

Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo? Study reveals which of the stars is preferred among left-wing or right-wing individuals; find out why.

 oglobo.globo.com/esportes/copa-do-mundo-2026/noticia/2026/06/20/messi-ou-cristiano-ronaldo-estudo-internacional-aponta-qual-dos-craques-e-favorito-entre-pessoas-de-esquerda-ou-direita-entenda.ghtml

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The long-standing rivalry between Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo may say less about goals, titles, and statistics than about who chooses a side. A study of 10,661 respondents in 26 countries, including Brazil, indicates that political identity was the most consistent individual factor explaining the preference between the two players: people more aligned with left-wing ideals tended to prefer the Argentinian, while more conservative voters leaned towards CR7.

Understand the study.

The research, titled "Political Identity Beyond Politics," was conducted by professors and researchers from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Carlos III University in Spain. The work stems from the idea that political and cultural polarization is no longer limited to electoral issues and can influence choices seemingly far removed from partisanship, such as admiration for celebrities, athletes, or lifestyles.

The authors argue that the Messi-Cristiano rivalry functions as a global "cultural stimulus": both are well-known figures in different countries, with comparable careers and high public recognition. According to the study, Messi is often associated with a more discreet, family-oriented, and collective-minded persona, while Cristiano Ronaldo is perceived as a figure of individual affirmation, self-confidence, and an explicit pursuit of excellence. The research emphasizes, however, that it does not make claims about the athletes' actual characteristics, but rather about how their public images are received by the public.



Lionel Messi became the joint top scorer in World Cup history alongside Miroslav Klose after scoring a hat trick against Algeria on Tuesday — Photo: Roberto Schmidt/AFP

Beyond ideology, other factors helped explain the preference. People with greater approval of authoritarian attitudes, higher self-esteem, and greater consumption of short-video news tended to prefer Cristiano Ronaldo. "Cognitive reflection," that is, more analytical and moderate behavior, appeared as a weak predictor of preference for Messi. Empathy, consumption of traditional media news, age alone, gender, education, social class, and political interest did not have a significant effect on the main model.

The relationship between politics and preference for gamers was stronger among younger and middle-aged respondents, weakening among older groups. According to the authors, this generational effect appeared specifically for ideology, and not for the other factors analyzed, such as self-esteem, authoritarianism, or consumption of short videos. The conclusion is that the fusion between political identity and cultural taste seems more present among generations socialized in more polarized environments.

How was the research conducted?

The survey was conducted between April and May 2026 through Qualtrics, an online data collection platform, with quota sampling in countries across six continents, including Brazil, Argentina, Portugal, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Nigeria, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Turkey, and South Africa. Each participant rated Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo on a scale of 1 to 7, from "very unfavorable" to "very favorable." The

difference between the scores given to the two players was used to measure relative preference.

Among the 26 countries analyzed, 19 showed statistically significant differences in preference. Eight tended towards Messi: South Korea, Argentina, Finland, Spain, the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, and Canada. Eleven tended towards Cristiano Ronaldo: Nigeria, India, France, China, Singapore, Portugal, Malaysia, Egypt, Mexico, Turkey, and Indonesia. Seven other countries, including Brazil, showed no significant difference, indicating a kind of technical tie in the evaluation of the two stars.



Cristiano Ronaldo was one of the athletes who wore the bracelet in Wednesday's game — Photo: MOLLY DARLINGTON / GETTY IMAGES NORTH AMERICA / GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP

The biggest effects were recorded in South Korea and Argentina. In the case of Argentina, the result is driven by the high score given to Messi. In South Korea, according to the authors, the movement is mainly explained by the relatively low score given to Cristiano Ronaldo.

The study also identified a curious asymmetry in the so-called "home advantage." Argentinians rated Messi much higher than Ronaldo, while the Portuguese preferred Cristiano, but by a smaller margin. Portugal, in fact, was not the most pro-Ronaldo country in the sample: Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Egypt, and Malaysia showed a stronger inclination towards the Portuguese player. For the researchers, this suggests that national preference is not limited to identification with a player from one's own country.

Among the countries, the strength of the national team in the FIFA ranking did not explain the average preference for Messi or Cristiano. The liberal democracy index showed an association in the direction expected by the researchers, but without reaching conventional statistical significance, which the authors attribute in part to the limited number of countries analyzed for this type of comparison.

Data from Brazil

The opinion of the 405 Brazilians consulted paints a picture of a divided country: Cristiano's average rating was 5.82, compared to Messi's 5.80, a difference considered statistically irrelevant. In the ranking of relative preference, Brazil appears in 12th position, between the Philippines and Australia, precisely in the range of countries where there was no significant inclination towards either Messi or Cristiano.

In Brazil, there is still a methodological caveat. In an alternative test, conducted using a forced-choice scale, the country showed a preference for Cristiano Ronaldo. However, in the main evaluation tests and the non-parametric test, the Brazilian difference was not significant. The authors note that the discrepancies were concentrated in small effects, below 0.15 in magnitude.