

Inequality isn't just about the 1 percent

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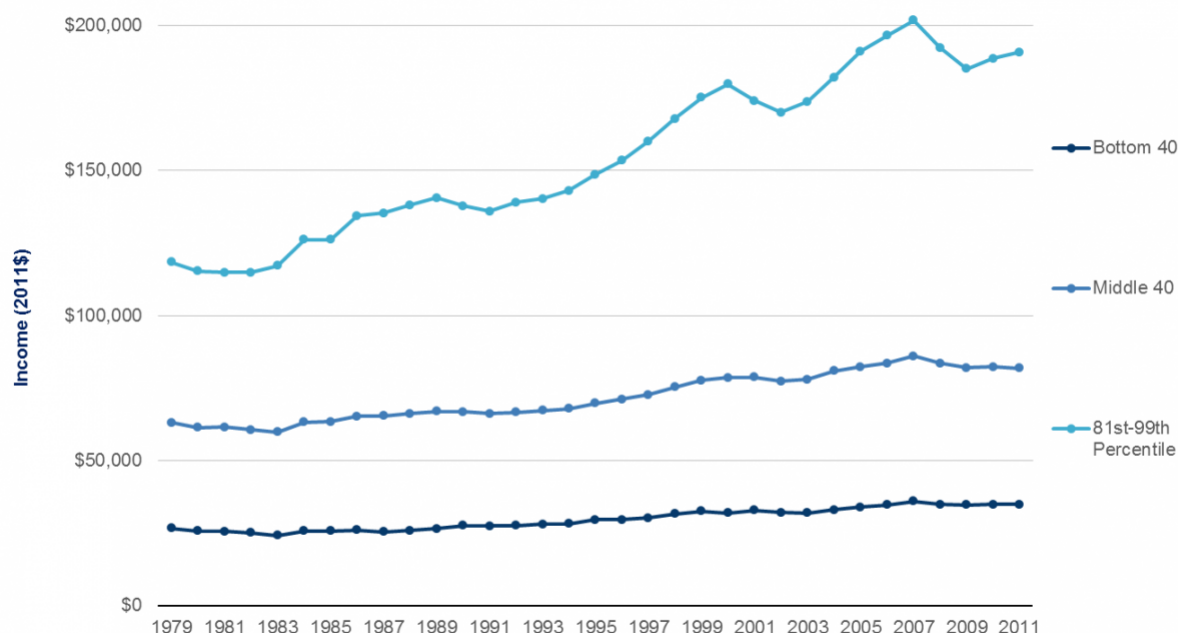
The signature issue of Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign is economic inequality. He talks about it constantly. [It's at the top of the list](#) on his site's "issues" page; [items two through five](#) are really about inequality, too.

[He does this in the language](#) you'd expect of a national candidate of the left, post-Occupy Wall Street: broadly populist language addressing the 1 percent and their large slice of the income pie, and the .1 percent and their even larger slice of the (even tastier) wealth pie. Bernie's stats and graphs leave people offended by the new Gilded Age we've entered—and they place 99 percent of voters on the side of the offended rather than the offending.

Framing inequality in this way puts the wild success of the superrich in sharp relief. But it also lets the regular rich off the hook.

[Richard Reeves recently highlighted something](#) Bernie generally does not: it's not just the 1 percent but the *20 percent* whose income growth has pulled away from the pack. Here's his graph:

Average real household income, 1979-2013



Source: CBO
Note: Income is pre-tax.

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Note that the lightest blue line at the top excludes the top 1 percent—it represents the 81st-99th percentile of earners, un-inflated by millionaire money. Superrich aside, the 20 percent are living in a much better economy than everyone else is.

Reeves calls this group the “upper middle class,” though [he acknowledges the slipperiness of such terminology](#). Elsewhere, [he identifies the issue](#) of even the 1 percent feeling like they’re not rich, not *really*, because the .1 percent are rising even faster. He focuses on the problem of people believing in higher taxes for the rich, by which they tend to mean [other people](#). I’d add the ecological and spiritual problem of endless aspiration, of striving for a target that keeps moving out of reach.

Oh, and I’d call the 20 percent rich, not upper middle class. They have more than enough money, and rising inequality has been good to them—and language around class matters. I’m repeating myself; see [this](#) or [this](#) or [this](#).

It’s hard to blame Bernie for railing against rarefied wealth, or even for trying to mobilize the 99 percent. But inequality is more complicated than just the superrich vs. everyone else. And different issues of inequality—the obscene wealth of the top 1 percent, the limited gains of the bottom 80, the poverty that persists farther down the scale—call for different policy solutions.