

How Could We Improve the Federal Tax System?

OTHER COMPREHENSIVE TAX REFORMS

What is the flat tax?

Q. What is the flat tax?

A. While any tax system with flat rates could be called a flat tax, the name is usually reserved for a system developed by Robert Hall and Alvin Rabushka in 1985. Their flat tax is really a two-part VAT: All value added except wages is taxed at the business level and wages are taxed at the individual level at the same flat rate but with an exemption related to family size.

The Hall-Rabushka flat tax would replace the current income tax system with a consumption tax. Their system is a two-part value-added tax (VAT). All value added would be taxed at the business level except wages, which would be deductible. Wages would be taxed at the individual level, with an exemption based on family size. All taxable wages and all business non-wage value added would face the same flat rate. In Hall and Rabushka's original proposal (1985), that rate would be 19 percent.

In short, the flat tax is a consumption tax, even though it looks like a wage tax to households and a variant of a VAT to most businesses. Therefore, except for the exemptions, the economic effects of the flat tax are essentially the same as those of a VAT or a sales tax.

The flat tax can be split into two parts: the business tax and the individual tax. Firms would be responsible for paying taxes (at a flat rate) on sales after they have deducted wages, pensions, material costs, and capital investments. Individuals would be responsible for paying taxes (again, at a flat rate) on the wages that firms have deducted, but only on wages in excess of an exemption level.

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Further Reading

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Gale, William G. 1999. "[Flat Tax.](#)" In *Encyclopedia of Taxation and Tax Policy*, edited by Joseph J. Cordes, Robert D. Ebel, and Jane G. Gravelle. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Hall, Robert E., and Alvin Rabushka. 1985. [The Flat Tax](#). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

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What is the X-tax?

Q. What is the X-tax?

A. The X-tax is a variant of the flat tax developed by economist David Bradford. It is mechanically identical to the flat tax, except that it incorporates graduated tax rates on household wage income to improve progressivity.

The X-tax is a variant of the flat tax developed by Princeton economist David Bradford (1986). Like the flat tax, it is consumption based and incorporates two elements: a business tax and a personal tax.

On the business side, firms would be responsible for paying taxes on their sales, less material costs and wages; the business tax rate would be equal to the highest individual tax rate. On the individual side, individuals or households would be taxed on wages, less a deduction based on family size. The individual tax would have graduated rates up to a maximum equal to the business rate.

The major difference between the flat tax and the X-tax is the inclusion of a graduated individual rate structure on wages. This makes the X-tax more progressive than the flat tax.

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Further Reading

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Viard, Alan D., and Robert Carroll. 2012. [Progressive Consumption Taxation: The X-Tax Revisited](#). Washington, DC: AEI Press.

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