

Finding the fairest way to judge the Olympic medal count

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Credit: kcxd, Flickr.

Australians think the fairest way to judge the Olympic medal tally is by medals per capita while Americans think it should be judged on total medals.

A researcher at The Australian National University (ANU) has found people will adjust their perception of the Olympic medal tally based on

their country's performance.

Professor Michael Platow of the ANU Research School of Psychology has surveyed people from Australia, New Zealand and the United States to ask the fairest way to evaluate the tally - by total number of medals, by medals per capita, or medals by sporting resources.

"A lot of Americans didn't understand the question. To them it was obvious, just count up the number of medals," Professor Platow said.

"Of course Australians and Kiwis say the medal count should be looked at per capita. That's because you can shift the rank orderings that way.

"People play with the rankings to make their country look better."

However, in a follow up study Professor Platow said Australians had a different view on the medal tally when asked about the Winter Olympics.

"For the Winter Olympics, Australians said looking at the medal tally in relation to resources was fairest," he said.

"Frankly there's not much snow in Australia and it doesn't have the resources to do well in the Winter Olympics."

The research was conducted into the use of 'fairness rules' for conflict resolution, and found people held flexible interpretations to benefit their social groups.

"People are deeply committed to their group memberships. We feel the emotions of winning and losing even though the vast majority of Australians aren't out there on the playing field," he said.

"You can see this happening in newspapers around the world. Sometimes they show the medal count by gold medals, sometimes by total medals, sometimes they mention the per capita change in the article.

"What is interesting is that we didn't ask what people preferred, we asked what was fair. These are judgements of fairness."

More information: Michael J. Platow et al. Social Creativity in Olympic Medal Counts: Observing the Expression of Ethnocentric Fairness, *Social Justice Research* (2014). [DOI: 10.1007/s11211-014-0219-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0219-1)

Provided by Australian National University

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