

Who Pays No Tax?

How Tax Credits Contribute to the Declining Fraction of Adults Paying Income Taxes and Increasing Tax Progressivity

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Abstract

What are the long-run trends in the fraction paying no federal individual income tax in the United States, and how does this fraction relate to overall tax progressivity? Using tax return data, this paper presents the first long-run estimates of the fraction paying no tax and finds that in recent decades it has almost perfectly correlated with tax progressivity. These estimates show that between 1985 and 2015, the fraction of working age adults paying no federal individual income tax increased from 20 to 36 percent. A decomposition considers the effects of changes in tax policy, demographics, and the income distribution. Almost all of the increase in the fraction paying no tax is due to changes in tax policy, with about two-thirds from increasingly generous tax credits. A similar decomposition considers the parallel increase in tax progressivity. By causing more adults to pay no tax, expansions in tax credits have also contributed to increasing tax progressivity. Finally, the substantial tax changes enacted in 2017 are forecasted to increase both the fraction paying no federal individual income tax and overall tax progressivity.

Keywords: Tax Credits, Tax Incidence, Tax Progressivity

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INTRODUCTION

The fraction of Americans paying no tax serves as a simple measure of tax progressivity that came to prominence during the 2010 presidential election. In the prior year, Williams (2009) estimated that 47 percent of tax units paid no federal individual income tax (hereafter, *tax*).¹ In the most comprehensive study to date, Heim, Lurie, and Pearce (2017) estimated that most of the recent increase in the fraction paying no tax since 2001 was due to changes in the population. The fraction paying no tax, however, fluctuated dramatically in earlier periods. This study is the first to present consistent estimates of the fraction paying no tax since the beginning of the federal individual income tax, extending over a full century. This reveals that the fraction paying no tax increased dramatically since 1985, and a decomposition shows that almost all of this increase is explained by changes in tax policy, in particular, from increasingly generous tax credits. Moreover, this paper is the first to connect trends in the fraction paying no tax with a distribution-wide measure of tax progressivity. This shows that the fraction paying no tax has served as an effective proxy for overall tax progressivity. Finally, I present the first forecasts of these measures over the next decade, including effects from the 2017 tax reform.

A number of studies responded to the 47 percent estimate by emphasizing that this fraction is lower for measures of tax burdens over multiple years (Marr and Huang, 2012; Heim, Lurie, and Pearce, 2014; Fullerton and Rao, 2016).² These studies, however, do not consider the large increase in the fraction paying no federal individual income tax since 1985. While multi-year measures show lower fractions paying no tax, I find that the increase was similar for annual

¹ Tax units are the conventional unit of observation in tax return data and combine individuals filing a tax return together or who would file together in the case of non-filers.

² These studies also explained that the fraction was unusually large due to the temporary making work pay credit and recession related unemployment. Another common point was that the fraction paying no tax falls significantly when including payroll taxes. Whereas having a positive income tax liability gives no direct benefit, payroll tax payments qualify one for various entitlement programs and increase expected Social Security benefits, complicating the interpretation of payroll tax progressivity, and so are not considered in this paper.

and multi-year measures. This means that while controlling for short-term income mobility with multi-year measures lowers the level, it does not explain the trend in the fraction paying no tax.³ Besides highlighting the increasing impact of tax credits on the fraction paying no tax, considering the last three decades shows that real income changes around the tax-exempt threshold has had different effects. Between 1985 and 2000, rising real incomes (falling inequality) in the region of the distribution where filers have little tax liability offset the increase in the fraction paying no tax; since the 2000 business cycle peak, falling real incomes (rising inequality) in a similar part of the distribution contributed to the increase in the fraction paying no tax.

Another recent study of the fraction paying no tax is Fullerton and Rao (2016), which uses survey-based data at the household level. This approach carries with it a number of issues. First, survey-based data are subject to multiple levels of error: survey response error, income reporting error, and tax burden calculation errors (due to incomplete take-up of some deductions and credits).⁴ Second, multiple tax unit households can present problems for calculating correct tax burdens, as household incomes may need to be divided between more than one tax return. Third, this study pools data over four decades, which obscures trends over time. I address these limitations by using administrative tax data, estimating tax burdens at the tax unit level, and showing trends over the last hundred years. This provides accurate and consistent measures of the fraction paying no federal individual income tax.

The fraction paying no tax and tax progressivity tend to move in parallel. Although they do not necessarily need to align—as in the case of increases in the top tax rate—since 1985 the

³ A similar increase in the fraction paying no tax for annual and multi-year measures is consistent with stable levels of short-term income mobility, as has been estimated by Dahl, DeLeire, and Schwabish (2011) and Celik et al (2012).

⁴ For example, how children will be claimed on tax returns may conflict with reporting in survey data. Jones and O'Hara (2016) and Splinter, Larrimore, and Mortenson (2017) found that some households with multiple tax units tend to reassign dependents to lower tax liabilities.

fraction paying no tax and tax progressivity, as measured by the Kakwani index, have had a correlation of 0.91. Moreover, decompositions of increases in both the fraction paying no tax and tax progressivity show similar effects from tax policy changes. In fact, most of the recent increase in tax progressivity was also driven by expansions in tax credits.

The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) dramatically expanded standard deductions and child credits, eliminated personal exemptions, and changed tax brackets and rates. This paper presents the first analysis of these changes on the forecasted fraction paying no tax and tax progressivity. The TCJA is expected to increase the 2018 fraction paying no tax by 2.5 percentage points and to increase tax progressivity by over 10 percent.

DATA AND APPROACH

Cross-section Data

Annual numbers of taxpayers are estimated from IRS Statistics of Income tax return samples, which are representative of the population of tax returns. Confidential files, referred to as the individual and sole proprietorship (INSOLE) files, are used since 1979. These data include taxpayer identification numbers (TINs, usually Social Security Numbers), allowing for merges with Social Security data that include years of birth. To convert from filing tax units to adults, weights are doubled for married filing jointly returns. For Figure 1 only, public use files are used from 1960 to 1978—except for missing years in 1961, 1963, and 1965, which are interpolated—and IRS Statistics of Income individual annual data books (publication 1304) before 1960.

The total number of tax units comes from Census-based estimates of Piketty and Saez (2003 and updates), which sums the number of married couples and unmarried individuals at least 20 years old. As the underlying tax data only includes individuals filing tax returns, these Census-based totals are necessary in order to impute the number of non-filing tax units (all of

which are assumed to pay no tax, as discussed below). The number of non-filing tax units is calculated as the total number of tax units less the number of tax returns with resident filers at least 20 years old, where the number of married filing separate returns is halved to fit the Census-based tax unit definition. Based on estimates of Census and tax data, I set the non-filing tax unit marriage rate at 40 percent and the fraction of non-filing tax units that are 20 to 64 years old (i.e., *working age*) at 55 percent.⁵ These assumptions allow a conversion of the unit of observation from tax units to working age adults.

Panel Data

A panel of tax returns is used to compare annual and multi-year fractions paying no tax in Figure 3 only; for all other analysis, cross-section data is used. The Continuous Work History Sample (CWHS) is a randomly sampled panel, including all tax returns with primary TINs with specific four digit endings, so tax units continually cycle into the panel when they start filing taxes and out of the panel upon death. For more description of the CWHS, see Dowd and Horowitz (2011a, 2011b). As the number of sampled TIN endings fluctuated over the sample, only those endings sampled in all years of each multi-year period are included.

The CWHS panel only includes tax returns, therefore some observations will be missing in years when not filing. While studies using the CWHS tend to exclude observations that are not in the sample every year of a multi-year period, this would provide downwardly biased estimates of the fraction paying no tax. To account for periodically missing observations, all primaries

⁵ For example, in 2000 the Census Bureau's Statistical Abstract reports 59.6 million married men. The IRS reports 50.3 million returns filing jointly and 2.5 million married filing separately (representing 1.2 million marriages). This leaves 8.1 million married couples not filing, and dividing by the estimated 18.6 million non-filer tax units gives a 43 percent non-filer marriage rate. For working age adults, I assume that only 20 percent of non-filing adults are married because elderly non-filers have a higher marriage rate. The assumption that 55 percent of non-filing tax units are working age yields an estimate of 110.7 million working age tax units, similar to Statistical Abstract based estimates of 110.1 million.

filing returns at least once during each five-year sample are kept in the sample. All those filing at least three times are kept in each eleven-year sample.⁶ This results in annual fractions of non-filers and adults not paying tax in the multi-year samples that are similar to the cross-section (compare the fraction filing in Table 1, Panel B with Panels C and D).

Defining Taxes

The federal individual income tax burden of filers is total tax liability reported on actual tax returns (after non-refundable credits and including other taxes) less included self-employment taxes, payroll taxes reported on tax returns, and refundable tax credits.⁷ I assume that non-filers pay zero income tax, even though some may have tax withheld from their wages. Estimates of non-filers by Heim, Lurie, and Pearce (2017) suggest that withheld taxes in excess of calculated tax liabilities may decrease the fraction paying no tax by a couple percentage points but do not affect the trend.⁸ Also, the fraction paying no tax may differ from the fraction that should pay no tax, as some income is not reported to the IRS and over-claiming expenses by businesses could decrease some tax burdens.

⁶ Including all individuals sampled in the CWHS over eleven-year periods would result in an excess estimated fraction of those paying no tax.

⁷ For example, on the 2015 Form 1040 the tax burden is total tax (line 63) less self-employment and payroll taxes (lines 57, 58 and 60a) and refundable credits (lines 66a, 67, 68, 69, and 73 box c). Note that some credits related to other taxes are excluded, such as the credit for federal tax on fuels, and the 2001 and 2008 tax rebates are excluded, as they were one-time payments and not fundamental parts of the individual income tax system.

⁸ This is likely an over-estimate due to millions of information returns that cannot be linked to the tax returns with which they were filed, incorrectly attributing the taxes withheld on these information returns to non-filers. This occurs because of “ITIN/SSN mismatches,” which is when taxpayers use Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) to file tax returns, but attach information returns with SSNs, as ITINs are invalid for work purposes and so cannot be used on Form W-2. Auten and Splinter (2017) discuss this issue and estimate that since 2006 at least a third of unlinked W-2 wages are on tax returns with only ITIN filers.

Decomposition Approach

A shift-share decomposition is used to estimate the causes for the recent increase in the fraction paying no tax among changes in tax policy, demographics, and the income distribution.⁹ The effect of tax policy is divided into three steps that transform 2015 tax burdens into 1985 counterfactual tax burdens. First, the EITC is replaced with 1985 EITC values, where credit values and various thresholds are indexed with the CPI-U, and the refundable and non-refundable portions of the child tax credit are removed, as this credit began in the 1990s. Second, some prominent new tax credits are removed: the net premium tax credit, the health care tax credit, and education credits. Third, personal exemptions and standard deductions are replaced with indexed 1985 values, and the bottom 1985 tax rate of 11 percent tax rate is applied to any resulting increase in taxable income.¹⁰

To estimate the effects of changes in demographics and the income distribution, I follow a reweighting approach similar to Larrimore (2014) and Heim, Lurie, and Pearce (2017). This means sequentially adjusting 2015 observational weights to match 1985 weights for age groups, filing types, the number of children claimed, and income groups. For example, the weights of age 20 to 24 filers are multiplied by the share of age 20 to 24 filers in 1985 and divided by their share in 2015. This leaves the within age group fraction paying no tax unchanged, while adjusting weights to control for their falling share of the population.¹¹

⁹ In an analysis of the level paying no tax, rather than the change, Johnson et al (2011) estimated that about half is from personal exemptions and the standard deduction, and half from tax credits and various exclusions.

¹⁰ As changes in personal exemptions and standard deductions can affect the amount of child and dependent care credit reported on Form 1040, its value is replaced with the unlimited amount on Form 8812.

¹¹ As in Heim, Lurie, and Pearce (2017), the population is divided into age group cells and the fraction of the population in each 2015 age cell is set to the fraction in each 1985 cell. For filing types, reweighting is by each age x filing type cell. For the number of children, reweighting is by each age x filing type x number of children cell. For income groups, reweighting is by each age x filing type x number of children cell x income group.

The filing groups include single, head of household, and married (including married filing jointly), where head of household identifies unmarried filers claiming dependents. Age groups are 20 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, and 55 to 64 years old. These are the same filing and age groups shown in Figures 4 and 5, as discussed in the next section. Number of children groups are for none, one, two, and three or more dependents claimed, which can also include disabled adults and elderly parents. Income groups in 1985 are set by filing status as five adjusted gross income ranges, equally divided by income between zero and an upper bound: \$20,000 for single filers, \$35,000 for head of household, and \$40,000 for married filers.¹² Note that this reweighting is only applied to those filing tax returns, and the characteristics of non-filers are left unchanged. As in other papers holding tax policy constant over time, such as Dowd (2005), changes to population demographics and the income distribution are considered unaffected by changes in tax policy.

A similar decomposition is applied to changes in tax progressivity. The tax change calculator is expanded such that all appropriate tax rates are applied to changes in taxable income resulting from changes in exemptions and standard deductions (rather than only the bottom rate). Also, instead of a reweighting approach that only accounts for changes in the bottom of the income distribution, actual 1985 data is used to account for inequality changes (this is the final level of tax progressivity at the bottom of Table 3). Tax progressivity is measured with the Kakwani index, estimated as the difference between the tax concentration coefficient and Gini coefficient of pre-tax income, defined as adjusted gross income plus adjustments. The tax concentration coefficient is a Gini-type measure of federal individual income taxes but with tax

¹² These 1985 income groups are set such that the top group for each filing status has very few adults paying no tax and are inflation adjusted for 2015. The bottom group includes those with negative incomes and the top group includes those with incomes over the upper bound.

units ranked by pre-tax income. See Mathews (2014) and Slavov and Viard (2016) for recent discussions.

FINDINGS

Tax-exempt Thresholds: 1913–1985

Figure 1 shows that the U.S. federal individual income tax initially excluded 99 percent of tax units. During World War II it expanded to become a mass tax, such that only a third of tax units paid no income tax. This was caused by decreases in personal exemptions. For example, between 1939 and 1944 personal exemptions for married couples fell from \$43,000 to \$13,000 (2016 dollars; see Seltzer, 1968). This is the most dramatic example of the fraction paying no tax changing with the amount of income at which tax is owed, referred to as the *tax-exempt threshold*.

Between 1945 and 1985, the fraction paying no tax fluctuated within a narrow range. Nominal and real income growth subjected more families to income taxes, as personal exemptions and standard deductions were not indexed to inflation. In Figure 1, this tax-exempt threshold “bracket creep” is seen as declines in the fraction paying no tax. The occasional upward jumps are partly due to tax legislation increasing tax-exempt thresholds. For example, the Revenue Act of 1948 increased personal exemptions and added an additional exemption for elderly filers.¹³ The Tax Reform Act of 1969 phased in increases of personal exemptions. Reforms in 1975 increased standard deductions and introduced the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and other reforms in the late 1970s increased standard deductions (Bakija and Steuerle,

¹³ It also unified personal exemptions, increasing dependent exemption amounts to be equal to that of filers, which dramatically lowered the taxes of large families relative to childless tax units (Steuerle, 1983).

1991).¹⁴ The rest of this section focuses on the period since 1985 because that marks a significant break in policy, with the indexation of the tax code and increasing generosity of tax credits.

Tax Credit Expansions: 1985–2015

Tax credit expansions resulted from a number of legislative changes. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 increased and indexed the EITC.¹⁵ Legislation in 1990 and 1993 further expanded the EITC. The Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997 introduced the child tax credit and two education tax credits. Tax legislation in 2001 and 2003 increased the standard deduction for joint filers, expanded education credits, increased the child and dependent care credit, and doubled the child tax credit to \$1,000. This contributed to the fraction of tax units paying no tax increasing to 41 percent in 2004.¹⁶ The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act increased the refundability of the child tax credit and enacted a set of temporary refundable tax credits, including the making work pay credit, the first-time homebuyer credit, and the American Opportunity Tax Credit. This temporarily increased the fraction of tax units paying no tax to 48 percent. In 2011, the decrease in the fraction paying no tax to 44 percent was due in part to the expiration of the making work pay credit.¹⁷

Figure 2 shows that these tax policy expansions corresponded with a 13 percentage point increase in the fraction of tax units receiving refundable credits, that is, with sufficient credits to offset any tax liability and result in a net payment from the federal government. The increase is

¹⁴ Some tax rate changes may also have an effect. For example, 1945 and 1948 legislation reduced rates, while 1950 legislation reversed these decreases, and 1951 legislation increased rates through 1953, contributing to a decreasing fraction paying no tax in those years (see www.taxpolicycenter.org/laws-proposals).

¹⁵ The 1986 reform also increased personal exemptions and standard deductions. Hausman and Poterba (1987) extrapolated 1983 tax data to estimate that the reform would cause about 6 million more tax units to pay no tax.

¹⁶ It appears that the effect of expanding these various credits on the fraction paying no tax was generally not a topic of discussion. One exception is Hodge (2003), which discusses the effect of child credit refundability.

¹⁷ The 2011 and 2012 two percentage point reduction in payroll taxes, called the “payroll tax holiday,” is viewed as replacing the making work pay credit. This paper does not capture this shift from income taxes to payroll taxes.

17 percent when considering adults and 15 percent for working age adults. As seen in the next subsection, these increases in the fraction receiving refundable credits are almost exactly paralleled in the fraction paying no tax.

Effects of Elderly Filers, Unit of Observation, and Multi-year Periods

The fraction of Americans paying no federal individual income tax varies based on whether the elderly are included, the unit of observation, and if multiple years are considered. Figure 3 shows that the fraction paying no tax has increased since 1985 regardless of these various approaches. Levels, however, have persistently differed. To discuss these differences, I focus on estimates for 2009, which allows for comparisons with centered 11-year averages (which lag annual data by five years).

In 2009, the fraction of tax units paying no income tax was 48 percent.¹⁸ This falls to 46 percent for tax units aged 20 to 64 years old, as elderly tax units are less likely to owe tax, and removing them from the sample slightly decreases the fraction paying no tax. Taking into account the two adults in married tax units, the fraction of working age adults paying no tax was 43 percent. Married tax units are more likely to pay taxes, so increasing their weight by converting from tax units to adults as the unit of observation decreases the fraction paying no tax. Adults are used for all remaining estimates, as they are a more consistent unit of observation than tax units, which are sensitive to changes in marriage rates.

Summing positive and negative tax burdens over multiple year periods (with taxes indexed by the CPI-U) decreases the fraction of working age adults paying no tax. Over the five-

¹⁸ The Williams (2009) estimate of 47 percent was based on forecasted data. More recently, the Tax Policy Center estimated that 51 percent of tax units paid no federal individual income tax in 2009 (www.taxpolicycenter.org/model-estimates/tax-units-zero-or-negative-tax-liability/baseline-distribution-tax-units-no-tax). This estimate is likely higher than the 48 percent estimated here because of a larger assumed number of total tax units, implying more non-filers.

year period centered on 2009, the fraction of working age adults paying no tax falls to 32 percent. Over the eleven-year period this falls to 28 percent.

A couple of examples show why a smaller fraction of adults pay no tax over five-year periods than annual periods. Someone paying zero tax for four years and paying any tax the fifth year is counted here as paying tax for that five-year period, even though four-fifths of the time they pay no tax in the annual estimates. Alternatively, an adult could have a negative tax in a number of years and would need to pay sufficient tax during the multi-year period to offset all of their refundable credits. The largest refundable credit—the EITC—is usually claimed for only one- or two-year spells (Dowd and Horowitz, 2011b).¹⁹ The gap between the fraction paying no tax over annual and five-year periods therefore suggests that many adults jump from having annual negative taxes to positive five-year taxes. This gap, however, declined since 1985 from over half of the annual fraction to about one-fifth. This was due in part to an increase in the persistence of paying no tax.²⁰

In summary, removing the elderly reduces the fraction paying no tax, changing the unit of observation from tax units to adults also lowers the fraction, and moving from annual to multi-year measures of tax burdens again lowers the fraction.

Demographic Effects

Changes in marriage rates, the tax benefits of claiming children, and the age composition may explain some of the trends in the fraction paying no tax. Between 1985 and 2015, the fraction of working age adults who were married fell from two-thirds to one-half. This resulted

¹⁹ Similarly, Ackerman, Holtzblatt, and Masken (2009) estimate that 62 percent of EITC recipients claim the credit less than half of the time in a seven-year period.

²⁰ Among working age adults paying no tax in the center year of a five-year period, the average years of paying no tax in 1985 was 3.8, and in 2012 it was 4.3. Dowd and Horowitz (2011b) observed a similar increase since the early 1990s in the five-year out probability of paying no tax.

in increases in the fraction filing as single (from 29 to 37 percent) and head of household (from 7 to 12 percent). As the largest increase in the fraction paying no tax was for head of household filers and the highest level was usually among single filers, as seen in Figure 4, the decline in marriage rates should contribute to the overall increase in the fraction paying no tax. In the next subsection, we see that it explains about a tenth of the increase in the fraction paying no tax.

Tax credits associated with qualifying children have also grown in importance (Ackerman et al, 2016). The fraction of single filers paying no tax increased little since 1985, as they have no qualifying children, while it more than doubled for head of household filers, as they usually benefit from tax credit expansions. Among married filers there is also a growing gap between fractions paying no tax among those with and without dependents. In 1985, married joint filers with no dependents and two dependents had similar fractions paying no tax. By 2015, only a tenth of those with no dependents paid no tax while a quarter of those with two dependents paid no tax.

Figure 5 shows the fraction of working age adults paying no tax by age. Even though the fraction paying no tax increased among all age groups, the increase was larger for the young, leading to a fanning out of the fraction paying no tax by age. For example, in 1985 the 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 year old age groups had a similar fraction paying no tax of 11 percent. By 2015, however, 33 percent of the younger group paid no tax and only 18 percent of the older group paid no tax. Again, the importance of children for various credits may explain some of the faster growth in the younger group.

Differences by age group, however, may suggest an exaggerated impact on the overall fraction paying no tax because of changes in the age composition. The markers in Figure 5 show in which year someone born in the middle of the Baby Boom would be in the middle of each age group. Notice that these Baby Boomers had little change in the fraction paying no tax. As they

are a relatively large age cohort, they attenuated the increase in the fraction of working age adults paying no tax such that age composition changes had little effect, as seen in the next subsection.

Decomposition

Table 2 presents the results of the decomposition, which shows how tax policy, demographics, and the income distribution caused the 1985 to 2015 increase in the fraction paying no tax. Shift-share decompositions can be sensitive to the order in which causes are considered, therefore I reverse the sequence of estimating causes and show a second set of results. The average of the two are treated as the main results.

About half of the increase in the fraction paying no tax is explained by an increase in the EITC and child credit (44 percent).²¹ Other tax credits explain an additional 18 percent of the increase, implying that all tax credits account for nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of the increase in the fraction paying no tax. Increases in personal exemptions and standard deductions explain another third of the increase (32 percent). This was due to a near doubling of personal exemptions and a large standard deduction increase for head of household filing status with the Tax Reform Act of 1986, as well as a standard deduction increase for married filers in 2003. Falling marriage rates, estimated by changes in filing status, explain a tenth of the increase (8 percent), while changes in the age distribution, number of children claimed, and income distribution have little effect. In summary, over ninety percent of the increase in the fraction of working age adults paying no tax since 1985 was explained by changes in tax policy. Especially important was the effect of increasingly generous tax credits.

²¹ Breaking out the effects suggests that the child credit explains about a quarter of the increase in the fraction paying no tax and the EITC about a sixth.

Dividing the time period studied in half reveals nonlinearity in the causes of an increasing fraction paying no tax. Table 2 shows that between 1985 and 2000, about 155 percent of the increase was explained by tax policy; but this was offset by a 70 percent decrease due to falling income inequality (rising real incomes) in the region of the income distribution where filers have little tax liability. Between 2000 and 2015, only 46 percent of the increase was due to tax policy. Meanwhile, a 50 percent positive effect from inequality (falling real incomes) offset most of the inequality effect from the earlier period.²²

Tax Progressivity

The increase in the fraction paying no federal income tax is related to changes in tax progressivity. To understand this relationship, Figure 6 compares the actual estimates of these two measures. Note that the fraction paying no tax and progressivity do not necessarily move together, such as when the top tax rate increased in 1993, but overall they have tended to move in parallel. Between 1985 and 2015, their correlation is 0.91.

A microsimulation tax model is used to estimate forecasted incomes and federal individual tax burdens. This model consists of a complete tax calculator and uses 2013 tax returns extrapolated based on macroeconomic forecasts of the Congressional Budget Office excluding any effects from TCJA, as described in Joint Committee on Taxation (2015). Forecasts for the years 2015 to 2027 are shown in Figure 6, both under the TCJA and under prior law, referred to here as the baseline. Relative to the 2018 baseline estimates, the TCJA increases the fraction paying no tax from 38.6 to 41.1 percent and increases tax progressivity from 31 to 34.²³

²² These results are consistent with the findings of Heim, Lurie, and Pearce (2017) for 2001 to 2013. Dividing the period at 2000 was chosen to keep all years during economic expansions and thus more comparable.

²³ These estimates do not take into account behavioral responses to changes in tax policy and only consider effects on the federal individual income tax system, excluding effects from changes to estate and gift taxes and the decrease in corporate tax rates under TCJA.

The TCJA declines in 2026 are due to the expiration of most individual tax provisions, with the exception of the permanent change from CPI-U to chained CPI-U indexing, which pushes TCJA below the baseline.

The increase in tax progressivity between 1985 and 2015 can be better understood by looking at how tax rates changed over the income distribution. Figure 7 shows average tax rates, which divide each income group's federal individual income tax by total income. Tax rates increased for the top quintile of working age adults and decreased for all other income groups, implying an increase in the progressivity of taxes. The growth of refundable tax credits contributed to decreasing tax rates of the bottom quintile from 0 percent to negative 6 percent. Rates of the second quintile fell even more, from 6 percent to negative 4 percent. These results are similar to estimates in Congressional Budget Office (2016).

A decomposition of tax progressivity can estimate if the increasing generosity of tax credits is also responsible for the increase in tax progressivity. Table 3 shows that between 1985 and 2015, tax progressivity measured with the Kakwani index increased from 21.9 to 31.4.²⁴ Larger personal exemptions and standard deductions account for much of the rest of the increase in tax progressivity, although increasing income inequality offset their contribution. As with the fraction paying no tax, increasingly generous child and earned income tax credits explain the overwhelming majority of increasing tax progressivity.

CONCLUSION

Using administrative tax data, this paper presents estimates of the fraction of tax units and adults with no federal individual income tax burden. Relative to tax–unit–based measures,

²⁴ Although Gini coefficients based on income reported on tax returns increased from 42 to 59, the concentration coefficient of federal individual income taxes increased even more, from 64 to 90, resulting in an increase in tax progressivity.

the fraction paying no tax falls when considering adults, as married couples are more likely to pay taxes. It falls again when considering taxes paid over multi-year periods, as incomes tend to recover quickly from negative shocks. A decomposition shows that over ninety percent of the rise in the fraction paying no tax since 1985 was caused by changes in tax policy. In particular, increases in the value of tax credits explain two-thirds of the change.

Besides increasing the fraction of taxpayers paying no tax, increasingly generous tax credits have contributed to an increase in federal individual income tax progressivity. The 2017 tax reform further increased tax credits and forecasts forecasted tax progressivity. As income volatility causes frequent churning in and out of the bottom of the distribution (Dowd and Horowitz, 2011b; Rank and Hirschl, 2015), increasing tax progressivity at the bottom of the distribution can not only be viewed as providing medium- and long-term income support, but also as contributing to the insurance effect of taxes by providing a temporary safety net.

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Table 1: Tax return data summary statistics

	<u>Fraction Filing</u>			<u>Median Tax (\$2015)</u>			<u>N. Observations</u>		
	1985	1995	2012	1985	1995	2012	1985	1995	2012
<i>Panel A: Cross-section (Tax Units)</i>									
20+ years old	0.84	0.84	0.85	2,420	2,050	590	118,140	113,986	332,828
20–64 years old	0.89	0.90	0.89	3,150	2,710	860	100,641	91,185	258,133
<i>Panel B: Cross-section (Adults)</i>									
20+ years old	0.85	0.85	0.84	3,070	2,710	940	118,140	113,986	332,828
20–64 years old	0.91	0.91	0.90	4,010	3,630	1,510	100,641	91,185	258,133
<i>Panel C: 5-year panel (Adults)</i>									
20–64 years old	0.88	0.88	0.87	3,910	3,680	1,410	8,555	20,536	129,478
<i>Panel D: 11-year panel (Adults)</i>									
20–64 years old	0.88	0.87	---	4,500	4,070	---	7,123	17,856	---

Notes: For panels, age restrictions apply in all years of each multi-year period and the primary must not have died by the end of the multi-year period. Estimates for the center year of each multi-year period are shown. For the 5-year panel, included TINs filed at least one year during each 5-year period; for the 11-year panel at least three years. Married filing joint returns are counted as two adults and non-filer tax units as 1.4 adults. Ages are based on the age of the primary filer. Median tax is indexed using the CPI-U and rounded to nearest \$10 amount.

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

Table 2:
Decomposition of increase in fraction of working age adults
paying no federal individual income tax

	1985–2015					1985–2000	2000–2015
	Fraction no tax	Change	Percent of total change	Reverse percent of total change	Avg. percent total change	Avg. percent total change	Avg. percent total change
2015 fraction paying no tax	36.5						
<i>A. Tax policy changes</i>							
Child credit and EITC	29.9	–6.5	40	49	44	61	23
Other credits	27.2	–2.7	17	19	18	---	16
Exemptions & std. deductions	21.7	–5.5	34	31	32	94	7
<i>B. Demographic changes</i>							
Age cohorts	22.3	0.7	–4	1	–2	–3	–3
Filing status	20.6	–1.7	11	6	8	5	5
Number of children	20.6	0.0	0	–5	–2	13	2
<i>C. Income distribution</i>							
	20.2	–0.4	2	0	1	–70	50
<i>D. Cumulative effect</i>							
		–16.3	100	100	100	100	100
1985 fraction paying no tax	20.2						

Notes: All values shown in percentage terms. For the 1985–2015 decomposition, 2015 tax burdens are adjusted by removing tax credits not available in 1985 and applying indexed 1985 EITC amounts and indexed exemptions and standard deductions. 2015 base data is adjusted to match 1985 income distribution and demographics by reweighting observations. The same approach is applied to the two other periods. Reverse percent total change applies changes in the reverse order as listed. Avg. percent total change is the average of percent total change and reverse percent total change.

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

Table 3:
Decomposition of increase in federal individual income
tax progressivity between 1985 and 2015

	Tax progressivity	Change	Percent of total change
2015 tax progressivity	31.4		
<i>A. Tax policy changes</i>			
Child credit and EITC	23.3	-8.1	87
Other credits	22.2	-1.0	11
Exemptions & std. deductions	19.8	-2.4	26
<i>B. Demographic changes</i>			
Age cohorts	19.1	-0.7	7
Filing status	19.3	0.1	-2
Number of children	19.4	0.1	-1
<i>C. Income distribution</i>			
	21.9	2.6	-28
<i>D. Cumulative effect</i>			
		-9.4	100
1985 tax progressivity	21.9		

Notes: Only includes adults 20 to 64 years old. See Table 2 and text for description of decomposition. Tax progressivity is measured by the Kakwani index, estimated as the difference between the tax concentration coefficient and Gini coefficient of pre-tax income (adjusted gross income plus adjustments).

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.



Figure 1: Fraction of Tax Units Paying No Federal Individual Income Tax, 1913–2015

Notes: Estimates are for tax units 20 years or older. For 1913 to 1915, all tax returns filed are assumed to pay tax. For 1916 to 1942, no tax filers younger than 20 years old are assumed to pay tax. For 1943 to 1959, 4 percent of tax returns paying tax (IRS data book definition) are assumed to be either younger than 20 years old or not pay tax after removing payroll taxes. Since 1960, estimates are based on annual microdata (with 1961, 1963, and 1965 interpolated).
Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

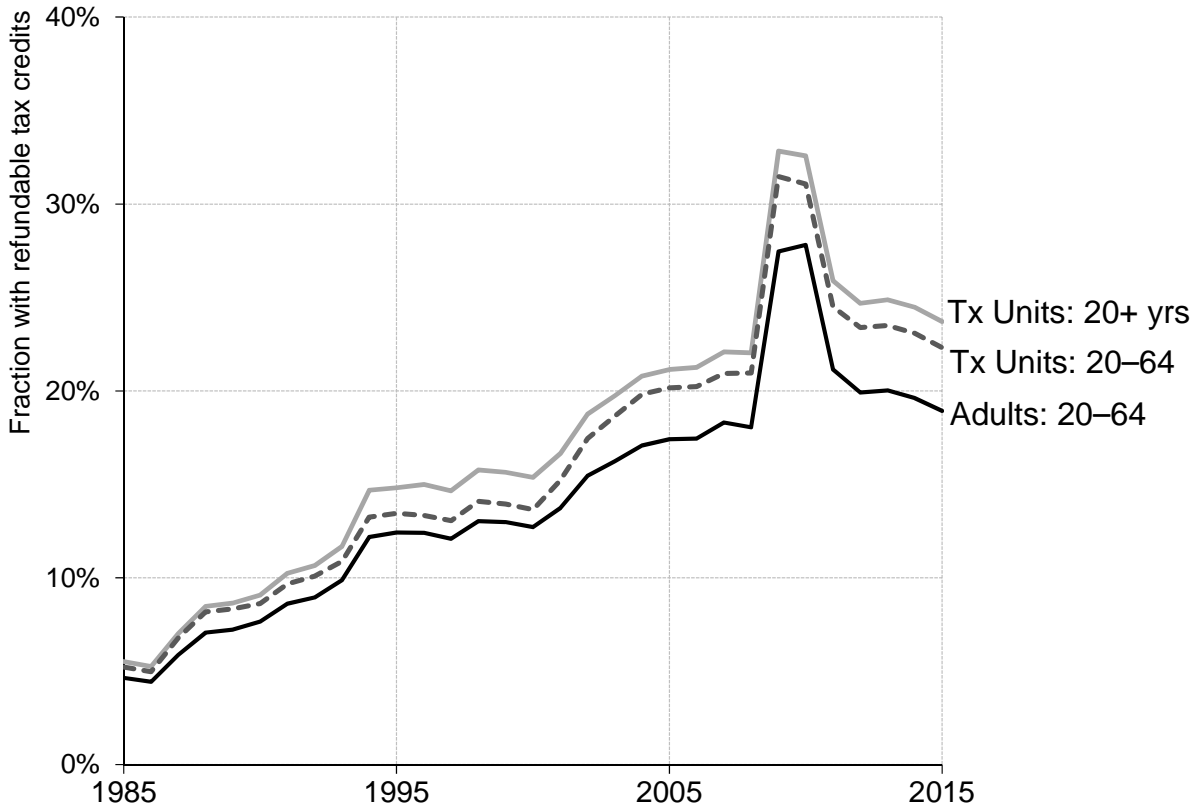


Figure 2: Fraction with Refundable Tax Credits

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

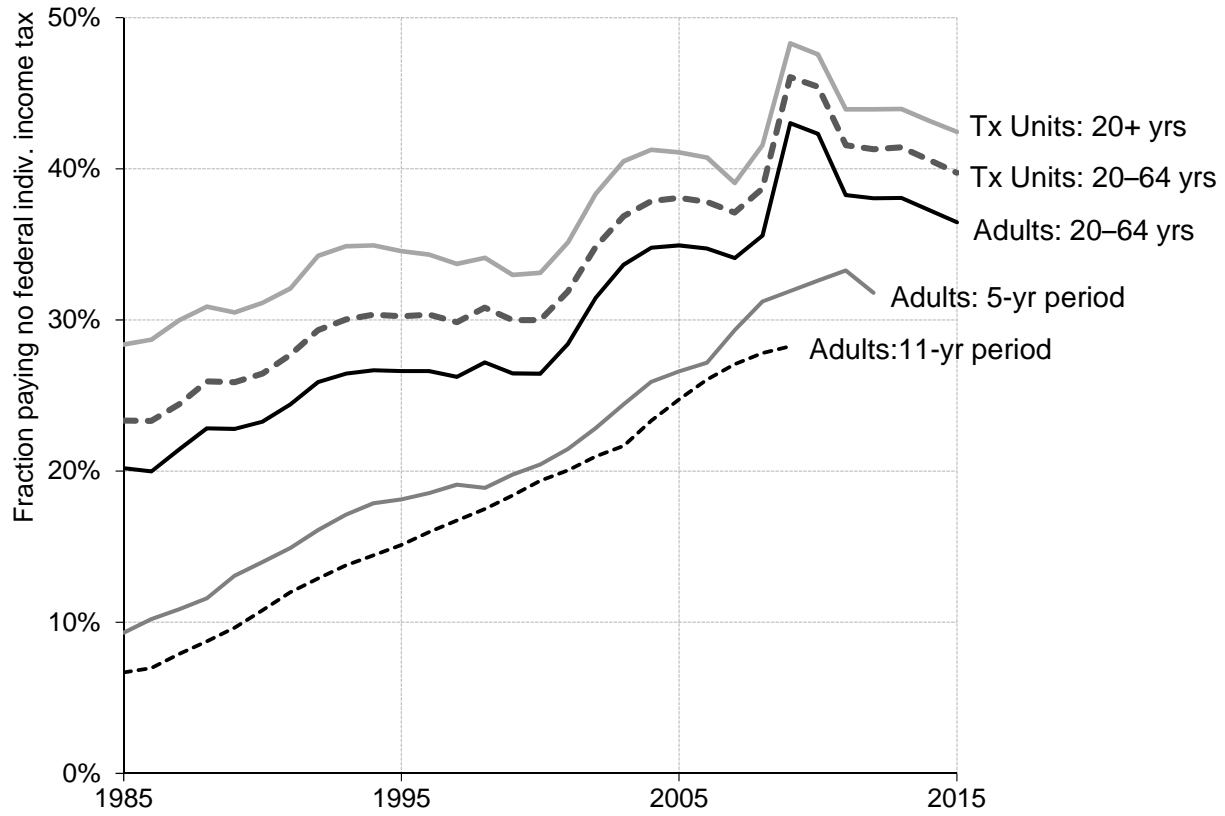


Figure 3: Fraction Paying No Federal Individual Income Tax

Note: See Table 1.

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

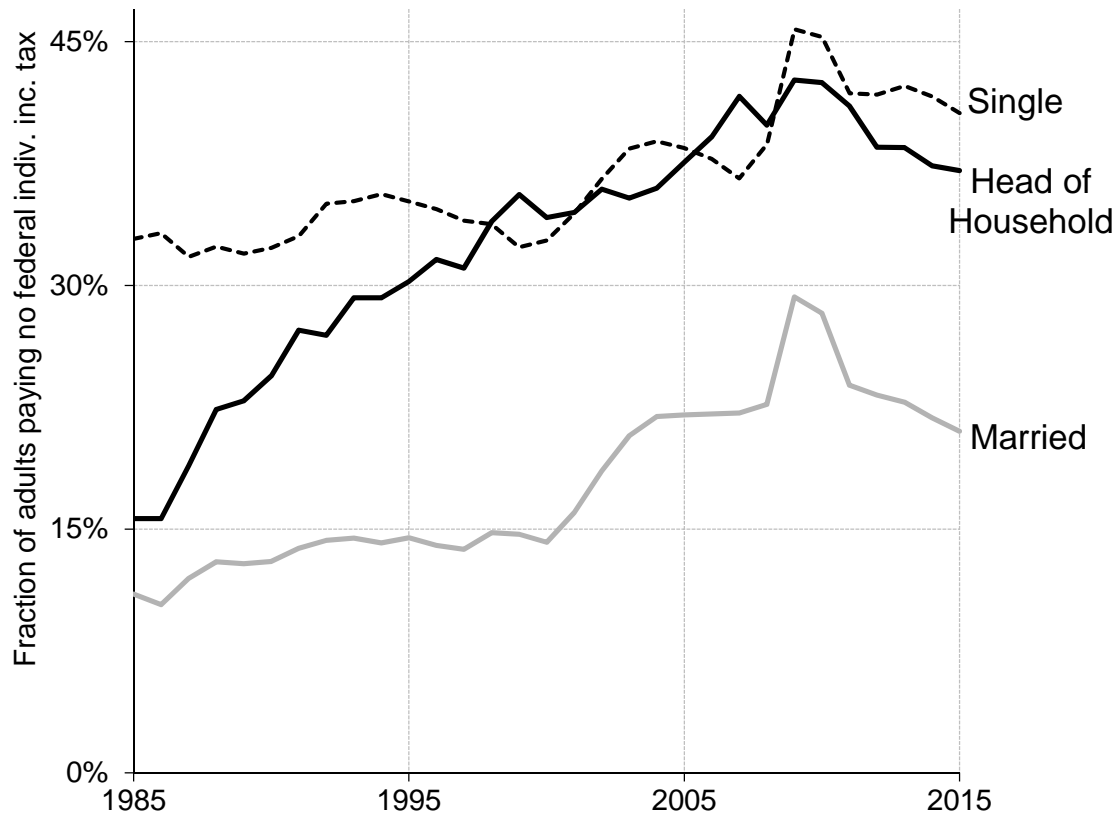


Figure 4: Fraction of Adults Paying No Federal Individual Income Tax by Filing Status

Note: Only includes 20 to 64 year old adults and excludes non-filers.

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

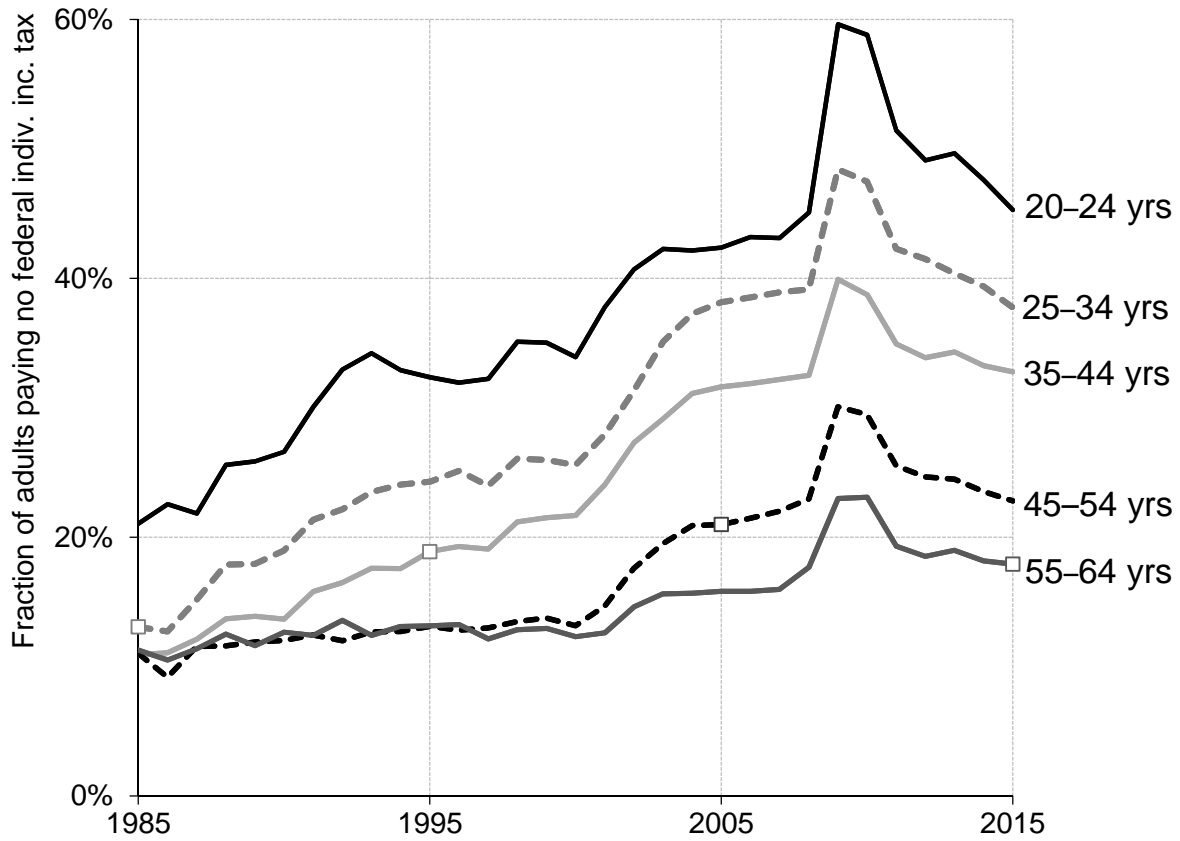


Figure 5: Fraction of Adults Paying No Federal Individual Income Tax by Age Group

Note: Markers indicate the year in which someone born in the middle of the Baby Boom would be in the middle of the age group.

Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.

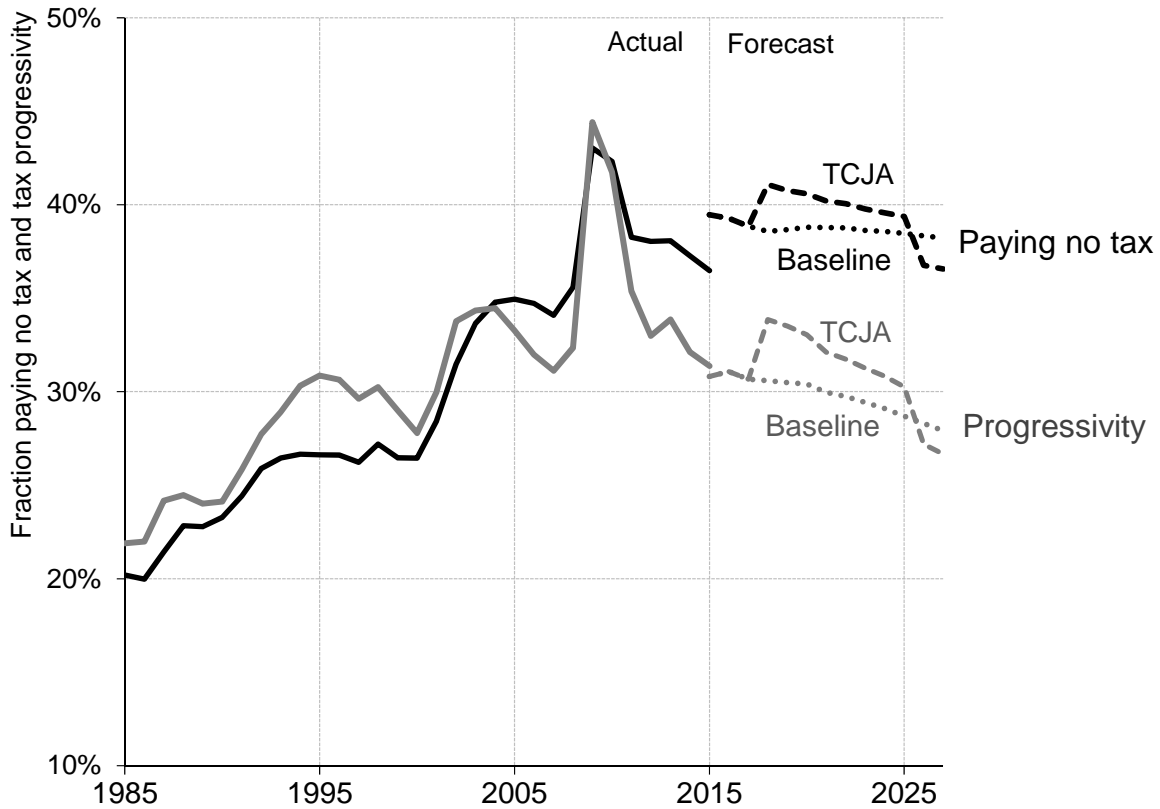


Figure 6: Fraction Paying No Federal Individual Income and Tax Progressivity

Notes: Only working age adults are included. Tax progressivity is measured by the Kakwani index. Forecasts begin in 2015, where baseline estimates are forecasts prior to the enactment of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA). The number of working age non-filing adults is set to grow at a 2 percent rate from 2015.

Sources: Authors' calculations, IRS data, and Joint Committee on Taxation Individual Tax Model.

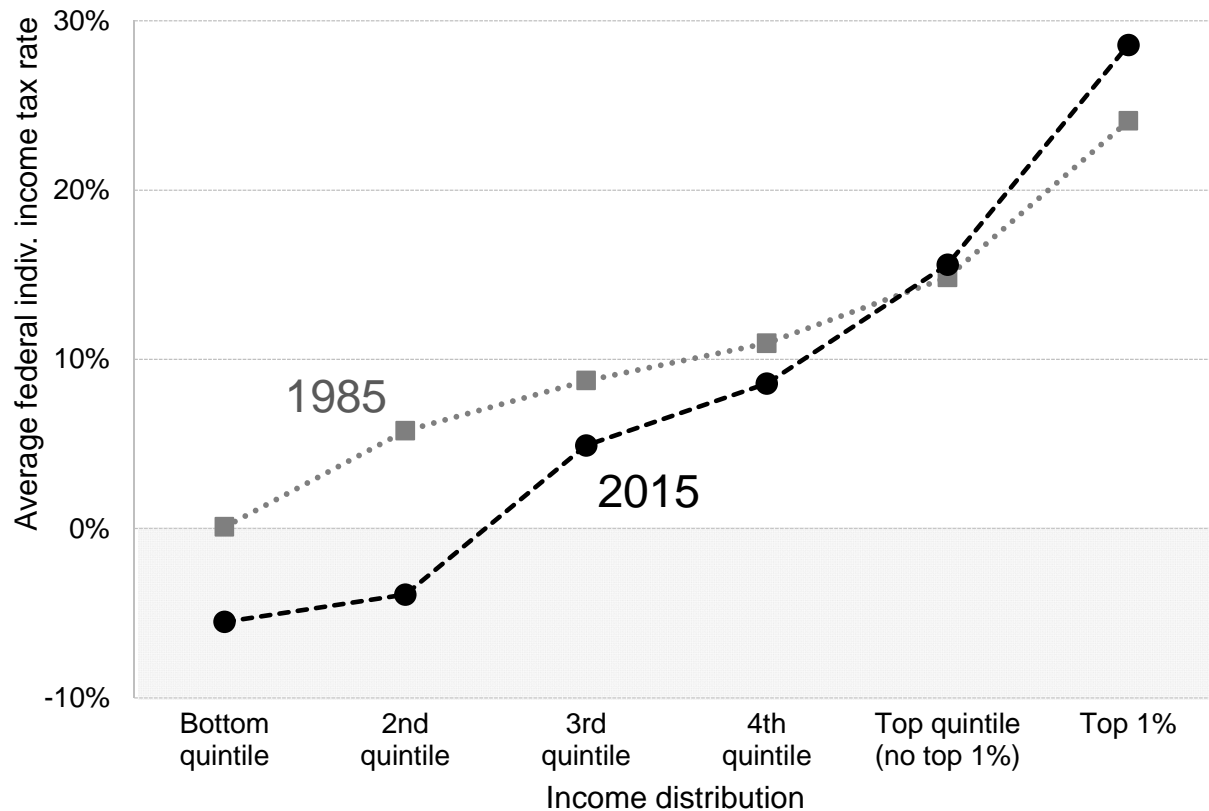


Figure 7: Average Tax Rates by Income Group in 1985 and 2015

Notes: Only includes adults 20 to 64 years old and thresholds set such that each quintile has the same number of adults. Average tax rates are total income group taxes divided by income. Taxes only include federal individual income taxes. Income for filers is adjusted gross income plus statutory adjustments, and in 1985 includes excluded capital gains. Income of non-filers is 30 percent of average filer income. Incomes are bottom-coded at zero.
Sources: Authors' calculations and IRS data.