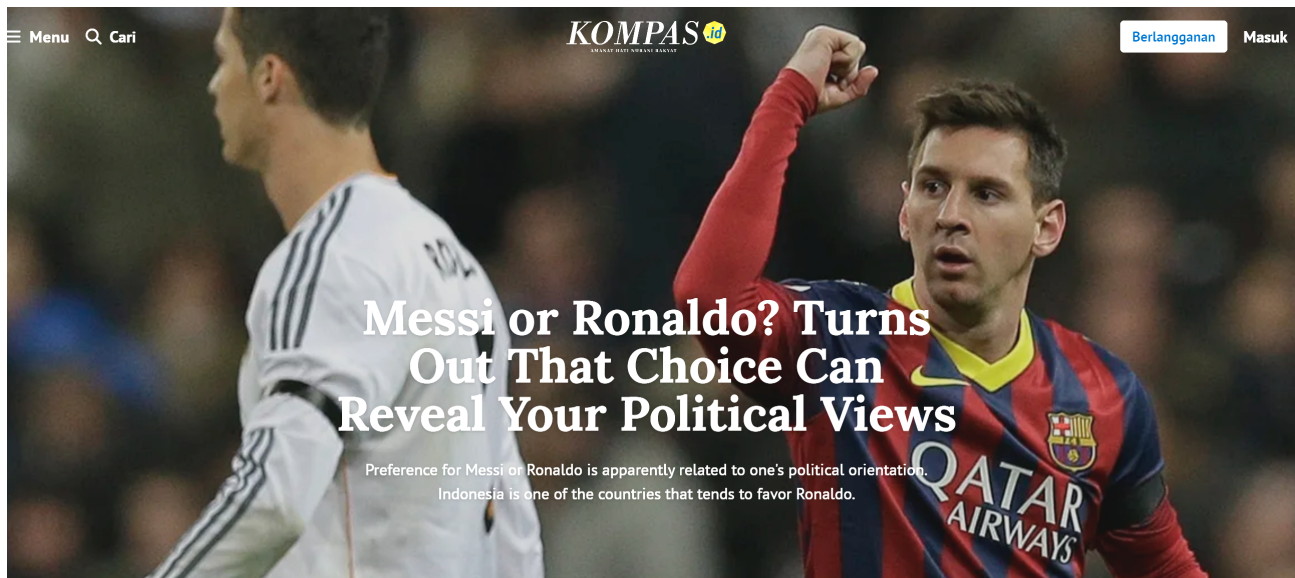




## Messi or Ronaldo? Turns Out That Choice Can Reveal Your Political Views

 [kompas.id/artikel/en-messi-atau-ronaldo-ternyata-pilihan-itu-bisa-mengungkap-pandangan-politik-anda](https://kompas.id/artikel/en-messi-atau-ronaldo-ternyata-pilihan-itu-bisa-mengungkap-pandangan-politik-anda)

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Preference for Messi or Ronaldo is apparently related to one's political orientation. Indonesia is one of the countries that tends to favor Ronaldo.

By Ahmad Arif

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In coffee shops, classrooms, offices, and even on social media, the debate about who is greater between footballers Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo seems never-ending. This debate has reignited during the ongoing 2026 World Cup.

Some people idolize Messi as a quiet, humble artist of the green field who prioritizes collective play. Others admire Ronaldo as a symbol of hard work, discipline, ambition, and individual victory.

But what if the choice is not just about football?

An international study involving more than 10,000 respondents across 26 countries found that preferences for Messi or Ronaldo are related to an individual's political orientation. People who identify as more liberal tend to prefer Messi, while those who are more conservative tend to choose Ronaldo.

The findings come from a study led by Saifuddin Ahmed of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and published in the May 2026 issue of the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), a repository of academic publisher Elsevier.



cristiano

Kemitraan berbayar



Disukai oleh **rully\_gustimigo** dan **36.084.073** lainnya

cristiano Victory is a State of Mind. A long tradition of crafting trunks photographed by @annieleibovitz for @louisvuitton

TANGKAPAN LAYAR INSTAGRAM/CRISTIANO

Two football megastars, Cristiano Ronaldo (right) and Lionel Messi, posted photographic works for a bag product advertisement on their respective Instagram accounts. The portraits, created by the renowned American photographer Annie Leibovitz, have attracted the attention of netizens.

For Ahmed, this result indicates that political identity not only influences choices at the ballot box but also seeps into the realm of popular culture, which seems far removed from politics. "If political identity can even affect choices regarding global football icons, it demonstrates how deeply the process of aligning such identities operates," said Ahmed, in a statement released by his university on Friday (19/6/2026).

## Two icons, two symbols

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This research did not ask respondents to assess the technical abilities of the two players. What was measured was the level of preference for their overall image and persona.

This is where it gets interesting. Messi and Ronaldo are more than just athletes. They have become global cultural symbols.

Messi is often perceived as a figure who is calm, humble, not very talkative, and prioritizes the team. He rarely displays a luxurious lifestyle or boasts about personal achievements. Many of his fans see Messi as a representation of natural talent that works quietly.

Conversely, Ronaldo has built a very different image. He openly celebrates his achievements, demonstrating extreme discipline, physical fitness, a luxurious lifestyle, and an almost limitless competitive spirit. He has made himself a global brand synonymous with individual success.

"Messi and Ronaldo represent different archetypes. One is built on calm and natural creativity, while the other on individual dominance and self-assertion," said Ahmed.

It is this difference in image that is thought to make people attracted to figures who best align with the values they believe in.

## Politics in everyday life

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Over the last two decades, social scientists have found that political identity increasingly influences choices that appear to be unrelated to politics. In the United States, for example, research shows that political orientation is related to media choices, food,

vehicles, and even consumer products purchased. Political parties are gradually transforming into cultural identities.

For the younger generation, choosing a favorite football player may unconsciously become part of how they define themselves.

Ahmed's study indicates that a similar phenomenon may occur globally. Even when evaluating the same subjects, two football stars known worldwide, political views still emerge as the strongest predictor compared to age, gender, education, or income.

This finding aligns with the growing research indicating that political identity now functions as a "social identity," which is a way for individuals to define themselves and their groups within society. Cultural choices then become one of the means to express that identity.



KOMPAS/ADRYAN YOGA PARAMADWYA

Young people walking around M Bloc Space, Jakarta, November 2025.

The findings of Ahmed and his team regarding Messi and Ronaldo are not an isolated case. Several previous studies have shown that political orientation also influences cultural choices, ranging from the types of travel experiences, entertainment, to the products consumed on a daily basis.

Research by Bryan Buechner and colleagues in the 2022 Journal of the Association for Consumer Research found that political ideology influences cultural consumption preferences. In four different studies from this University of Chicago journal, liberals

preferred global and diverse cultural experiences, while conservatives preferred more local and familiar experiences. The researchers explained that this difference is related to the different levels of cognitive flexibility between the two groups.

Meanwhile, a 2025 study in the journal *Communication & Sport* showed that political identity influences how sports fans interpret issues that arise in the world of sports. The stronger a person's political identification, the more likely they are to view sports issues through a political lens.



Kompas/Danu Kusworo (DNU)

Portuguese Manchester United player Cristiano Ronaldo showed photos of Martunis during his visit to Portugal some time ago, when he met Martunis during a visit to Banda Aceh, June 2005.

This research uses social identity theory, a theory that is also very useful in explaining the Messi-Ronaldo phenomenon. According to this theory, humans naturally form groups of "us" and "them." Initially used to explain intergroup conflict, this theory is now widely used to understand sports fanaticism.

## Young people are more polarized

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One of the most interesting findings from Ahmed's research is that the relationship between political ideology and player preference is much stronger among the younger generation. Among younger respondents, the liberal-Messi and conservative-Ronaldo

tendencies are clearly evident. However, this influence drastically weakens in older age groups to the point of nearly disappearing.

Researchers suspect that the younger generation is growing up in an era of social media and stronger political polarization compared to previous generations. As a result, political identity is more easily attached to various aspects of daily life.

In other words, for the younger generation, choosing a favorite football player may unconsciously become part of the way they define themselves.

This study also found another surprising factor. Those who more frequently obtain news from short video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts tend to prefer Ronaldo.

This finding is not entirely surprising. Ronaldo is one of the most dominant figures on social media worldwide. He has hundreds of millions of followers and consistently builds a strong visual image of an athletic body, hard training, luxury cars, and various symbols of personal success. Such a character aligns perfectly with the logic of short video platforms that prioritize visuals, quick emotions, and personal branding.



AFP/Dibyangshu Sarkar

World football star from Argentina, Lionel Messi (38) at a fan jump event at Salt Lake Stadium, Kolkata, India, December 2025.

Conversely, Messi is relatively more reserved. He rarely appears as an influencer of his personal life and is more widely recognized through his performances on the field.

This research does not prove that TikTok makes people like Ronaldo. However, the results indicate that media consumption patterns and preferences for public figures are interconnected.

Psychological factors also play a role. Respondents with higher self-esteem tend to prefer Ronaldo over Messi. Additionally, a tendency towards authoritarian values is also associated with a preference for Ronaldo.

According to researchers, individuals with high self-esteem may find it easier to identify with figures that exude excellence, dominance, and confidence. They see Ronaldo not merely as a football player, but as a symbol of the achievements they aspire to attain.

Conversely, Messi's appeal seems to be more related to an appreciation for creativity, reflection, and collective effort. Research has found that cognitive reflection ability has a weak but consistent relationship with the preference for Messi.

## **Indonesia tends to choose Ronaldo**

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Globally, 11 countries in the survey prefer Ronaldo, eight countries prefer Messi, while seven countries do not show a significant difference. Indonesia is among the countries that relatively lean towards Ronaldo, along with several countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia.

However, researchers remind us that local cultural factors are very important. In Indonesia, Ronaldo's popularity has been established since the early 2000s when he became a young star at Manchester United. His humanitarian visit to Aceh after the 2004 tsunami also left a deep impression on many Indonesian football fans. In addition, the dominance of English Premier League broadcasts over the years has further strengthened his fan base.

| Country        | Paired <i>t</i> (BH) | Wilcoxon (BH) | Slider (BH) | Direction          |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------|
| South Korea    | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Messi            |
| Argentina      | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Messi            |
| Finland        | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Messi            |
| Spain          | ***                  | ***           | **          | → Messi            |
| United Kingdom | ***                  | ***           | **          | → Messi            |
| Norway         | **                   | ***           | *           | → Messi            |
| United States  | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Messi            |
| Canada         | *                    | *             | ns          | → Messi            |
| South Africa   | ns                   | ns            | ns          | ≈ 0                |
| Japan          | ns                   | ns            | *           | → Messi (slider)   |
| Philippines    | ns                   | ns            | ns          | ≈ 0                |
| Brazil         | ns                   | ns            | *           | → Ronaldo (slider) |
| Australia      | ns                   | ns            | *           | → Ronaldo (slider) |
| Germany        | ns                   | ns            | ns          | ≈ 0                |
| Netherlands    | ns                   | ns            | ns          | ≈ 0                |
| Nigeria        | *                    | **            | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| India          | *                    | *             | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| France         | ***                  | *             | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| China          | *                    | *             | *           | → Ronaldo          |
| Singapore      | **                   | ***           | ns          | → Ronaldo          |
| Portugal       | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| Malaysia       | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| Egypt          | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| Mexico         | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| Turkey         | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |
| Indonesia      | ***                  | ***           | ***         | → Ronaldo          |

Saifuddin Ahmed, dkk dalam SSRN, 2026

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Meanwhile, South Korea has the strongest preference for Messi. Interestingly, this is more due to the low assessment of Ronaldo compared to the high assessment of Messi. Many observers link this to public disappointment after Ronaldo did not play in the highly anticipated exhibition match in Seoul in 2019.

Nevertheless, the debate over Messi versus Ronaldo is often regarded as light entertainment for football fans. However, this research indicates that this choice can serve as a window to observe how political identity, psychology, social media, and popular culture intertwine.

In an era where politics permeates almost every sphere of life, even the simple question, "Who do you think is the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time)?", may not just be about football.

## Credits

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