

400 Highest-Income Americans Paid an Effective Rate of 18.1% in 2008

Should Tax Hikes on these Americans Be “Off the Table?”

As House Speaker John Boehner and other Republican leaders in Congress continue to assert that tax increases even on the very wealthiest Americans are “off the table,” one rationale sometimes advanced for this view is that Americans who work hard and become successful have to pay over a third of their income in federal income taxes.

But a new report from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) shows that this is not remotely true.¹ The IRS data show that the federal income tax rates paid by the highest-income Americans have dropped substantially since 2000, largely due to cuts in the tax rates on capital gains and dividends pushed through by the Bush Administration. While income from work (salaries and wages) is subject to rates as high as 35 percent, income from investments (long-term capital gains and stock dividends) is taxed at only 15 percent.

The IRS report shows that in 2008 (the latest year for which data are available), the 400 richest income tax filers paid just 18.1 percent of their adjusted gross income (AGI) in federal income taxes. That is down from 22.3 percent in 2000, and is just more than half of the top statutory income tax

The 400 Richest Americans in 2008: Income and Tax Profile			
	Total \$Billions	Average (000s)	Share of US Total
Adjusted Gross Income (AGI)	\$ 108.2	\$ 270,510	1.3%
Capital Gains Taxed at Lower Rate	\$ 61.4	155,748	10.5%
	Total \$Billions	Average (000s)	Effective Tax Rate
Income Taxes Paid	\$ 19.6	\$ 48,893	18.1%

Source: Internal Revenue Service

rate of 35 percent. More than half of the income reported by those 400 taxpayers consisted of capital gains and dividends subject to the preferential rates.

The IRS report, which shows the effective federal income tax rates paid by the 400 highest-income Americans in each year since 1992, offers an important opportunity to understand how the tax system affects the most privileged Americans. The table above shows that:

- Only those with at least \$109 million of AGI were members of this group in 2008, and the

¹Internal Revenue Service, “The 400 Individual Income Tax Returns Reporting the Highest Adjusted Gross Income Each Year, 1992-2008,” May 11, 2011. <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/08intop400.pdf>

average AGI for these 400 taxpayers was \$270 million.

- Each one of these 400 taxpayers enjoyed, on average, more than \$155 million of net capital gains and dividend income that was subject to special lower tax rates in 2008.
- Although 400 returns are less than 1/1000th of a percent of the total individual tax returns filed, these 400 taxpayers collected more than 10 percent of the total preferential-rate capital gains and dividends in the nation in 2008.
- These 400 taxpayers paid income taxes averaging just under \$49 million in 2008. As a share of AGI, their tax bills averaged 18.1 percent.
- This decline from 22.3 percent to 18.1 percent represented a total tax cut of \$4.5 billion in 2008 for this group, or an average tax cut of over \$11.3 million each.

“This valuable data confirms what we already knew—that the very richest Americans are paying much less of their income in tax than many would have us believe,” noted Citizens for Tax Justice director Robert S. McIntyre. “These taxpayers are now paying lower effective tax rates than at virtually any time since the IRS began publishing these data in 1992—and the Bush Administration’s capital gains and dividends tax cuts are the main culprit.”