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REAL TIME ECONOMICS | INEQUALITY

U.S.'s Rio 2016 Haul Didn't Slow Trend Toward Olympic Equality

Olympic medals were the most evenly spread among countries since 1960



U.S. swimmers Nathan Adrian, Michael Phelps, Ryan Murphy and Cody Miller celebrate after winning the gold medal in the men's 4x100 medley relay final of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. *PHOTO: ETTORE FERRARI/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY*

By **PAUL OVERBERG**

Aug 23, 2016 12:13 pm ET

Team USA's dominant performance at the **Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympic Games** didn't stop a trend that had been spreading medals more equally among nations.

The same formula often used to measure income inequality among households is a handy tool for comparing the distribution of Olympic medals.

Measured by the Gini index, which varies from 0 (complete equality) to 1 (complete inequality), the dispersion of medals among 205 nations in Rio fell to 0.845 from 0.856 at the **London Games** in 2012. It was the lowest since the 1960 **Rome Games**, when it measured 0.839.

The trend reached to the top of the medal stand. Counting just gold medals, the index fell slightly to 0.882 from 0.898 in 2012. It peaked at 0.933 in the boycott-marred 1984 **Los Angeles Games**.

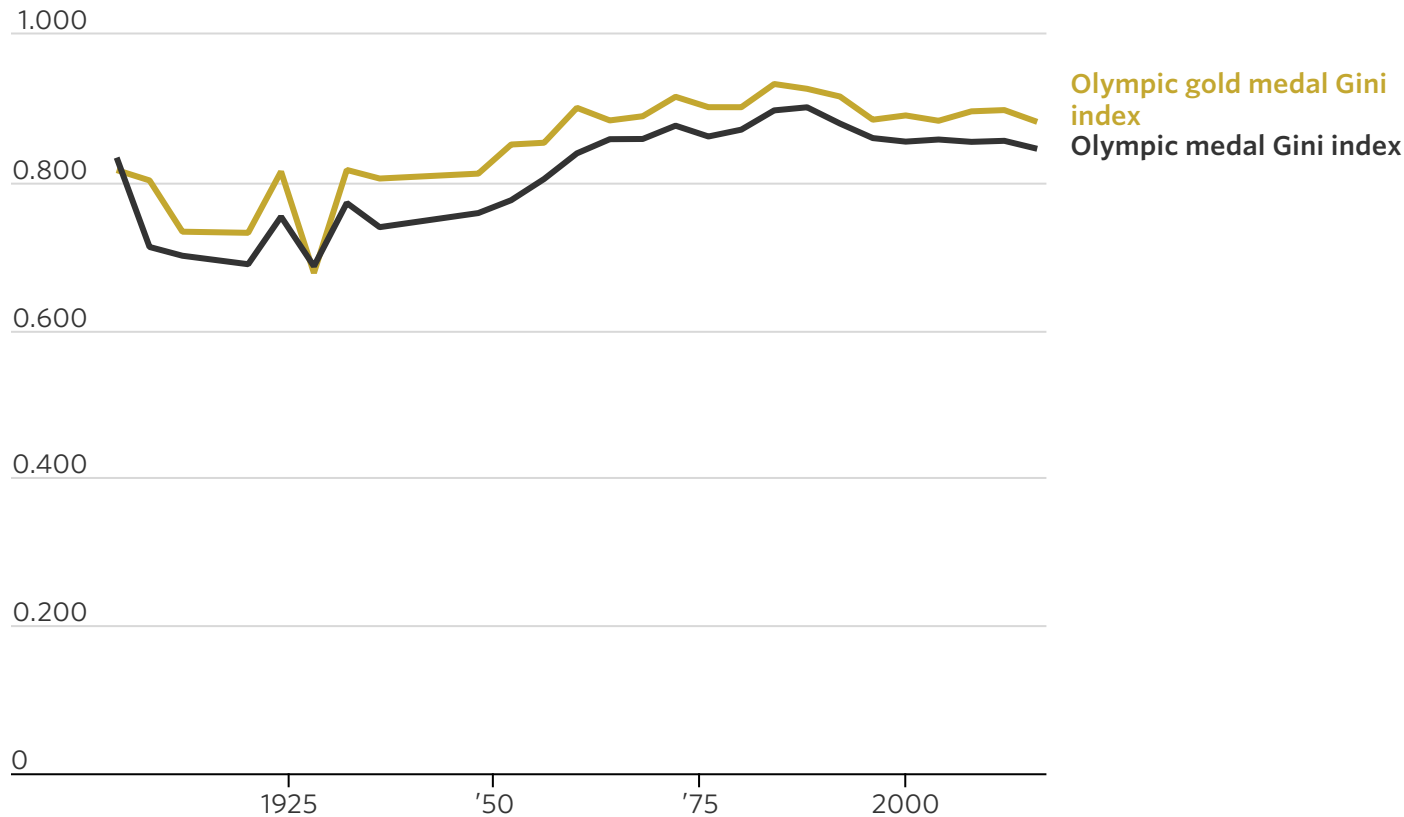
The U.S. household income Gini index has risen steadily since the early 1980s, as middle-class paychecks have stagnated and top earners have enjoyed strong gains. That has turned a once-arcaic debate among labor economists into movements like Occupy Wall Street and a presidential campaign issue, especially for **Bernie Sanders** and **Hillary Clinton**.

A combination of forces has driven the Olympic trend toward equality, according to Olympic historian **Bill Mallon**. One is a diaspora that has seen athletes who failed to make their countries' Olympic squads recruited by other nations. **Bahrain** and **Qatar** in particular have boosted their Olympic squads this way, he said.

Another factor is growth of the games themselves. Since the **Los Angeles Games**, the number of competing nations, sports, events and athletes has risen 40% to 60%. In particular, Mallon cited the growing number of women's events and countries sending women. Since 1984, the share of competitors who are

Spreading the Olympic Wealth

Inequality measure shows more nations collecting more medals



Note: Gini index varies from 0 (complete equality) to 1 (complete inequality)

Source: Sports Reference

women has jumped from 23% to about 45%.

And more countries can afford to devote resources to training elite athletes, he said. “As the countries of the world get wealthier and wealthier, there’s a chance to come forward and win medals.”

The Gini index captures shifts among all participants, so it’s more useful than measures that focus just on the top 1% or 5%. For example, as the top medal winner in Rio with 121, **Team USA** collected 12.4% of the hardware. That sounds

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lopsided, but it's well below the postwar average of 17.6%. That share has dropped steadily over the last generation, falling to 11.5% in 2008 and 10.7% in 2012.

The slow trend toward equality also can be seen in a steady erosion of the top five nations' medal share, which after **World War II** routinely topped 55% and remained there as recently as the **Seoul Games** in 1988. Since then, it has averaged 38%, and fell three percentage points from the London Games to 36.5%.

So if rich nations are losing their lock on the medal stand, why isn't the index dropping more quickly? One reason: Most of the gains are shifting just down the rankings to something like an upper middle-class. And more nations are collecting medals, but more nations are participating as well. About 60% of participating nations earned no medals in Rio, about the same as the 1960s. But now that almost every nation on Earth participates in the Summer Games, a wider distribution of medals would push the Gini lower in the **2020 Tokyo Games** and beyond.

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