

How can we tell when a democracy, or rule by the people, evolves into a plutocracy, the reign of the rich? Easy. We have a democracy when a political system can and does make a good-faith effort to address the problems average people face. In a plutocracy, on the other hand, the political system pays no more than lip service to average people's problems and works diligently instead at protecting — and growing — the wealth of the already wealthy.

By this simple standard, we Americans today live in a plutocracy. Some evidence is the record of the decade since the Wall Street financial crash ushered in the Great Recession. Ten years ago the tremors that had been roiling the U.S. economy turned into an economic earthquake. In quick order, about 9 million workers lost their jobs. About the same number of families lost their homes which wiped out over \$19 trillion in household wealth.

What happened next? Plutocracy happened next. The American political system came rushing to the rescue of the same elites whose frauds and financial manipulations had greased the skids for the crisis. Since March 2009, the share values of publicly traded companies in the United States have increased over 320 percent, creating, in the process, more than \$18 trillion in new wealth.

The bulk of that new wealth — the overwhelming bulk — has settled in the pockets of America's affluent. The nation's wealthiest 10 percent holds 84 percent of the nation's stock value. And what about the vast majority of Americans who own either no stock at all or precious little? As of 2016, the most recent year with full data available, the overall wealth of the median — most typical — American household is sitting 34 percent below that household's net worth just before the Great Recession began.

We have no sign that the luck of that top 10 percent will be turning anytime soon. The enormous tax break for Corporate America

enacted last December has 2018 corporate second-quarter profits up nearly 25% over 2017 levels. And that surge comes above and beyond three decades of already rising corporate profits. In 2014, that increase shoved \$1.35 trillion extra into the pockets of shareholders and business owners, the equivalent of \$17,000 for every worker in America's corporate sector.

This is the decade in which wealth inequality has increased the most in U.S. history.

All these numbers, some might say, signal that our economic and political system isn't working. But the system *is* working — for the rich. From a plutocracy, we shouldn't expect anything else. Still, we can end here on a cheery note. Americans almost a century ago faced a plutocracy just like ours today. They beat their plutocracy back with The New Deal. We can do the same.