PIONEER
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POLICY BRIEF

North Carolina and Massachusetts: Two Different Paths on Growth, Taxes, and Jobs

By Jim Stergios & Aidan Enright

Introduction

Massachusetts and North Carolina compete for many of the same industries and workers: life sciences, advanced manufacturing, financial and business services, technology, higher education, and other research-driven enterprises. Both states anchor major regional economies, benefit from world-class universities, and rely on a steady inflow of skilled labor to sustain growth. In practice, this means they are often vying for the same marginal firm deciding where to expand, the same startup choosing where to establish operations, and the same recent graduate weighing where to build a career.

Despite these similarities, the two states have taken notably different approaches to tax policy over the past decade and a half—offering an instructive comparison of distinct fiscal strategies on economic outcomes.

Following the Great Recession (2008–2009), North Carolina pursued sequential, gradual tax reforms aimed at lowering rates, broadening the base, and simplifying the overall structure of its tax code. These changes ultimately created a flat individual income tax rate, cut the income tax rate by a third, and set the corporate income tax rate on a path to be completely phased out by 2030.

During that time Massachusetts slowly lowered its personal income tax rate in 0.05 percent increments from 5.3 percent to 5.0 percent. However, more recently, in a departure from its historically flat income tax framework, Massachusetts approved a surtax on high-income households.

This divergence in policy approach signals different purposes. North Carolina's reforms were designed to improve competitiveness by reducing the cost of investment and work, with the expectation that a simpler, lower-rate system would attract businesses and encourage in-state expansion. Massachusetts has instead prioritized revenue preservation, even if that comes with a comparatively higher tax burden on taxpayers.

Research from Boston University demonstrates that taxes are one of three core factors in decisions to relocate, together with health care costs and housing.[1] Moreover, a survey from Mass Opportunity Alliance shows that taxes play an outsized role among those who have left the Bay State.[2] This brief focuses on the respective tax policies of North Carolina and Massachusetts for two additional reasons: 1) net migration data has demonstrated that states with competitive tax policies are attracting, and high tax states are losing, population and investment;[3] 2) tax policy changes have immediate effects, unlike proposed solutions to housing and health care costs, and therefore can address the state's economic malaise with urgency. In the following sections we will analyze these states' different tax policy approaches and their effect over time on tax revenues and economic growth.

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Different Paths

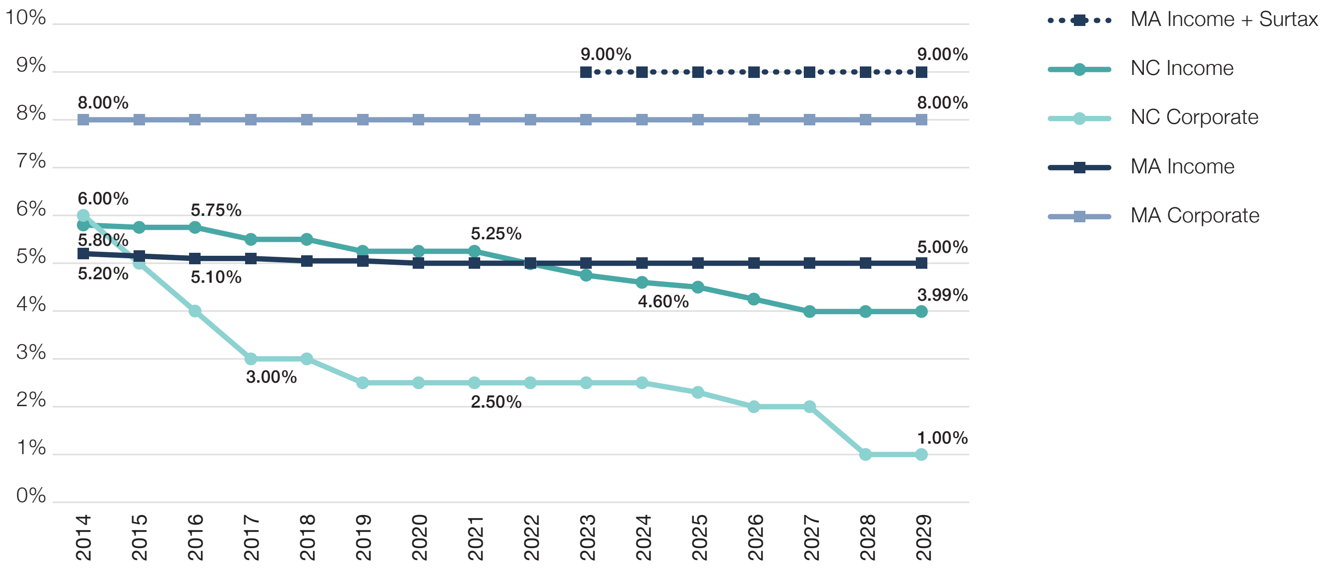
From 2014 to 2025, North Carolina steadily reduced both its individual and corporate tax rates. Its individual income tax shifted to a 5.8 percent flat tax in 2014, fell to 5.75 percent in 2015, and then continued downward, via six incremental cuts of 0.05 to 0.26 percent. The rate will hit 4.25 percent in tax year 2026, with current law taking it to 3.99 percent for the next tax period. The state also enacted revenue-trigger reductions that will further reduce the income tax rate if certain thresholds are hit, raised its maximum standard deduction, created an elective pass-through entity tax workaround to mitigate the federal SALT cap, simplified its franchise tax, and placed the corporate income tax on a path from 6.0 percent in 2014 to 2.3 percent in 2025 and ultimately to elimination by 2030.[4]

Since 2014 North Carolina has reduced its income tax from 5.8 to 4.25 percent; its corporate tax from 6 to 2.3 percent.

Massachusetts, by contrast, made only modest changes to its flat personal income tax, which reached 5.0 percent in 2020 and remained there in 2025. In 2023, Massachusetts also imposed an additional 4 percent surtax on taxable income exceeding a million dollars.[5] Changes were made at the margins to the short-term capital gains tax rate and estate tax threshold in 2024, but fell short of structural, lasting, and impactful tax reform.[6] The Bay State's C-corporation excise rate remained 8.0 percent.

Figure 1 shows the trajectory of tax policy changes in North Carolina and Massachusetts, showing how North Carolina used the past decade to lower and simplify its core rates, while Massachusetts largely held its structure in place and even added a new top-end levy making it an even greater outlier compared to other states.[7]

Figure 1. North Carolina vs. Massachusetts, Personal & Corporate Income Tax Rates, 2014–2029[8]



Source: North Carolina General Assembly tax figures and prior Pioneer research

Different Results for Residents, Businesses, and Taxpayers

Job creation is a kind of economic infrastructure. Talent attracts investment; investment attracts more talent; and both are influenced by the basic policy climate in which employers and workers make long-term decisions. An economic environment where private sector employment is growing is an environment characterized by high business confidence, economic expansion, and increasing dynamism and innovation.

Tax policy is not the sole catalyst attracting talent and investment, but it is one of the clearest signals a state sends about whether it intends to reward work, entrepreneurship, and expansion. Migration patterns across the country in recent years have leant evidence to this fact, with no-tax and low-tax states gaining the lion's share of domestic migrants and businesses.[9] North Carolina has experienced a large influx of new residents and massive employment growth.

Statewide, from 2020 to 2025, North Carolina has added 450,000 jobs, Massachusetts has lost 18,000.

Figure 2 shows the startling difference in private-sector employment growth between Massachusetts and North Carolina. From January 2020 to December 2025, Massachusetts *lost* 18,000 private sector jobs, a decline of 0.55 percent, making it one of only three states to lose jobs during that span of time. In contrast, North Carolina added 448,900 private sector jobs, an increase of 11.52 percent. The average rate of growth for states between 2020 and 2025 was 4.6 percent.

Figure 2. Private Sector Employment Change, Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, January 2020–December 2025[10]

Area	Change from 2020 to 2025	% Change 20–25
Massachusetts	–18,000	–0.55%
North Carolina	448,900	11.52%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Employment Statistics

It is also important to contrast the Boston-Cambridge-Newton metropolitan statistical area (MSA) with North Carolina's major research-and-growth corridors (the Research Triangle which includes Charlotte, Raleigh, and Durham) because they are similarly sized economic competitors, with similar institutional ecosystems, industry composition, and talent pools. Both have strong research universities, major hospitals, technology firms, financial and professional services, and knowledge-intensive employers.

Figure 3 shows the dramatic difference between the two regions. From January 2020 to December 2025 North Carolina's Research Triangle far outpaced Greater Boston in private sector employment growth. Greater Boston stood still, with a 0.00% employment change over five years while the Research Triangle grew by more than 15 percent and created an additional 291,100 jobs.

Figure 3. Private Sector Employment Change, Greater Boston vs. Research Triangle-Charlotte, January 2020–December 2025[11]

Area	Growth	% Change
Boston-Cambridge-Newton	**100**	**0.00%**
NC Research Triangle-Charlotte	**291,100**	**15.2%**
Durham-Chapel Hill	30,900	11.8%
Raleigh-Cary	108,400	19.7%
Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia	151,800	13.8%

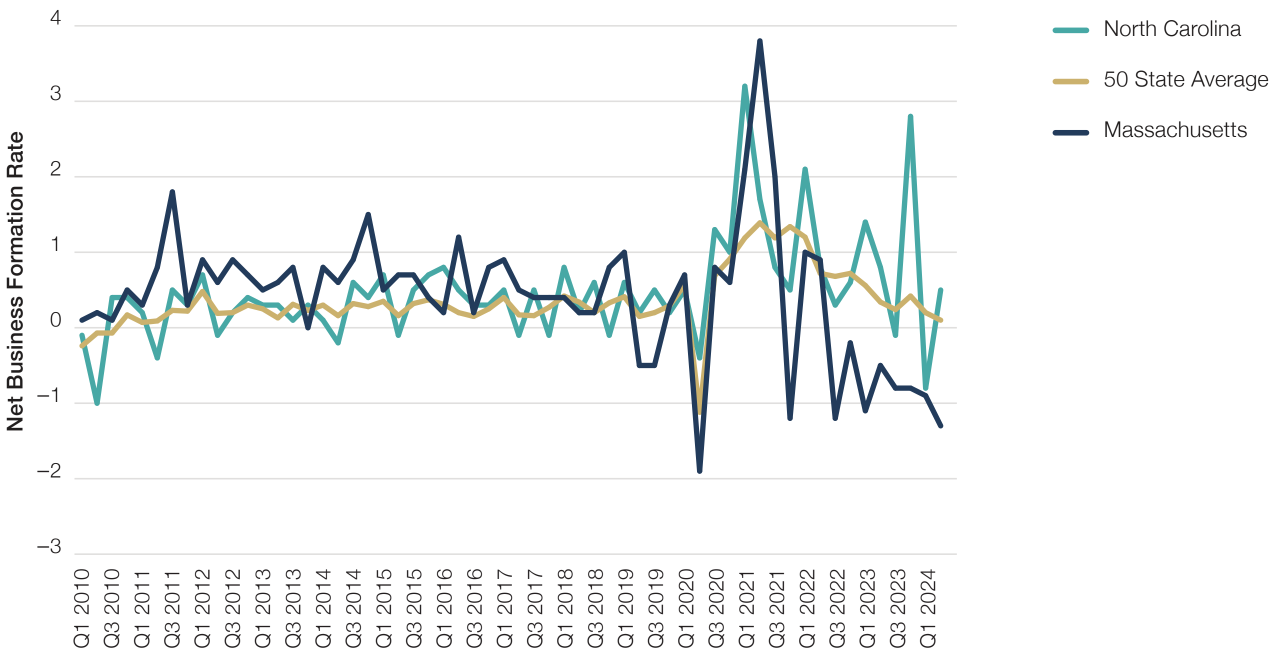
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Employment Statistics

One of the major reasons for the difference stems from the relative dearth in business formation in Massachusetts compared to North Carolina since the beginning of the pandemic, as seen in figure 4. Business formation is the primary driver of employment growth in the economy, with younger establishments growing and innovating at significantly higher rates than incumbent firms.[12]

From Q3 2022 to Q2 2024, Massachusetts' net business formation rate was negative, and the state had the lowest average business formation rate by quarter in 2022 and 2023 of any state. During the same period, North Carolina's net business formation rate consistently exceeded the national average, and its total number of businesses increased by 83,500, or 29 percent, from Q1 2020 to Q2 2025. Massachusetts grew 28,900 new businesses, or 11.4 percent.

This robust business formation led to the creation of thousands of new jobs, reinforcing a cycle of growth in North Carolina and contributed to attracting thousands of new residents to fill new positions.

Figure 4. Net Business Formation, Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, Q1 2010–Q2 2024 [13]

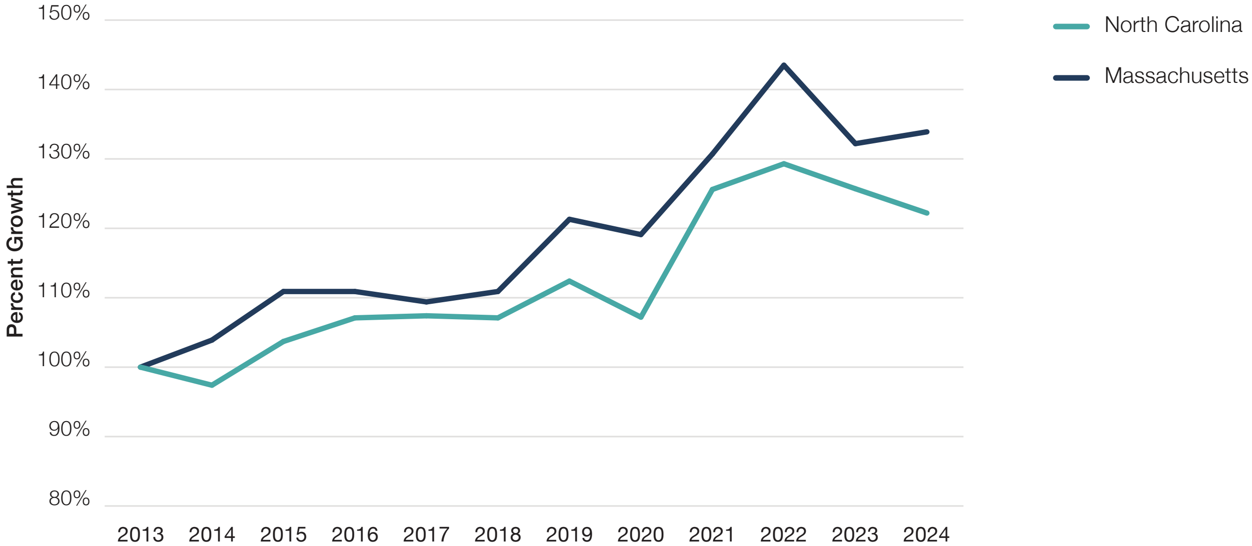


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics' Business Employment Dynamics

Impact on State Government Revenues

State revenues illustrate how tax policy and employment growth have affected each state. We use Census Bureau Annual Survey of State Tax Collections (STC) data to make a like comparison across states from 2014 to 2024. As Figure 4 shows, over that decade, both North Carolina and Massachusetts experienced significant growth in real tax revenue (inflation adjusted to 2024 dollars). North Carolina's real tax revenue grew by 22 percent while Massachusetts' grew by 34 percent.

Figure 5. Real Total Tax Revenue Growth, Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, 2013–2014, 2024 dollars [14]



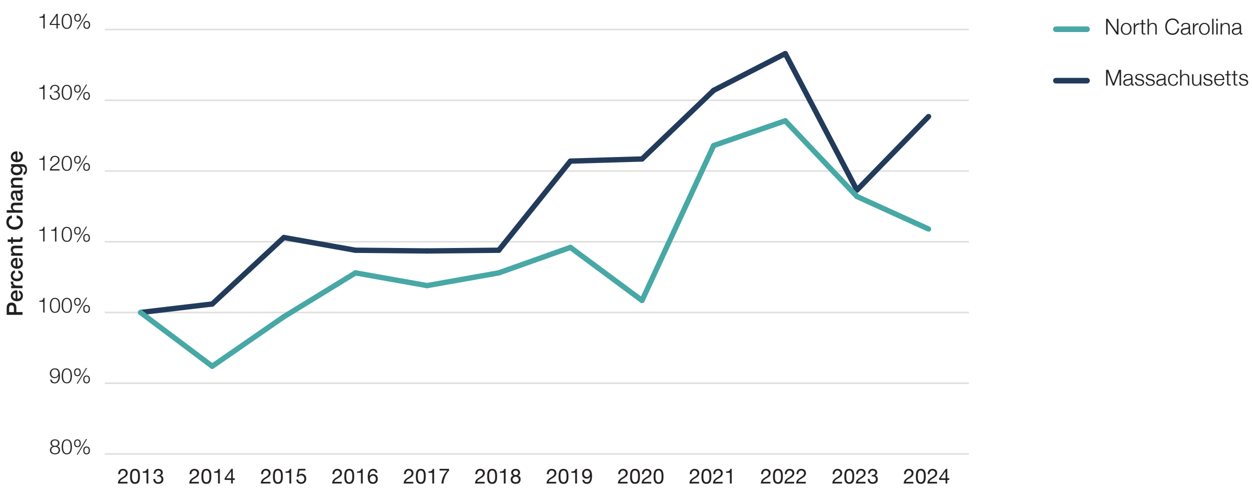
Source: Census Bureau's [Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections](). Inflation calculations were made using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' [All Urban Consumers Consumer Price Index data](). Real revenue growth is indexed to 2013 revenue levels (100 percent) .

Growth in individual income tax figures mirrored those of total tax revenue. While North Carolina's individual income tax rate declined by 1.2 percent from 2014 to 2024, its real income tax revenue still grew by 12 percent, as seen in Figure 5. Massachusetts' rate declined far less, only 0.2 percent, and yet North Carolina kept closer pace than what might have been expected given the degree in differences between both state's tax cuts during that period. Massachusetts real individual income tax growth was 28 percent.

From 2014 to 2023, North Carolina and Massachusetts grew real (inflation-adjusted) individual income tax revenues at the same rate (16 percent). With its enactment of a new surtax on incomes exceeding $1 million in 2023, Massachusetts far outpaced growth in these revenues for the period closing with 2024. Without the surtax, the Commonwealth's total real individual income tax revenue would have, at best, remained flat.[15]

From 2014 to 2023, North Carolina and Massachusetts grew real individual income tax revenues at the same 16 percent rate.

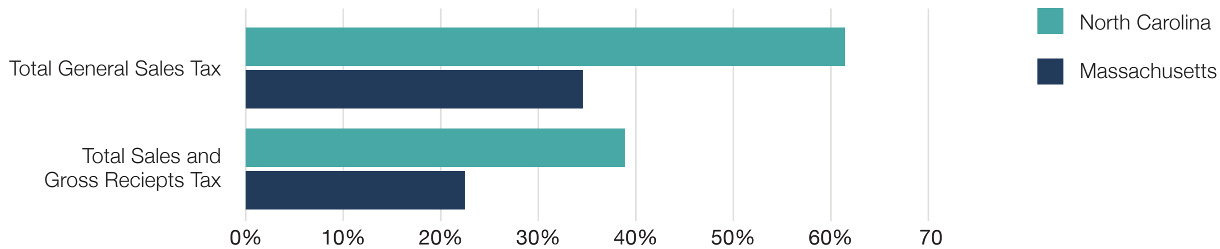
Figure 6. Change in Real Individual Tax Revenue, Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, 2013–2024, 2024 dollars [16]



Source: Census Bureau's [Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections](). Inflation calculations were made using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' [All Urban Consumers Consumer Price Index data](). Real revenue growth is indexed to 2013 revenue levels (100 percent) .

The data highlights an interesting finding, that while North Carolina reduced its tax burdens broadly and aggressively, its revenues did not suffer substantially as a result. Population growth expanded its tax base both in terms of income but also consumption. The tax categories that exhibited the largest growth from 2014 to 2024 were individual income taxes, even though the rate declined by over 1 percent, and consumption taxes like general sales and gross receipts. As Figure 6 shows, real total general sales tax revenues increased by 61.4 percent in North Carolina, almost double Massachusetts' 34.6 percent growth—despite North Carolina's sales tax rate only increasing 0.1 percent and Massachusetts' rate staying the same since 2014.[17]

Figure 7. Growth in Sales Tax & Gross Receipt Tax Revenue, Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, 2013–2024, 2024 dollars[18]



Source: Census Bureau's Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections. Inflation calculations were made using the Bureau of Labor Statistics' All Urban Consumers Consumer Price Index data.

The bottom line is that from 2014 to 2024 North Carolina was able to increase affordability for businesses and individuals through a lower tax burden, increase business investment and population growth, all while continuing to grow the state's real tax revenue. Massachusetts maintained higher rates, added a surtax, and only marginally outpaced North Carolina in real revenue growth. Weak and, in fact, negative private sector job growth means a declining or static tax base, and most likely additional tax and fee pressures on residents and taxpayers. The ability to grow state and local revenues must be understood alongside the underlying economic base.[19]

The Path Not Taken

What if Massachusetts adopted policies that enable it to create jobs like North Carolina?

As noted above, according to metro employment data for the period from 2020 to 2025, North Carolina's Research Triangle's private-sector jobs grew by more than 290,000, or 15.24 percent, while Greater Boston's jobs base grew by only 100, or 0.00 percent. Had Greater Boston's January 2020 employment level of 2.44 million grown at the same rate as the Research Triangle, it would boast 2.81 million private sector jobs, an increase of 372,000.

Statewide, the picture looks the same. From 2020 to 2025, Massachusetts' employment base *declined* by 18,000 jobs (–0.55 percent) while North Carolina added 448,900 private-sector jobs (11.52 percent). Given that in January 2020 Massachusetts had a job base of 3.27 million, had it grown private-sector jobs at North Carolina's 11.52 percent rate, the Bay State would today be home to approximately 3.65 million private sector jobs, instead of declining—an increase of 377,000.

Negative private sector job growth means a declining or static tax base—and additional tax and fee pressures on fewer taxpayers.

What about the impact on state revenue growth? To estimate the fiscal impact of 377,000 additional jobs, we suggest two scenarios based on a range of expected average salaries, apply an effective income tax rate to estimate personal income tax revenue, and estimate sales tax from the share of income spent on taxable goods and services. The average income brackets are based on May 2024 Occupational Wage and Employment Statistics and 2024 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages data for Massachusetts—informing conservative low and high ranges for our estimates.[20] We also assume an effective income tax rate below 5 percent to reflect deductions and exemptions using Smart Asset calculations, and that taxable consumption is equal to roughly 23.62 percent of personal income (at 6.25 rate) based on a Tax Foundation analysis from 2024.[21] Capital gains are excluded due to their volatility and weak connection to job growth.

Figure 7 presents three scenarios—low, middle, and high—to show a reasonable range for revenue impacts. The columns represent assumed average salary, a calculation of the total income those jobs would generate, how much the state collects in income tax, sales tax, and total new state revenue. The purpose is not to present a single precise number, but to show a credible range based on transparent assumptions detailed above. Using that method, we estimate that 377,000 additional jobs would generate $1.94 to $2.30 billion annually.

We estimate that 377,000 additional jobs would generate $1.9 to $2.3 billion in new annual revenue for Massachusetts.

Figure 8. Estimated Massachusetts Revenue from 377,000 Additional Jobs[22]

Scenario	Average Salary Assumption	Total New Income ($B)	Effective Income Tax Rate	Income Tax Collected ($B)	Sales Tax Collected ($B)	Total New Annual Revenue ($B)
OWES	$83,050	30.2	4.74%	1.48	0.46	**~1.94**
QCEW	$97,787	36.9	4.78%	1.76	0.54	**~2.30**

Conclusion

Massachusetts and North Carolina compete directly for the same industries, firms, and skilled workers. Over the past decade, they have pursued markedly different strategies—and the results related to investment and business and job creation are clear. North Carolina has consistently acted to lower and simplify the tax burdens in order to drive economic growth; Massachusetts has maintained its existing tax structure, in recent years adding a significant surtax on high earners and providing marginal tax relief.

North Carolina's experience demonstrates that a lower-rate, growth-oriented strategy can drive rising state revenues and strong job creation. Massachusetts' experience points in the opposite direction: a higher tax structure has been accompanied by increasing outmigration, job losses, and a significant decline in business formation. The Commonwealth now faces a clear choice: can it afford to stay on its current path while competitor states expand their payrolls, attract mobile talent, and build a larger long-term tax base?

Appendix

Figure 1. Tax Rate and Real Tax Revenue Comparison (in 2024 dollars)—Massachusetts vs. North Carolina, 2014 to 2029

Year	MA Corporate Rate	MA Income Rate	MA Corporate Revenue	MA Income Revenue	MA Total Tax Revenue	NC Corporate Rate	NC Income Rate	NC Corporate Revenu	NC Income Revenue	NC Total Tax Revenue
2014	8.00%	5.20%	2,908,342	17,554,085	33,444,444	6.00%	5.80%	1,803,124	13,769,668	31,159,300
2015	8.00%	5.15%	2,948,186	19,181,645	35,702,527	5.00%	5.75%	1,760,698	14,821,335	33,201,761
2016	8.00%	5.10%	3,050,505	18,861,109	35,695,996	4.00%	5.75%	1,393,979	15,740,701	34,269,043
2017	8.00%	5.10%	2,810,979	18,843,668	35,205,491	3.00%	5.50%	968,837	15,467,709	34,385,739
2018	8.00%	5.05%	3,009,493	20,338,989	37,047,694	3.00%	5.50%	927,619	15,753,161	34,798,863
2019	8.00%	5.05%	3,615,704	21,045,068	39,027,927	2.50%	5.25%	1,026,322	16,269,304	35,982,502
2020	8.00%	5.00%	3,068,940	21,104,277	38,333,182	2.50%	5.25%	802,670	15,155,467	34,304,270
2021	8.00%	5.00%	4,252,121	22,787,008	42,065,292	2.50%	5.25%	1,754,625	18,416,295	40,211,838
2022	8.00%	5.00%	7,350,791	23,689,409	46,186,410	2.50%	4.99%	1,748,574	18,944,549	41,384,938
2023	8.00%	5.00%	6,924,578	20,336,891	42,558,890	2.50%	4.75%	1,688,487	17,353,292	40,228,388
2024	8.00%	5.00%	6,290,604	22,134,838	43,080,972	2.50%	4.60%	1,558,772	16,664,704	39,124,746
2025	8.00%	5.00%				2.30%	4.50%			
2026	8.00%	5.00%				2.00%	4.25%			
2027	8.00%	5.00%				2.00%	3.99%			
2028	8.00%	5.00%				1.00%	3.99%			
2029	8.00%	5.00%				1.00%	3.99%			

Endnotes

1 Treffeisen, Beth. 2026. “Massachusetts Keeps Losing Residents to Other States, Census Finds.” *Boston.Com.* February 3, 2026. https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2026/02/02/massachusetts-keeps-losing-residents-to-other-states-census-finds/#:~:text=In%20a%202024%20report%2C%20Mark,more%20than%20the%20state%20average

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3 Yushkov, Andrey. 2024. “How Do Taxes Affect Interstate Migration? | State Migration Trends.” Tax Foundation. September 3, 2024. https://taxfoundation.org/data/all/state/taxes-affect-state-migration-trends-2024/#:~:text=Higher%2DIncome%20Residents%20Moved%20to%20Low%2DTax%20States&text=Among%20taxpayers%20with%20$200%2C000%20or,%2C%20Massachusetts%2C%20and%20New%20Jersey

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5 The 4 percent surtax was indexed to inflation and the threshold for the tax has since risen above $1 million.

6 Massachusetts Department of Revenue, “2023 Massachusetts Tax Cuts Legislation.” 2024. Mass.Gov. January 5, 2024. https://www.mass.gov/info-details/2023-massachusetts-tax-cuts-legislation.

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10 Author’s analysis. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Employment Statistics (CES).

11 Author’s analysis. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Employment Statistics (CES).

12 Poole, Heather. “Job Creation by Startups and Young Companies.” Cga.Ct.Gov. https://www.cga.ct.gov/2016/rpt/2016-R-0003.htm#:~:text=New%20Firms,Job%20Creation%2C%20September%202010

13 Net business formation refers to establishments, not firms. For example, a single Dunkin location is considered an establishment, and a new Dunkin would be considered a birth. Dunkin as a whole company is considered a firm. The net rate is calculated by subtracting the net deaths rate from the net births rate. Birth and death rates are calculated by taking the number of births or deaths as a percentage of total firms in a given state.

14 The revenue for both Massachusetts and North Carolina in 2013 has been denoted as 100 percent to control for differences in revenue and visually plot an apples-to-apples percentage change from 2014 to 2024. The data is based on the Census Bureau’s Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections and calculations for inflation adjustments were made by the author.

15 Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation. 2024. “FY 2025 AND FY 2026 TAX REVENUE FORECAST—RISKS ABOUND.” *MTF Bulletin.* https://masstaxpayers.org/sites/default/files/publications/2024-12/MTF%20FY%202026%20Consensus%20Revenue%20Forecast%20Final.pdf

16 The revenue for both Massachusetts and North Carolina in 2013 has been denoted as 100 percent to control for differences in revenue and visually plot an apples-to-apples percentage change from 2014 to 2024. The data is based on the Census Bureau’s Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections and calculations for inflation adjustments were made by the author.

17 Massachusetts rate was 6.25 percent from 2014 to 2024 while North Carolina’s increased from 6.9 percent to 7 percent. Mandal, Abir. 2026. “2026 Sales Tax Rates | Sales Taxes by State.” Tax Foundation. January 20, 2026. https://taxfoundation.org/data/all/state/sales-tax-rates/

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19 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Consumer Price Index Historical Tables,” https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/data/consumerpriceindexhistorical_us_table.htm

20 “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Tables.” 2026. Bls.Gov. https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm; “Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.” 2026. Bls.Gov. 2026. https://www.bls.gov/cew/. Note: OEWS data is for all industries while QCEW data is for only private sector industries only.

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22 The estimates are constructed using publicly available Massachusetts tax rates (5.0 percent income tax; 6.25 percent sales tax), assumed ranges for average and median wages, and standard adjustments for effective tax rates and taxable consumption shares using Smart Asset. They are illustrative, back-of-the-envelope calculations and not official Department of Revenue projections.

About the Authors

Jim Stergios is the Executive Director of Pioneer Institute, where he provides leadership in the strategic development of the organization, advancing its capacities and expanding its work in states across the nation. Prior to joining Pioneer, he served as Chief of Staff and Undersecretary for Policy in the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, where he spearheaded efforts in water policy, regulatory reform, and urban revitalization. He has also founded and managed a business, taught at the university level, and served as headmaster at a preparatory school.

Known for his sharp policy analysis and commentary, he is a frequent media commentator, regularly appearing on local television and radio stations. His opinion pieces have been published in major outlets including *The Wall Street Journal, The Hill, The Boston Globe*, and regional newspapers throughout New England. Jim holds a doctoral degree in Political Science from Boston University, where he serves on the Board of Advisors.

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