



Tax planning

2021 year-end guide



Smart decisions. Lasting value.™

Tax planning: 2021 year-end guide

On a personal note, I'm excited to be leading the Crowe tax business unit. I am so proud of the resilience, strength, and ingenuity that Crowe has shown during what will surely be seen as one of the most consequential periods in history. I look forward to future opportunities to share our insight and expertise with you.

The past year and a half has been transformational, changing the way we live, the way we work, and the way we do business. The only certainty is that more change is on the way. Thriving in this environment means understanding the current rules, keeping abreast of potential changes, and preparing for what might come.

In the tax world, we have seen a number of changes over the past year, including:

- Legislation enacted at the end of 2020
- Extended and – in some cases – expanded tax benefits in 2021 for families and employers affected by the pandemic

And more major tax changes could be coming.

For businesses, the coming changes could include an increase in the corporate tax rate and revisions to the international tax rules. For individuals, these changes could involve an increase in tax rates, including on capital gains, and a reduction of the estate and gift tax exemption.

Through it all, clients have relied on Crowe to help plan for and manage change. We have provided the latest information through our industry- and subject-matter-focused publications, including this Year-End Tax Guide, our weekly Tax News Highlights publication, and our Keep Score election series. These resources and insights inform and provide a valuable spark for meaningful conversations with Crowe professionals about how we can help you achieve your goals and manage your risk.

Change means possibility. We look forward to helping you harness those possibilities in a meaningful and positive way.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicole Bencik".

Nicole Bencik
Managing Partner, Tax
Crowe

“Uncertainty” is the watchword for 2021 tax planning



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fter the tumultuous year that was 2020, “uncertainty” remains the watchword in 2021, especially when it comes to tax planning. The shift of political control in Washington and the evolving pandemic and U.S. economic situation could result in more tax law changes — or not.

To take advantage of all available breaks, you first need to be aware of relevant tax law changes that have already gone into effect. While major changes under 2020’s Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act have largely expired, some have been extended or even expanded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA), signed into law late last year, or the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), signed into law in March. The latter two laws include other tax law provisions as well. You also can’t forget about the massive Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) that generally went into effect three years ago but still impacts tax planning. Finally, you need to keep an eye out for more tax law changes that could affect 2021 planning.

This guide provides an overview of some of the most significant tax law changes that affected 2021 and other key tax provisions you need to be aware of. It offers a variety of strategies for reducing your taxes in the current tax environment. Use it to identify the best strategies for your particular situation with your tax advisor, who also can keep you apprised of any new tax law developments that might affect you.

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Careful planning is especially important this year



Tax rates on “ordinary income” are often higher than those that apply to investment income. (See page 8 for information about the tax treatment of investments.) Ordinary income generally includes salary, income from self-employment or business activities, interest, and distributions from tax-deferred retirement accounts. Some of it may also be subject to payroll tax, or you may have to pay the alternative minimum tax (AMT), under which different tax rates apply.

This is why careful planning for ordinary income and deductible expenses is always important. And possible tax rate increases next year make it especially important.

Timing income and expenses

Smart timing of income and expenses, where permitted, can reduce your tax liability, and poor timing can unnecessarily increase it. Generally, deferring income to the next year and accelerating deductible expenses into the current year may be a good idea, for instance when you don’t expect to be subject to the AMT (see page 3) in the current year or the next year. Why? Because it will defer tax, which generally is beneficial.

But when you expect to be in a higher tax bracket next year — or you believe

tax rates may rise — the opposite approach may be beneficial: Accelerating income will allow more income to be taxed at your current year’s lower rate. And deferring expenses will make the deductions more valuable, because deductions save more tax when you’re subject to a higher tax rate.

Whatever the reason behind your desire to time income and expenses, you may be able to control the timing of these income items:

- ▲ Bonuses,
- ▲ Self-employment income,
- ▲ U.S. Treasury bill income, and
- ▲ Retirement plan distributions, to the extent they won’t be subject to early-withdrawal penalties and aren’t required. (See page 20.)

Some expenses with potentially controllable timing are investment interest expense (see page 11), mortgage interest (see page 12), and charitable contributions (see page 16).

TCJA is still affecting timing

The TCJA has made timing income and deductions more challenging because some choices that taxpayers used to make no longer are making sense. Here’s a look at some significant

TCJA changes that have affected deductions:

Reduced deduction for state and local tax. Property tax used to be a popular expense to time. But with the TCJA’s limit on the state and local tax deduction, property tax timing will likely provide little, if any, benefit for higher-income taxpayers. Through 2025, the entire itemized deduction for state and local taxes — including property tax and either income or sales tax — is limited to \$10,000 (\$5,000 for married taxpayers filing separately).

If you reside in a state with no, or low, income tax, this change might be less relevant. But keep in mind that deducting sales tax instead of income tax may be beneficial, especially if you purchased a major item, such as a car or boat.

Suspension of miscellaneous itemized deductions subject to the 2% floor.

This deduction for expenses such as certain professional fees, investment expenses and unreimbursed employee business expenses is suspended through 2025. While this eliminates the home office deduction for employees who work from home (even if your employer has required it), if you’re self-employed, you may still be able to deduct home office expenses. (See page 12.)

More-restricted personal casualty and theft loss deduction. Currently through 2025, this itemized deduction is suspended except if the loss was due to an event officially declared a disaster by the President.

Increased standard deduction. The TCJA nearly doubled the standard deduction. While many higher-income taxpayers will still benefit from itemizing, some — such as those in low-tax

CHART 1

2021 standard deduction

Filing status	Standard deduction ¹
Singles and separate filers	\$12,550
Heads of households	\$18,800
Joint filers	\$25,100

¹ Taxpayers who are age 65 or older or blind can claim an additional standard deduction: \$1,350 if married, \$1,700 if unmarried.

WHAT'S NEW!

Tax law uncertainty complicates timing

Determining the right timing for income and expenses in 2021 is especially challenging because changes that might be signed into law later this year could affect the tax rate you pay on both ordinary income and investment income — probably not for 2021 but potentially for 2022, which would impact 2021 planning.

Proposals have included:

- Increasing the top ordinary income tax rate from 37% back to 39.6% (the pre-TCJA top rate),
- Increasing the long-term capital gains and qualified dividend rate for higher-income taxpayers, and
- Broadening the NIIT (see page 11) and payroll taxes (see page 4) to apply to more types of income of higher-income taxpayers.

Check with your tax advisor for the latest information on these proposals and other tax law change developments.

states, who don't have mortgages or who don't have large charitable deductions — may now save more tax by claiming the standard deduction. (See Chart 1 for the 2021 standard deduction amounts.)

Tax-advantaged saving for health care

If medical expenses not paid via tax-advantaged accounts or reimbursable by insurance exceed a certain percentage of your adjusted gross income (AGI), you can claim an itemized deduction for the amount exceeding that "floor." This floor can be difficult for higher-income taxpayers to exceed.

New! In late 2020, the 7.5% floor (which had in recent years been a temporary reduction from 10%) was made permanent.

Eligible expenses may include health insurance premiums, long-term-care insurance premiums (limits apply), medical and dental services, and prescription drugs. Mileage driven for health care purposes also can be deducted — at 16 cents per mile for 2021.

Consider bunching elective medical procedures (and any other services and purchases whose timing you can control without negatively affecting your or your family's health) into alternating years if it would help you exceed the applicable floor and you'd have enough total itemized deductions to benefit from itemizing.

If one spouse has high medical expenses and a relatively lower AGI, filing separately may allow that spouse to exceed the AGI floor and deduct some medical expenses that wouldn't be deductible if the couple filed jointly.

Warning: Because the AMT exemption for separate returns is considerably lower than the exemption for joint returns, filing separately to exceed the floor could trigger the AMT. Because filing separately may also result in higher taxes for other reasons as well, you should carefully consider this option.

You may be able to save taxes without having to worry about the medical expense deduction floor by contributing to one of these accounts:

HSA. If you're covered by a qualified high deductible health plan, you can contribute pre-tax income to an employer-sponsored Health Savings Account — or make deductible contributions to an HSA you set up yourself — up to \$3,600 for self-only coverage and \$7,200 for family coverage for 2021 (plus \$1,000 if you're age 55 or older). HSAs can bear interest or be invested, growing tax-deferred similar to an IRA. Withdrawals for qualified medical expenses are tax-free, and you can carry over a balance from year to year.

FSA. You can redirect pretax income to an employer-sponsored Flexible Spending Account up to an employer-determined limit — not to exceed \$2,750 in 2021. The plan pays or reimburses

you for qualified medical expenses. (If you have an HSA, your FSA is limited to funding certain permitted expenses.) What you don't use by the plan year's end, you generally lose — though your plan might give you a 2½-month grace period to incur expenses to use up the previous year's contribution.

New! Your plan might allow you to roll over *all* unused amounts to 2022 under the CAA.

Smaller AMT threat

The top AMT rate is 28%, compared to the top regular ordinary-income tax rate of 37%. But the AMT rate typically applies to a higher taxable income base. You must pay the AMT if your AMT liability exceeds your regular tax liability.

The TCJA substantially increases the AMT exemptions through 2025. (See Chart 8 on page 24.) This means that currently fewer taxpayers will have to pay the AMT.

In addition, deductions used to calculate regular tax that aren't allowed under the AMT can trigger AMT liability, and currently there aren't as many differences between what's deductible for AMT purposes and regular tax purposes. (See Chart 2 on page 4.) This also reduces AMT risk. However, the AMT will continue to affect some higher-income taxpayers.

So before timing your income and expenses, determine whether you're already likely to be subject to the AMT — or whether the actions you're considering might trigger it. In addition to deduction differences, some income items might trigger or increase AMT liability, such as:

- ▲ Long-term capital gains and qualified dividend income,
- ▲ Accelerated depreciation adjustments and related gain or loss differences when assets are sold, and
- ▲ Tax-exempt interest on certain private-activity municipal bonds. (For an exception, see the warning on page 11.)

Finally, in certain situations exercising incentive stock options (ISOs) can trigger significant AMT liability. (See the warning at the top of page 7.)

Avoiding or reducing AMT

With proper planning, you may be able to avoid the AMT, reduce its impact or even take advantage of its lower maximum rate:

If you could be subject to the AMT for the 2021 tax year ... consider accelerating income into this year, which may allow you to benefit from the lower maximum AMT rate. And deferring expenses you can't deduct for AMT purposes may allow you to preserve those deductions (but watch out for the annual limit on the state and local tax deduction). If you also defer expenses you can deduct for AMT purposes, the deductions may become more valuable because of the higher maximum regular tax rate. Finally, carefully consider the tax consequences of exercising ISOs.

If you could be subject to the AMT for the 2022 tax year ... consider taking the opposite approach. For instance, defer income to next year, because you'll likely pay a relatively lower AMT rate. Also, before year end consider selling any private-activity municipal bonds whose interest could be subject to the AMT. But be careful and talk with your tax advisor because changes in tax law could affect next year's planning.

Also be aware that, in certain circumstances, you may be entitled to an AMT credit.

Payroll taxes

In addition to income tax, you must pay Social Security and Medicare taxes on earned income, such as salary and bonuses. The 12.4% Social Security tax applies only up to the Social Security wage base of \$142,800 for 2021. All earned income is subject to the 2.9% Medicare tax. Both taxes are split equally between the employee and the employer.

Warning: Deferral of the employee share (6.2% of wages) of Social Security tax available to certain employees in 2020 under the Aug. 8, 2020, presidential memorandum has not been extended to 2021. Under the CAA, any deferred 2020 tax must be withheld from the employee's pay and paid on a prorated basis over 2021.

Self-employment taxes

If you're self-employed, you pay both the employee and employer portions of payroll taxes on your self-employment income. The employer portion (6.2% for Social Security tax and 1.45% for Medicare tax) is deductible above the line. **Warning:** Payroll tax deferral available in 2020 for the employer share of Social Security tax has not been extended to 2021. Under the CARES Act, the first half of any deferred 2020

tax is due by Dec. 31, 2021, and the second half is due by Dec. 31, 2022.

As a self-employed taxpayer, you may benefit from other above-the-line deductions as well. You can deduct 100% of health insurance costs for yourself, your spouse and your dependents, up to your net self-employment income. You also can deduct contributions to a retirement plan and, if you're eligible, an HSA for yourself. And you might be able to deduct home office expenses. (See page 12.) Above-the-line deductions are particularly valuable because they reduce your AGI and, depending on the specific deduction, your modified AGI (MAGI), which are the triggers for certain additional taxes and the phaseouts of many tax breaks.

Additional 0.9% Medicare tax

Another payroll tax that higher-income taxpayers must be aware of is the additional 0.9% Medicare tax. It applies to FICA wages and net self-employment income exceeding \$200,000 per year (\$250,000 if married filing jointly and \$125,000 if married filing separately).

If your wages or self-employment income varies significantly from year to year or you're nearing the threshold for triggering the additional Medicare tax, timing your income where permitted may help you avoid or reduce it. For example, if you're an employee, perhaps you can time when you receive a bonus or exercise stock options. If you're self-employed, you may have flexibility on when you purchase new equipment or invoice customers. If you're an S corporation shareholder-employee, the law might permit you to save tax by adjusting how much you receive as salary vs. distributions. (See "Owner-employees" at right.)

Also consider the withholding rules. Employers must withhold the additional tax beginning in the pay period when wages exceed \$200,000 for the calendar year — without regard to an employee's filing status or income from other sources. So your employer might withhold the tax even if you aren't liable for it — or it might not withhold the tax even though you are liable for it.

CHART 2

What itemized deductions may also be deductible for AMT purposes?

Expense	Regular tax	AMT	For more information
State and local income tax	■		See "TCJA is still affecting timing" on page 2.
Property tax	■		See "Home-related deductions" on page 12.
Mortgage interest	■	■	See "Home-related deductions" on page 12.
Interest on home equity debt used to improve your principal residence or second residence	■	■	See "Home-related deductions" on page 12.
Investment interest	■	■	See "Investment interest expense" on page 11.
Medical expenses	■	■	See "Tax-advantaged saving for health care" on page 3.
Charitable contributions	■	■	See page 16.

WHAT'S NEW!

Have employees? You may be eligible for 2 payroll tax breaks

To help employers retain their workforces and provide paid leave during the pandemic, legislation signed into law in 2020 offered some payroll tax relief. Much of this relief has been extended into 2021 and, in some cases, it's been expanded. Keep in mind that additional rules and limits apply, and there could be more changes to these breaks. Check with your tax advisor for the latest information.

1. Employee retention credit. The CARES Act created this payroll tax credit for employers whose operations were fully or partially suspended because of a COVID-19-related governmental shutdown order or whose gross receipts dropped more than 50% compared to the same quarter in the previous year (until gross receipts exceed 80% of gross receipts in the earlier quarter).

Employers whose workforces exceeded 100 employees could claim the credit for employees who'd been furloughed or had their hours reduced because of the reasons noted. If an employer had 100 or fewer employees, it could qualify for the credit regardless of whether there had been furloughs or hour reductions. The credit equaled 50% of up to a ceiling of \$10,000 in annual compensation, including health care benefits, paid to an eligible employee after March 12, 2020, through Dec. 31, 2020.

The CAA extended the credit through June 30, 2021, and for those quarters increased the credit to 70% of compensation and the ceiling to \$10,000 *per quarter*. It also reduced the gross receipts threshold to a 20% drop, and increased the threshold for a "large" employer to more than 500 employees. The ARPA extended the expanded credit through Dec. 31, 2021, but ending it sooner has been proposed. Check with your tax advisor for the latest information.

2. Paid leave credit. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act generally required employers with fewer than 500 employees to provide paid leave in certain COVID-19-related situations in 2020. Covered employers generally could take a federal payroll tax credit for 100% of the qualified sick and family leave wages they pay each quarter, up to \$511 per day for leave taken for the employee's own illness or quarantine and \$200 for leave taken to care for others. The ARPA extended the credit through Sept. 30, 2021.

If you *don't* owe the tax but your employer is withholding it, you can claim a credit on your 2021 income tax return. If you *do* owe the tax but your employer *isn't* withholding it, consider increasing your *income* tax withholding, which can be used to cover the shortfall and avoid interest and penalties. Or make estimated tax payments.

Owner-employees

There are special considerations if you're a business owner who also works in the business, depending on its structure:

Partnerships and limited liability companies. Generally, all trade or business income that flows through to you for income tax purposes is subject to self-employment taxes — even if

it isn't distributed to you. But such income may not be subject to self-employment taxes if you're a limited partner or the LLC member equivalent. Check with your tax advisor on whether the 0.9% Medicare tax or the 3.8% NIIT (see page 11) will apply.

S corporations. Only income you receive as salary is subject to payroll taxes and, if applicable, the 0.9% Medicare tax. To reduce these taxes, you may want to keep your salary relatively — but not unreasonably — low and increase the income that is taxed to you through your Schedule K-1 by virtue of your share of the earnings from the business. That income isn't subject to the corporate level tax or the 0.9% Medicare tax and, typically, isn't subject to the 3.8% NIIT.

C corporations. Only income you receive as salary is subject to payroll taxes and, if applicable, the 0.9% Medicare tax. Nonetheless, you may prefer to take more income as salary (which is deductible at the corporate level) as opposed to dividends (which aren't deductible at the corporate level yet are still taxed at the shareholder level and could be subject to the 3.8% NIIT) if the overall tax paid by both the corporation and you would be less.

Warning: The IRS scrutinizes payments to owner-employees for possible misclassification, so tread carefully.

Estimated tax payments and withholding

You can be subject to penalties if you don't pay enough tax during the year through estimated tax payments and withholding. Here are some ways to help avoid underpayment penalties:

Know the minimum payment rules. For you to avoid penalties, your estimated tax payments and withholding must equal at least 90% of your tax liability for 2021 or 110% of your 2020 tax (100% if your 2020 AGI was \$150,000 or less or, if married filing separately, \$75,000 or less).

Use the annualized income installment method. This method often benefits taxpayers who have large variability in income from month to month. For instance, these variations could be due to bonuses, investment gains and losses, or seasonal income (at least if it's skewed toward the end of the year). Annualizing computes the tax due based on income, gains, losses and deductions through each estimated tax period.

Estimate your tax liability and increase withholding. If you determine you've underpaid, consider having the tax shortfall withheld from your salary or year end bonus by Dec. 31. Because withholding is considered to have been paid ratably throughout the year, this is often a better strategy than making up the difference with an increased quarterly tax payment, which may still leave you exposed to penalties for earlier quarters. ■

Do you know the tax consequences of your compensation package?



Compensation may take several forms, including salary, fringe benefits and bonuses. If you're an executive or other key employee, you might receive stock-based compensation, such as restricted stock, restricted stock units (RSUs) or stock options (either incentive or nonqualified). Nonqualified deferred compensation (NQDC) may also be included in your compensation package. The tax consequences of these types of compensation can be complex — subject to ordinary income, capital gains, payroll and other taxes. So smart tax planning is critical.

Restricted stock

Restricted stock is stock your employer grants to you subject to a substantial risk of forfeiture. Income recognition is normally deferred until the stock is no longer subject to that risk (that is, it's vested) or you sell it. When the restriction lapses, you pay taxes on the stock's fair market value (FMV) at your ordinary-income rate. (The FMV will be considered FICA income, so it could trigger or increase your exposure to the additional 0.9% Medicare tax. See page 4.)

But with a Section 83(b) election, you can instead recognize ordinary income when you receive the stock. This election, which you must make within 30 days after receiving the stock, allows you to convert potential future appreciation from ordinary income to long-term capital gains income and defer it until the stock is sold.

The election can be beneficial if the income at the grant date is negligible or the stock is likely to appreciate significantly before income would otherwise be recognized. And with ordinary-income tax rates now especially low under the TCJA, it might be a good time to recognize income.

There are some potential disadvantages of a Sec. 83(b) election, however. First, prepaying tax in the current year could push you into a higher income tax bracket and trigger or increase your exposure to the additional 0.9% Medicare tax. But if your company is in the earlier stages of development, the income recognized may be relatively small.

Second, any taxes you pay because of the election can't be refunded if you eventually forfeit the stock or sell it at a decreased value. However, you'd have a capital loss in those situations.

Third, when you sell the shares, any gain will be included in net investment income and could trigger or increase your liability for the 3.8% NIIT. (See page 11.) Also, for the highest-income taxpayers, raising the long-term capital gains rate to equal the ordinary income rate has been proposed. So depending on whether that proposal becomes law and your income level, the Sec. 83(b) election might not provide a tax benefit.

See Case Study 1 for additional information, and work with your tax advisor to map out whether the Sec. 83(b) election is appropriate for your situation.

RSUs

Restrictive stock units (RSUs) are contractual rights to receive stock, or its cash value, after the award has vested. Unlike restricted stock, RSUs aren't eligible for the Sec. 83(b) election. So there's no opportunity to convert ordinary income into capital gains.

But they do offer a limited ability to defer income taxes: Unlike restricted stock, which becomes taxable immediately upon vesting, RSUs aren't taxable until the

employee actually receives the stock. So rather than having the stock delivered immediately upon vesting, the law might allow you to delay delivery

Such a delay will defer income tax and may allow you to reduce the additional 0.9% Medicare tax (because the RSUs are treated as FICA income). However, deferral must satisfy the strict requirements of Internal Revenue Code Section 409A. Also keep in mind that it might be better to recognize income now because of the currently low tax rates.

ISOs

Incentive stock options (ISO) allow you to buy company stock in the future (but before a set expiration date) at a fixed price equal to or greater than the stock's FMV at the date of the grant. Thus, ISOs don't provide a benefit until the stock appreciates in value. If it does, appreciate in value you can buy shares at a price *below* what they're then trading for, provided you're eligible to exercise the options.

ISOs receive tax-favored treatment but must comply with many rules. Here are the key tax consequences:

- ▲ You owe no tax when ISOs are granted.
- ▲ You owe no regular income tax when you exercise the ISOs.
- ▲ If you sell the stock *after* holding the options for at least one year and then holding the shares for at least one year from the exercise date, you pay tax on the sale at your long-term capital gains rate. (Depending on what happens with proposed tax law changes and your income level, this could end up being the same as your ordinary rate.) You also may owe the NIIT.

▲ If you sell the stock *before* long-term capital gains treatment applies, a “disqualifying disposition” occurs and any gain is taxed as compensation at ordinary-income rates. (Disqualified dispositions aren’t, however, subject to FICA and Medicare tax, including the additional 0.9% Medicare tax.)

Warning: If you don’t sell the stock in the year of exercise, a tax “preference” item is created for the difference between the stock’s FMV and the exercise price (the “bargain element”) that can trigger the AMT. A future AMT credit could mitigate this. Consult your tax advisor because the rules are complex.

If you’ve received ISOs, plan carefully when to exercise them and whether to immediately sell shares received from an exercise or hold them. Waiting to exercise ISOs until just before the expiration date (when the stock value may be the highest, assuming the stock is appreciating) and holding on to the stock long enough to garner long-term capital gains treatment often is beneficial. But there’s also market risk to consider. Plus, acting earlier can be advantageous in several situations:

- ▲ Exercise early to start the holding period so you can sell and receive long-term capital gains treatment sooner.
- ▲ Exercise when the bargain element is small or when the market price is close to bottoming out to reduce or eliminate AMT liability.
- ▲ Exercise annually so you can buy only the number of shares that will achieve a breakeven point between the AMT and regular tax and thereby incur no additional tax.
- ▲ Sell in a disqualifying disposition and pay the higher ordinary-income rate to avoid the AMT on potentially disappearing appreciation.

On the negative side, exercising early accelerates the need for funds to buy the stock, exposes you to a loss if the shares’ value drops below your

CASE STUDY 1

Deferral opportunity available for stock-based compensation in certain situations



Lina was about to receive some stock-based compensation from her employer, so she contacted her tax advisor to find out what the tax consequences would be. Her advisor explained that the tax treatment would depend on the type of stock-based compensation. For example, Lina might be able to take advantage of the Section 83(b) election. (See “Restricted stock” at left.) Or she might be eligible for a tax break under the TCJA.

The TCJA break allows for the deferral of tax on stock-based compensation in certain circumstances. Generally, it gives taxpayers the opportunity to match the taxation of restricted stock and stock options with the timing of the sale of the stock. It’s intended for situations in which there is no ready market for the sale of the stock.

The availability of the deferral opportunity is limited, however. It generally will apply only if at least 80% of full-time employees are covered by the stock-based compensation plan. You and your tax advisor should also consider the impact of any proposals to change the tax law.

exercise cost, and may create a tax cost if the preference item from the exercise generates an AMT liability.

The timing of ISO exercises also could positively or negatively affect your liability for higher tax rates and the NIIT. See Case Study 1 for additional information and, with your tax advisor, evaluate the risks and crunch the numbers to determine the best strategy for you.

NQSOs

The tax treatment of nonqualified stock options (NQSO) is different from the tax treatment of ISOs: NQSOs create compensation income (taxed at ordinary-income rates) on the bargain element when exercised (regardless of whether the stock is held or sold immediately), but they don’t create an AMT preference item.

You may need to make estimated tax payments or increase withholding to fully cover the tax on the exercise. Keep in mind that an exercise could trigger or increase exposure to top tax rates, the additional 0.9% Medicare tax and the NIIT.

NQDC plans

These plans pay executives in the future for services to be currently performed.

They differ from qualified plans, such as 401(k)s, in several ways. For example, unlike 401(k) plans, NQDC plans can favor highly compensated employees, but plan funding isn’t protected from the employer’s creditors. (For more on 401(k)s, see page 20.)

One important NQDC tax issue is that payroll taxes (see page 4) are generally due once services have been performed and there’s no longer a substantial risk of forfeiture — even though compensation may not be paid or recognized for income tax purposes until much later. So your employer may withhold your portion of the payroll taxes from your salary or ask you to write a check for the liability. Or it may pay your portion, in which case you’ll have additional taxable income. **Warning:** The additional 0.9% Medicare tax could also apply.

Keep in mind that the rules for NQDC plans are tighter than they once were, and the penalties for noncompliance can be severe: You could be taxed on plan benefits at the time of vesting, and a 20% penalty and potential interest charges also could apply. So check with your employer to make sure it’s addressing any compliance issues, and consult with your tax advisor. ■

Don't let taxes erode your investment returns



For much of 2021, the stock market has generally been on an upward trend. But economic, political and pandemic uncertainty could cause volatility to resume. Such uncertainty also makes tax planning for investments challenging. Tax treatment of investments varies dramatically based on factors such as type of investment, type of income it produces, how long you've held it and whether any special limitations or breaks apply.

And there are many additional factors to evaluate before deciding whether to sell or hold an investment, such as investment goals, time horizon, risk tolerance, factors related to the investment itself, fees and charges that apply to buying and selling securities, and your need for cash. But taxes are still important to consider if you want to prevent them from eroding your returns.

Capital gains tax and timing

Although time, not timing, is generally the key to long-term investment success, timing can have a dramatic impact on the tax consequences of investment activities. For 2021, your marginal long-term capital gains rate can be as much as 20 percentage points lower than your ordinary-income tax rate.

The long-term capital gains rate applies to investments held for more than 12 months. The applicable rate depends on your income level and the type of asset you've sold. (See Chart 3.)

Currently the top long-term gains rate of 20% kicks in before the top ordinary-income rate does. (See Chart 8 on page 24.) Lawmakers could, however, make changes to

the rates sooner. Taxing long-term gains of the highest-income taxpayers at their ordinary-income rate has been proposed, though a smaller increase may be more likely. Higher rates already apply to certain types of assets. (See Chart 3.)

Holding on to an investment until you've owned it more than one year may help substantially cut tax on any gain. Keeping it even longer can also make tax sense. But be sure to look at your specific situation, and keep an eye out for possible tax law changes.

Being tax-smart with losses

Losses aren't truly losses until they're realized — that is, generally until you sell the investment for less than what you paid for it. So while it's distressing to see an account statement that shows a large loss, the loss won't affect your current tax situation as long as you still own the investment.

Realized capital losses are netted against realized capital gains to determine capital gains tax liability. If net losses exceed net gains, you can deduct only \$3,000 (\$1,500 for married taxpayers filing separately) of losses per year.

CHART 3 What's the maximum 2021 capital gains tax rate?

Type of gain	Rate ¹
Short-term (assets held 12 months or less)	Taxpayer's ordinary-income tax rate
Long-term (assets held more than 12 months)	15%
Some key exceptions	
Long-term gain of certain higher-income taxpayers	20% ²
Most long-term gain that would be taxed at 10% or 12% based on the taxpayer's ordinary-income rate	0%
Long-term gain on collectibles, such as artwork and antiques	28%
Long-term gain attributable to certain recapture of prior depreciation on real property	25%
Gain on qualified small business (QSB) stock held more than 5 years	
■ Acquired before Feb. 18, 2009	14% ³
■ Acquired on or after Feb. 18, 2009, and before Sept. 28, 2010	7% ⁴
■ Acquired on or after Sept. 28, 2010	0%

¹ In addition, the 3.8% net investment income tax (NIIT) applies to net investment income to the extent that modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) exceeds \$200,000 (singles and heads of households), \$250,000 (married filing jointly) or \$125,000 (married filing separately).

² The 20% rate applies only to those with taxable income exceeding \$445,850 (singles), \$473,750 (heads of households), \$501,600 (joint filers) or \$250,800 (separate filers).

³ Effective rate based on a 50% exclusion from a 28% rate.

⁴ Effective rate based on a 75% exclusion from a 28% rate.

against ordinary income (such as wages, self-employment and business income, interest, dividends, and taxable retirement plan distributions). But you can carry forward excess losses until death.

If you don't have enough gains to absorb losses, you could be left with losses in excess of the annual ordinary-income deduction limit. So think twice before selling an investment at a loss. After all, if you hold on to the investment, it may recover the lost value. In fact, a buy-and-hold strategy works well for many long-term investors because it can minimize the effects of market volatility.

Of course, an investment might continue to lose value. That's one reason why tax considerations shouldn't be the primary driver of investment decisions. If you're ready to divest yourself of a poorly performing stock because, for example, you don't think its performance will improve or your investment objective or risk tolerance has changed, don't hesitate solely for tax reasons.

Plus, building up losses for future use could be beneficial. This may be especially true if you have a large investment portfolio, real estate holdings or a closely held business that might generate substantial future gains, or if tax rates increase.

CASE STUDY 2

How to qualify for the 0% capital gains rate



Faced with a long-term capital gains tax rate of 23.8% (20% for the top tax bracket, plus the 3.8% NIIT), David and Michelle decide to give some appreciated stock to their adult daughter, Alexis. Just out of college and making only enough from her entry-level job to leave her with \$25,000 in taxable income, Alexis falls into the 12% ordinary-income tax bracket and the 0% long-term capital gains bracket.

However, the 0% rate applies only to the extent that capital gains "fill up" the gap between Alexis's taxable income and the top end of the 0% bracket. For 2021, the 0% bracket for singles tops out at \$40,400, (just \$125 less than the top of the 12% ordinary-income bracket). So if Alexis sells the stock her parents transferred to her and her gains are \$15,000, the entire amount will qualify for the 0% rate. The sale will be tax-free vs. the \$3,570 David and Michelle would have owed had they sold the stock themselves.

Warning: If Alexis had been subject to the "kiddie tax" (see page 18), the results would have been quite different. It's also important to consider any gift tax consequences before transferring stock. (See page 22.)

Finally, remember that capital gains distributions from mutual funds can also absorb capital losses.

Wash sale rule

If you want to achieve a tax loss with minimal change in your portfolio's asset allocation, consider the wash sale rule. It prevents you from taking a loss on a security if you buy a substantially identical security (or an option to buy such a security) within 30 days before or after you sell the security that created the loss. You can recognize the loss only when you sell the replacement security.

Fortunately, there are ways to avoid triggering the wash sale rule and still achieve your goals. For example, you can:

- ▲ Sell the security and immediately buy securities of a different company in the same industry or shares in a mutual fund that holds securities much like the ones you sold,
- ▲ Sell the security and wait 31 days to repurchase the same security, or
- ▲ Before selling the security, purchase additional shares of that security equal to the number you want to sell at a loss, and then wait 31 days to sell the original portion.

Alternatively, you can do a bond swap, where you sell a bond, take a loss and

then immediately buy another bond of similar quality and duration from a different issuer. Generally, the wash sale rule doesn't apply because the bonds aren't considered substantially identical. Thus, you can achieve a tax loss with virtually no change in economic position. But these rules are complex, so you should consult with your tax advisor to make sure your tax treatment matches your expectations.

Warning: You can't avoid the wash sale rule by selling stock at a loss in a taxable account and purchasing the same stock within 30 days in a tax-advantaged retirement account.

Mutual funds

Investing in mutual funds is an easy way to diversify your portfolio. But beware of the tax pitfalls.

First, mutual funds with high turnover rates can create income that's taxed at ordinary-income rates. Choosing funds that provide primarily long-term gains can save you more tax dollars because of the lower long-term rates.

Second, earnings on mutual funds are typically reinvested. Unless you or your investment advisor increases your basis accordingly, you may report more gain than required when you sell the fund. Brokerage firms are required to track (and report to the IRS) your cost basis in mutual funds acquired in recent years.

Third, buying equity mutual fund shares late in the year can be costly taxwise. See Case Study 3 on page 10 to learn why.

Small business stock

By purchasing stock in certain small businesses, you can diversify your portfolio. You also may enjoy preferential tax treatment:

Conversion of capital loss to ordinary loss. If you sell qualifying Section 1244 small business stock at a loss, you can treat up to \$50,000 (\$100,000, if married filing jointly) as an ordinary, rather than a capital, loss — regardless of your holding period. This means you can use it to offset ordinary income, reducing your tax by as much as 37%

of this portion of the loss. Sec. 1244 applies only if total capital invested isn't more than \$1 million.

Tax-free gain rollovers. If within 60 days of selling qualified small business (QSB) stock you buy other QSB stock with the proceeds, you can defer the tax on your gain until you dispose of the new stock. The rolled-over gain reduces your basis in the new stock. For determining long-term capital gains treatment, the new stock's holding period includes the holding period of the stock you sold. To be a QSB, a business must be engaged in an active trade or business and must not have assets that exceed \$50 million, among other requirements.

Exclusion of gain. Generally, taxpayers selling QSB stock are allowed to exclude up to 100% of their gain if they've held the stock for more than five years. But, depending on the acquisition date, the exclusion may be less: The exclusion is 75% for stock acquired on or after Feb. 18, 2009, and before Sept. 28, 2010, and 50% for stock acquired before Feb. 18, 2009.

When the exclusion is less than 100%, the taxable portion of any QSB gain will be subject to the lesser of your ordinary-income rate or 28%, rather than the normal long-term capital gains rate. (See Chart 3 on page 8.) Thus, if the 28% tax rate and the 50% exclusion apply, the effective tax rate on the QSB gain will be 14% ($28\% \times 50\%$).

Keep in mind that all three of these tax benefits are subject to additional requirements and limits. Consult your tax and financial advisors to be sure an investment in small business stock is right for you.

Passive activities

If you've invested in a trade or business in which you don't materially participate and where income or loss flows through to your tax return, remember the passive activity rules. Why? Passive activity *income* may be subject to the 3.8% NIIT (see page 11), and passive activity *losses* generally are deductible only against income from other passive activities. You can carry forward disallowed losses, subject to the same limits each tax year.

To avoid passive activity treatment, you must "materially participate" in the activity, which typically means you must participate in the trade or business more than 500 hours during the year or demonstrate that your involvement constitutes substantially all of the participation in the activity. But there are other ways to meet the material participation test. Plus, there are special rules that apply to real estate. (See page 13.) To help ensure your hours claim will be able to withstand IRS scrutiny, carefully track and document your time. Contemporaneous recordkeeping is better than records that are created after the fact.

If you don't pass the material participation test, consider:

Increasing your involvement. If you can exceed 500 hours, the activity no longer will be subject to passive activity rules.

Grouping activities. You may be able to group certain activities together to be treated as one activity for tax purposes and exceed the 500-hour threshold. But the rules are complex, and there are potential downsides to consider.

Looking at other activities. If you have passive losses, one option is to limit your participation in another activity that's generating net income, so that you don't meet the 500-hour test. Another is to invest in an additional income-producing trade or business that will be passive to you. Under both strategies, you'll have passive income that can absorb some or all of your passive losses.

Disposing of the activity. This generally allows you to deduct all passive losses — including any loss on disposition (subject to basis and capital loss limitations). But, again, the rules are complex.

Even if you do pass the material participation test, be aware that your loss deduction might be affected by the rules for deducting business losses. (See "What's new!" on page 14.)

CASE STUDY 3

Mutual fund capital gains distribution: A taxable event



Marcus purchases 500 shares of an equity mutual fund on December 1 at \$100 per share, for a total investment of \$50,000. The next week, the fund makes a capital gains distribution of \$15 per share.

Marcus ends up with capital gains of \$7,500, reportable on his tax return for the year of the distribution. It doesn't matter whether

the actual value of the shares has increased or even decreased since Marcus purchased them, or whether he reinvests the proceeds back into the same fund.

Why? The distribution itself is a taxable event. If capital gains distributions from the mutual fund are reinvested in the fund, the distribution itself doesn't change Marcus's value in the fund. It simply increases the number of shares he owns, yet now at a lower per-share value.

Income investments

Qualified dividends are taxed at the favorable long-term capital gains tax rate rather than at your higher ordinary-income tax rate. Interest income, however, generally is taxed at ordinary-income rates.

So stocks that pay qualified dividends may be more attractive taxwise than other income investments, such as CDs and taxable bonds. But beware that taxing long-term gains of the highest-income taxpayers at their ordinary-income rate has been proposed, and this would likely also impact the taxation of qualified dividends of such taxpayers.

Some dividends are already subject to ordinary-income rates. These include certain dividends from:

- ▲ Real estate investment trusts (REITs),
- ▲ Regulated investment companies (RICs),
- ▲ Money market mutual funds, and
- ▲ Certain foreign investments.

Also note that the tax treatment of bond income varies. For example:

- ▲ Corporate bond interest is fully taxable for federal *and* state purposes.
- ▲ Bonds (except U.S. savings bonds) with original issue discount (OID) build up “interest” as they rise toward maturity. You’re generally considered to earn a portion of that interest annually — even though the bonds don’t pay this interest annually — and you must pay tax on it.
- ▲ Interest on U.S. government bonds is taxable on federal returns but exempt by federal law on state and local returns.
- ▲ Interest on state and local government bonds is excludable on federal returns. If the bonds were issued in your home state, interest also may be excludable on your state return, depending on the state.

Keep in mind that state and municipal bonds usually pay a lower interest rate. See Case Study 4.

Warning: Tax-exempt interest from private-activity municipal bonds can trigger or increase AMT liability. However, any income from tax-exempt bonds issued in 2009 and 2010 (along with 2009 and 2010 re-fundings of bonds issued after Dec. 31, 2003, and before Jan. 1, 2009) is excluded from the AMT. And AMT is less of a risk for most taxpayers now. (See page 3.)

3.8% NIIT

Taxpayers with modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) over \$200,000 (\$250,000 if married filing jointly and \$125,000 if married filing separately)

CASE STUDY 4

Tax-exempt or taxable bonds? It's a question of yield



Working with her financial advisor, Sara decides she needs more bonds in her investment portfolio. She's in the 37% bracket, so she's leaning toward municipal bonds. After all, municipal bond interest will be tax-free on Sara's federal return.

But the fact that an investment is tax-exempt doesn't necessarily make it a better choice than a comparable taxable investment.

Municipal bonds typically offer lower yields than comparable corporate bonds. To make a fair comparison, Sara needs to calculate the tax-equivalent yield — which incorporates tax savings into the municipal bond's yield — using this formula:

Tax-equivalent yield = actual yield / (1 – Sara's marginal tax rate).

For example, Sara considers a municipal bond with a 4.00% yield and a comparable corporate bond that offers a 6.25% yield. Because she's in the 37% tax bracket, the municipal bond's tax-equivalent yield is $.04 / (1 - .37) = .0635$, or 6.35%.

In terms of the amount of income she'll get to keep, the municipal bond is a slightly better choice. If the municipal bond is also exempt from state and local taxes, it's an even better choice.

But Sara also needs to consider factors such as risk and how well each bond will help achieve her overall investment goals.

may owe the net investment income tax (NIIT) on top of whatever other tax they owe on their investment income. The NIIT equals 3.8% of the lesser of net investment income or the amount by which MAGI exceeds the applicable threshold.

Net investment income can include capital gains, dividends, interest, passive business income, rental income and other investment-related income. But it *doesn't* include business or self-rental income from an active trade or business.

Many of the strategies that can help you save or defer income tax on your investments can also help you avoid or defer NIIT liability. And because the threshold for the NIIT is based on MAGI, strategies that reduce your MAGI — such as making retirement plan contributions (see page 20) — could also help you avoid or reduce NIIT liability.

Investment interest expense

Interest on debt used to buy assets held for investment, such as margin debt used to buy securities, generally is deductible for both regular tax and AMT purposes. But special rules apply.

Your investment interest expense deduction is limited to your net investment income, which, for the purposes of this deduction, generally includes taxable interest, nonqualified dividends and net short-term capital gains (but not long-term capital gains), reduced by other investment expenses. Any disallowed interest expense is carried forward, and you can deduct it in a later year against net investment income.

You may elect to treat all or a portion of net long-term capital gains or qualified dividends as investment income in order to deduct more of your investment interest expense. But if you do, that portion of the long-term capital gain or dividend will be taxed at ordinary-income rates.

Payments a short seller makes to the stock lender in lieu of dividends may be deductible as investment interest expense. But interest on debt used to buy securities that pay tax-exempt income, such as municipal bonds, isn't deductible.

Also keep in mind that passive interest expense — interest on debt incurred to fund a passive activity — becomes part of your overall passive activity income or loss, subject to limitations. ■

Breaks related to your home and other real estate



There are many ways you can maximize the tax benefits associated with owning a principal residence, vacation home or rental property. Tax planning is also important if you'd like to sell your home or other real estate this year. But don't forget about the TCJA. It impacts some home-related deductions and some tax breaks for real estate investors and other real property businesses.

Home-related deductions

Consider these itemized deductions in your tax planning:

Property tax deduction. Under the TCJA, for 2021, the property tax deduction is subject to a \$10,000 limit (\$5,000 if you're married filing separately) on combined deductions for state and local taxes (SALT). (See page 2 for more details.)

Mortgage interest deduction. You generally can deduct interest on mortgage debt incurred to purchase, build or improve your principal residence and a second residence. Points paid related to your principal residence also may be deductible. For 2021, the TCJA reduces the mortgage debt limit from \$1 million to \$750,000 for debt incurred after Dec. 15, 2017 (\$500,000 and \$375,000, respectively, for separate filers), with some limited exceptions.

Home equity debt interest deduction. For 2021, the TCJA effectively limits the home equity interest deduction to debt that would qualify for the home mortgage interest deduction. (Under pre-TCJA law, interest was deductible on up to \$100,000 of home equity debt used for any purpose, such as to pay off credit card debt or to buy a car.)

Home office deduction. Under the TCJA, employees can no longer deduct

home office expenses, because of the suspension of miscellaneous deductions subject to the 2% of adjusted gross income (AGI) floor. (See page 2.) But the self-employed can still claim the deduction if their home office is their principal place of business (or used substantially and regularly to conduct business) and that's the space's only use.

They can deduct from their self-employment income a portion of their mortgage interest, property taxes, insurance, utilities and certain other expenses, and the depreciation allocable to the space. Or they can use the simplified method for calculating the deduction — \$5 per square foot for up

to 300 square feet. Although taxpayers using this method won't be able to depreciate the portion of their home that's used as an office, they can claim mortgage interest, property taxes and casualty losses as itemized deductions to the extent otherwise allowable, without needing to apportion them between personal and business use of the home.

Home rental rules

If you rent out all or a portion of your principal residence or second home for less than 15 days during the year, you don't have to report the income. But expenses directly associated with the rental, such as advertising and cleaning, won't be deductible.

CASE STUDY 5

Reaping the benefits of bonus depreciation on QIP investments

Avery owns a small commercial building and has several retail tenants. Sadly, one tenant went out of business during the pandemic. But another tenant is interested in expanding into that space if it can be reconfigured to meet its needs.

So Avery is considering making some leasehold improvements and wondering what tax breaks would be available. Leasehold improvements made in 2018 for another tenant didn't provide much of a tax benefit due to a technical error in the TCJA.

The TCJA classified qualified retail-improvement, restaurant and leasehold-improvement property as qualified improvement property (QIP). QIP placed in service after 2017 should have had an accelerated, 15-year MACRS recovery period and, in turn, qualify for 100% bonus depreciation. Bonus depreciation is additional first-year depreciation of 100% for qualified property placed in service through Dec. 31, 2022. (For 2023 through 2026, bonus depreciation is scheduled to be gradually reduced.) But, the statutory language didn't define QIP as 15-year property, so QIP defaulted to a 39-year recovery period, making it ineligible for bonus depreciation.

Avery consults a tax advisor, who shares some good news: The CARES Act included a technical correction to fix the QIP drafting error. Commercial real estate owners like Avery as well as other businesses that have made qualified improvements during the past three years can claim an immediate tax refund for the bonus depreciation they missed. Businesses investing in QIP in 2021 and beyond also can claim bonus depreciation going forward, according to the phaseout schedule.

So, not only can Avery's 2021 leasehold improvements potentially qualify for 100% bonus depreciation, but Avery can file an amended tax return for 2018 and request a refund for bonus depreciation related to the 2018 leasehold improvements.

WHAT'S NEW!

TCJA interest deduction rules return for 2021

Generally, under the TCJA, interest paid or accrued by a business is deductible only up to 30% of adjusted taxable income (ATI). Taxpayers with average annual gross receipts of \$25 million or less for the three previous tax years generally are exempt from the limitation. Larger real property businesses can *elect* to continue to fully deduct their interest, but then they're required to use the alternative depreciation system for real property used in the business.

The CARES Act generally increased the interest expense deduction limit to 50% of ATI for the 2019 and 2020 tax years.

But that break hasn't been extended, so the TCJA's 30% deduction limit and other rules return for 2021.

If you rent out your principal residence or second home for 15 days or more, you'll have to report the income. But you may be entitled to deduct some or all of your rental expenses — such as utilities, repairs, insurance and depreciation. Exactly what you can deduct depends on whether the home is classified as a rental property for tax purposes (based on the amount of personal vs. rental use):

Rental property. You can deduct rental expenses, including losses, subject to the real estate activity rules discussed at right. Property tax attributable to the rental use of the home isn't subject to the SALT limit. You can't deduct any interest that's attributable to your personal use of the home. However, you can take the personal portion of property tax as an itemized deduction (subject to the SALT limit).

Nonrental property. You can deduct rental expenses only to the extent of your rental or other passive income. Any excess can be carried forward to offset rental income in future years. You also can take an itemized deduction for the personal portion of both mortgage interest and property taxes, subject to the applicable limits. In some instances, it may be beneficial to reduce personal use of a residence so it will be classified as a rental property.

Home sales

When you sell your principal residence, you can exclude up to \$250,000 of gain (\$500,000 for married couples filing jointly) if you meet certain tests. Gain that qualifies for exclusion will also be excluded from the 3.8% NIIT. (See page 11.) To support an accurate tax

basis, maintain thorough records, including information on your original cost and subsequent improvements, reduced by any casualty losses and depreciation claimed based on business use. **Warning:** Gain that's allocable to a period of "non-qualified" use generally isn't excludable.

Losses on the sale of any personal residence aren't deductible. But if part of your home is rented out or used exclusively for your business, the loss attributable to that portion may be deductible.

Because a second home is ineligible for the personal residence gain exclusion, consider converting it to rental use before selling. It can be considered a business asset, and you may be able to defer tax on any gains through an installment sale or a Section 1031 exchange. Or you may be able to deduct a loss, but only to the extent attributable to a decline in value *after* the conversion.

Real estate activity rules

Income and losses from investment real estate or rental property are passive by definition — unless you're a real estate professional. Why is this important? Passive activity income and losses have some negative tax consequences. (See "Passive activities" on page 10.)

To qualify as a real estate professional, you must annually perform:

- ▲ More than 50% of your personal services in real property trades or businesses in which you materially participate, and
- ▲ More than 750 hours of service in these businesses during the year.

Keep in mind that special rules for spouses may help you meet the material participation test. **Warning:** To help withstand IRS scrutiny, be sure to keep adequate records of time spent.

Depreciation-related breaks

Valuable depreciation-related breaks may be available to real estate investors. One such break is the Sec. 179 expensing election. It allows you to deduct (rather than depreciate over a number of years) qualified improvement property.

The TCJA also allows Sec. 179 expensing for certain depreciable tangible personal property used predominantly to furnish lodging and for the following improvements to nonresidential real property: roofs, HVAC equipment, fire protection and alarm systems, and security systems.

For qualifying property placed in service in 2021, the expensing limit is \$1.05 million. The break begins to phase out dollar-for-dollar when asset acquisitions for the year exceed \$2.62 million. (These amounts are adjusted annually for inflation.)

Other valuable breaks include bonus depreciation and accelerated depreciation. (See Case Study 5.)

Tax-deferral

It's possible to divest yourself of appreciated investment real estate but defer the tax liability. This may even help you keep your income low enough to avoid triggering the 3.8% NIIT and the 20% long-term capital gains rate. Consider the following:

Installment sale. An installment sale allows you to defer gains by spreading them over several years as you receive the proceeds. **Warning:** Ordinary gain from certain depreciation recapture is recognized in the year of sale, even if no cash is received.

Sec. 1031 exchange. Also known as a "like-kind" exchange, this technique allows you to exchange one real estate investment property for another and defer paying tax on any gain until you sell the replacement property. Beware that significantly limiting this break has been proposed. ▀

Keep your eye on your financial future while taking available tax breaks now



Times continue to be challenging for business owners. Some have businesses that are thriving while others are still struggling to recover from the pandemic and resulting economic crisis. Whatever your business's situation, taking full advantage of available tax breaks is critical. At the same time, you must keep your eye on your own financial future, which requires a long-term outlook as well.

Business structure

Income taxation and owner liability are the main factors that differentiate business structures. Many business owners choose entities that combine pass-through taxation with limited liability, namely limited liability companies (LLCs) and S corporations.

The TCJA significantly changed the tax consequences of business structure. The current corporate rate (21%) is substantially lower than the top individual rate (37%), providing sizable tax benefits to C corporations and mitigating the impact of double taxation for their owners. But, the TCJA also introduced a powerful deduction for owners of pass-through entities. (See below.)

For tax or other reasons, a structure change may be beneficial in certain situations. But keep in mind that increases to both the corporate rate and the top individual rate, as well as limits on the deduction for owners of pass-through entities, have been proposed.

199A deduction for pass-through businesses

Section 199A provides a deduction for sole proprietors and owners of pass-through business entities, such as partnerships, S corporations and LLCs that are treated as sole proprietorships or as partnerships for tax purposes. The deduction generally equals 20% of

qualified business income (QBI), not to exceed 20% of taxable income. QBI is generally defined as the net amount of qualified items of income, gain, deduction and loss that are connected with the conduct of a U.S. business.

Additional limits begin to apply if taxable income exceeds the applicable threshold — \$164,900 or, if married filing jointly, \$329,800 (\$164,925 if married filing separately). The limits fully apply when 2021 taxable income exceeds \$214,900 and \$429,800 (\$214,925), respectively.

One such limit is that the 199A deduction generally can't exceed the greater of the owner's share of:

- ▀ 50% of the amount of W-2 wages paid to employees by the qualified business during the tax year, or:
- ▀ The sum of 25% of W-2 wages plus 2.5% of the cost of qualified property.

Another is that the 199A deduction generally isn't available for income from "specified service businesses."

WHAT'S NEW!

Tighter limits on loss deductions are back

A loss occurs when a business's expenses and other deductions for the year exceed its revenue. To provide COVID-19 relief, the CARES Act made some temporary changes to tax breaks related to business loss deductions, but the relief hasn't been extended to 2021:

1. **Net operating losses (NOLs).** The TCJA generally reduces the amount of taxable income that can be offset with NOL deductions from 100% to 80%. It also generally prohibits NOLs from being carried back to an earlier tax year — but allows them to be carried forward indefinitely (as opposed to the previous 20-year limit).

Under the CARES Act, taxpayers could carry back NOLs arising in 2018 through 2020 tax years to the previous five tax years. The CARES Act also allowed taxpayers to potentially claim an NOL deduction equal to 100% of taxable income for prior-year NOLs carried forward into tax years beginning before 2021.

The TCJA's 80% of taxable income deduction limit and prohibition of carry-backs generally return for NOLs arising in 2021 or later.

2. **Pass-through entity "excess" business losses.** For 2021, the TCJA applies a limit to deductions for current-year business losses incurred by non-corporate taxpayers: Such losses generally can't offset more than \$250,000 (\$500,000 for married couples filing jointly) of income from other sources, such as salary, self-employment income, interest, dividends and capital gains. (The limit is annually adjusted for inflation.) "Excess" losses are carried forward to later tax years and can then be deducted under the NOL rules.

The CARES Act temporarily lifted the limit, allowing taxpayers to deduct 100% of business losses arising in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Not only does the deduction limit return for 2021, but the ARPA has extended it through 2026. There are proposals to make the deduction limit permanent.

CHART 4

**Profit-sharing plan vs. SEP:
How much can you contribute?**

Profit-sharing plan	SEP
2021 maximum contribution: \$58,000 or \$64,500	2021 maximum contribution: \$58,000
Additional limits: You can't contribute more than 25% of your compensation generally. But you can contribute 100% up to the 401(k) limits if the plan includes a 401(k) arrangement.	Additional limits: You can't contribute more than 25% of your eligible compensation. (Special rules apply if you're self-employed.)
To qualify for the \$64,500 limit, your plan must include a 401(k) arrangement. And you must be eligible to make catch-up contributions (that is, be age 50 or older).	To make the maximum contribution, your eligible compensation must be at least \$232,000 (\$290,000 before the deduction if you're self-employed).

Note: Other factors may further limit your maximum contribution.

Examples include businesses that provide investment-type services and most professional practices (other than engineering and architecture).

To reiterate, none of these limits apply if your taxable income is under the applicable threshold. In that case, you should qualify for the full 20% deduction.

Retirement saving

If most of your money is tied up in your business, retirement can be a challenge. So if you haven't already set up a tax-advantaged retirement plan, consider doing so this year. If you might be subject to the 3.8% NIIT (see page 11), this may be particularly beneficial because retirement plan contributions can reduce your modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) and thus help you reduce or avoid the NIIT. Keep in mind that, if you have employees, they generally must be allowed to participate in the plan, provided they work enough hours and meet other qualification requirements. Here are a few options:

Profit-sharing plan. This is a defined contribution plan that allows discretionary employer contributions and flexibility in plan design. You can make deductible 2021 contributions (see Chart 4 for limits) as late as the due date of your 2021 income tax return, including extensions — provided your plan exists on Dec. 31, 2021.

SEP. A Simplified Employee Pension is a defined contribution plan that provides benefits similar to those of a profit-sharing plan. But you can establish a SEP in 2022 and still make

deductible 2021 contributions as late as the due date of your 2021 income tax return, including extensions. (See Chart 4 for contribution limits.)

Defined benefit plan. This plan sets a future pension benefit and then actuarially calculates the contributions needed to attain that benefit. The maximum compensation for benefit purposes for 2021 is generally \$230,000 or 100% of average earned income for the highest three consecutive years, if less. Because it's actuarially driven, the 2021 contribution needed to attain the future benefit may exceed the maximum contributions allowed by other plans, depending on your age and the desired benefit.

You can make deductible 2021 contributions until the due date of your 2021 income tax return, including extensions — provided your plan exists on Dec. 31, 2021. **Warning:** Employer contributions generally are mandatory.

Exit planning

An exit strategy is a plan for passing on responsibility for running the company, transferring ownership and extracting your money from the business. This requires planning well in advance of the transition. Here are some common exit options:

Buy-sell agreement. When a business has more than one owner, a buy-sell agreement can control what happens to the business when a specified event occurs, such as an owner's retirement, disability or death. It's critical to factor in tax and funding issues when drafting a buy-sell agreement.

Succession within the family. You can pass your business on to family members by giving them interests, selling them interests or doing some of each. Now may be a particularly good time to transfer ownership interests in your business. (See page 22 to learn why.)

ESOP. An employee stock ownership plan is a qualified retirement plan created primarily to own your company's stock. It can provide liquidity and various tax benefits.

Sale to an outsider. If you can find the right buyer, you may be able to sell the business at a premium.

Sale or acquisition

Whether you're selling your business as part of an exit strategy or acquiring another company to help grow your business, the tax consequences can have a major impact on the transaction's success or failure. Consider installment sales, for example. A taxable sale might be structured as an installment sale if the buyer lacks sufficient cash or pays a contingent amount based on the business's performance.

An installment sale also may make sense if the seller wishes to spread the gain over a number of years. This could be especially beneficial if it would allow the seller to stay under the thresholds for triggering the 3.8% NIIT or the 20% long-term capital gains rate. But an installment sale can backfire on the seller. For example:

- Depreciation recapture must be reported as gain in the year of sale, no matter how much cash the seller receives.
- If tax rates increase, the overall tax could wind up being more.

With a corporation, a key consideration is whether the deal should be structured as an asset sale or a stock sale. If a stock sale is chosen, another important question is whether it should be a tax-deferred transfer or a taxable sale.

Depending on the timing and structure of the sale or acquisition, many factors may need to be considered. Be sure to consult with your tax advisor so you understand the consequences of your particular plan. Of course, tax consequences are only one of many important considerations when planning a sale or acquisition. ■

How to do well by doing good



Giving to charity can provide not only large tax deductions to help you do well financially but also the satisfaction of doing good. As long as you keep in mind the various rules and limits, such as that you generally must itemize tax deductions to benefit, charitable giving can play a key role in your tax planning.

Cash donations

Outright gifts of cash (which include donations made via check, credit card and payroll deduction) are the easiest to make. The substantiation requirements depend on the gift's value:

- ▲ Gifts under \$250 can be supported by a canceled check, credit card receipt or written communication from the charity.
- ▲ Gifts of \$250 or more must be substantiated by the charity.

Deductions for cash gifts to public charities normally can't exceed 60% of your adjusted gross income (AGI), but this limit has been substantially increased through 2021. (See "What's new!") The AGI limit remains at 30% for cash donations to nonoperating private foundations. Contributions exceeding the applicable AGI limit can be carried forward for up to five years.

Warning: Charitable contribution deductions are allowed for alternative minimum tax (AMT) purposes, but your tax savings may be less if you're subject to the AMT. For example, if you're in the 37% tax bracket for regular income tax purposes, but the 28% tax bracket for AMT purposes, your deduction may be worth only 28% instead of 37%.

Stock donations

Appreciated publicly traded securities you've held more than one year are

long-term capital gains property, which often makes one of the best charitable gifts. Why? You can deduct the current fair market value and avoid the capital gains tax you'd pay if you sold the property. This will be especially beneficial to taxpayers facing the 3.8% NIIT (see page 11) or the top 20% long-term capital gains rate this year.

Donations of long-term capital gains property are subject to tighter deduction limits, however — 30% of AGI for gifts to public charities, 20% for gifts to non-operating private foundations. In some situations, the increased AGI limit for cash gifts to public charities might mean that cash gifts will make more sense in 2021. (See "What's new!")

Don't donate stock that's worth less than your basis. Instead, sell the stock so you can deduct the loss and then donate the cash proceeds to charity.

IRA donations

Taxpayers age 70½ or older are allowed to make direct contributions from their IRA to qualified charitable organizations, up to \$100,000 per tax year. Note that the age for these qualified charitable distributions (QCDs) hasn't changed even though the SECURE Act increased the age after which required minimum distributions (RMDs) generally must begin from 70½ to 72. (See page 21.)

CHART 5 How much can itemizers deduct for their donations?

Cash. This includes not just actual cash but gifts made by check, credit card or payroll deduction. You may deduct 100%.

Ordinary-income property. Examples include stocks and bonds held one year or less, inventory, and property subject to depreciation recapture. You generally may deduct only the lesser of fair market value or your tax basis.

Long-term capital gains property. You may deduct the current fair market value of appreciated stocks, bonds and other securities and real estate held more than one year.

Tangible personal property. Your deduction depends on the situation:

- If the property *isn't* related to the charity's tax-exempt function (such as an antique donated for a charity auction), your deduction is limited to your basis.
- If the property *is* related to the charity's tax-exempt function (such as an antique donated to a museum for its collection), you can deduct the fair market value.

Vehicle. Unless it's being used by the charity, you generally may deduct only the amount the charity receives when it sells the vehicle.

Use of property. Examples include use of a vacation home and a loan of artwork. Generally, you receive no deduction because it isn't considered a completed gift.

Services. You may deduct only your out-of-pocket expenses, not the fair market value of your services. You can deduct 14 cents per charitable mile driven.

Payments made in exchange for college athletic event seating rights. Under the TCJA, these are no longer deductible.

Note: Your annual charitable deductions may be reduced if they exceed certain limits based on your AGI, the type of donation and the type of charity receiving the donation. If you receive some benefit from the charity relating to your donation, such as services or products, your deduction must be reduced by the value of the benefit you receive. Various substantiation requirements also apply. Consult your tax advisor for additional details.

A charitable deduction can't be claimed for QCDs. But QCDs aren't included in taxable income and can be used to satisfy an IRA owner's RMD. (See page 21.)

A QCD might be tax-smart if you won't benefit from the charitable deduction or face AGI-based limits. To be a QCD, the transfer must be made by the IRA trustee directly to an eligible charity.

Making gifts over time

If you don't know which charities you want to benefit but you'd like to start making large contributions now, consider a private foundation. It offers you significant control over how your donations ultimately will be used. You must comply with complex rules, however, which can make foundations expensive to run. Also, the AGI limits for deductibility of contributions to nonoperating foundations are lower. (See "Cash donations" and "Stock donations.")

If you'd like to influence how your donations are spent but avoid a foundation's downsides, consider a donor-advised fund (DAF). Many larger public charities and investment firms offer them. **Warning:** To deduct your DAF contribution, obtain a written acknowledgment from the sponsoring organization that it has exclusive legal control over the assets contributed.

Charitable remainder trusts

To benefit a charity while helping ensure your own financial future, consider a CRT. Here's how it works:

- ▲ For a given term, the CRT pays an amount to you annually (some of which generally is taxable).
- ▲ At the term's end, the CRT's remaining assets pass to one or more charities.
- ▲ When you fund the CRT, you receive an income tax deduction for the present value of the amount that will go to charity.
- ▲ The property is removed from your taxable estate.

You may owe capital gains tax when you receive the payments. However, because the payments are spread over time, much of the liability will be deferred. Plus, a portion of each payment might

WHAT'S NEW!

CAA extends charitable donation deduction increases to 2021

Making large *cash* donations to public charities this year might be beneficial because the CARES Act increased the 2020 deduction limit for such gifts from 60% of adjusted gross income (AGI) to 100% of AGI, and the CAA has extended this increase to 2021. Normally donations of appreciated stock provide the biggest tax-saving opportunities, but this year cash donations might offer greater opportunities because of the 100% of AGI deduction limit.

If you *don't* itemize deductions, normally you can't deduct charitable donations. But, the CARES Act allowed taxpayers who claim the standard deduction to deduct up to \$300 of cash donations to qualified charities in 2020, and the CAA has also extended this break to 2021 — and increased the maximum deduction to \$600 for married couples filing jointly.

Also keep in mind that, if itemizing no longer will save you tax because of the increased standard deduction, you might benefit from "bunching" donations into alternating years so that your total itemized deductions in those years would then surpass your standard deduction. You can then itemize just in those years.

be considered tax-free return of principal. This may help you reduce or avoid exposure to the 3.8% NIIT and the 20% top long-term capital gains rate.

You can name someone other than yourself as income beneficiary or fund the CRT at your death, but the tax consequences will be different.

Charitable lead trusts

To benefit charity while transferring assets to loved ones at a reduced tax cost, consider a CLT. It works as follows:

- ▲ For a given term, the CLT pays an amount to one or more charities.
- ▲ At the term's end, the CLT's remaining assets pass to one or more loved ones you name as remainder beneficiaries.
- ▲ When you fund the CLT, you make a taxable gift equal to the present value of the amount that will go to the remainder beneficiaries.
- ▲ The property is removed from your taxable estate.

For gift tax purposes, the amount of the remainder interest is determined using the assumption that the trust assets will grow at the current Section 7520 rate. The lower the Sec. 7520 rate, the smaller the remainder interest and the lower the gift tax — or the less of your lifetime gift tax exemption you'll have to use up. If the trust's earnings outperform

the Sec. 7520 rate, the excess earnings will be transferred to the remainder beneficiaries gift- and estate-tax-free.

Because the Sec. 7520 rate is currently very low, now may be a good time to lock in a low rate while still available and take the chance that your actual return will outperform it. Keep in mind, however, that the increased gift and estate tax exemption may reduce the tax benefits of a CLT, depending on your specific situation. (For more on estate and gift taxes, see page 22.)

You can name yourself as the remainder beneficiary or fund the CLT at your death, but the tax consequences will be different.

Qualified charities

Before you donate, it's critical to make sure the charity you're considering is indeed a qualified charity — that it's eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions.

The IRS's online search tool, Tax Exempt Organization Search, can help you more easily find out whether an organization is eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable contributions. You can access the tool at IRS.gov. According to the IRS, you may rely on this list in determining deductibility of your contributions.

Also, don't forget that political donations aren't deductible. ■

Planning for children's financial security



One of the biggest goals of most parents is that their children become financially secure adults. To pave the way, it's important to show young people the value of saving and provide them with the best education possible. By taking advantage of tax breaks for you and your children, you can do both. If you're a grandparent, you also may be able to take advantage of some of these breaks — or help your grandchildren take advantage of them.

Child and dependent care breaks

Some higher-income taxpayers who couldn't benefit from the child tax credit before the TCJA went into effect are now finding that they do. The TCJA has significantly raised the modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) phaseout ranges for the credit. Through 2025, the total credit amount a taxpayer is allowed to claim is reduced by \$50 for every \$1,000 (or part of a \$1,000) by which MAGI exceeds \$200,000, or \$400,000 for married couples filing jointly. The thresholds used to be only \$75,000 and \$110,000, respectively. Expanded child tax credits and advance payment were added by ARPA. See "What's new!".

Tax credits reduce your tax bill dollar for dollar (unlike deductions, which just reduce the amount of income subject to tax), so they're particularly valuable. Under the TCJA:

- ▀ For each child under age 17 at the end of the tax year, you may be able to claim a \$2,000 credit. This credit has been expanded for 2021, though.
- ▀ For each qualifying dependent other than a qualifying child (such as a dependent child over the age limit or a dependent elderly parent), a \$500 family credit may be available.

If you adopt, you might be eligible for the adoption credit. It's \$14,440 for

2021, but it's subject to a MAGI-based phaseout that's lower than for the child credit (\$216,660–\$256,660 for both heads of households and joint filers). Other child-related breaks may also be available, such as the child and dependent care tax credit. See "What's new!" for expanded breaks for 2021.

Kiddie tax

The "kiddie tax" generally applies to unearned income beyond \$2,200 (for 2021) of children under age 19 and of full-time students under age 24 (unless the students provide more than half of their own support from earned income). Such income is generally taxed at the parents' tax rate.

The purpose of the kiddie tax is to minimize the ability of parents to significantly reduce their family's taxes by transferring income-producing assets to their children in lower tax brackets. Keep the kiddie tax in mind before transferring income-producing assets to children (or grandchildren) who'd be subject to it.

IRAs for teens

One of the best ways to get children on the right financial track is to set up IRAs for them. Their retirement may seem too far off to warrant saving now, but IRAs can be ideal for teenagers precisely because they likely will have many years to let their accounts grow tax-deferred or tax-free.

WHAT'S NEW!

Child and dependent care breaks expanded for 2021

The ARPA temporarily enhances some valuable credits and deductions for families:

Child tax credit. The ARPA raises the eligibility age to under age 18 at the end of 2021. It also increases the credit to \$3,000 per child, and to \$3,600 per child under age 6 at the end of 2021. However, the increased credit amount (\$1,000 or \$1,600) is subject to lower income phaseouts: It's reduced by \$50 for every \$1,000 (or part of a \$1,000) by which MAGI exceeds \$112,000 for head of household filers, or \$150,000 for married couples filing jointly.

Under the ARPA, taxpayers can receive advance payments (generally by direct deposit) equaling 50% of the IRS's estimate of the taxpayer's 2021 child tax credit from July 2021 through December 2021.

Child and dependent care tax credit. For children under age 13 or other qualifying dependents, generally, a credit is available that equals 20% of the first \$3,000 of qualified expenses for one child or 20% of up to \$6,000 of such expenses for two or more children. So, the maximum credit is usually \$600 for one child or \$1,200 for two or more children.

For 2021, the ARPA increases the credit to 50% of up to \$8,000 in qualified expenses for one child and up to \$16,000 for two or more children — so the credit ultimately is worth up to \$4,000 or \$8,000. The credit is subject to an income-based phaseout beginning at household income levels exceeding \$125,000, but not fully phasing out until \$438,000.

Child and dependent care FSA. Under the ARPA, for 2021, you can contribute up to \$10,500 (up from \$5,000 for 2020) pretax to an employer-sponsored child and dependent care Flexible Spending Account. The plan pays or reimburses you for these expenses. You can't claim a tax credit for expenses reimbursed through an FSA.

The 2021 contribution limit is the lesser of \$6,000 or 100% of earned income. A teen's traditional IRA contributions typically are deductible, but distributions will be taxed. Roth IRA contributions aren't deductible, but qualified distributions will be tax-free.

If your children or grandchildren don't have earned income and you own a business, consider hiring them. As the business owner, you can deduct their pay, and other tax benefits may apply. **Warning:** The children must be paid in line with what you'd pay nonfamily employees for the same work.

529 plans

Section 529 plans provide another tax-advantaged savings opportunity. You can choose a prepaid tuition plan to secure current tuition rates or a tax-advantaged savings plan to fund education expenses. Here are some of the possible benefits of such plans:

- ▲ Although contributions aren't deductible for federal purposes, any growth is tax-deferred. (Some states do offer tax breaks for contributing.)
- ▲ The plans usually offer high contribution limits, and there are no income limits for contributing.
- ▲ There's generally no beneficiary age limit for contributions or distributions.
- ▲ You can control the account, even after the child is of legal age.
- ▲ You can make tax-free rollovers to another qualifying family member.
- ▲ A special break for 529 plans allows you to front-load five years' worth of annual gift tax exclusions and make up to a \$75,000 contribution (or \$150,000 if you split the gift with your spouse) per beneficiary in 2021.

Prepaid tuition vs. savings plan

With a 529 *prepaid tuition plan*, if your contract is for four years of tuition, tuition is guaranteed regardless of its cost at the time the beneficiary actually attends the school. One downside is that there's uncertainty in how benefits will be applied if the beneficiary attends a different school. Another negative is that the plan doesn't cover costs other than tuition, such as room and board.

A 529 *college savings plan*, on the other hand, can be used to pay a student's expenses at most postsecondary educational institutions. Distributions used to pay the following expenses are income-tax-free for federal purposes and potentially also for state purposes, making the tax deferral a permanent savings:

- ▲ Qualified postsecondary school expenses, such as tuition, mandatory fees, books, supplies, computer equipment, software, Internet service and, generally, room and board,
- ▲ Elementary and secondary school tuition of up to \$10,000 per year per student, and
- ▲ Up to \$10,000 of student loans per beneficiary.

The biggest downside may be that you don't have direct control over investment decisions; you're limited to the options the plan offers. Additionally, for funds already in the plan, you can make changes to your investment options only twice during the year or when you change beneficiaries. For these reasons, some taxpayers prefer Coverdell ESAs.

But each time you make a new contribution to a 529 savings plan, you can select a different option for that contribution, regardless of how many times you contribute throughout the year. And every 12 months you can make a tax-free rollover to a different 529 plan for the same child.

ESAs

Coverdell Education Savings Accounts are like 529 savings plans in that contributions aren't deductible for federal purposes, but plan assets can grow tax-deferred and distributions used to pay qualified education expenses are income-tax-free.

One of the biggest ESA advantages used to be that they allowed tax-free distributions for elementary and secondary school costs and 529 plans didn't. With the TCJA enhancements to 529 plans, this is less of an advantage. But ESAs still have a leg up because they can be used for elementary and secondary school expenses other than just tuition — and there's no dollar limit on these annual distributions. Another advantage is that you have more investment options.

ESAs are worth considering if you'd like to have direct control over how your contributions are invested or if you want to fund elementary or secondary education expenses in excess of \$10,000 per year or that aren't tuition.

But the \$2,000 contribution limit is low, and it begins to phase out at a MAGI of \$190,000 for married couples filing jointly and \$95,000 for other filers. No contribution can be made when MAGI hits \$220,000 and \$110,000, respectively.

Also, contributions can generally be made only for beneficiaries under age 18. When the beneficiary turns age 30, the ESA generally must be distributed within 30 days, and any earnings may be subject to tax and a 10% penalty.

ABLE accounts

Achieving a Better Life Experience accounts offer a tax-advantaged way to fund qualified disability expenses for a beneficiary who became blind or disabled before age 26. For federal purposes, tax treatment is similar to that of Sec. 529 college savings plans.

Currently 529 plan funds can be rolled over to an ABLE account without penalty if the ABLE account is owned by the beneficiary of the 529 plan or a member of the beneficiary's family. Such rolled-over amounts count toward the ABLE account annual rollover and contribution limit (\$15,000 for 2021). Proposals have been made to expand these benefits.

Education tax credits

If you have a child in college or graduate school, you may not qualify for one of these credits because your income is too high (phaseout range of \$80,000–\$90,000; \$160,000–\$180,000 for joint filers), but your child might:

American Opportunity credit. This tax break covers 100% of the first \$2,000 of tuition and related expenses and 25% of the next \$2,000 of expenses. The maximum credit, per student, is \$2,500 per year for the first four years of post-secondary education.

Lifetime Learning credit. This tax break — up to \$2,000 per tax return — is available for postsecondary education expenses beyond the first four years. ■

Make the most of tax-advantaged retirement plans



It's true that the amount high-income taxpayers are allowed to contribute to tax-advantaged retirement plans is limited. However, the exponential power of tax-deferred (or in the case of Roth accounts, tax-free) compounding makes these plans hard to pass up. And consider this: Contributions to a traditional plan reduce your AGI and, therefore, could help preserve your eligibility for certain tax breaks and avoid triggering certain taxes or higher rates. But be careful when taking retirement plan distributions — they could have the opposite effect. To fully leverage retirement plan advantages, look ahead and watch out for tax traps.

Retirement plan contributions

Contributing the maximum you're allowed (see Chart 6) to an employer-sponsored defined contribution plan, such as a 401(k), is likely a smart move:

- ▲ Contributions are typically pretax, reducing your modified adjusted gross income (MAGI). This in turn can help you reduce or avoid exposure to the 3.8% NIIT. (See page 11.)
- ▲ Plan assets can grow tax-deferred — meaning you pay no income tax until you take distributions.
- ▲ Your employer may match some or all of your contributions.

If you participate in a 401(k), 403(b) or 457 plan, it may allow you to designate some or all of your contributions as Roth contributions. While Roth contributions don't reduce your current MAGI,

qualified distributions will be tax-free. The opportunity to make such Roth contributions may be beneficial for higher-income earners because they're ineligible to contribute to a Roth IRA.

Roth IRA conversions

If you have a traditional IRA, a partial or full conversion to a Roth IRA can allow you to turn tax-deferred future growth into tax-free growth. It also can provide estate planning advantages. Unlike other retirement plans, Roth IRAs don't require you to take distributions during your lifetime, so you can let the entire balance grow tax-free for the benefit of your heirs.

But the converted amount is taxable in the year of the conversion. Whether a conversion makes sense for you depends on factors such as:

- ▲ Your age,
- ▲ Whether the conversion would push you into a higher income tax bracket or trigger the 3.8% NIIT,
- ▲ Whether you can afford to pay the tax on the conversion,

- ▲ Your tax bracket now and expected tax bracket in retirement, and
- ▲ Whether you'll need the IRA funds in retirement.

With tax rates particularly low now (and perhaps a better chance that your rate at retirement will be higher), it may be a good time for a Roth conversion. Your tax advisor can run the numbers and help you decide if a conversion is right for you this year.

Early withdrawals

With a few exceptions, retirement plan distributions before age 59½ are subject to a 10% penalty on top of any income tax that ordinarily would be due on a withdrawal. This means that, if you're in the top tax bracket of 37%, you can lose almost half of your withdrawal to taxes and penalties — and perhaps more than half if you're also subject to state income taxes and/or penalties. Additionally, you'll lose the potential tax-deferred future growth on the withdrawn amount.

If you have a Roth account, you can withdraw up to your contribution amount without incurring taxes or

CHART 6 Retirement plan contribution limits for 2021

	Regular contribution	Catch-up contribution ¹
Traditional and Roth IRAs	\$ 6,000	\$1,000
401(k)s, 403(b)s, 457s and SARSEPs ²	\$19,500	\$6,500
SIMPLEs	\$13,500	\$3,000

¹ For taxpayers age 50 or older by the end of the tax year.

² Includes Roth versions where applicable.

Note: Other factors may further limit your maximum contribution. If you're a business owner or self-employed, you may be able to set up a plan that allows you to make much larger contributions. (See Chart 4 on page 15.)

WHAT'S NEW!

Tax breaks on COVID-19 distributions

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the CARES Act waived the 10% early withdrawal penalty — along with providing additional tax advantages that taxpayers age 59½ and older can also benefit from — on COVID-19-related distributions up to \$100,000. These generally were 2020 withdrawals made by someone who had been (or whose family had been) infected with COVID-19 or who had been economically harmed by the virus. If you took an eligible 2020 distribution, consider these tax-deferral options:

Recontribute the distributions. Normally once you've taken a distribution, you have only 60 days to return it to the plan. But the CARES Act created an exception for eligible COVID-19 distributions: They may be recontributed to the retirement plan over the three-year period starting the day after the withdrawal.

If you can afford to do so, this is likely the best option. You can avoid current tax liability, and the funds can return to growing tax deferred, building up your retirement nest egg. Depending on when you recontribute, you may have to initially pay some tax and then file an amended return after the recontribution to get that tax back.

Spread out the income tax payments. Generally, tax on retirement plan distributions is due by the filing deadline for the year the distribution was taken. But under the CARES Act, you can spread out the reporting of eligible COVID-19 distributions evenly over 2020, 2021 and 2022.

If you can't afford to recontribute the distribution, this option might be beneficial — though if your 2020 tax bracket was lower than usual, you may be better off reporting the entire distribution on your 2020 return (filing an amended return if necessary). Also, you still have the option to return some or all of the distribution up until the end of the three-year period; you'll just need to file one or more amended returns to get the tax refunded.

The rules are complex, so be sure to consult your tax advisor.

penalties. But you'll be losing the potential tax-free growth on the withdrawn amount.

So if you're in need of cash, consider tapping your taxable investment accounts rather than dipping into your retirement plan. (See page 8 for information on the tax treatment of investments.)

Leaving a job

When you change jobs or retire, avoid taking a lump-sum distribution from your employer's retirement plan because it generally will be taxable — and potentially subject to the 10% early-withdrawal penalty. These options help avoid current income tax and penalties:

Staying put. You may be allowed to leave your money in your old plan. But if you'll be participating in a new employer's plan or you already have an IRA, keeping track of multiple plans can make managing your retirement assets more difficult.

A rollover to your new employer's plan. If you're changing jobs and this will leave you with only one retirement plan to keep track of, it may be a good solution. But evaluate how well the new plan's investment options meet your needs.

A rollover to an IRA. If you participate in a new employer's plan, this will require keeping track of two plans. But it may be the best alternative because IRAs offer nearly unlimited investment choices.

If you choose a rollover, request a *direct* rollover from your old plan to your new plan or IRA. If the funds are sent to you by check, you'll need to make an *indirect* rollover within 60 days to avoid tax and potential penalties.

Warning: If you don't do a direct rollover, the check you receive from your old plan may be net of 20% federal income tax withholding. Your subsequent indirect rollover must be of the gross amount

(making up for the withheld amount with other funds) or you'll be subject to income tax — and potentially the 10% penalty — on the difference.

RMDs

Historically, after taxpayers have reached age 70½, they've had to begin to take annual required minimum distributions from their IRAs (except Roth IRAs) and, generally, from any defined contribution plans. However, the age has increased to 72 for taxpayers who didn't turn age 70½ before Jan. 1, 2020 (that is, were born after June 30, 1949).

If you don't comply with RMD rules, you can owe a penalty equal to 50% of the amount you should have withdrawn but didn't. You can avoid the RMD rule for a non-IRA Roth plan by rolling the funds into a Roth IRA.

Warning: The RMD waiver available in 2020 hasn't been extended to 2021.

Waiting as long as possible to take distributions generally is advantageous because of tax-deferred compounding. But a distribution (or larger-than-required distribution) in a year your tax rate is lower than usual may save tax.

Be sure, however, to consider the lost future tax-deferred growth and, if applicable, whether the distribution could: 1) cause Social Security payments to become taxable, 2) increase income-based Medicare premiums and prescription drug charges, or 3) affect other tax breaks with income-based limits.

Also keep in mind that, while retirement plan distributions aren't subject to the additional 0.9% Medicare tax (see page 4) or 3.8% NIIT, they are included in your MAGI. That means they could trigger or increase the NIIT, because the thresholds for that tax are based on MAGI.

If you've inherited a retirement plan, consult your tax advisor about the distribution rules that apply to you.

Warning: The time period for distributions has been reduced to 10 years for beneficiaries — other than surviving spouses and certain others — inheriting plans after Dec. 31, 2019.

Today's tax savings opportunities may not be available tomorrow



Because the TCJA has put estate, gift and generation-skipping transfer (GST) tax exemptions at record-high levels, far fewer taxpayers are worrying about these taxes. But the high exemptions are only temporary, and proposed tax law changes could also increase taxes when assets are transferred. So whether or not you'd be subject to estate taxes under the current exemptions, it's a good idea to consider whether you can seize opportunities to potentially lock in tax savings today.

Estate tax

While the TCJA keeps the estate tax rate at 40%, it has doubled the exemption base amount from \$5 million to \$10 million. The inflation-adjusted amount for 2021 is \$11.7 million. (See Chart 7.)

Without further legislation, the estate tax exemption will return to an inflation-adjusted \$5 million in 2026. So taxpayers with estates in the roughly \$6 million to \$12 million range (twice that for married couples), whose estates would escape estate taxes if they were to die while the doubled exemption is in effect, still need to keep potential post-2025 estate tax liability in mind. Plus, it's possible the exemption could be reduced sooner.

Gift tax

The gift tax continues to follow the estate tax, so the gift tax exemption also has increased under the TCJA. (See Chart 7.) Any gift tax exemption used during your lifetime reduces the estate tax exemption available at death. Using up some of your exemption during your lifetime can be tax-smart,

especially if your estate exceeds roughly \$6 million (twice that if you're married). (See Case Study 6.)

Under the "annual exclusion," you also can exclude certain gifts of up to \$15,000 per recipient in 2021 (\$30,000 if your spouse elects to split the gift with you or you're giving joint or community property) without depleting any of your gift and estate tax exemption.

Warning: Each year you need to use your annual exclusion by Dec. 31. The exclusion doesn't carry over from year to year. For example, if you didn't make an annual exclusion gift to your granddaughter last year, you can't add \$15,000 to your 2021 exclusion to make a \$30,000 tax-free gift to her this year.

GST tax

The GST tax generally applies to transfers (both during your lifetime and at death) made to people more than one generation below you, such as your grandchildren. This is in addition to any gift or estate tax due. The GST tax exemption also has increased under the TCJA. (See Chart 7.)

The GST tax exemption can be a valuable tax-saving tool for taxpayers with large estates whose children also have — or may eventually have — large estates.

With proper planning, they can use the exemption to make transfers to grandchildren and avoid any tax at their children's generation.

State taxes

Even before the TCJA, some states imposed estate tax at a lower threshold than the federal government did. Now the differences in some states are even more dramatic. To avoid unexpected tax liability or other unintended consequences, consult a tax advisor familiar with the law of your particular state.

Exemption portability

If part (or all) of one spouse's estate tax exemption is unused at that spouse's death, the estate can elect to permit the surviving spouse to use the deceased spouse's remaining exemption. This exemption "portability" provides flexibility at the first spouse's death, but it has some limits. Portability is available only from the most recently deceased spouse, doesn't apply to the GST tax exemption and isn't recognized by many states.

And portability doesn't protect future growth on assets from estate tax like applying the exemption to a credit shelter (or bypass) trust does. Such a trust also offers creditor and remarriage protection, GST tax

CHART 7 2021 transfer tax exemptions and rates

	Estate tax	Gift tax	GST tax
Exemption	\$11.7 million ¹	\$11.7 million	\$11.7 million
Rate	40%	40%	40%

¹ Less any gift tax exemption already used during life.

planning, and possible state estate tax benefits.

So married couples should still consider these trusts — and consider transferring assets to each other as necessary to fully fund them at the first death. Transfers to a spouse (during life or at death) aren't subject to gift or estate tax as long as the recipient spouse is a U.S. citizen.

Tax-smart giving

Giving away assets now will help reduce the size of your taxable estate. Here are some strategies for tax-smart giving:

Choose gifts wisely. Consider both estate and income tax consequences and the economic aspects of any gifts you'd like to make:

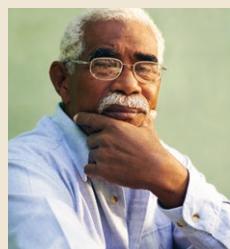
- ▲ To minimize *estate tax*, gift property with the greatest future appreciation potential.
- ▲ To minimize *your beneficiary's income tax*, gift property that hasn't appreciated significantly while you've owned it.
- ▲ To minimize *your own income tax*, don't gift property that's declined in value. Instead, consider selling the property so you can take the tax loss and then gifting the sale proceeds.

Warning: It's been proposed that, when appreciated assets are transferred, gains beyond a specific limit be included in the taxable income of the giver (or of the estate in the case of a bequest). There would be some exceptions, however. Check with your tax advisor for the latest information.

Plan gifts to grandchildren carefully. Annual exclusion gifts are generally exempt from the GST tax, so they also help you preserve your GST tax exemption for other transfers. For gifts to a grandchild that don't qualify for the exclusion to be tax-free, you generally must apply

CASE STUDY 6

2021 might be a good year to make "taxable" gifts



Louis has an estate of \$12 million. In 2021, he has already made \$15,000 annual exclusion gifts to each of his chosen beneficiaries. With future inflation adjustments, the exemption might be enough to protect his entire estate.

But he's in good health and believes he'll live beyond 2025. He also thinks that the exemption might be reduced sooner. So he's concerned about having

substantial estate tax exposure, especially considering that his assets likely will continue to appreciate.

His tax advisor suggests that he make some gifts beyond the annual exclusion this year. Louis uses \$6 million of his gift tax exemption to make additional "taxable" gifts. Therefore, his estate can't use that amount as an exemption. But he protects at least \$6 million from gift and estate tax, even if the exemption drops below \$6 million during his lifetime.

He also removes the future appreciation from his estate. If the assets, say, double in value before Louis's death, the gift will essentially have removed \$12 million from his estate. This amount escapes the estate tax.

He does, however, need to keep in mind his beneficiaries' income tax. Gifted assets don't receive the "step-up" in basis that bequeathed assets do. This means that, if beneficiaries sell the assets, their taxable capital gains will be determined based on Louis's basis in the assets. So their capital gains tax could be higher than if they inherited the assets. But there also have been proposals to change the rules regarding when gains on transferred appreciated assets are taxed. See the warning under "Choose gifts wisely" at left.

both your GST tax exemption and your gift tax exemption.

Pay tuition and medical expenses.

You may pay these expenses without the payment being treated as a taxable gift to the student or patient, as long as the payment is made directly to the provider.

Make gifts to charity. Donations to qualified charities aren't subject to gift tax. They may also be eligible for an income tax deduction. (See page 16.)

Trusts

Trusts can provide a way to transfer assets and potentially enjoy tax savings while preserving some control over what happens to the transferred assets. For those with large estates, funding trusts now, while the gift tax exemption is high, may be particularly tax-smart. Here are some types of trusts to consider:

A qualified personal residence trust (QPRT). It allows you to give your home to your children today — removing it from your taxable estate at a reduced gift tax cost (provided you survive the trust's term) — while you retain the right to live in it for a specified period.

A grantor-retained annuity trust (GRAT). It works on the same principle as a QPRT, but allows you to transfer other assets; you receive payments back from the trust for a specified period.

A GST — or "dynasty" — trust. It can help you leverage both your gift and GST tax exemptions. And it can be an excellent way to potentially lock in the currently high exemptions while removing future appreciation from your estate. ▀

CHART 8 2021 individual income tax rate schedules

Tax rate		Regular tax brackets			
		Single	Head of household	Married filing jointly or surviving spouse	Married filing separately
10%	\$ 0 – \$ 9,950	\$ 0 – \$ 14,200	\$ 0 – \$ 19,900	\$ 0 – \$ 9,950	\$ 9,951 – \$ 40,525
12%	\$ 9,951 – \$ 40,525	\$ 14,201 – \$ 54,200	\$ 19,901 – \$ 81,050	\$ 40,526 – \$ 86,375	\$ 86,376 – \$ 164,925
22%	\$ 40,526 – \$ 86,375	\$ 54,201 – \$ 86,350	\$ 81,051 – \$ 172,750	\$ 164,926 – \$ 209,425	\$ 164,926 – \$ 209,425
24%	\$ 86,376 – \$ 164,925	\$ 86,351 – \$ 164,900	\$ 172,751 – \$ 329,850	\$ 209,426 – \$ 314,150	\$ 209,426 – \$ 314,150
32%	\$ 164,926 – \$ 209,425	\$ 164,901 – \$ 209,400	\$ 329,851 – \$ 418,850	\$ 209,426 – \$ 314,150	\$ 209,426 – \$ 314,150
35%	\$ 209,426 – \$ 523,600	\$ 209,401 – \$ 523,600	\$ 418,851 – \$ 628,300	\$ 523,600 – \$ 752,800	\$ 523,600 – \$ 752,800
37%	Over \$ 523,600	Over \$ 523,600	Over \$ 628,300	Over \$ 752,800	Over \$ 752,800

Tax rate		AMT brackets			
		Single	Head of household	Married filing jointly or surviving spouse	Married filing separately
26%	\$ 0 – \$ 199,900	\$ 0 – \$ 199,900	\$ 0 – \$ 199,900	\$ 0 – \$ 99,950	\$ 0 – \$ 99,950
28%	Over \$ 199,900	Over \$ 199,900	Over \$ 199,900	Over \$ 199,900	Over \$ 199,900

AMT exemptions					
		Single	Head of household	Married filing jointly or surviving spouse	Married filing separately
Amount	\$ 73,600	\$ 73,600	\$ 73,600	\$ 114,600	\$ 57,300
Phaseout ¹	\$ 523,600 – \$ 818,000	\$ 523,600 – \$ 818,000	\$ 523,600 – \$ 818,000	\$ 1,047,200 – \$ 1,505,600	\$ 523,600 – \$ 752,800

¹ This is the AMT income range over which the exemption phases out; only a partial exemption is available. The exemption is completely phased out if AMT income exceeds the top of the applicable range.

Note: Consult your tax advisor for AMT rates and exemptions for children subject to the "kiddie tax" and for estates and trusts.

CHART 9 2021 corporate income tax rates

Tax rate	Type of corporation
21%	C corporation
21%	Personal service corporation

**CHART 10 2021 estate and trust income tax rate schedule**

Tax rate	Tax brackets
10%	\$ 0 – \$ 2,650
24%	\$ 2,651 – \$ 9,550
35%	\$ 9,551 – \$ 13,050
37%	Over \$ 13,050

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