

Given the significant rise in interest rates, this educational document focuses on the potential impact to investors of the current market environment on bond prices, liquidity and tax implications from buying certain types of municipal bonds in the secondary market.

## BACKGROUND

Interest rate risk, one of the most important factors to consider when investing in fixed income markets, is the risk to a bond posed by changes in interest rates. Generally, interest rates and bond prices have an inverse relationship, such that, as interest rates rise, bond prices tend to fall (and vice versa). [Read more about interest rate risk here.](#)

Since the beginning of 2022, interest rates have risen across all fixed income products, including municipal bonds. As of March 15, 2022, yields on benchmark AAA rated municipal bonds have risen approximately 90 to 119 basis points, depending on the years to maturity of the benchmark (a basis point equals 0.01%). One benchmark yield curve provider shows the 10-year maturity has risen from 1.04% at the end of 2021 to 1.97% at the close of business on March 15, 2022, an increase of 93 basis points. Correspondingly, the prices of municipal bonds have declined, with many bonds being offered and trading at a discount. For additional information, including real time trade prices and access to municipal yield curves, visit the MSRB's free [Electronic Municipal Market Access \(EMMA®\) website.](#)

When an investor buys a bond at a dollar price below the stated face value of \$100.00 per bond<sup>1</sup> (also known as par), that is considered buying the bond "at a discount." Investors need to understand the potential tax implications

from buying bonds at significant discounts to par, as well as the potential for these bonds to have less liquidity than bonds trading around par or at a premium, which means above par. With interest rates rising and tax-exempt bond prices falling, there has been a significant increase in the amount of bonds being offered and trading at substantial discounts to par. The MSRB analyzed trade data available on EMMA from February 14 to February 15, 2022, and the results showed almost 600 customer purchases of tax-exempt bonds with an executed dollar price between \$50.00 and \$95.00.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of these customer purchases were for trades of \$100,000 or less, a trade level often used as a proxy for trades by individual investors. Although some of these trades were in high-yield, credit-challenged securities, the majority were in highly rated issues with coupons ranging from 0.70% to 3.00%. Only 50 trades, fewer than 9% of the trades, had a coupon greater than 3%.

## TAX CONSIDERATIONS

With more bonds available for purchase at a significant discount, it is important that investors understand the potential federal income tax implications from the IRS's *de minimis* rule. This rule determines whether the price

<sup>1</sup> Generally, municipal bond prices are quoted in reference to the face or par value of the bond. So a price of \$100.00 is equal to 100% of the face or par value of a bond (typically \$1,000). Accordingly, the price \$100.00 actually equates to \$1,000 (100% x 1,000) per bond. As an additional example, a price of \$97.50 is equal to 97.50% of the face or par value of a bond. Accordingly, the price \$97.50 actually equates to \$975 (97.5% x 1,000) per bond.

<sup>2</sup> The search excluded zero coupon bonds (*i.e.*, bonds that have no stated interest), a type of original discount bond.

appreciation (or accretion) of a bond that is purchased at a discount will be taxed at the ordinary income tax rate, or if it will be taxed at the capital gains tax rate. Generally, if the discount falls within a specified *de minimis* threshold, it is deemed to be too small to be treated as a market discount. As a result, the appreciation upon the sale or exchange of the bond will be treated as a capital gain rather than as ordinary income.

If the market discount is less than one quarter of 1% of the stated redemption price of the bond at maturity, multiplied by the number of complete years to maturity from when the taxpayer acquires the bond, the market discount will be deemed *de minimis* and treated as a capital gain for tax purposes if the bond is held to maturity, redeemed or sold for a price above the purchase price. If the discount is greater than this *de minimis* threshold, the accrued market discount realized at maturity must be treated as ordinary

income. However, if the bond is sold above the purchase price before maturity, such premium may be taken into account in determining the total amount of market discount upon sale.

For a bond with 10 full years before the maturity and a stated redemption price at maturity of par, the *de minimis* threshold is calculated to be  $0.25\% \times 10$  (number of full years to maturity) = 2.5%. So, for a bond with 10 full years until maturity purchased at a price from \$97.50<sup>3</sup> to \$99.999, the discount would be deemed to be *de minimis* if held to maturity. If, however, for example, an investor purchased 20 bonds with 10 full years until maturity at a price of \$95.00, the market discount would not be considered *de minimis*, and the investor would have to declare the full amount of the discount (\$50 per bond x 20 bonds = \$1,000) as ordinary income at maturity.

#### EXAMPLE

The following example is a scenario of an actual municipal bond transaction.

ON FEBRUARY 14, 2022

investor purchased  
25 bonds

with a  
2.00% coupon

maturing  
October 15, 2038

at a  
2.72% yield

and a dollar price  
\$90.402

These bonds had 16 full years until maturity when purchased, so the *de minimis* threshold would be  
 $0.25\% \times 16 = 4.0\%$

The *de minimis* price threshold for the bond is  $\$100 - \$4 = \$96.00$

Because this bond was purchased at a discount outside the *de minimis* threshold, the amount of market discount (\$2,399.50) would be treated as ordinary income, assuming the bond was held to maturity.

$\$100.00 - \$90.402 = \$9.598$  per bond x 25 bonds =  $\$2,399.50$

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1 regarding municipal bond pricing.

## LIQUIDITY CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to note that bonds that reach a substantial discount can have significantly less liquidity than bonds trading around par or at a premium. This is a key factor because if an investor needs to sell a bond that is at a significant discount, there may be fewer willing purchasers. Many investors who might otherwise consider purchasing the bonds could want higher income than a discount bond would provide and may not want the tax consequences associated with buying a tax-exempt bond at a substantial discount.

## CONCLUSION

Investors should monitor their portfolios for bonds falling to a significant discount price because the bonds could become less liquid and more difficult to sell, even if the bonds were purchased around par or at a premium.

Buying deeply discounted bonds can be part of an overall portfolio strategy if the investor understands the tax implications and is comfortable with buying a potentially less liquid bond. Investors may wish to compare yields on deeply discounted bonds to those bonds trading around par or at a premium. Investors should look to be compensated for the tax consequences and potential illiquidity when buying large discount bonds with higher yields as opposed to buying bonds trading near par or at a premium. In the example above, the investor bought the bonds at 2.72% when benchmark AAA rates in 16 years were about 1.80%, a significant pickup in yield. Investors should consider talking to their tax advisor and financial professional before purchasing any deeply discounted tax-exempt bonds.

### About the MSRB

The Municipal Securities Rulemaking Board (MSRB) protects and strengthens the municipal bond market, enabling access to capital, economic growth, and societal progress in tens of thousands of communities across the country. The MSRB fulfills this mission by creating trust in our market through informed regulation of dealers and municipal advisors that protects investors, issuers and the public interest; building technology systems that power our market and provide transparency for issuers, institutions, and the investing public; and serving as the steward of market data that empowers better decisions and fuels innovation for the future. The MSRB is a self-regulatory organization governed by a board of directors that has a majority of public members, in addition to representatives of regulated entities. The MSRB is overseen by the Securities and Exchange Commission and Congress.

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