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Author: Pedro H.G. Ferreira de Souza

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A History of Inequality: Top Incomes in Brazil, 1926-2015

Pedro H. G. Ferreira de Souza

Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea)

Highlights

- First analysis of top income shares in Brazil from 1926 to 2015;
- Concentration of income at the top follows a sine wave pattern;
- Changes correlate closely with political-institutional disruptions;
- “Tax-adjusted” Ginis suggest surveys overstate the recent decline in inequality.

Abstract

This paper uses income tax tabulations to estimate top income shares in Brazil over the long run. Between 1926 and 2015, the concentration of income at the top remained very high, following a sine wave trend: top shares ebbed and flowed over time, frequently in tandem with political and institutional disruptions. There is some evidence in favor of Williamson’s “missed leveling” hypothesis regarding the origins of Latin America’s exceptionally high levels of inequality, but the recent

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