

The immediate crisis may have passed, but most Americans still haven't recovered from the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression. Wealthy Americans, on the other hand, are doing better than ever. In the three years after the recession hit, UC economist Emmanuel Saez has calculated that the top 1 percent captured an incredible 95 percent of the nation's income growth.

The folks in the middle and at the bottom haven't seen wage or income growth, not just over the last three or four years, but over the last 15 years. America's median household income has dropped by more than \$4,000 since 2000, after adjusting for inflation.

If that fact is not bad enough the overall trend toward inequality has kicked into hyper drive. Our nation's 20 richest individuals—a group small enough to fit in a single Gulfstream jet—have more wealth than the bottom half of the entire US population.

These inequalities will not go away on their own; as much as some people would like to believe otherwise, governmental policies are necessary. Two past ones, in particular, stand out for me. In an attempt to correct income inequality, the wealth of the Gilded Age tycoons was mitigated by top marginal tax brackets of over 90%. Whether or not that was too high for the time can be debated, but what cannot be called into question is what has happened since. Over the past 3-4 decades, the tax climate has been very favorable to the wealthy - from lower taxes on unearned income (stocks and bonds) to far lower top marginal income tax brackets and a host of ways to shield income from taxation.

The second was the policy during FDR's time to bolster trade unions. This ensured that workers received better wages, which meant they had the money to spend to fuel the engine of the U.S. economy. For at least the past two decades unions have been on the decline due to political oppression and trade agreements. As unions declined, so did the fortunes of the middle class they created.

If we are serious about reversing this disastrous inequality which is destroying both the economy and the fabric of our society, we need to stop destructive trade agreements that only benefit corporations, support higher wages through minimum wage increases and union-friendly policies, and adopt a tax structure more in line with the policies of the Eisenhower presidency.

Americans of modest means face all sorts of rigged rules. But we'll never truly change them until we engage and galvanize new hearts and minds. We need campaigns that empower large constituencies to fight for greater equality. I think that is beginning to happen.