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# Recent Changes in the Estate and Gift Tax Provisions

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## Summary

The American Taxpayer Relief Act (ATRA; P.L. 112-240) established permanent rules for the estate and gift tax for 2013 going forward. The tax revision of 2017 (P.L. 115-97) doubled the exemption levels. This increase expires after 2025.

The estate tax is imposed on bequests at death as well as inter-vivos (during life) gifts. A certain amount of each estate, \$5 million in 2011, indexed for inflation, is exempted from taxation by the federal government. With indexation, the value was \$5.49 million in 2017 and with the temporary doubling of the exemption and inflation adjustments, is \$11.7 million in 2021. The taxable estate is taxed at 40%. The exemption applies to total bequests and gifts (separate from the annual inter-vivos gift exemption of \$15,000 per donee for 2021). Transfers between spouses are exempted, and any unused exemption can be inherited by a surviving spouse. Other elements of the tax remain, including deductions for charitable bequests and a number of special provisions for farms and small businesses.

The permanent tax treatment of estates and gifts had been uncertain for some time. The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 (EGTRRA; P.L. 107-16), among other tax cuts, provided for a gradual reduction and elimination of the estate tax. Under EGTRRA, the estate tax exemption rose from \$675,000 in 2001 to \$3.5 million in 2009, and the rate fell from 55% to 45%. In 2010, the estate tax was eliminated. There was general agreement that some sort of estate tax would be retained. A proposal to make the 2009 rules (\$3.5 million exemption and 45% rate) permanent was included in President Obama's 2010 and 2011 budget outlines and was passed by the House in December 2009. In addition, in 2009, Senate Democratic leaders supported the plan to enact the 2009 rules permanently. The Senate Republican leadership proposed a \$5 million exemption and 35% rate. This latter provision was eventually adopted for a two-year period, through 2012. For estates of decedents in 2010, either the 2010 or the 2011 rules could have been elected. Spouses can inherit unused exemptions. The permanent provisions retain most of the rules adopted for 2011 and 2012, but with a higher rate.

Compared with the \$1 million exemption and 55% rate under pre-EGTRRA law, the 2013 permanent rules were estimated to lose an average of about \$37 billion over the next 10 years, a two-thirds reduction in estate tax revenues. The increase in the exemption level costs around \$10 billion per year, a further reduction of about 40% of projected revenues.

Regardless of the exemption levels considered, few estates are affected by the tax. The estate tax is a highly progressive tax, with about three-fourths collected from estates in which decedents are in the top 1% of the income distribution. At a \$5 million exemption, less than 0.2% of estates will be subject to the tax, and at the higher temporary levels, less than 0.1% of estates will be subject to the tax. Although concerns have been raised about the effects of the tax on small businesses and farmers, estimates indicate that only a small share of these decedents are affected.

Budget proposals during the Obama Administration proposed a return to the 2009 rates and exemptions. They also proposed a variety of structural reforms, including restricting Grantor Retained Annuity Trusts (GRATs), providing consistent valuation for estate tax and basis for capital gains, limiting the duration of generation-skipping trusts, and providing consistent treatment of grantor trusts along with some other minor changes. Prior provisions would have disallowed minority discounts (for estates left to a family partnership) and addressed other aspects of GRATs. During the recent 2017 tax reform deliberations, the House proposed to increase the higher exemption temporarily and repeal the estate tax after 2024. The Biden Administration has proposed to tax capital gains when transferred by gift or at death. Currently, these gains escape capital gains taxes. The Build Back Better Act (BBBA; H.R. 5376), the House

proposal currently considered as part of reconciliation, would return the exemption levels to \$5 million indexed for inflation (which would be approximately \$5.9 million in 2021), allow increased limits on special provisions for farmers and small businesses, and make other changes limiting certain discounts or affecting the treatment of grantor trusts.

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## Introduction

The estate and gift tax is imposed on bequests at death and on inter-vivos (during lifetime) gifts. The rate of the tax and the level of exemption have been under discussion for some time, with temporary provisions in place for a number of years. The American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-240) established permanent rules for the estate and gift tax for 2013 going forward. Although details of the tax structure are addressed in the following section, the principal rules are as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- In 2011, estates and lifetime gifts had a combined exemption of \$5 million in asset value, indexed for inflation. This exemption was made permanent and was \$5.49 million for 2017.
- The estate tax rate on the taxable portion of the estate, if any, is 40%.
- The exemption from the estate tax applies to estates and lifetime inter-vivos gifts in the aggregate. The separate annual exemption per donee for inter-vivos gifts is retained; it is also indexed in \$1,000 increments and has increased from \$13,000 in 2012 to \$14,000 in 2017 and \$15,000 in 2018.
- Transfers to spouses remain exempt, but spouses can inherit any unused portion of the exemption from each other, so that the combined exemption for a couple was \$10 million in 2011. Other estate tax deductions, such as those for charitable contributions, are retained.
- A number of special rules for farms and small businesses are retained.
- A doubling of the exemption level was adopted in the 2017 tax revision (P.L. 115-97), effective from 2018 to 2025; for 2021, the exemption is \$11.7 million.

This report describes the basic structure of the estate and gift tax, provides a brief history of recent developments, discusses the revenue effects and distribution of the tax, and briefly discusses issues and options.

## Basic Structure

The estate and gift tax is a unified tax, so that assets transferred as gifts during a person's lifetime are combined with those transferred at death (bequests) and subject to a single rate schedule.<sup>2</sup> The tax is imposed on the decedent's estate and the rate structure applies to total bequests and gifts given; heirs are not subject to tax.

## Rates and Basic Exemptions

The exemption for 2017 is \$5.49 million, and it is indexed for inflation. From 2018 to 2025, the exemption is doubled, and it is \$11.7 million for 2021. Although the rates of the tax are graduated, the exemption is applied in the form of a credit and offsets taxes applied at the lower

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<sup>1</sup> See Estate Tax, at <http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&-Self-Employed/Estate-Tax>, and Frequently Asked Questions on the Gift Tax, at <http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&-Self-Employed/Frequently-Asked-Questions-on-Gift-Taxes#5>.

<sup>2</sup> CRS Report 95-416, *The Federal Estate, Gift, and Generation-Skipping Transfer Taxes*, by Emily M. Lanza, provides a detailed description of the estate tax (report out of print; available to congressional clients from the author upon request).

rates. Thus the taxable estate is therefore subject to a flat 40% rate. This rate is higher than the 35% rate that prevailed in 2011 and 2013, but lower than the 45% rate that applied in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Individuals are also allowed to exempt annual gifts of \$14,000 per recipient for 2017, which are not counted as part of the lifetime exemption. The annual gift tax exemption is indexed for inflation in \$1,000 increments and will rise to \$15,000 in 2018 and remain at that level in 2021. A generation-skipping tax is also imposed, to address estate tax avoidance through gifts and bequests to a later generation.<sup>4</sup>

## **Other Exemptions and Deductions**

Transfers between spouses are exempt. Estates are allowed to take deductions for charitable contributions and administrative expenses; a deduction for taxes paid on estates and inheritances imposed by states; and to exempt up to \$5.49 million for 2017 (\$11.7 million in 2021) in remaining assets from the tax.

A spouse can inherit any unused exemption. Thus, if a husband died and left an estate of \$3 million in 2017, the remainder of his \$5.49 million exemption can be used by his wife, whose exemption would be increased by the \$2.43 million difference.

## **Special Provisions for Small Businesses, Farms, and Landowners**

A series of provisions benefit small businesses, including farms and landowners. These provisions include the ability of family businesses to pay any estate tax due in installments with only the interest payments during part of the installment period, special use valuations, and conservation easements. Minority discounts, although granted by courts rather than specifically in the law, may also benefit small businesses. Minority discounts are allowed when assets are left to a family partnership in which no individual has a controlling share and are thus deemed to lose value for that reason.

Although the estate tax return is due within nine months of the death, small businesses are allowed to defer payment (except for interest) for the next five years, and pay the remaining installment payments over 10 years. Because the last interest payment and the first installment coincide, the overall delay in full payment is 14 years. The benefit is allowed only for the business portion of assets if 35% of the estate is in a farm or closely held business.

Small businesses are also allowed to value their assets at use as a farm or business. This provision is particularly beneficial to farms and allows a reduction in the estate value of up to \$1 million, adjusted for inflation (\$1.19 million in 2021). It means, for example, that the value of the farm will be what it could be sold for if restricted to farm use rather than to be subdivided for development. Heirs are required to continue use of the assets as a farm or business for 10 years.

Farmers and other landowners may also benefit from conservation easements, a perpetual restriction on the use of the land. In addition to the reduction in value due to the easement itself, an exclusion of up to 40% of the restricted value of the land, capped at \$500,000, is allowed.

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<sup>3</sup> A discussion of the debate over exemptions and rates as the 2001 tax cut provisions were expiring is in CRS Report R41203, *Estate Tax Options*, by Jane G. Gravelle (report out of print; available to congressional clients from the author upon request).

<sup>4</sup> For example, parents may directly skip a generation by leaving some assets to grandchildren, or they may set up a lifetime trust for their children, with the assets subsequently inherited by the grandchildren. The generation-skipping tax is imposed in these circumstances, although it also has an exemption.

## **Step-up in Basis for Appreciated Assets**

Heirs take as their basis (the amount to be deducted from the sales price) for purposes of future capital gains the value of the asset at the date of the decedent's death. This treatment is referred to as step-up in basis and means that no capital gains tax is paid on the appreciation of assets during the decedent's lifetime. For example, if a decedent purchased stock for \$100,000 and the value of the stock at the time of death were \$200,000, if the heir sells the property for \$250,000 a gain of \$50,000 (\$250,000 minus the stepped-up basis of \$200,000) is recognized. The \$100,000 of gain that accrued during the decedent's lifetime is never taxed. The step-up rules do not apply to gifts, in which carryover basis is applied. In that case, the original basis of \$100,000 would be carried over and the gain would be \$150,000 (\$250,000 minus \$100,000). Both the gain accrued by the donor and the gain accrued by the donee are taxed.

## **Differences in the Treatment of Bequests and Gifts**

Aside from the different exemption levels in some estate tax rules, there are other differences between the taxation of gifts and bequests. As noted above, gifts do not benefit from the step-up in basis. When the donee subsequently sells an asset, the cost (referred to as basis) deducted from the sales price is the original cost to the donor. For example, if a donor purchased stock for \$100,000 and the value of the stock at the time of the gift were \$200,000, when the donee sells the property for \$250,000 a gain of \$150,000 (\$250,000 minus the original basis of \$100,000) is recognized. The basis cannot be less than the fair market value at the time of the gift if a loss is realized.

In addition, the gift tax is tax exclusive (i.e., the tax is imposed on the gift net of the tax), whereas the estate tax is tax inclusive (i.e., the tax is applied to the estate inclusive of the tax). To illustrate, consider a 50% tax rate. Assuming the exemption is already used, to provide a gift of \$1 million costs \$1.5 million: the tax rate of 50% is applied to the gift of \$1 million for a \$0.5 million tax. To provide a net amount of \$1 million for a bequest, \$2 million is required: a tax of \$1 million (50% of \$2 million) and a net to the heir of \$1 million. Another way of stating this is that the gift tax rate, if stated as a tax inclusive rate like the estate tax, would be 33%. Thus for a 40% estate tax rate, the gift tax rate equivalent is 28.6%.<sup>5</sup>

## **Brief History of Recent Developments**

The Economic Growth and Tax Relief Act of 2001 (EGTRRA; P.L. 107-16) provided for a gradual reduction in the estate tax. A unified exemption for both lifetime gifts and the estate of \$675,000 applied at that time.

Under EGTRRA, the estate tax exemption rose from \$675,000 in 2001 to \$3.5 million in 2009, and the top tax rate fell from 55% to 45%. Although combined estate and gift tax rates are graduated, the exemption is effectively in the form of a credit that eliminates tax due at lower rates resulting in a flat rate on taxable assets under 2009 law. The gift tax exemption was, however, restricted to \$1 million.

For 2010, EGTRRA scheduled the elimination of the estate tax, although it retained the gift tax and its \$1 million exemption. EGTRRA also provided for a carryover of basis for assets inherited at death, so that, in contrast with prior law, heirs who sold assets would have to pay tax on gains

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<sup>5</sup> To convert the statutory tax inclusive rate into an equivalent rate for a tax exclusive application, the formula is  $t/(1+t)$ , where  $t$  is the tax inclusive rate.

accrued during the decedent's lifetime. This provision has a \$1.3 million exemption for gain (plus \$3 million for a spouse).

As with other provisions of EGTRRA, the tax revisions were to expire in 2011, returning the tax provisions to their pre-EGTRRA levels. The exemption would have reverted to \$1 million (a value that had already been scheduled for pre-EGTRRA law) and the rate to 55% (with some graduated rates). The carryover basis provision effective in 2010 would be eliminated (so that heirs would not be taxed on gain accumulated during the decedent's life when they inherit assets).

During debate on the estate tax, most agreed that the 2010 provisions would not be continued and, indeed, could be repealed retroactively. President Obama proposed a permanent extension of the 2009 rules (a \$3.5 million exemption and a 45% tax rate), and the House provided for that permanent extension on December 3, 2009 (H.R. 4154). The Senate Democratic leadership indicated a plan to retroactively reinstate the 2009 rules for 2010 and beyond. Senate Minority Leader McConnell proposed an alternative of a 35% tax rate and a \$5 million exemption.<sup>6</sup> A similar proposal for a \$5 million exemption and a 35% rate, which also included the ability of the surviving spouse to inherit any unused exemption of the decedent, is often referred to as Lincoln-Kyl (named after the two Senators who supported it). Proposals were also made to begin with the \$3.5 million exemption and 45% rate and phase in the \$5 million exemption and 55% rate. Others had argued for permanent estate tax repeal.<sup>7</sup> At the end of 2010, a temporary two-year extension, with a \$5 million exemption, a 35% rate, and inheritance of unused spousal exemptions was enacted in P.L. 111-312. These provisions provided for estate tax rules through 2012, and absent legislation, the provisions would have reverted to the pre-EGTRRA rules (\$1 million exemption, 55% top rate).

The American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-240) established the permanent exemption (\$5.25 million) and rate (40%) described above.

The 2017 tax revision (P.L. 115-97) doubled the exemptions for the years 2018 through 2025. The House had proposed doubling the exemption through 2024 and then repealing the estate tax and lowering the gift tax rates to 35%.

## Revenues and Coverage

Compared with preexisting law (a \$1 million exemption and a 55% rate), the ATRA revision was projected to lose \$369 billion in revenue from FY2013 to FY2022, rising from \$27 billion in FY2015 to \$54 billion FY2022.<sup>8</sup> This change reduced total projected revenue from the estate tax by about two-thirds.<sup>9</sup> The 2017 revision was projected to reduce revenues by \$83 billion over eight years, for a further reduction in projected revenue of about 40%.

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<sup>6</sup> See Chuck O'Toole, "Estate Tax Expiration Imminent After Congress Fails to Complete Action," *Tax Notes Today*, December 17, 2009, 2009TNT 240-4. For a discussion indicating that there would not be a legal issue with a retroactive tax, see Jay Starkman, "Can an Estate Tax be Retroactive?" *Tax Notes*, February 22, 2010, pp. 972-974.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to H.R. 4154, numerous bills were introduced in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress to address the estate tax. The phase-in proposal was described in Martin Vaughn, "U.S. Effort to Reduce Estate Tax Hits Turbulence," Dow Jones Newswire, May 18, 2010, at <http://www.nasdaq.com/aspx/stock-market-news-story.aspx?storyid=201005181832dowjonesdjonline000463&title=us-senate-effort-to-reduce-estate-tax-hits-turbulence>.

<sup>8</sup> Estimates of the Joint Committee on Taxation, JCX-1-13, January 1, 2013, at <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=4497>.

<sup>9</sup> Based on data reported in CRS Report R41203, *Estate Tax Options*, by Jane G. Gravelle (report out of print; available to congressional clients from the author upon request), using data from the Urban Brookings Tax Policy Center, Table T09-0431, at <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?DocID=2506&topic2ID=60&topic3ID=66&>

Data from estate tax returns indicate that revenues fell from \$19.9 billion in 2017 to \$13.2 billion in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

Only a small portion of high-income decedents are affected by the tax under a \$5 million exemption.

- The estate tax would have affected less than 0.2% of decedents over the next decade under the permanent rules. The doubling of the exemption would reduce that share to 0.07%.<sup>11</sup>
- The estate tax is concentrated among high-income taxpayers: 91% is paid by the top quintile, 60.4% by the top 1%, and 26% by the top 0.1%. The concentration in upper income categories would be increased with the higher temporary exemption levels. For 2018, 93% is paid by the top 10%, 71% by the top 1%, and 39% by the top 0.1%.
- About 0.2% of estates with half or more of their assets in businesses will be subject to the estate tax under the permanent rules, and less with the higher exemption levels.
- About 100 farm estates (or approximately two per state) are projected to be subject to the estate tax, and constitute 1.8% of taxable estates according to a projection from a CBO study. If the number of farm estates fall in proportion to the number of estates in general, around 25 farm estates (one estate every two years per state) would be taxable with the higher exemption level enacted in 2017. Less than a quarter of taxable farm estates (0.4% of all farm estates) are projected to have inadequate liquidity to pay estate taxes. The Department of Agriculture, using a somewhat different measure of what constitutes a farm, projects less than 1% (0.4%) of farm operator estates is projected to pay the tax, totaling 153 estates. These shares would also be expected to decline significantly with the higher exemptions.

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<sup>10</sup> Internal Revenue Service, Statistics of Income, Estate Tax Filing Year Tables, <https://www.irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-estate-tax-filing-year-tables>.

<sup>11</sup> The 0.2% share is based on 2.7 million deaths in 2017 and estimates that 5,460 estates are projected to pay the estate tax in 2017 according to estimates by the Tax Policy Center, Table T17-0230, at <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/model-estimates/baseline-estate-tax-tables-2017/t17-0230-current-law-distribution-gross-estate-and>. The share for 2020 is from Tax Policy Center, Briefing Book, p. 2, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/who-pays-estate-tax>. The distribution by income class is based on the Tax Policy Center, Table T17-0056, at <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/model-estimates/baseline-share-federal-taxes-march-2017/t17-0056-share-federal-taxes-all-tax-units>. The distribution for 2018 (with the doubling of exemptions) is from the Tax Policy Center, Briefing Book, p. 3, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/who-pays-estate-tax>. Some of these estimates are reported in CRS Report R41203, *Estate Tax Options*, by Jane G. Gravelle (report out of print; available to congressional clients from the author upon request). Sources include data from Urban Brookings Tax Policy Center, Tables T10-0073 and T09-0402, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?DocID=2664&topic2ID=60&topic3ID=66&DocTypeID=>; Table T10-0269, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?Docid=2868&DocTypeID=>; Tables T09-0196, T09-0198, and T09-0199, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?DocID=> 2270&topic2ID=60&topic3ID=66&DocTypeID=; Table T09-0431, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?DocID=2506&topic2ID=60&topic3ID=66&DocTypeID=>. Table T09-0426, <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/numbers/displayatab.cfm?DocID=2501&topic2ID=60&topic3ID=73&DocTypeID=> Congressional Budget Office, *Effects of the Federal Estate Tax on Farms and Small Businesses*, July 2005, <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/65xx/doc6512/07-06-EstateTax.pdf>. The number of farms is based on 1.8% applied to the taxable estates projected for 2016 reflecting data from the CBO study.

- About 94 estates (about two per state) with half their assets in small business and that expect their heirs to continue in the business are projected to be subject to the estate tax; they constitute 2.5% of total estates.<sup>12</sup> Less than a half (1.1%) is projected to have inadequate liquidity to pay estate taxes.<sup>13</sup> These amounts would also decline significantly with the higher exemption level.

## Issues and Options

A number of general issues have been raised about the estate tax. For example, some have expressed concern that the estate tax discourages savings. Others have noted that the tax encourages charitable bequests because they are deductible and reducing rates and increasing the exemption will reduce charitable contributions. A broader estate tax is also criticized as causing complex planning and tax administration problems.<sup>14</sup>

Although the current size of the exemption and the rate of tax had been set in permanent tax law, the House and Senate tax reform proposals differed in their approaches in 2017. Although both proposed an immediate doubling of the exemption level, the House would have repealed the estate tax (and reduced the gift tax rate to 35%) after 2024. The final bill doubled the exemption level but, as with other individual provisions, the increase is set to expire after 2025. As a result, the exemption level will return to its permanent level in 2026, absent further legislative change to extend the increase or make the increase permanent. The Obama Administration had previously proposed to return to the 2009 rates and levels. President Obama's budgets also contained some more narrow proposals aimed at perceived abuses of the estate tax. All of the estimates of revenue gain for President Obama's budget, unless otherwise noted, are for FY2016-FY2025 and are obtained from the FY2016 budget proposals.<sup>15</sup> Note that these estimates of narrow provisions are based on the assumption of lower exemptions and higher rates in the 2016 budget.

The Build Back Better Act (BBBA; H.R. 5376, 117<sup>th</sup> Congress), currently considered as part of reconciliation, also contains several changes including restoring the lower exemption. It also makes narrower changes including increasing the limits on discounts for valuation of farms and businesses based on use, coordinating the income and estate tax treatment of grantor trusts, and disallowing minority discounts for cash and readily marketable assets. The revenue estimates for these proposals are all for FY2022-FY2031 and are obtained from estimates of the Joint Committee on Taxation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These estates were identified by their use of the qualified family owned business income (QFOBI). In prior law, this provision allowed estates with at least half of their assets in a family business to take a deduction for these business assets. This provision originally allowed up to \$675,000 of business deductions at a time when the basic estate tax exemption was \$625,000, and imposed an overall cap of \$1.3 million on the total of both deductions. To qualify for the QFOBI deduction, heirs had to continue the business for 10 years or the tax savings must be repaid. Once the regular exemption passed the \$1.3 million level, the provision was no longer relevant. Although QFOBI is obsolete, it was used in prior statistical studies to identify small business estates whose continuance might be made more difficult due to an estate tax.

<sup>13</sup> Data on the 0.8% of farms that pay the tax are from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/federal-tax-issues/federal-estate-taxes.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> These issues are discussed in more detail in CRS Report R41203, *Estate Tax Options*, by Jane G. Gravelle (report out of print; available to congressional clients from the author upon request).

<sup>15</sup> Department of the Treasury, *General Explanations of the Administrations Fiscal Year 2016 Revenue Proposals*, February 2015, at [http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/tax-policy/Pages/general\\_explanation.aspx](http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/tax-policy/Pages/general_explanation.aspx). Past budget proposals can be found there as well.

<sup>16</sup> Joint Committee on Taxation, "Estimated Budgetary Effects Of An Amendment In The Nature Of A Substitute To

Another issue of concern is with the step-up in basis, which discourages realizations of capital gains taxes and is the major reason that there are limits to raising revenue by increasing capital gains tax rates, because these increases will lead to holding more assets until death to avoid the tax. One study estimated that capital gains represented 13% of the assets of estates under \$2 million (the smallest estates) and 55% of the assets of estates over \$100 million.<sup>17</sup>

## Making the Higher Exemption Levels Permanent

The 2017 increase in exemption level was estimated to lose \$83 billion in revenue.<sup>18</sup> Making it permanent would appear to have increased the cost by about \$12 billion; it would also eventually be larger, not just due to growth in wealth, but to lags in filing estate tax returns.

## Proposal to Repeal the Estate Tax and Reduce the Gift Tax Rate to 35%

The House version of H.R. 1 in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (which, after changes, became the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, P.L. 115-97) would have first increased the exemption levels and repealed the estate tax after 2023. The revenue estimate indicates a cost of \$150 billion from FY2018 to 2027,<sup>19</sup> but this estimate understates the permanent cost of this proposal because repeal was delayed (and there is a delay in filing estate tax returns as well). This proposal was not in the final legislation. In the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 1105 and S. 860 would have immediately repealed the estate tax and reduced the rate of the gift tax rate. H.R. 1105 was reported by the House Ways and Means Committee (H.Rept. 114-52). The bills would have provided a transition rule for assets placed in a qualified domestic trust by a decedent who died before the effective date. The estate tax would not apply after 10 years or after the death of the surviving spouse. The proposal was estimated to cost \$269 billion for FY2015-FY2025.<sup>20</sup>

## Proposal to Return to 2009 Rates and Exemptions

The Obama Administration's FY2016 budget proposals to restore the 2009 higher rates and lower exemptions were estimated to raise \$189 billion over 10 years.

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The Revenue Provisions Of Subtitles F, G, H, I, And J Of The Budget Reconciliation Legislative Recommendations Relating To Infrastructure Financing And Community Development, Green Energy, Social Safety Net, Responsibly Funding Our Priorities, And Drug Pricing, Scheduled For Markup By The Committee On Ways And Means On September 14, 2021," JCX-42-21, September 13, 2021, <https://www.jct.gov/publications/2021/jcx-42-21/>.

<sup>17</sup> Robert B. Avery, Daniel Grodzicki, and Kevin B. Moore, *Estate vs. Capital Gains Taxation: An Evaluation of Prospective Policies for Taxing Wealth at the Time of Death*, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Finance and Economics Discussion Series (FEDS) 2013-28, March 2013, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/feds/estate-vs-capital-gains-taxation-an-evaluation-of-prospective-policies-for-taxing-wealth-at-the-time-of-death.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Committee on Taxation, "Estimated Budget Effects Of The Conference Agreement For H.R. 1, The 'Tax Cuts And Jobs Act'," JCX-67-17, December 18, 2017, <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=5053>.

<sup>19</sup> Joint Committee on Taxation, "Estimated Revenue Effects Of H.R. 1, The 'Tax Cuts and Jobs Act', As Ordered Reported By The Committee On Ways And Means On November 9, 2017," JCX-54-17, November 11, 2017, <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=5034>.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Committee on Taxation, "Description of an Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute to the Provisions of H.R. 1105, The 'Death Tax Repeal Act Of 2015'," JCX-68-15, March 24, 2015, <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=4761>.

## Proposal to Return to the 2017 Exemption Level

The BBBA, part of the House bill in reconciliation in 2021, would restore the \$5 million (adjusted for inflation, approximately \$5.9 million) for deaths in 2022 and after, estimated to raise \$54.3 billion for FY2022-FY2031. Because the exemption is already scheduled to revert to that level after 2025, most of the revenue gain would be in the first five fiscal years.

## Proposal to Tax Capital Gains at Death or by Gift

The Biden Administration has proposed to tax capital gains and dividends at ordinary rates for taxpayers with adjusted gross income of more than \$1 million for joint returns, and \$500,000 for other returns. Currently, the top rate on capital gains and dividends is 20%, and the net investment income tax of 3.8% that also applies to passive capital income in general results in a top rate of 23.8%. The top rate on ordinary income is 37%, which with the net investment income tax of 3.8% would lead to a top rate of 40.8%. Another provision of the proposals is to increase the top rate to 39.6%, which, with the 3.8% additional tax would be 43.4%.

This increase in capital gains rates would be accompanied by taxation of capital gains at death or by gift, with a \$1 million exemption. Personal property other than collectibles would be excluded as would \$250,000 of gain on homes (and any unused amount could be subsequently used by the surviving spouse, making the total \$500,000 for a couple). Family-owned businesses and farms would not have to pay the tax until assets are sold or the business is no longer family-owned and operated. The tax could be paid over 15 years for assets that are not liquid (i.e., other than financial assets such as stocks and bonds). This tax may be reported on a final income tax schedule or as part of the estate and gift tax return. The tax would reduce the size of the estate (or gift), so that for large estates subject to the tax, the estate tax would be reduced by 43.4% on the portion of the estate subject to tax.

Together, the increase in tax rates on capital gains and dividends and taxation of capital gains at death or by gift are projected to raise \$322.5 billion from FY2022 to FY2031.<sup>21</sup>

## Narrow Provisions

### Increase the Valuation Limits for Discounts for Businesses and Farms Based on Use

As discussed above, farmers and businesses can value assets based on use rather than market value, but there is a limit to the reduction in value of \$1 million, indexed for inflation (a \$1.19 million value in 2021). The BBBA would increase the limit to \$11.7 million. This provision is estimated to lose \$0.3 billion in revenue over 10 years.

### Grantor Trusts Income and Transfer Tax Rules

In a grantor trust, an individual is treated as owner for income tax purposes. However, the trust and the individual are treated as separate persons for purposes of the estate and gift tax. Grantor trusts can be used to transfer assets out of the individual's estate. For income tax purposes, the grantor and the trust are treated as a unit, so that transactions between them are disregarded. Grantor trusts can be designed so that the earnings of the trust flow through to the grantor and the

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, *General Explanations of the Administration's Fiscal Year 2022 Revenue Proposals*, May 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/131/General-Explanations-FY2022.pdf>.

grantor pays the income taxes. Since these taxes are not considered gifts to the trust, the earnings in the trust can grow tax free.

For estate and gift tax purposes, the assets of the trust are separate from the individual so that distributions to beneficiaries are not treated as gifts under the gift tax and the assets of the trust are not included in the estate. One technique to transfer assets into the trust is to sell an appreciated asset to the trust in exchange for a low-interest promissory note. No capital gain will be realized on the transfer and no income tax paid on the interest payments. A grantor may also swap assets of equal value that can be beneficial for tax purposes if high-basis assets (which would yield lower capital gains if sold by the trust to a third party) are exchanged for low-basis assets, which will not be subject to capital gains tax at death.

The BBBA would treat the transfer of property between the grantor and the trust as a taxable event, so that gain would be recognized on transactions (losses would not be recognized). The revision would also include the trust in the taxable estate and any distributions made by the trust to the beneficiaries would be treated as a gift made by the grantor and thus subject to gift tax rules. This provision would apply to grantor trusts other than revocable trusts (revocable trusts are included in the estate) but would be grandfathered so that only contributions and transactions with the trust going forward would be covered and included in the estate.

These provisions would apply to all irrevocable grantor trusts—including GRATs (discussed below), insurance trusts, and spousal lifetime access trusts, or SLATs—which are trusts allowing lifetime benefits for spouses.

These provisions are estimated to raise \$7.9 billion for FY2022-FY2031.

### **Grantor Retained Annuity Trusts**

A Grantor Retained Annuity Trust (GRAT) is a trust that allows the grantor to receive an annuity, with any remaining assets transferred to the trust recipient. The value of the gift is reduced by the value of the assets used to fund the annuity. If the assets in the trust appreciate substantially, then virtually all of the gift can be reduced by the value of the annuity, while still providing a substantial ultimate gift to the recipient. If the grantor dies during the annuity period, the remaining value of the annuity is included in the estate. This trust approach could be a method of transferring assets roughly tax free if the assets appreciate at a rate faster than the discount rate used to value the annuity. The grantor needs to survive over the period of the annuity. To assure the latter will be likely to occur, many of these trusts have very short annuity periods, as short as two years.

Although successive short-term GRATs reduce the risk of losing control of capital by the grantor, there is also an advantage of a long-term GRAT. If the interest rate is expected to rise, the trust can lock in a low discount rate for the entire term. This low interest rate will increase the value of the annuity deduction compared with successive short-term GRATs that will have to use the current interest rate at the time the GRAT is established.

The GRAT proposal in President Obama's 2016 budget proposal would have imposed a minimum annuity term of 10 years, disallowed any decline in the annuity, and required a non-zero remainder interest. It would have imposed a maximum term of the annuitant's life plus 10 years. The provision was estimated to raise \$18.4 billion over 10 years.

As discussed above, GRATs would be affected by the BBBA provisions and assets would be included in the estate.

## **Minority Discounts**

The existing restrictions keep estates from engaging in artificial actions designed to reduce the value of estates (such as freezes on assets). As discussed above, courts sometimes allow estates to reduce the fair-market value when assets are left in family partnerships in which no one has a majority control. These discounts have even been allowed when assets are in cash and readily marketable securities, and the setting up of these family partnerships has become an estate tax avoidance tool. The BBBA would disallow discounts for cash and readily marketable securities. Exceptions exist for assets used for hedging transactions and business working capital. This provision is estimated to raise \$19.9 billion over 10 years.

## **Consistent Valuation**

Currently, there is no explicit rule preventing a low valuation of fair-market value for an estate and a high valuation of the asset for purposes of stepped-up basis in the hands of the heir. A low value of an asset reduces the estate tax, but a high value (because it reduces the amount of gain) reduces the capital gains tax. Requiring the same value for both purposes, proposed by the Obama Administration, was projected to raise \$3.2 billion over 10 years.

## **Other Minor Provisions**

When generation-skipping transfers are made to a trust, the estate tax exemption applicable to them also exempts the associated earnings during the trust lifetime. In the past, a trust life has been limited because most states had a Rule Against Perpetuities that generally limited trusts to a 21-year life. Most of those laws have been eliminated. The Obama Administration's proposal would have limited the life of a generation-skipping trust to 90 years. The revenue effect would have been negligible over the next 10 years.

Currently, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has a lien on estate tax deferrals for closely held business, but these liens are for 10 years, shorter than the deferral period. This provision would have extended the liens through the deferral period and was projected to raise \$0.3 billion over 10 years.

Currently, payments for medical care or education made directly to the provider for another are exempt from the generation-skipping tax and the gift tax. Taxpayers have been using trusts to eventually pay for these expenses and avoid tax on the accumulations. The Obama Administration indicated that the original purpose of this provision was to exempt payments between living persons and would have disallowed exemptions for payments to trusts. This provision would have lost revenue in the budget horizon, \$0.2 billion.

The executor of an estate is responsible for estate tax issues, but there is no clear federal rule about authority to address income tax issues of the decedent from prior years. This Obama Administration provision would have extended authority for addressing federal income tax issues to the executor. It would have involved a negligible revenue loss.

## **Simplify Gift Tax Exclusion for Annual Gifts**

This provision would have disallowed the unlimited use of trusts (called Crummey trusts) to expand the number of annual gift exclusions, by imposing an additional overall limit of \$50,000 on gifts made via trusts. This Obama Administration proposal was projected to raise \$3.4 billion over 10 years.

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