

**Legislative Recommendation #8****Continue to Limit the IRS’s Use of “Math Error Authority” to Clear-Cut Categories Specified by Statute****SUMMARY**

- *Problem:* The IRC provides taxpayers with “deficiency procedures” that generally give them certain rights to challenge an IRS determination that they owe tax, but it gives the IRS the authority to bypass deficiency procedures and summarily assess tax when a tax return contains one of 22 categories of “mathematical or clerical errors” (often referred to as “math errors”). On several occasions, the Department of the Treasury and the IRS have requested that Congress grant them the authority to add new categories of math errors by regulation. This would have the effect of depriving taxpayers of deficiency procedures in a wider range of circumstances.
- *Solution:* Congress should retain the authority to revise categories of math errors legislatively and not give the Department of the Treasury and the IRS the authority to add new categories of math errors administratively.

**PRESENT LAW**

Before the IRS may assess a deficiency, IRC § 6213(a) ordinarily requires that it send the taxpayer a “notice of deficiency” that gives the taxpayer 90 days (150 days if addressed to a taxpayer outside the United States) to contest it by filing a petition with the U.S. Tax Court (known as “deficiency procedures”). The taxpayer’s ability to appeal a deficiency determination to the Tax Court before paying the tax is central to the taxpayer’s *right to appeal an IRS decision in an independent forum*.<sup>1</sup>

As an exception to standard deficiency procedures, IRC § 6213(b)(1) authorizes the IRS to summarily assess and collect tax without first providing the taxpayer with a notice of deficiency or access to the Tax Court when addressing “mathematical and clerical” errors (known as “math error authority”). If a taxpayer contests a math error notice within 60 days, IRC § 6213(b)(2)(A) provides that the IRS must abate the assessment. If the IRS abates the assessment, it must follow deficiency procedures before it can reassess the tax. Taxpayers who do not contest a math error notice within 60 days lose the right to do so in court before paying. The IRS may summarily assess 22 types of mathematical or clerical errors, which are codified at IRC § 6213(g)(2) in subparagraphs A-V.

**REASONS FOR CHANGE**

Congress generally requires the IRS to follow deficiency procedures, which provide taxpayers with notice and a reasonable opportunity to challenge the IRS’s tax adjustment. Math error authority, which provides fewer taxpayer protections, was authorized as a limited exception to regular deficiency procedures. It allows the IRS to make adjustments in cases of clear taxpayer error, such as where a taxpayer incorrectly adds numbers or incorrectly transcribes a number from one form to another. Because taxpayers have fewer protections under math error procedures, the procedures are not intended to be used where a substantive disagreement may exist. When Congress has expanded the IRS’s math error authority, it has done so consistent with that principle.

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<sup>1</sup> See IRC § 7803(a)(3)(E) (identifying the *right to appeal a decision of the Internal Revenue Service in an independent forum* as a taxpayer right).

Because math error procedures are cheaper and simpler for the IRS than deficiency procedures, the Department of the Treasury in the past has requested that Congress grant it the authority to add new categories of “correctable errors” by regulation.<sup>2</sup>

The National Taxpayer Advocate is concerned about the impact on taxpayer rights of giving the IRS broad authority to add new categories of math error. In our reports to Congress, we have documented numerous circumstances in which the IRS has used math error authority to address discrepancies that have undermined taxpayer rights.<sup>3</sup>

If the IRS uses math error authority to address more complex issues that require additional fact finding, its assessments are more likely to be wrong, and the IRS’s computer-generated notices, which confuse many taxpayers in the simplest of circumstances, are likely to become even more difficult to understand.<sup>4</sup> A recent example illustrates a significant omission on math error notices, where taxpayers’ Recovery Rebate Credits were adjusted. In 2021, the IRS issued about 6.5 million math error notices that omitted the 60-day time period language for requesting an abatement of the tax.<sup>5</sup> The IRS later reissued letters to these taxpayers informing them of their right to request an abatement and restarted the 60-day time period from the date of these new letters. Notably, the law does not require the IRS to tell taxpayers the assessment will become final if they fail to contest a math error adjustment within 60 days. As a result, taxpayers can lose their right to challenge the adjustments in court before paying, undermining the taxpayer’s *right to appeal an IRS decision in an independent forum*.

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- 2 See, e.g., Joint Committee on Taxation, JCS-1-19, Description of Certain Revenue Provisions Contained in the President’s Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal 62, 64 (July 8, 2019); Department of the Treasury, General Explanations of the Administration’s Fiscal Year 2016 Revenue Proposals 245-246 (Feb. 2015).
  - 3 See, e.g., National Taxpayer Advocate 2018 Annual Report to Congress 164 (Most Serious Problem: *Post-Processing Math Error Authority: The IRS Has Failed to Exercise Self-Restraint in Its Use of Math Error Authority, Thereby Harming Taxpayers*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ARC18\\_Volume1\\_MSP\\_11\\_PostProcessing.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ARC18_Volume1_MSP_11_PostProcessing.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2018 Annual Report to Congress 174 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Notices: Although the IRS Has Made Some Improvements, Math Error Notices Continue to Be Unclear and Confusing, Thereby Undermining Taxpayer Rights and Increasing Taxpayer Burden*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ARC18\\_Volume1\\_MSP\\_12\\_MathError.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ARC18_Volume1_MSP_12_MathError.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2015 Annual Report to Congress 329-339 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority: Authorize the IRS to Summarily Assess Math and “Correctable” Errors Only in Appropriate Circumstances*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ARC15\\_Volume1\\_LR\\_02\\_Math-Error-Authority.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ARC15_Volume1_LR_02_Math-Error-Authority.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2014 Annual Report to Congress 163-171 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Notices: The IRS Does Not Clearly Explain Math Error Adjustments, Making It Difficult for Taxpayers to Understand and Exercise Their Rights*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2014-ARC\\_VOL-1\\_S1\\_MSP-16-508.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2014-ARC_VOL-1_S1_MSP-16-508.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2013 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, at 5 (*Do Accuracy-Related Penalties Improve Future Reporting Compliance by Schedule C Filers?*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2013-ARC\\_VOL-2-1.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2013-ARC_VOL-2-1.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2013 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, at 92-93, [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2013-ARC\\_VOL-2.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2013-ARC_VOL-2.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2011 Annual Report to Congress 74-92 (*Expansion of Math Error Authority and Lack of Notice Clarity Create Unnecessary Burden and Jeopardize Taxpayer Rights*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2011-ARC\\_MSP-2-6.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2011-ARC_MSP-2-6.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2006 Annual Report to Congress 311 (Most Serious Problem: *IRS Implementation of Math Error Authority Impairs Taxpayer Rights*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2006\\_arc\\_vol\\_1\\_cover\\_section\\_1.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2006_arc_vol_1_cover_section_1.pdf); National Taxpayer Advocate 2003 Annual Report to Congress 113 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Authority*), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/reports/2003-annual-report-to-congress/full-report/>; National Taxpayer Advocate 2002 Annual Report to Congress 25 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Authority*), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/reports/2002-annual-report-to-congress/full-report/>; National Taxpayer Advocate 2002 Annual Report to Congress 186 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority*), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/reports/2002-annual-report-to-congress/full-report/>; National Taxpayer Advocate 2001 Annual Report to Congress 33 (Most Serious Problem: *Explanations on Math Error Authority*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2001\\_tas.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2001_tas.pdf).
  - 4 Erin M. Collins, Math Error, Part I, NATIONAL TAXPAYER ADVOCATE BLOG (July 28, 2021), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/news/nta-blog-math-error-part-i/>; Erin M. Collins, Math Error, Part II: Math Error Notices Aren’t Just Confusing; Millions of Notices Adjusting the Recovery Rebate Credit Also Omitted Critical Information, NATIONAL TAXPAYER ADVOCATE BLOG (Aug. 3, 2021), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/news/nta-blog-math-error-part-ii-math-error-notices-arent-just-confusing-millions-of-notices-adjusting-the-recovery-rebate-credit-also-omitted-critical-information/>.
  - 5 Erin M. Collins, Math Error, Part II: Math Error Notices Aren’t Just Confusing; Millions of Notices Adjusting the Recovery Rebate Credit Also Omitted Critical Information, NATIONAL TAXPAYER ADVOCATE BLOG (Aug. 3, 2021), <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/news/nta-blog-math-error-part-ii-math-error-notices-arent-just-confusing-millions-of-notices-adjusting-the-recovery-rebate-credit-also-omitted-critical-information/>.

Math error authority may be appropriate to use where required schedules are omitted or annual or lifetime dollar caps have been exceeded. It also may be appropriate to use where there is a discrepancy between a return entry and data available to the IRS from a reliable government database, such as records maintained by the Social Security Administration. But the IRS should not be the arbiter of that reliability. Rather, Congress should retain full authority to determine whether the administrative “efficiency” of using math error authority in these instances outweighs the loss of the significant taxpayer protections that deficiency procedures provide.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Refrain from giving the IRS authority to add new categories of “correctable errors” by regulation. Because the deficiency procedures created by Congress provide important taxpayer protections, Congress should retain the sole authority to determine whether and when to create exceptions to deficiency procedures by adding categories of mathematical or clerical errors.
- Amend IRC § 6213(g) to authorize the IRS to exercise its existing (and any new) authority to summarily assess a deficiency due to “clerical errors” only where: (i) there is a discrepancy between a return entry and reliable government data; (ii) the IRS’s notice clearly describes the discrepancy and how to contest it; (iii) the IRS has researched all information in its possession that could help reconcile the discrepancy; (iv) the IRS does not have to evaluate documentation to make a determination; and (v) there is a low abatement rate for taxpayers who respond.
- Amend IRC § 6213(g) to provide that the IRS is not authorized to use any new criteria or data to make summary assessments unless the Department of the Treasury, in conjunction with the National Taxpayer Advocate, has evaluated and publicly reported on the reliability of the criteria or data for that intended use.<sup>6</sup>

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6 For a more limited recommendation, see National Taxpayer Advocate 2015 Annual Report to Congress 329-339 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority: Authorize the IRS to Summarily Assess Math and “Correctable” Errors Only in Appropriate Circumstances*), [https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ARC15\\_Volume1\\_LR\\_02\\_Math-Error-Authority.pdf](https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ARC15_Volume1_LR_02_Math-Error-Authority.pdf).