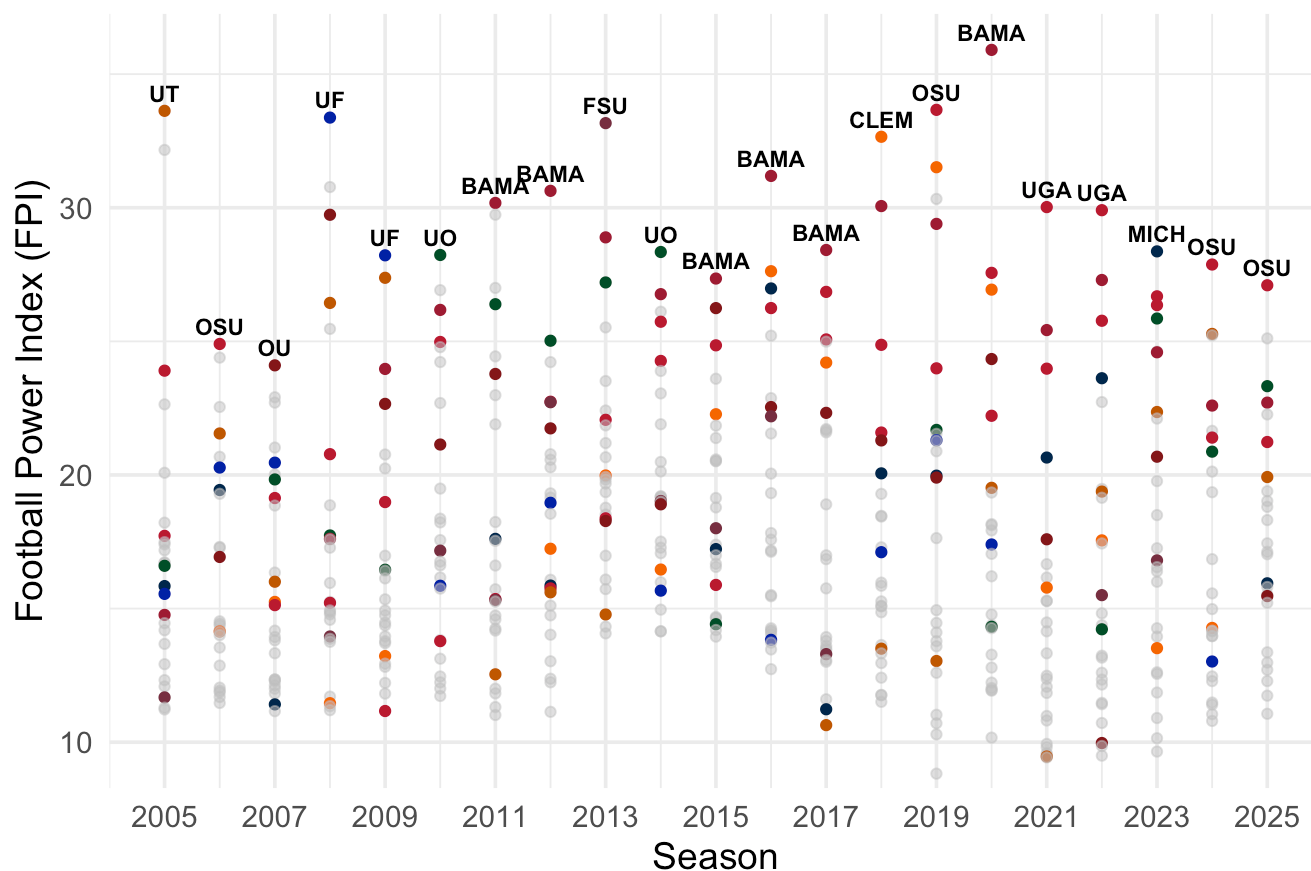


Top 25 Team FPI Values by Year (2005–2025)



Introduction

Parity has become one of the most used words in college football. Analysts bring it up every week, coaches mention it when discussing potential big upsets, and fans insist that it's their team's year.

The sport has clearly changed. Deep rosters at programs like Georgia are no longer as insulated because backups can now leave immediately for starting roles elsewhere and get paid to do so. The NIL era and the transfer portal were expected to narrow the talent gap, giving programs like Texas Tech, Indiana, and Vanderbilt a real chance to compete.

But increased movement does not automatically mean the overall competitive balance has tightened. To measure the sport's structure across seasons, we can look at ESPN's Football Power Index (FPI), which estimates how many points a team is above or below an average team. If parity were improving, the ΔFPI (difference in FPI) between ranking tiers should be shrinking over time.

This report uses ΔFPI to evaluate whether the sport is truly becoming more balanced or just a changing of the guard for who is at the top.

What Δ FPI Represents

FPI measures projected team strength. Δ FPI quantifies the gap between groups of teams. Smaller Δ FPI values mean teams are getting closer in strength, while larger values mean separation.

To understand parity at different levels of the sport, we compare Δ FPI across meaningful rank groupings:

1 vs 4: Competitiveness at the very top

1 vs 10: Depth of elite contenders

5 vs 12: Strength of playoff-caliber teams in the 12-team era

12 vs 25: Edge of playoffs compared to top 25

25 vs 50: Separation between ranked and mid-tier teams

Interpreting Δ FPI Across Tiers

Top-End Parity

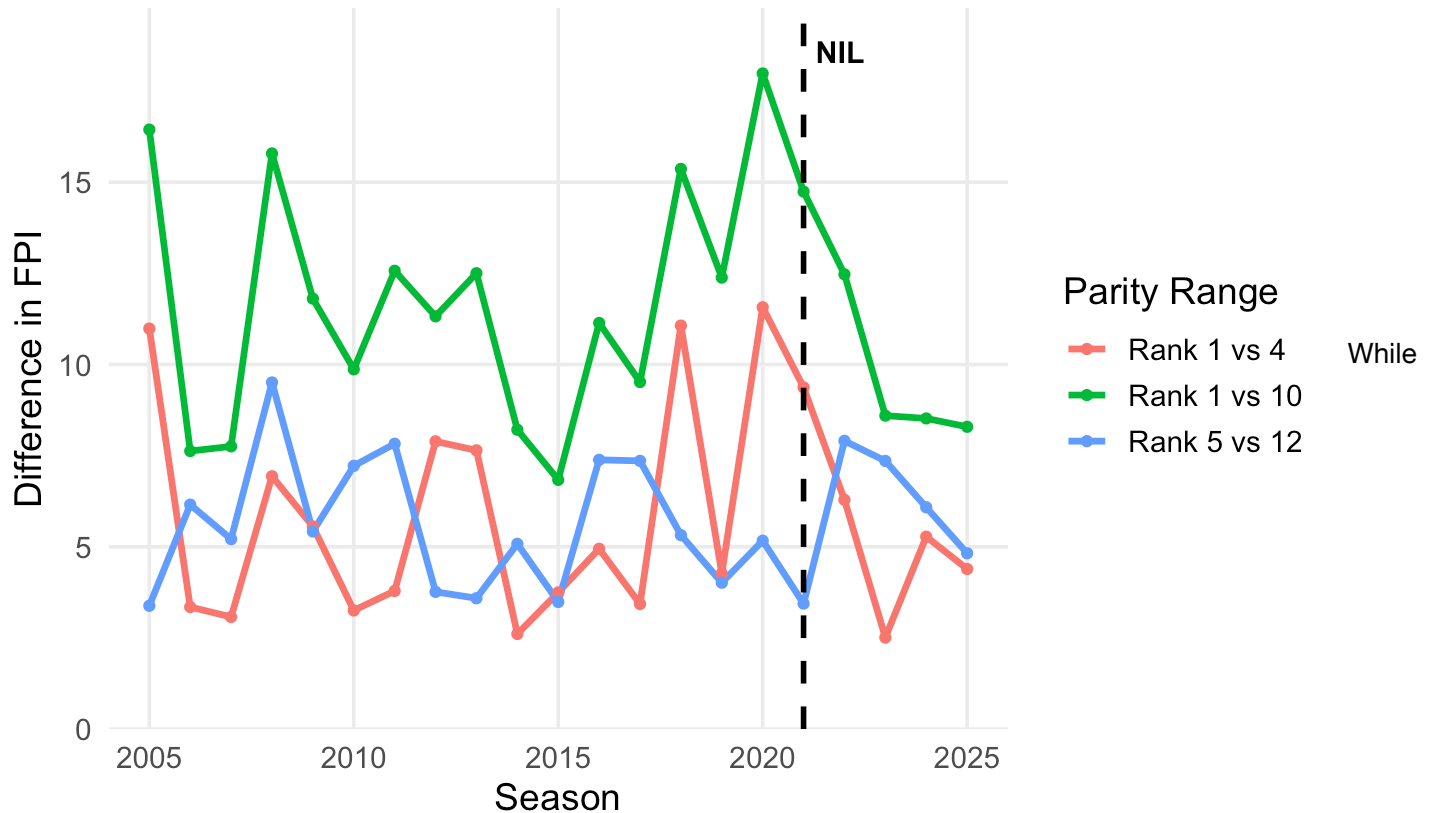
Δ FPI for 1–4, 1–10, and 5–12 shows how tightly clustered the elite programs are. True top-end parity would appear as a decline in these gaps.

Mid-Tier Parity

Δ FPI for 12–25 and 25–50 captures the broader middle of the sport. These ranges reveal whether mid-tier teams are closing the gap or whether ranked programs still maintain a durable advantage.

Parity: Top End (FPI Gaps 2005–2025)

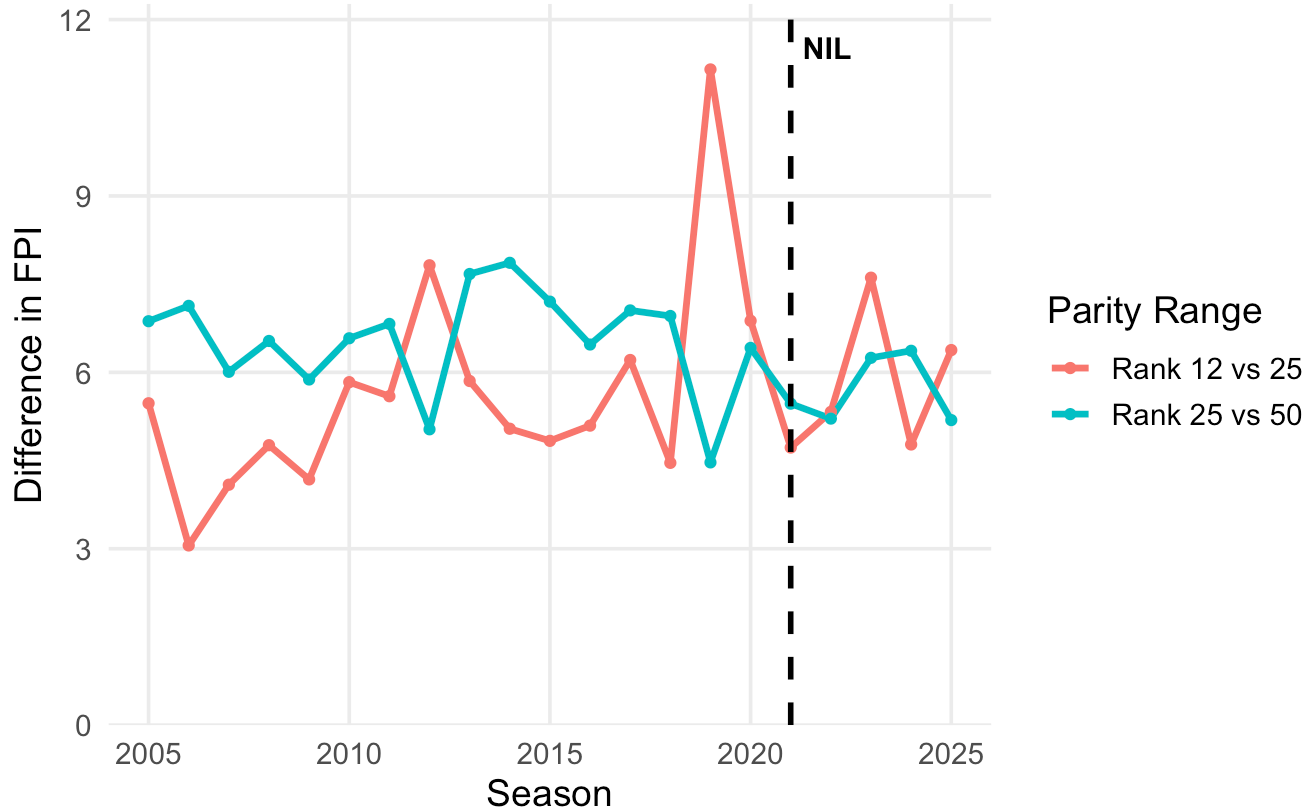
How tightly bunched are playoff level teams



Rank 5 vs 12, which roughly represents a first round playoff matchup, continues to hover around a 5–7 point gap, there is a clear tightening among the true elites. The spread from Rank 1 to 10 has shrunk noticeably, and the gap between Rank 1 and 4, the pinnacle of college football, has also narrowed. Much of this comes from the top team not being as dominant as a group like 2020 Alabama, but seasons like 2023 (GO BLUE), where there is no single overwhelming favorite, create a ton of drama in predicting what the committee will do and make many of the biggest games feel like genuine toss ups.

Parity: Mid Tier (FPI Gaps 2005–2025)

How tightly bunched are fringe playoff and strong mid tier teams



The only real outlier is 2019, which had an unusually strong top 12 compared to the bottom of the top 25. Aside from that season, the Δ FPI between ranks 12 and 25, and between 25 and 50, stays remarkably stable, consistently landing in the 4–7 point range.

Analysis

College football still produces volatile results every season. A playoff contender like Penn State can push Oregon to double overtime and then lose to a struggling UCLA team a week later. Upsets like that create the impression that parity is spreading and that more teams are capable of beating high-level opponents.

However, the Δ FPI data shows that the underlying competitive structure has remained steady.

The middle tier has barely shifted. The 25th-ranked team is still about a touchdown behind the 12th-ranked team and about a touchdown ahead of the 50th-ranked team, almost exactly in line with historical norms. There is no structural parity forming between these tiers. The labels on the teams might change, but the distances between them do not. What is changing is who occupies those slots: programs that once lived in the middle, like Texas Tech, Vanderbilt, or Indiana, now occasionally appear near the top.

At the same time, the 12-team playoff has fundamentally changed what it means to be in the mix. Teams no longer need to be in the 1–4 range to realistically picture a postseason path. In most seasons, 20 to 25 teams can still talk themselves into having a route to the bracket. And even though last year's first round produced lopsided results, with home teams winning by an average of almost 20 points and a median of 24.5, simply having a shot at the field is transformative for programs like SMU, Arizona State, and even Indiana.

This expanded playoff conversation can create the feeling that parity is improving, because teams that once had no postseason relevance are now discussed alongside programs like Georgia and Ohio State. But the Δ FPI makes it clear that the underlying landscape is not much different than before.

At the top, ΔFPI is slightly smaller in recent years, but the shift is driven mostly by the best team's FPI coming down rather than a genuine compression of all elite programs. The top contender is not as dominant as peak Alabama or peak Georgia, but the distance among the top teams themselves remains significant.

Bottom line:

The combination of NIL, the transfer portal, and the 12-team playoff has made the sport infinitely better for people like me who are sickos. Any team has always been capable of winning on a random Saturday, but now it genuinely feels like more teams could get hot at the right moment and crash the playoff. The pool of programs that can realistically dream about reaching the postseason, and maybe even lifting the trophy in January, has grown, which creates the sense that the field has finally leveled.

Unfortunately, the numbers do not share that optimism. ΔFPI shows that beneath the excitement, the same structural gaps between tiers still exist, and the landscape is far less balanced than it feels.