“What is Government Doing about Inequality since the 1970s?”

Presented by:

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Open to the public. Free of charge.
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Dr. Lindert earned an A.B. from Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and a Ph.D. from Cornell University.
“What is Government Doing about Inequality since the 1970s?”

Income inequality has been rising since the 1970s, especially in the United States. Are conservative changes in government policy contributing to this inequality, or have policy changes brought relief from rising inequality? New data suggest that although the U.S. government, like Britain and others, has been helping the richest slightly by cutting top tax rates, they have continued to help the poor and near-poor with better safety nets. Public education has also acted as a growing long-run equalizer of incomes. The net effect of policies that show up in the government budget has been slightly pro-poor, checking part of the rise of inequality.

If the changes in government spending and taxes did not make Americans more unequal, what did? Global market forces, mostly. Part of the answer has been that government policies toward trade and immigration have stood aside, letting market globalization foster growth while widening the income gaps within this country. Ironically, the pro-growth refusal to shelter workers against the globalization of trade and labor markets started as a Republican policy preference, but Republicans have now become the more protectionist party at the expense of world income growth.

References