


National Economic Education Delegation

- **Vision**
 - One day, the public discussion of policy issues will be grounded in an accurate perception of the underlying economic principles and data.
- **Mission**
 - NEED unites the skills and knowledge of a vast network of professional economists to promote understanding of the economics of policy issues in the United States.
- **NEED Presentations**
 - Are **nonpartisan** and intended to reflect the consensus of the economics profession.

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Who Are We?

- **Honorary Board: 44 members**

- 2 Fed Chairs: Janet Yellen, Ben Bernanke
- 6 Chairs Council of Economic Advisers
 - o Furman (D), Rosen (R), Bernanke (R), Yellen (D), Tyson (D), Goolsbee (D)
- 3 Nobel Prize Winners
 - o Akerlof, Smith, Maskin

- **Delegates: 365 members**

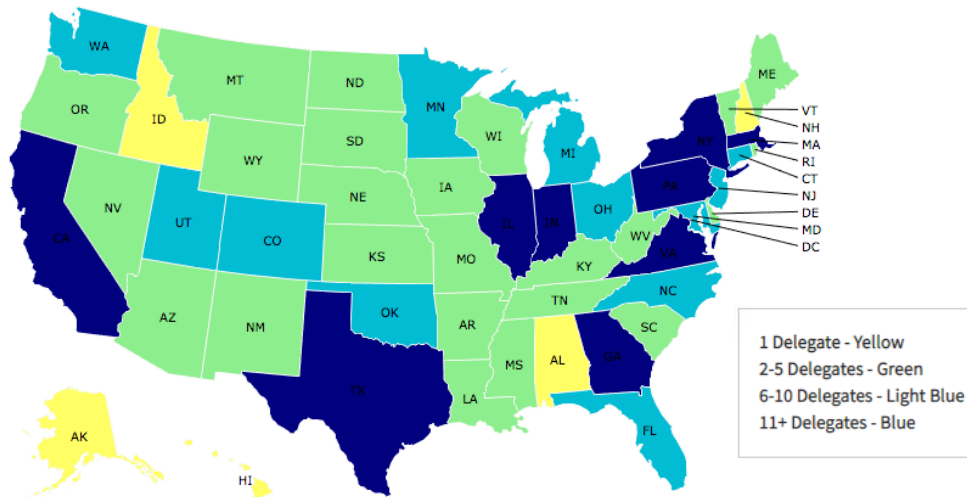
- At all levels of academia and some in government service
- All have a Ph.D. in economics
- Crowdsource slide decks
- Give presentations

- **Global Partners: 42 Ph.D. Economists**

- Aid in slide deck development



Where Are We?



Credits and Disclaimer

- **This slide deck was authored by:**
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- **This slide deck was reviewed by:**
 - Timothy Smeeding, University of Wisconsin
 - Robert Wright, Augustana University
- **Disclaimer**
 - NEED presentations are designed to be nonpartisan
 - It is, however, inevitable that the presenter will be asked for and will provide their own views.
 - Such views are those of the presenter and not necessarily those of the National Economic Education Delegation (NEED).



Outline

- **Definition**
- **Measurement**
- **How does it happen?**
- **Does it matter?**
- **Is it a problem?**
- **What to do about it**



Economic Inequality: Income

- **Definition:**

- The extent to which the distribution of income deviates from complete equality
- The dispersion of income throughout the economy

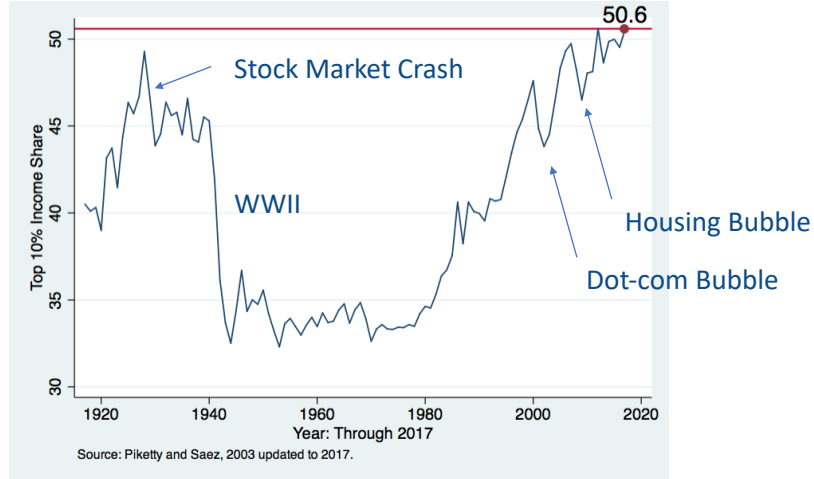


Different Ways of Thinking About Inequality

- **Income Inequality**
 - Before taxes and transfers
 - After taxes and transfers
- **Wealth Inequality**
- **Consumption Inequality**

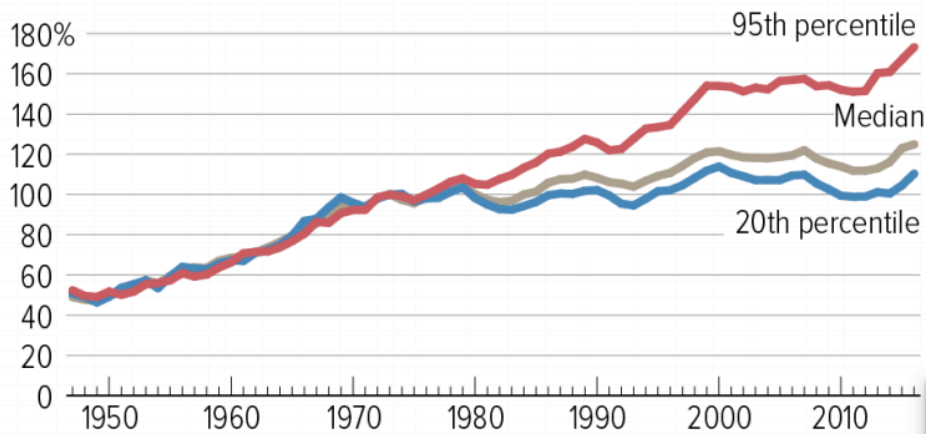


National Income Inequality: Share of Top 10%



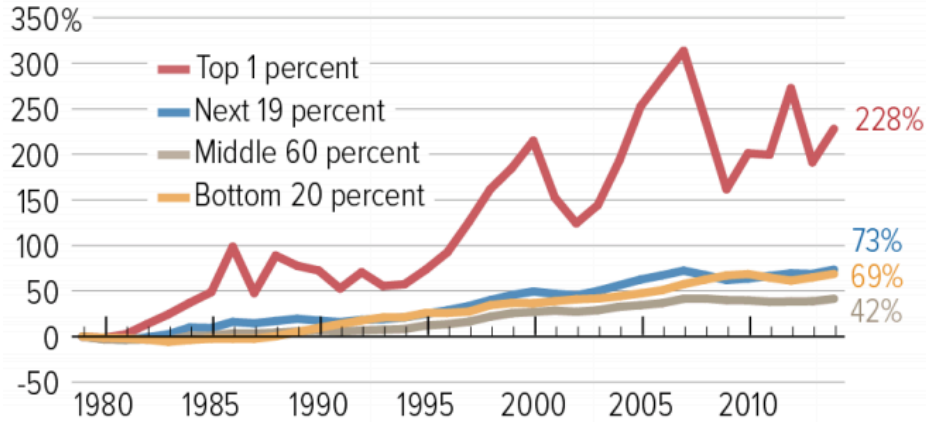
The Abrupt Increase in Inequality (Before Taxes)

Real family income between 1947 and 2016, as a percentage of 1973 level



Most of the Action Is at the Very Top

Percent change in income after transfers and taxes since 1979



Source: Chad Stone, Danilo Trisi, Arloc Sherman, and Roderick Taylor, "A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Policy Futures, May 15, 2018, page 11.

Income Changes from Growing Inequality

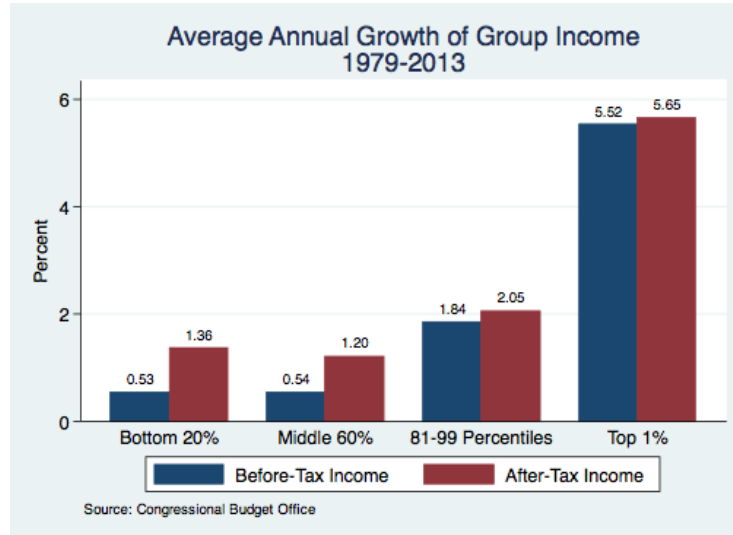
Bottom 90% of Households

INCOME GROUP	TOTAL LOSS/GAIN IN ANNUAL INCOME*	AVERAGE LOSS/GAIN PER HOUSEHOLD PER YEAR*
TOP 1%	\$673 billion more	\$597,241 more
96-99	\$140 billion more	\$29,895 more
91-95	\$29 billion more	\$4,912 more
81-90	\$43 billion less	\$3,733 less
61-80	\$194 billion less	\$8,598 less
41-60	\$224 billion less	\$10,100 less
21-40	\$189 billion less	\$8,582 less
BOTTOM 20%	\$136 billion less	\$5,623 less

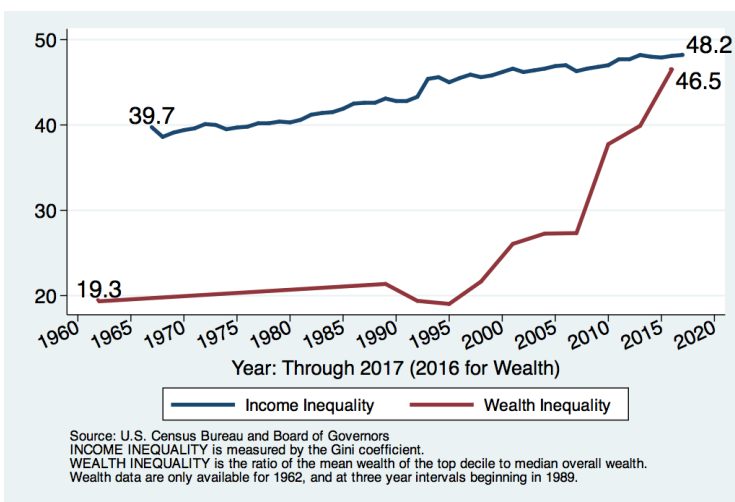
* Compared to what incomes would have been had all income groups seen the same growth rate in 1979-2005 as they did during previous decades.
Source: Jacob Hacker, Yale University; Paul Pierson, UC-Berkeley



Growth Has Been Primarily at the Very Top



Income and Wealth Inequality

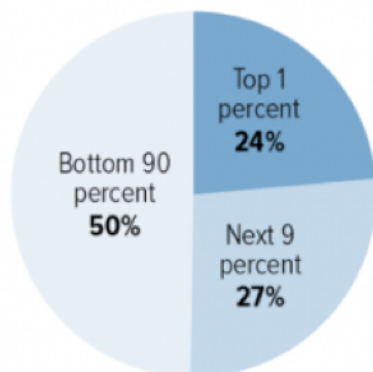


Income Inequality (Gini)

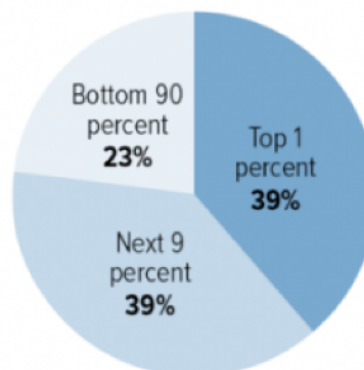
- US: 48.2%
- CA: 48.7%
- Marin: 51.5%

Wealth Inequality Exceeds Income Inequality

Distribution of before-tax income, 2016



Distribution of wealth, 2016



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Source: Chad Stone, Danilo Trisi, Arloc Sherman, and Roderick Taylor, "A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Policy Futures, May 15, 2018, page 15, Figure 4.

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Where Does Inequality Come From?

• Labor Characteristics

- Demographics
 - o Age distribution
- Personal Choices
 - o Educational attainment
 - o Effort
 - o Priorities
 - o Household composition
- Immigration

• Market Forces

- Technology
- Changing demand patterns
- Competition for labor

• Government Policy

- Market influence
- Redistribution



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Government Policy and Inequality

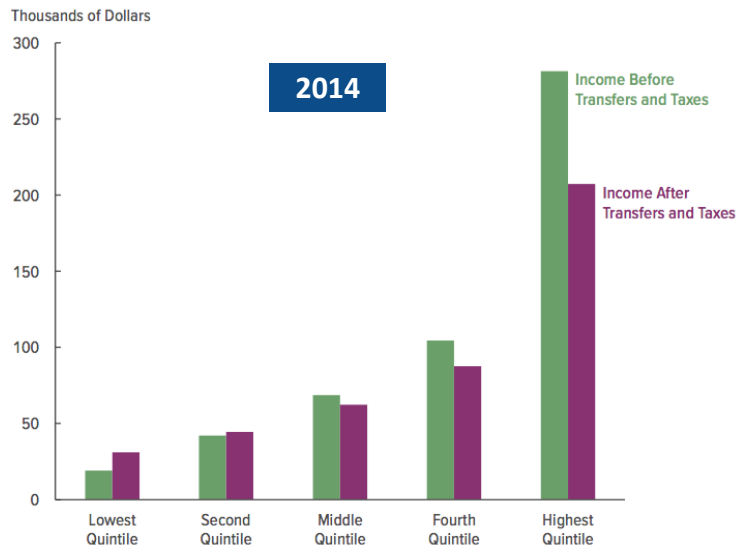
- **Market Influence: PRE-distribution**

- Characteristics of labor
 - o Access to education
- Effects on labor demand
 - o Market regulation
 - Competition policy
 - o Labor regulations
 - Minimum wage, overtime, health insurance, etc.

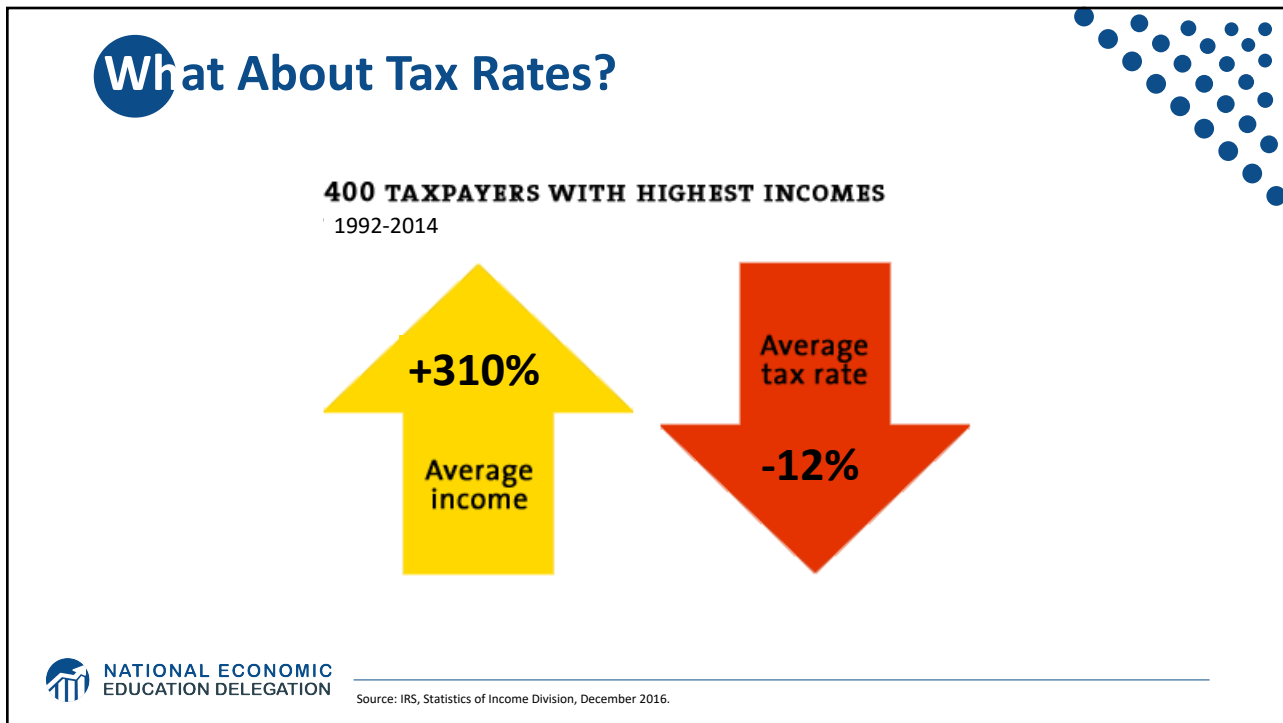
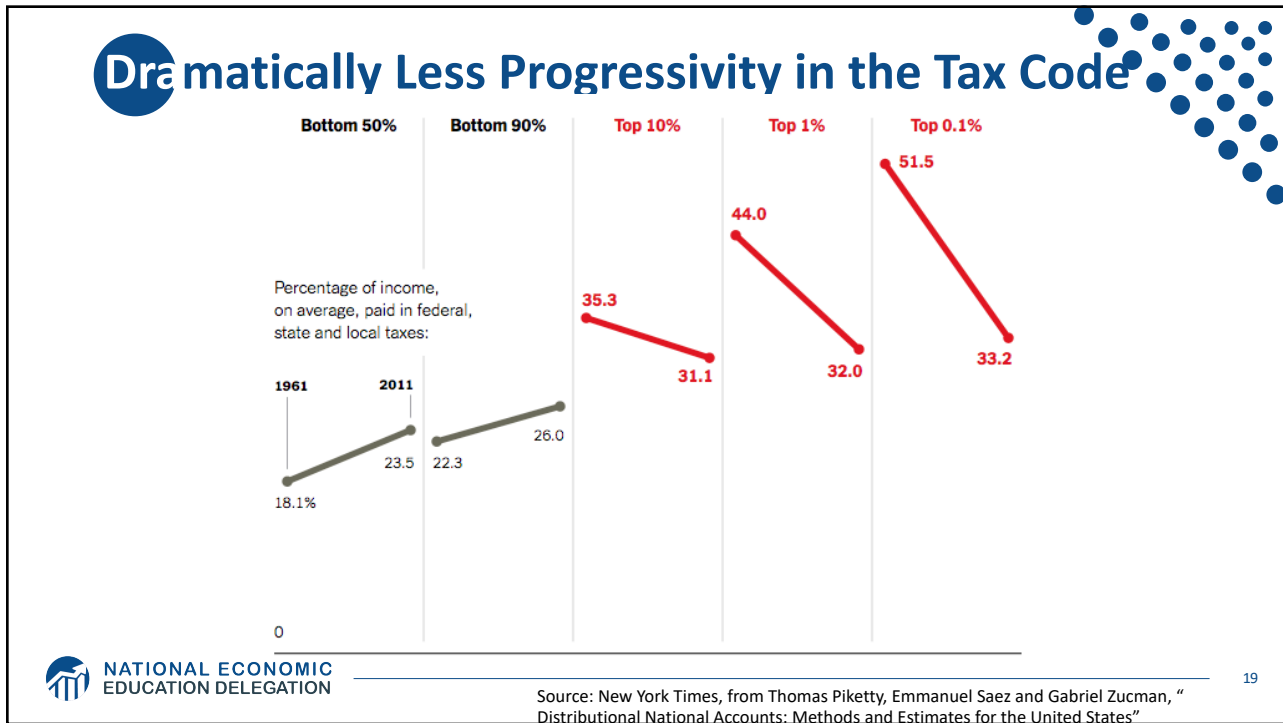
- **RE-distribution**

- Tax Rates
- Income support
 - o Direct aid
 - o Food stamps

Tax and Transfer Programs and Inequality



Source: U.S. Congressional Budget Office, "The Distribution of Household Income, 2014", Average Income Before and After Means-Tested Transfers and Federal Taxes, by Income Group, 2014.



Market Forces and Inequality

- **Changing demand patterns**
 - Technology
 - Globalization
 - Industry composition
 - PCs instead of typewriters
 - Services instead of goods
 - Professional services instead of personal services
- **Competition in labor markets**
 - Unionization
 - Market concentration

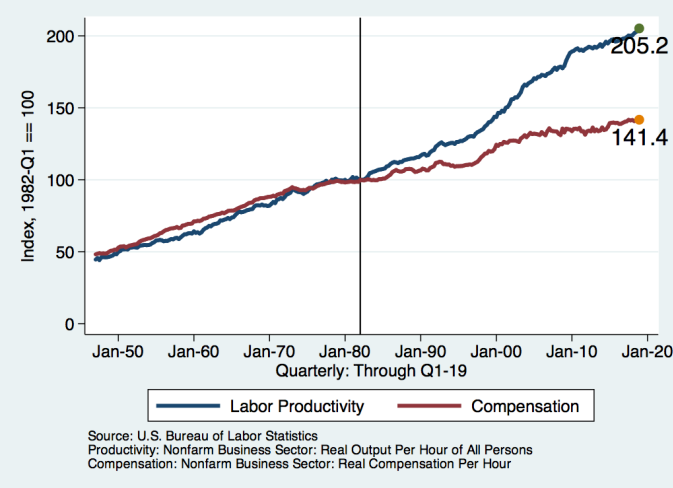


Where Does Inequality Come From? Summary

- **Labor characteristics**
 - What do workers bring to the market?
- **Market forces**
 - How does the market value the labor characteristics?
- **Government policies**
 - PRE-distribution – affecting markets
 - Redistribution – affecting incomes



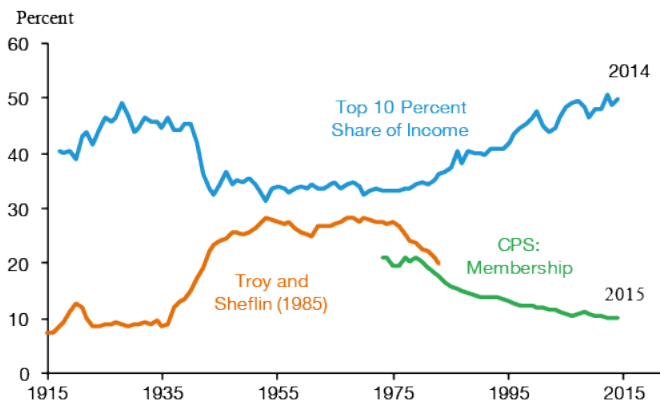
Labor Income is Unhinged from Productivity



Why?

- Declining unionization
- Globalization
- Immigration
- Competition policy
- Cheap technology

Declining Unionization

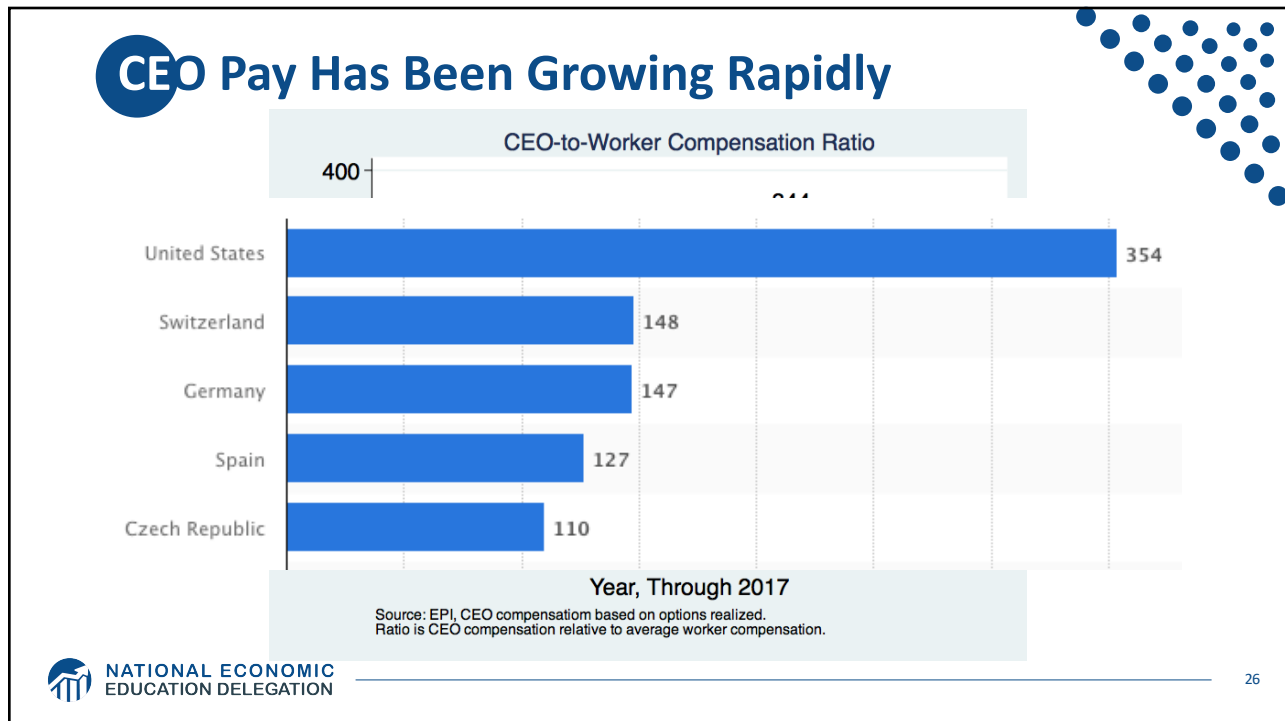
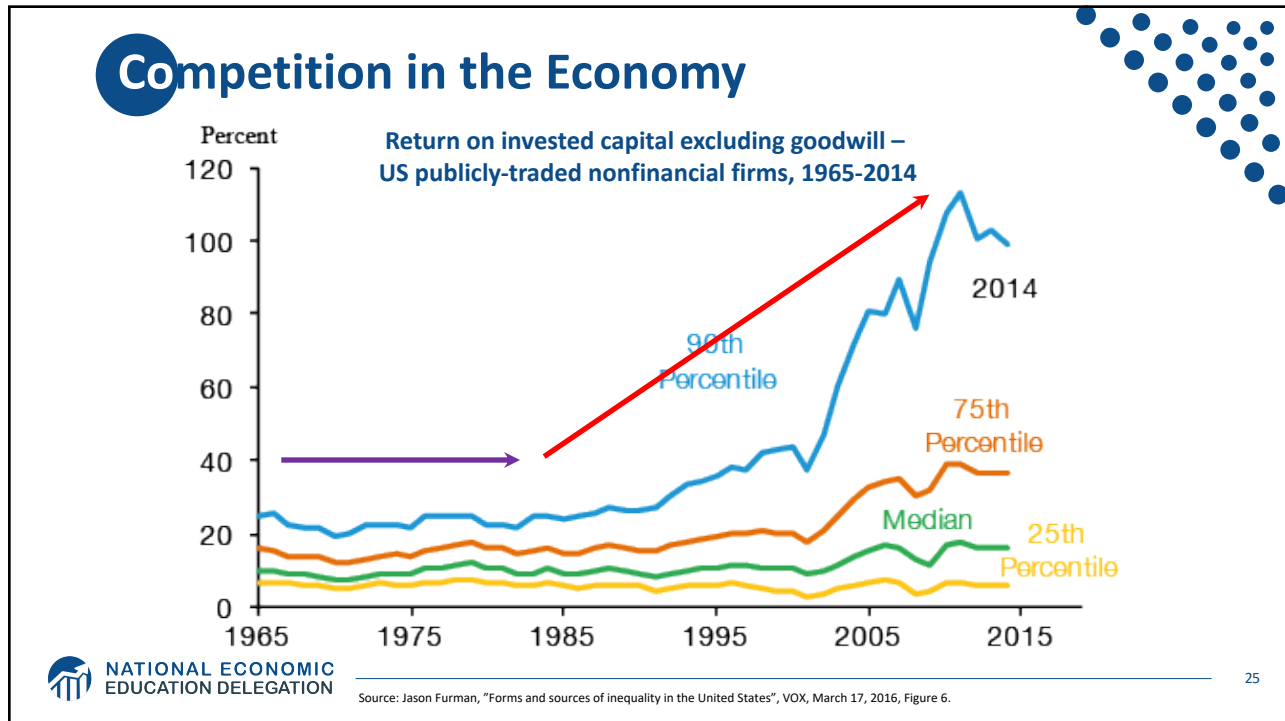


Unionization Rates

- **1983:** 20.1%
- **2018:** 10.5%

Unionization Rates

- **Public:** 33.9%
- **Private:** 6.4%



Technology can Hurt Low Income Workers



Early on, technology was good to low income workers



Until it was bad for them....



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Globalization

- **What is globalization?**
 - Flow of goods, services, capital, and labor across international borders
- **How does it affect inequality?**
 - Through a differential impact on low-skilled workers and hence their wages
 - For the United States, globalization is thought to lower the wages of low skilled and hence low-wage workers relative to those of high-skilled workers



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What is driving increasing inequality?

- **Primary drivers:**
 - Technology
 - Globalization
 - Institutions

- **These drivers can also influence personal choices in ways that affect measured income inequality.**
 - For example, educational choices or labor force participation



Why Does Inequality Matter?

- **Too little inequality can:**
 - Reduce individual motivation
 - Slow economic growth

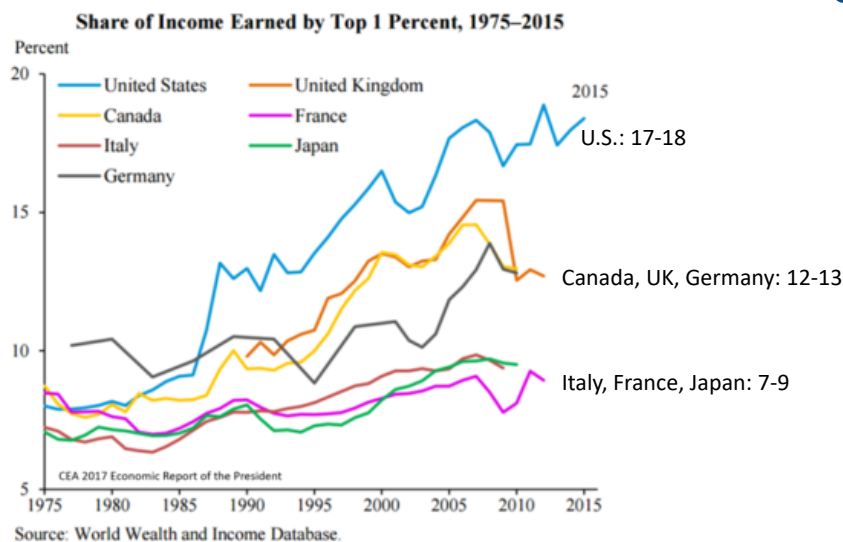
- **Too much inequality can:**
 - Reduce individual motivation
 - Slow economic growth

- **Too much inequality may also:**
 - Divide society
 - Distort political environment
 - Reduce political participation

- **Reduce investments in public goods**
 - Education
 - Environmental protection



An International Perspective: Comparables



Addressing Inequality: Is It A Problem?

- **Why it might be a problem.**

- Economic issues (*Efficiency*)
 - o There is evidence that at some level, increased inequality slows economic growth.
 - o Or, inequality concentrates resources among investors.
- Noneconomic issues (*Equity*)
 - o Values, ethics and morals will drive individual evaluations of the level of inequality.
 - E.g., inequality is primarily a function of market outcomes, so should be left alone.
 - Or, a solid middle class is important for maintaining a civil society, which runs contrary to a high degree of inequality.

- **Suppose you think it's a problem. How might it be addressed?**

Addressing Inequality: Immediately Available Policy Solutions (1/2)

- **RE-distribution**
 - Tax and transfer programs
- **PRE-distribution**
 - Strengthen labor unions
 - Minimum wages
 - Collective bargaining
 - Other policies that favor labor over business owners



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Addressing Inequality: Immediately Available Policy Solutions (2/2)

- **Other**
 - Reverse trends in market power
- **Locally**
 - Employment services: job training, interview skills, or assistance with day-to-day issues, such as child care
 - Cognizance of the potential for technologies to affect worker/employer power dynamics
 - Uber, Lyft, etc.



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Addressing Inequality: Long Term

- **It's all about access to resources:**

- Education, in particular
 - Improve public education
 - Reduce disparities in quality of public education
 - Improve counseling in low-income schools
 - With respect to college – paths to success and funding
- Investments are needed in early education, not later
 - Universal pre-K
 - Upgrade quality of elementary schools in low-income areas



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What to do About Inequality?

- **Nothing?**
- **Redistribution?**
- **PRE-distribution?**
- **Access to resources?**



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Tension in Policy Solutions

- **Is it possible to increase growth at the same time that you reduce income inequality?**
 - Common refrain among some that government intervention in the economy is always and everywhere bad for growth.
- **Possibly: expanding equality of access promotes the full utilization of resources.**
 - Expanding equality of access requires resources likely from the well-to-do.



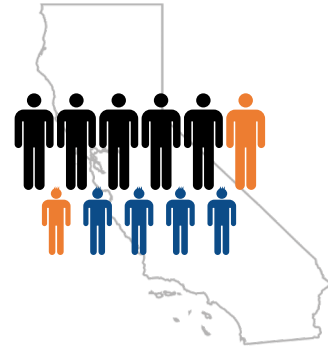
Most Prominent Policy Proposals

- **Redistributions:**
 - Raising the top marginal tax rate to 70%.
 - 2% annual tax on wealth.
- **Other:**
 - Minimum wage
- **Primary concern:**
 - How does it distort market decisions?
 - Investments
 - Labor supply



Summary

- **Income inequality is clearly increasing.**
 - The economy is clearly favoring owners of productive resources over labor.
- **The causes appear to be largely driven by:**
 - The market – technology, competition, and trade
 - Changing institutions.
- **Open questions are:**
 - To act or not to act?
 - If so, how?
- **The level of income inequality is a policy choice.**



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Thank you!

Any Questions?

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