

Roth IRA Conversions for 2010

A unique opportunity for IRA owners

provided by Jude Wilson RFC, MBA

In 2010, anyone may convert a traditional IRA to a Roth IRA. No income limits will stand in the way of the conversion.¹ Should you do it? Here's why it may (or may not) make sense for you to go Roth next year.

Why you might want to consider it. A Roth IRA permits tax-free growth and tax-free income distributions in retirement (assuming you are age 59½ or older and have held your Roth account for 5 years or longer). You can contribute to a Roth IRA after age 70½, without having to take mandatory withdrawals. While contributions to a Roth IRA aren't tax-deductible, the younger you are, the more attractive a Roth IRA may seem.²

However, older investors have reason to go Roth as well - especially if they don't really need to withdraw IRA assets. Under present tax law, converting an untapped traditional IRA to a Roth will shrink the size of your taxable estate, and careful estate planning could foster decades of tax-free growth for those IRA assets.³

Currently, if you name your spouse as the beneficiary of your Roth IRA, your spouse can treat the inherited IRA as his or her own after you die and forego withdrawals. So those Roth IRA assets can keep compounding untaxed across the rest of your spouse's life.

If your spouse then names a son or daughter as a beneficiary, that heir has the choice to make

minimum withdrawals according to his or her life expectancy, all while the assets continue to compound tax-free. Currently, withdrawals from an inherited Roth IRA are not subject to income tax.³

Why you may want to think twice about it. The IRS regards a traditional IRA-to-Roth IRA conversion as a distribution from a traditional IRA - a taxable event.⁴ You'll need to pay taxes on the entire amount of the conversion. Do you have the money to do that? Keep in mind, however: with the market down, many IRA values are lower than they have been for years. That translates to paying less tax on gains. It is also worth remembering that tax rates could increase in the years ahead - another reason why now may be a good time to convert. (You could simply do a partial Roth IRA conversion if converting the full amount would send you into a higher tax bracket.)⁴

You may be tempted to use the current IRA assets to pay the conversion tax, but should you? If you're younger than 59½, you're looking at a 10% penalty on the amount you withdraw, and you'll lose the chance for tax-free compounding of those assets within the Roth IRA.⁵

Why you might want to fund a Roth IRA this year. In 2009, any withdrawals from a traditional IRA can be used to fund a Roth IRA.⁶ Interesting. Why is this so?

In years past, mandatory withdrawals from a traditional IRA typically couldn't be deposited into a Roth IRA. But the federal government has suspended mandatory IRA withdrawals for 2009.⁷ Any IRA withdrawals made in 2009 are thereby elective withdrawals. So, if your adjusted gross income (AGI) is \$100,000 or less, you have an option to fund a Roth IRA with a withdrawal from a traditional IRA - at least through the end of 2009.⁶

In 2009, you can fund a Roth IRA with after-tax contributions to a 401(k), 403(b) or 457 retirement savings plan. This year, you can take those contributions and convert them to a Roth IRA tax-free, provided your AGI is \$100,000 or less. More good news: there is no limit to the conversion amount.¹

A potential tax break for those who convert in 2010. If you do a Roth conversion during 2010, you can choose to divide the taxes on the conversion between your 2011 and 2012 federal returns.⁸

Be sure to consult your tax advisor before you convert. This is a very good idea before you arrange any rollover, trustee-to-trustee transfer, or same-trustee transfer of your IRA assets. In any year, you should fully understand the potential tax impact of a Roth conversion on your finances and your estate. Also, remember that while the income limit on Roth IRA conversions will go away in 2010, the income limits on Roth IRA contributions still apply next year and for the foreseeable future.⁸

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Citations.

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