FRANKLIN TEMPLETON

Municipal Tax-Free Income Update

Commentary | March 31, 2025

Market review

The municipal (muni) bond market, as measured by the Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index,[1] posted a slightly negative return for the first quarter of 2025 (Q1). January and February saw positive returns supported by healthy inflows of funds and steady demand, while returns posted in March reversed those gains. Data for US fourth-quarter 2024 gross domestic product showed an annualized increase of 2.4% for the quarter, a deceleration from the third quarter's 3.1% expansion. Growth was driven primarily by consumer and government spending increases, while investments declined. Against this backdrop, the benchmark 10-year US Treasury (UST) note's yield ended Q1 36 basis points (bps)[2] lower, at 4.21%.

Outlook & Strategy

There was a significant swing in market sentiment across Q1 as participants digested the first few months of US President Donald Trump's new administration. January saw positive excess returns across a number of sectors as market sentiment moved higher in anticipation of new business friendly initiatives. This was replaced by a negative shift in risk appetite during February and March as unclear tariff policies became the market's focus. Throughout the quarter, investment-grade munis underperformed USTs. Despite modest outflows in March, muni funds overall benefited from steady inflows earlier in the quarter.

Muni credit fundamentals remain broadly stable, with signs of improvement even in sectors that struggled post-pandemic, though revenue growth is moderating, and economic tailwinds are slowing. High reserves and fiscal flexibility continue to support most issuers, and credit ratings are expected to remain steady over the next six months, though sector-specific challenges persist. Potential policy changes under the Trump administration, such as the possible elimination of tax exemptions for certain bonds and the cancellation of federal leases, are adding uncertainty to the muni market outlook, alongside broader concerns about how federal decisions may impact local economies. At the same time, US consumer sentiment is softening, and overall uncertainty around the economic growth outlook has increased in response to the administration's proposed reforms and policy direction.

However, hard data continues to indicate a resilient US economy. The labor market appears to have reached an equilibrium of a low level of both new additions and layoffs, with a still-low unemployment rate, and economic activity remains solid. Going forward, our economists are looking to deregulation and tax reforms to support growth over the medium term. The heightened uncertainty surrounding the administration's trade policy and the impact on US businesses makes US Federal Reserve policy difficult to predict. It remains to be seen whether risks are skewed toward a significant slowdown in growth or higher inflation. However, our economists remain optimistic on US growth, considering that the economy remains on solid footing and pro-growth measures are still expected. Consequently, we are penciling in only one 25-bp rate reduction in 2025, though an absence of rate cuts this year is also possible.

[1] The **Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index** is a broad measure of the municipal bond market with maturities of at least one year. Source: Bloomberg Indices. Important data provider notices and terms available at www.franklintempletondatasources.com. All data is subject to change.

[2] A **basis point (bp, or bps)** is one one-hundredth of one percent (1/100% or 0.01%).

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(800) 342-5236

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