

In the 1920s, refiners in the United States started adding lead compounds to gasoline in order to boost octane levels and improve engine performance. Lead, however, is a toxin. And it's particularly harmful to young children, affecting the development of their brains and nervous systems. In adults, it causes long-term harm, including increased risk for high blood pressure and kidney damage.

In 1970, a federal law, the Clean Air Act, was passed, forming the basis of the US air pollution policy at the national level. The act specified standards for controlling auto emissions. The phase-down of lead in gasoline began in 1974, when the US Environmental Protection Agency introduced rules requiring the use

of unleaded gasoline in new cars. Lead was banned as a fuel additive in the United States beginning in 1996. States are free to implement individual fuel programs to address their own environmental quality concerns.

Pumping gas is really not so simple. Rather, it has many far-reaching aspects into our everyday life and routine. Politics are not hidden. Politics are visible. And now you can see politics in your life every time you pump gas.