

# Inequality as policy: The United States since 1979\*

John Schmitt\*\* [[Center for Economic and Policy Research](#), USA]

Copyright: John Schmitt, 2009

## Introduction

Since the end of the 1970s, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in economic inequality. While the United States has long been among the most unequal of the world's rich economies, the economic and social upheaval that began in the 1970s was a striking departure from the movement toward greater equality that began in the Great Depression, continued through World War II, and was a central feature of the first 30 years of the postwar period.

Despite the magnitude of the rise in inequality, the political discourse in the United States refers only obliquely to these developments. The public debate generally acknowledges neither the scale of the increase in inequality nor, except in the most superficial way, the causes of this sudden and sustained turn of events.

This short essay seeks to provide an alternative view of the postwar period in the United States, particularly of the last three decades. My argument is that the high and rising inequality in the United States is the direct result of a set of policies designed first and foremost to increase inequality. These policies, in turn, have their roots in a significant shift in political power against workers and in favor of their employers, a shift that began in the 1970s and continues through today.

The first section of the paper briefly documents the size of the rise in U.S. inequality and puts this change into historical context. The second section sketches an explanation for rising inequality, one that differs from the deeply rooted, but poorly articulated vision that lurks just below the surface of polite political discourse in the United States. The final section focuses on an important part of inequality in the United States that does not receive the attention it deserves.

## Rise of inequality

As economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez have documented meticulously, for most of the 20th century, economic inequality in the United States was falling or flat.<sup>1</sup> (See **Figure 1**.) The last 30 years of increasing economic concentration are the exception, not the rule, of the last century of economic development in the United States.

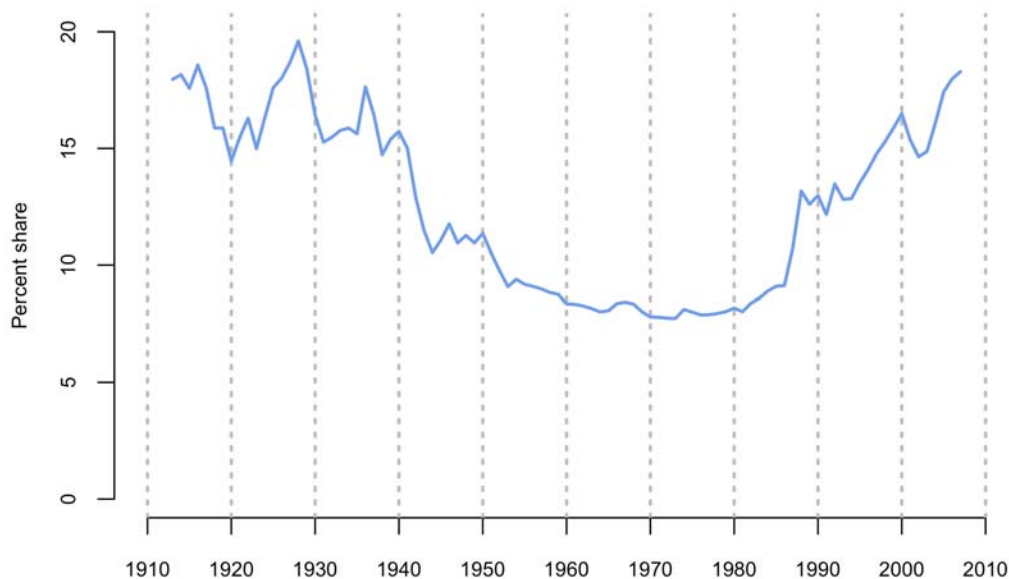
From a peak just before the 1929 stock market crash through the early 1950s, wage and income inequality, broadly measured, were declining. From the early 1950s through the late 1970s, inequality was flat, or even falling slightly. Since the late 1970s, however, inequality has skyrocketed, climbing back to levels last seen in the 1920s. In 1979, for example, the top one percent of all U.S. taxpayers received

---

1 See Emmanuel Saez's homepage <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/> and <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/TabFig2007.xls> for further details. For a comprehensive review of U.S. economic inequality, see Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America 2008-2009*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008 and <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/>.

about 8 percent of national income; by 2007, the top one percent received over 18 percent. If we include income from capital gains in the calculation, the increase in inequality is even sharper, with the top one percent capturing 10 percent of all income in 1979, but over 23 percent in 2007.

**FIGURE 1: Share of Total Income, Top 1% of U.S. Income Earners**



Source: Piketty and Saez (2009).

The Piketty and Saez data are only the simplest (and among the most dramatic) ways to demonstrate the rise in economic inequality in the United States over the last thirty years. A full discussion of the many dimensions of increasing polarization across (and within) education levels, gender, race, and region are well documented in *The State of Working America*, produced every other year by the Economic Policy Institute.<sup>2</sup> The Piketty and Saez data, however, are sufficient to show an enormous increase in economic concentration that is unprecedented in modern U.S. history, roughly double in size and duration of the run-up in inequality in the 1920s.

### **Inequality as policy: Changing power relations**

Early on, many conservative analysts in the United States went to great lengths to deny the increase in inequality, a particularly difficult task given that a host of survey and administrative data sets covering wages, compensation, incomes, and even net worth all showed sharp increases in inequality. From the late-1980s, however, the mainstream of the economics profession had turned its attention instead to explaining the rising inequality. The bulk of the profession fairly quickly settled on two likely suspects: “skills-biased technical change” and, to a lesser degree, “globalization.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The wage data summarized in *The State of Working America* series, for example, show a sharp increase between 1979 and 2007 in the earnings of high-wage workers (those at the 90th percentile of the wage distribution) and low-wage workers (those at the 10th percentile).

According to the first explanation, the diffusion of computers and related technology in the early 1980s steadily increased the demand for skilled workers relative to less-skilled workers, driving up the wages and incomes of more-educated workers and depressing the wages and incomes of less-educated workers. From a political perspective, the skills-biased technical change view had several convenient features. At face value, it appeared to be broadly consistent with the data (even though economists on the left, such as David Howell and Lawrence Mishel, and more mainstream economists including David Card, John DiNardo, Alan Manning, and others have presented strong critiques<sup>3</sup>). At least as importantly, however, the technological explanation removed policy, politics, and power from the discussion of inequality, by attributing rising economic concentration to “technological progress,” a force that could be resisted only at our peril. The skills-biased technical change explanation also put significant limits on the terms of policy debates: the problems of the three-fourths of the U.S. workforce without a university degree were either the result of the poor personal decision not to pursue enough education, or, at most, a sign that, as a society, we needed to invest more in education.

The second standard, though less favored, explanation for rising inequality was the elusive idea of “globalization.” In the most common view, globalization is supposed to have lowered the earnings of less-educated workers by putting them in direct competition with low-wage workers around the world. This competition put pressure on wages through international trade in goods and services; through the relocation or threat of relocation of production facilities to overseas locations; through competition with immigrants in local labor markets; and through other channels.<sup>4</sup>

Globalization is the less favored explanation in the standard political discourse not because it does not offer what is at face value a coherent explanation of the rise in inequality, but because, by acknowledging the social costs of the increased integration of markets, the globalization explanation threatens to derail an important economic project of the elite. Economists and politicians in the United States spent much of the 1980s and 1990s arguing that the expansion of trade was the only path to national prosperity. In this context, blaming widening inequality on the same process of globalization that was supposed to be making us richer became quite awkward. (As an aside, I note that globalization has proved itself to be a flexible political tool in the U.S. and European debates. On the one hand, it seems, U.S. and European workers are told that their future prosperity depends on more globalization. On the other hand, they are also told that globalization means that our societies can no longer afford a generous welfare state.)

But the main problem with globalization as an explanation for rising inequality is that the typical ways in which the discussion is framed obscure the underlying process through which globalization actually acts on inequality. The standard framing presents globalization, like technological process, as an exogenous force, something that happens *to us*. In reality, globalization is a complex process of integrating capital, product, and labor markets, where almost every characteristic of those newly integrated markets is the subject of, or should be the subject of, political and regulatory debate. Contrary to the standard framing, which presents globalization as something that no nation can escape or even

---

3 See, for example, Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz (2009); David Howell, “Theory-Driven Facts and the Growth in Earnings Inequality,” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol. 31, no. 1 (October 1999), pp. 54-86; David Card and John DiNardo, “Skill Biased Technological Change and Rising Wage Inequality: Some Problems and Puzzles,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 8779 (February 2002); Maarten Goos and Alan Manning, “Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The Rising Polarization of Work in Britain,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 89, no. 1 (February 2007), pp.118–133.

4 A complete discussion of the impact of globalization on economic inequality is beyond the scope of this essay. For an excellent overview, see Josh Bivens, *Everybody Wins, Except for Most of Us: What Economics Teaches About Globalization*, Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2008.

attempt to shape, we can choose the terms under which we integrate capital, product, and labor markets across countries. Over the last 30 years we have indeed “chosen” a particular form of globalization in the United States – a form that benefits corporations and their owners at the expense of workers and their communities. If we had chosen globalization on different terms, however, economic integration would not have required rising inequality. Another globalization is possible.

In opposition to these two standard explanations for the recent rise in inequality, I want to offer an alternative view, one that explains inequality as a function of power, sustained by politics, and implemented as policy. In this alternative view, it is not technological progress nor the inevitable march of globalization, but rather the sharp shift in the strength of capital and employers relative to workers that explains the increasing concentration of wages, income, and wealth over the last three decades.

The decline in inequality from the end of the 1920s through the end of the 1970s – evident in the Piketty and Saez graph – was a function of a series of social movements over that same period that worked to reduce economic and social inequality. The 1930s saw the ascendancy of the U.S. labor movement, which went from a small force scattered across the national geography and industrial structure to an institution representing over one-third of U.S. private-sector workers by the mid-1950s. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s pressed for political, social, and economic equality for blacks. The women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s fought for social and economic equality for women. The labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the women’s movement separately, but especially together, changed the way U.S. corporations did business. Wages and benefits rose for all workers, union and non-union. Employers were legally and socially prohibited from paying minority and women workers less than white men for the same work. Together with the environmental and consumer movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to constrain U.S. businesses engaged in endangering the environment and consumers, these social movements had the effect of increasing incomes for those at the bottom and lowering incomes for those at the top (by raising the cost of doing business).

Throughout the entire period, employers resisted each of these movements (labor, civil rights, feminist, environmental, and consumer) but employers especially resisted the corresponding legislation that accompanied each of these efforts. The economic elite, while eventually comfortable with the social aims of all of these movements, almost uniformly opposed the accompanying legislation, including: making union organizing easier; guaranteeing workers’ health and safety; prohibiting discrimination against racial minorities and women in labor markets and in other markets such as housing and credit; protecting the nation’s air and water; and ensuring the safety of consumer products. From the 1930s through the 1970s, capital generally fought a losing battle, able to shape and contain the specific policies that grew out of the various social movements, but ultimately unable to prevent the enactment and enforcement of a host of policies that worked strongly against employers’ immediate economic interests.

By the end of the 1970s, however, employer opposition coalesced and the economic disruption caused by two oil crises in the 1970s gave capital and employers a political opening. Even while Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, was in the White House, a subtle but important shift in U.S. politics occurred – a shift away from the core constituency of the Democratic party (labor, women, racial minorities, and environmentalists) – and toward employer interests.<sup>5</sup> By the time Carter lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan in 1980, the corporate backlash against almost fifty years of social progress was in full swing.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Jimmy Carter was, in many respects, the first New Democrat president. His push for deregulation, his opposition to union-backed labor law reform, and his appointment of Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve Board foreshadowed the shifts

The backlash was sold as a response to the economic crisis of the 1970s and the emphasis was overwhelmingly on improving the efficiency of the U.S. economy, which was described (and is still described today by many on the right) as sclerotic, overly unionized, and overly regulated. Each of the major policy initiatives of the last three decades claimed to offer important efficiency advantages. The long decline in the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage was supposed to correct a distortion in the low-wage labor market. The deregulation (more accurately, re-regulation) of the airline, trucking, railway, financial, and telecommunications industries was supposed to lower consumer prices in those markets. The liberalization of foreign trade through a plethora of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements was similarly supposed to lower consumer prices on imported goods. The privatization of many federal, state, and local government functions – from school bus drivers to the administration of welfare policy and even much of the U.S. war in Iraq and Afghanistan – was supposed to lower the cost of government. The steady, policy-enabled, deterioration of unionization in the private sector – from over one-third of workers in the 1950s to about eight percent today – was supposed to improve the competitiveness of U.S. firms.

These policies, sold as ways to enhance national efficiency, however, also had another common thread. They all worked to lower the bargaining power of workers relative to their employers. In many cases, the alleged efficiency gains have not materialized.<sup>7</sup> In every case, however, the negative impact on workers has been obvious and substantial. The inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage is now about 30 percent lower than it was at its peak in the 1960s. Workers in deregulated industries –airlines and trucking, most obviously – have seen their wages and benefits stagnate and fall. Even many mainstream economists acknowledge an important role for corporate-oriented international trade and commercial agreements in depressing the wages of less-educated workers, who have been forced to compete directly on world markets with workers often making only a small fraction of U.S. manufacturing wages. Privatization has been a windfall for the companies who win government contracts, while their main efficiency gains hinge on their ability to pay non-unionized, private-sector workers less than more unionized public-sector employees. The huge decline in unionization in the private sector has decimated the U.S. working class, which depends on the union wages and benefit premium to secure a middle-class standard of living.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, these policies – a low and falling minimum wage; the de- or re-regulation of major industries; the corporate-directed liberalization of international capital, product, and labor markets; the privatization of many government services; the decline in unionization; and other closely related policies – are the proximate cause of the rise in inequality. Of course, the underlying cause is a shift at the end of the 1970s in the balance of economic and political power following almost five decades of ascendancy of labor and other social movements.

---

within the Democratic Party that gave birth to the Democratic Leadership Council in 1985 and the Clinton presidency in 1992.

- 6 For historical accounts, see Samuel Bowles, David M. Gordon, and Thomas E. Weisskopf, *Beyond the Wasteland: A Democratic Alternative to Economic Decline*, New York: Doubleday, 1984 and Dean Baker, *The United States Since 1980*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. For a global perspective on these same issues, see Vicente Navarro, "The Worldwide Class Struggle," *Monthly Review*, vol. 58, no. 4 (September 2006), pp. 18-33.
- 7 The restructuring of the U.S. economy generally failed in its drive for efficiency and economic and productivity growth did not return to the earlier postwar pace. See, for example, Dean Baker and David Rosnick, "'Usable Productivity' Growth in the United States: An International Comparison, 1980-2005," Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, June 2007. [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/productivity\\_2007\\_06.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/productivity_2007_06.pdf).
- 8 For an analysis of factors behind the falling rate of private-sector unionization in the United States, see John Schmitt and Ben Zipperer, "Dropping the Ax: Illegal Firings During Union Election Campaigns, 1951-2007," Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, March 2009. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/dropping-the-ax-update-2009-03.pdf>.

I am not simply arguing that the explosion of inequality was a side-effect of these policies. I am arguing, rather, that the explosion of inequality – what is, effectively, the upward redistribution of the large majority of the benefits of economic growth since the late 1970s – was the *purpose* of these policies. The purported efficiency gains, which were realized in some cases but not in others, were merely a political distraction.

## **Beyond wages and income**

So far, I've focused on the rise of inequality and the explanations for it. The measures I've referred to are based almost exclusively on the distributions of wages, incomes, and wealth. But, these distributions, which are – correctly – the centerpiece of any analysis of inequality, also miss an important part of the problem facing U.S. workers, their families, and their communities.

Wages for large swaths of workers, particularly for non-college-educated workers who make up about three-fourths of the U.S. workforce, have trailed far behind growth in productivity over the last thirty years,<sup>9</sup> and, for many groups of workers, wages have actually stagnated or even fallen in inflation-adjusted terms.<sup>10</sup> While raising wages for workers at the middle and bottom is important, increasing wages will not be enough. Restoring real wage growth to the two or even three percent per-year rates experienced during the first thirty years of the postwar period would certainly help. But the main problems that U.S. workers face cannot be solved simply with faster real wage growth.

In my experience, European workers, even European economists familiar with the U.S. economic system, have trouble appreciating just how unprotected U.S. workers are; and it is not just workers in the low-wage labor market that are unprotected<sup>11</sup> – even relatively well-off U.S. professionals work in a legal and social environment that almost no worker in western Europe would have to tolerate.

One key issue is job security. In the United States, with rare exceptions, workers are what our legal code refers to as “at-will employees” – that is, employees work at the will of the employer, with no legal claim to their job or to severance pay in the case of layoff.<sup>12</sup> To be clear, in the overwhelming majority of cases, U.S. employers can fire a worker without reason or advanced notice and without any legal obligation to provide severance pay. The major exceptions to this arrangement are the 13 percent of the workforce that is unionized and a small share of high-end workers such as company officers who negotiate individual contracts with their employers. One remnant of the civil rights and women's movement is that employers cannot fire workers for reasons of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or certain other characteristics; but an employer can fire a worker without notice for almost any other reason: for arriving late to work, for refusing to work overtime, for arguing with the boss about a schedule change, or essentially any reason, reasonable or not, that does not involve discrimination. The “employment at will” doctrine creates a profound structural imbalance of power between the overwhelmingly non-unionized

---

9 See Dean Baker, “Behind the Gap between Productivity and Wage Growth,” Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, February 2007. [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/0702\\_productivity.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/0702_productivity.pdf)

10 For a detailed discussion of wage trends in the United States since the mid-1970s, see Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz (2009).

11 See, for example, the comparison of low-wage work in the Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, in Jerome Gautie and John Schmitt (eds.), *Low-Wage Work in the Wealthy World*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, (2009, forthcoming).

12 The International Labor Organization has published an excellent overview of the relevant U.S. labor law here: <http://www.ilo.int/public/english/dialogue/ifpdial/info/termination/countries/usa.htm>.

workforce and their employers, and is a central cause of the problems facing the low-wage workers featured in Roger Weisberg's superb documentary film "Waging a Living."

When workers do lose their jobs, the social safety net has many holes. Historically, only about 40 percent of unemployed workers receive unemployment insurance benefits and these are stingy by international standards.<sup>13</sup>

The large majority of U.S. workers also depend on their job (or their spouse's job) for health insurance. With the typical employer-provided health insurance plan costing about \$5,000 per year for individual coverage and about \$13,000 per year for family coverage,<sup>14</sup> higher wages alone will not go far in providing quality health insurance, particularly for lower- and middle-income workers.

U.S. workers also suffer from a severe time squeeze, which is exacerbated by the lack of any legally required paid time off. U.S. law, for example, does not mandate any form of paid time off for any purpose. As a result, almost one-fourth of U.S. workers have no paid vacation or paid holidays, and the average U.S. worker has only nine days of paid vacation and six days of paid public holidays per year, with many having less than the average.<sup>15</sup> Nor does U.S. law require employers to provide paid parental leave.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the U.S. law that requires employers to provide 12 weeks of *unpaid* parental leave has exemptions for employer-size and job tenure that effectively remove a large share of the U.S. workforce from coverage.<sup>17</sup> U.S. workers are not even legally entitled to paid (or unpaid) sick days.<sup>18</sup> As a result, over 40 percent of U.S. private-sector workers have no paid sick days, and, given the "employment at will" doctrine, are at risk of losing their jobs if they miss work when they are sick. Higher wages alone would do little to give workers the time they seek to handle their many non-work responsibilities.

All of these non-wage issues – the lack of legal job protections, the lack of a safety net for most of the unemployed, the strong dependence of workers on their employers for health insurance, the lack of paid time off, and others – are major challenges for workers at almost all levels of wage distribution. But these problems are particularly acute for low-wage workers, who are not just the worst paid, but also the

---

13 Before the current recession, the share of unemployed workers who received unemployment insurance benefits in the 2000s varied between 35 and 45 percent (Robert Greenstein and Chad Stone, "Addressing Longstanding Gaps in Unemployment Insurance Coverage," Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, August 2007. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=517>

14 Kaiser Family Foundation and Health Research & Educational Trust, 2009 Employer Health Benefits Survey, p. 14. <http://ehbs.kff.org/pdf/2009/7936.pdf>

15 See Rebecca Ray and John Schmitt, "No-Vacation Nation," Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, May 2007. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/2007-05-no-vacation-nation.pdf>.

16 See Rebecca Ray, Janet Gornick, and John Schmitt, "Parental Leave Policies in 21 Countries Assessing Generosity and Gender Equality," Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, June 2009 (revised). [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/parental\\_2008\\_09.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/parental_2008_09.pdf)

17 See Heather Boushey and John Schmitt, "Job Tenure and Firm Size Provisions Exclude Many Young Parents from Family and Medical Leave," Center for Economic and Policy Research Issue Brief, June 2007. [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/firmsize\\_2008\\_02.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/firmsize_2008_02.pdf)

18 See Jody Heymann, Hye Jin Rho, John Schmitt, and Alison Earle, "Contagion Nation: A Comparison of Paid Sick Day Policies in 22 Countries," Center for Economic and Policy Research Briefing Paper, May 2009. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/paid-sick-days-2009-05.pdf>

least likely to have union-representation, the least likely to have employer-provided health insurance (or insurance of any kind), and the least likely to have any form of paid time off.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

In the standard neoclassical economics framework, low wages are simply a symptom of low levels of skill. Wage levels, however, are also a function of unionization rates; the level of the minimum wage; the entire regulatory framework governing the terms and conditions of employment, from job security legislation to paid time off; the size and scope of the public sector; the degree of competition in national and international product markets; and other fundamentally political issues, all of which have little or nothing to do with workers' skills.

The sharp and sustained increase in economic inequality in the United States over the last 30 years is not a reflection of a national preference for inequality (discussed more blandly as "flexibility"), and not the continuation of an inexorable increase in inequality from 1776 to the present. The last 30 years, in fact, mark a significant departure from a five-decade trend toward greater economic and social equality. What changed was not the demand for skilled workers, but the balance of power between workers and their employers.

\* This is a revised version of a lecture presented at the University of Coimbra (Portugal) on September 28, 2009.

\*\* The author would like to thank Julio Marques Mota, Adelaide Duarte, Adelino Fortunato, Vicente Navarro, and participants in a conference at the Economics Faculty of the University of Coimbra in Portugal for many helpful comments and Travis McArthur for assistance with the data.

---

### SUGGESTED CITATION:

John Schmitt, "Inequality as Policy: The United States Since 1979", *real-world economics review*, issue no. 51, 1 December 2009, pp. 2-9, <http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue51/Schmitt51.pdf>

---

19 See John Schmitt, Margy Waller, Shawn Fremstad, and Ben Zipperer "Unions and Upward Mobility for Low-wage Workers," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, vol. 11 (2008), no. 3 (September), pp. 337-348. <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/121398549/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0>