

**Legislative Recommendation #45****Promote Consistency With the Supreme Court's *Boechler* Decision by Making the Time Limits for Bringing All Tax Litigation Subject to Equitable Judicial Doctrines****SUMMARY**

- *Problem:* The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the U.S. Tax Court may waive the 30-day deadline for filing a petition in a collection due process (CDP) case when it is equitable to do so (*e.g.*, if a taxpayer misses a filing deadline because he has had a heart attack and is temporarily incapacitated). Other provisions of the IRC also contain filing deadlines, but it is not clear whether courts have the authority to waive those deadlines on equitable grounds.
- *Solution:* Clarify that federal courts may waive filing deadlines when it is equitable to do so.

**PRESENT LAW**

Various provisions in the IRC authorize proceedings or suits against the government, provided such actions are brought timely. If a time limit for bringing suit is deemed a jurisdictional requirement, it cannot be waived or forfeited. It is not subject to equitable exceptions that might excuse an untimely filing. IRC § 7442, which relates to the jurisdiction of the U.S. Tax Court, does not specify that prescribed periods for petitioning the Tax Court are jurisdictional.<sup>1</sup>

Equitable doctrines that, if available, might excuse an untimely filing include equitable tolling (applicable when it is unfair to hold a plaintiff to a statutory deadline because of an extraordinary event that impeded the plaintiff's compliance); equitable estoppel (applicable when it is unfair to allow the defendant to benefit from the statutory deadline because of something the defendant did to prevent a timely suit); forfeiture (applicable when the parties have acted as if the case need not operate under the statutory deadlines); and waiver (applicable when the parties have agreed explicitly that a case need not operate under legal deadlines).

The U.S. Supreme Court held in the *Boechler* case that the 30-day time limit in IRC § 6330(d)(1) to file a petition with the U.S. Tax Court for review of a CDP determination is not a jurisdictional requirement.<sup>2</sup> The Court noted that time limits that are not jurisdictional are presumptively subject to equitable tolling and explained that “we treat a procedural requirement as jurisdictional only if Congress ‘clearly states’ that it is.”<sup>3</sup> After parsing the language of IRC § 6330(d)(1), the Court found no such clear statement.

Taxpayers generally bring their actions in the U.S. Tax Court, a U.S. district court, or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims.<sup>4</sup>

1 IRC § 7442 provides in its entirety:

The Tax Court and its divisions shall have such jurisdiction as is conferred on them by this title, by chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1939, by title II and title III of the Revenue Act of 1926 (44 Stat. 10-87), or by laws enacted subsequent to February 26, 1926.

2 *Boechler, P.C. v. Comm'r*, 142 S. Ct. 1493 (2022), *rev'g and remanding* 967 F.3d 760 (8th Cir. 2020).

3 *Id.* at 1497.

4 Some tax claims may also be heard by U.S. bankruptcy courts. The Supreme Court has held that the three-year lookback period that may qualify a tax liability for discharge in bankruptcy is subject to equitable tolling. *Young v. United States*, 535 U.S. 43, 47 (2002).

## U.S. Tax Court

CDP cases like the one in the *Boechler* case are not the only type of controversy in which taxpayers, by filing a petition in the U.S. Tax Court within a specified period, may litigate their tax liabilities without first paying the tax. Some other examples include deficiency proceedings and “standalone” innocent spouse cases (*i.e.*, where a taxpayer seeks innocent spouse relief in situations other than in response to a notice of deficiency or as part of a CDP proceeding).

IRC § 6213(a) provides that “[w]ithin 90 days . . . the taxpayer may file a petition with the Tax Court for a redetermination of the deficiency.” The Supreme Court in *Boechler* acknowledged that lower courts have interpreted the IRC § 6213(a) deadline as jurisdictional and therefore not subject to equitable tolling but noted that “almost all [such lower court cases] predate this Court’s effort to ‘bring some discipline’ to the use of the term ‘jurisdictional.’”<sup>5</sup>

As for IRC provisions imposing time limits for requesting innocent spouse relief in standalone cases, the Supreme Court in *Boechler* noted that IRC § 6015(e)(1)(A) “much more clearly link[s] [its] jurisdictional grant[s] to a filing deadline,” but the Court did not decide whether the time limit is jurisdictional.<sup>6</sup> Prior to *Boechler*, three appellate courts agreed with the U.S. Tax Court and held that the time limit for requesting standalone innocent spouse relief is jurisdictional.<sup>7</sup>

## Other Federal Courts

Sometimes taxpayers may obtain judicial review in federal courts other than the Tax Court if they sue within a specified period. For example, a refund suit can generally be brought in the U.S. district courts or in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims within two years from the date the IRS denies a claim.<sup>8</sup> There is a split among the circuits regarding whether the statutory period for bringing a suit for refund is subject to equitable doctrines.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, taxpayers may sue in a U.S. district court to enjoin enforcement of a wrongful levy or sale or to recover property (or proceeds from the sale of property) if they do so within a specified period (generally, within two years of levy).<sup>10</sup> Several federal courts have held that the period is not subject to equitable tolling,<sup>11</sup> but at least one appellate court has held that it is.<sup>12</sup>

5 *Boechler*, 142 S. Ct. 1493 (2022). After the Supreme Court issued its decision in the *Boechler* case, however, the Tax Court held that equitable tolling does not apply to deficiency cases. See *Hallmark v. Comm’r*, 159 T.C. No. 6 (2022). It is likely this decision will be appealed.

6 IRC § 6015(e)(1)(A), in relevant part, provides that “[t]he individual may petition the Tax Court (and the Tax Court shall have jurisdiction) to determine the appropriate relief available to the individual under this section if such petition is filed during the 90-day period.” The Court also noted that IRC § 6404(g)(1), which confers Tax Court “jurisdiction over any action . . . to determine whether the Secretary’s failure to abate interest under this section was an abuse of discretion, . . . if such action is brought within 180 days” more clearly links the jurisdictional grant to a filing deadline. *Id.* at 1498.

7 *Nauflett v. Comm’r*, 892 F.3d 649, 652-654 (4th Cir. 2018); *Matuszak v. Comm’r*, 862 F.3d 192, 196-198 (2d Cir. 2017); *Rubel v. Comm’r*, 856 F.3d 301, 306 (3d Cir. 2017).

8 IRC § 6532(a)(1).

9 *Compare RHI Holdings, Inc. v. United States*, 142 F.3d 1459, 1460-1463 (Fed. Cir. 1998) (declining to apply equitable principles to IRC § 6532), with *Wagner v. United States*, 353 F. Supp. 3d 1062 (E.D. Wash. 2018) (concluding the time limits set forth in IRC § 6532 are not jurisdictional and, moreover, that plaintiff’s petition was timely filed), and *Howard Bank v. United States*, 759 F. Supp. 1073, 1080 (D. Vt. 1991), *aff’d*, 948 F.2d 1275 (2d Cir. 1991) (applying equitable principles to IRC § 6532 and estopping the IRS from raising the limitations period as a bar to suit).

10 IRC § 6532(c).

11 See *Becton Dickinson and Co. v. Wolckenhauer*, 215 F.3d 340, 351-354 (3d Cir. 2000), and cases cited therein from four other circuits (holding that the IRC § 6532(c) period is jurisdictional and not subject to equitable tolling).

12 See, e.g., *Volpicelli v. United States*, 777 F.3d 1042, 1047 (9th Cir. 2015) (holding that the IRC § 6532(c) period is subject to equitable tolling); *Supermail Cargo, Inc. v. United States*, 68 F.3d 1204 (9th Cir. 1995) (same).

Taxpayers may also bring suit, if they do so within the specified periods, to seek civil damages in a U.S. district court or bankruptcy court regarding unauthorized actions by the IRS.<sup>13</sup> Courts have differed on whether equitable doctrines can toll the period for bringing suit.<sup>14</sup>

## REASONS FOR CHANGE

The *Boechler* decision clarified that the filing deadline in CDP cases is not jurisdictional, but it did not address whether filing deadlines in other tax cases are jurisdictional. There is inconsistency in lower courts' interpretations of the various statutes that contain filing deadlines in tax cases.

The consequence for failing to commence suit in the Tax Court or another federal court within the time limits prescribed by the IRC is severe: taxpayers lose their day in that court, which may be the only prepayment forum, or the only forum at all, with jurisdiction to hear their claim.

Treating the IRC time limits for bringing suit as jurisdictional – which means that taxpayers who file suit even seconds late are barred from court regardless of the cause – can lead to harsh and unfair results. For example, the IRS itself occasionally provides inaccurate information to taxpayers regarding the filing deadline, and even in that circumstance, the court has declined to hear the taxpayer's case.<sup>15</sup> Other extenuating circumstances may include a medical emergency (*e.g.*, a heart attack or other medical condition that requires a taxpayer to be hospitalized or causes him or her to be in a coma).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, most U.S. Tax Court petitioners do not have representation, and unrepresented taxpayers are less likely to recognize the severe consequences of filing a late petition.

The *right to a fair and just tax system*<sup>17</sup> requires that equitable doctrines be available to excuse a late filing in extenuating circumstances. Taxpayers would still be required to demonstrate that an equitable doctrine applies, and courts could apply the doctrines narrowly. But the National Taxpayer Advocate believes courts should have the flexibility to make those judgments.

<sup>13</sup> IRC §§ 7431(d); 7432(d)(3); 7433(d)(3).

<sup>14</sup> *Compare Aloe Vera of America, Inc. v. United States*, 580 F.3d 867, 871-872 (9th Cir. 2009) (holding that the time for bringing suit under IRC § 7431 is not subject to equitable tolling) and *Hynard v. IRS*, 233 F. Supp. 2d 502, 509 (S.D. N.Y. 2002) (holding that the time for bringing suit under IRC § 7433 is not subject to equitable tolling), with *Ramos v. United States*, 90 A.F.T.R.2d (RIA) 7176 (N.D. Cal. 2002) (denying motion to dismiss because doctrine of equitable tolling might apply to an IRC § 7433 action), and *Bennett v. United States*, 366 F. Supp. 2d 877, 879 (D. Neb. 2005) (holding that the application of equitable tolling to IRC §§ 7432 and 7433 actions has not been definitively determined, but it is an extraordinary remedy and did not apply in this case).

<sup>15</sup> See, *e.g.*, *Naufflett*, 892 F.3d at 652-654 (doctrine of equitable tolling did not apply to innocent spouse case despite reliance on alleged erroneous IRS advice regarding the filing deadline); see also *Rubel v. Comm'r*, 856 F.3d 301, 306 (3d Cir. 2017).

<sup>16</sup> In the context of administrative refund claims, the IRC essentially incorporates the doctrine of equitable tolling. Under IRC § 6511(h), a taxpayer in a coma would likely be able to show that he or she was “financially disabled.” In that case, the IRC § 6511 statute of limitation would be suspended for the period during which the taxpayer was financially disabled, giving the taxpayer more time to request a refund even if the deadline for doing so otherwise would have expired. We see no reason why court filing deadlines should provide less flexibility.

<sup>17</sup> See IRC § 7803(a)(3)(J), <https://www.irs.gov/taxpayer-bill-of-rights> (identifying the “right to a fair and just tax system” as a taxpayer right). The Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TBOR) lists rights that already existed in the tax code, putting them in simple language and grouping them into ten fundamental rights. Employees are responsible for being familiar with and acting in accord with TBOR, including the “right to a fair and just tax system.”

## RECOMMENDATION

- Enact a new section of the IRC to clarify that the periods in the IRC within which taxpayers may petition the Tax Court or file suit in other federal courts are not jurisdictional and are subject to equitable judicial doctrines.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> If this change to the IRC is enacted, a late-filed petition in Tax Court would no longer be dismissed for lack of jurisdiction if the taxpayer is able to establish that equitable tolling should apply. That would mean that a dismissal of a petition from a notice of deficiency by the Tax Court due to untimeliness would be treated as a decision on the merits under IRC § 7459(d), and the doctrine of *res judicata* would prevent the taxpayer from pursuing a refund suit. We therefore recommend that IRC § 7459(d) be correspondingly amended to make clear that a dismissal based on untimeliness is not a decision on the merits.