

Who likes Messi, who likes Ronaldo?

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Messi (in the blue and red striped shirt) and Ronaldo during the Barcelona vs. Juventus match at Camp Nou, Barcelona, Spain, on December 8, 2020. Photo: *Reuters*

This study, titled "*Political Identity Beyond Politics: The Messi-Ronaldo Preference Across 26 Countries*," was conducted by a group of international scientists including Saifuddin Ahmed, Kokil Jaidka, Muhammed Ehab Rasul, and Teresa Gil Lopez. From this, a psychological picture emerges: Compassion or dominance? The underlying political ideology within each individual is what determines whether they belong to the "M10" or "CR7" faction.

Why can a football debate be related to politics? The answer lies in **the media personas** these two superstars project in the public mind. Messi embodies an introverted, quiet, submissive figure who values family and puts the team first. Conversely, Ronaldo is a symbol of individual dominance, confidently expressing his ambitions, aggressively promoting himself, and not hesitating to display his "self-centered" individualism. This asymmetry coincidentally aligns perfectly with the ideological divide of "dominance – community" in political psychology.

Methodologically, the study surveyed 10,661 people in 26 countries across 6 continents between April and May 2026. By applying a two-tiered hierarchical linear model, researchers analyzed participants' opinions on the "Messi or Ronaldo" debate, based on several underlying factors.

The results show that political ideology is the strongest predictor of individual player preference, surpassing even demographic factors such as gender, education, or social class. Specifically, scientists assert that those with liberal or left-leaning tendencies favor Messi. Conversely, those with conservative or right-leaning worldviews are more likely to name Ronaldo.



Messi celebrates after Argentina's victory over Algeria in the group stage of the 2026 World Cup at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, USA, on June 16, 2026. Photo: *Reuters*

Data from the survey reveals clear **polarizations across countries**, regardless of their national team's FIFA ranking. Nineteen out of 26 countries lean heavily toward one side. The "[Messi fanatics](#)" camp is led by South Korea and, of course, Argentina. The Messi effect is even more pronounced in these countries than the Ronaldo effect in those who favor the Portuguese superstar. Western nations such as Finland, Spain, England, Norway, the United States, and Canada also show a clear dominance of the Argentinian superstar.

[When it comes to Ronaldo](#) fans, Asian and African countries dominate. Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Mexico, Egypt, Portugal, Singapore, China, France, India, and Nigeria are the places where captain Al-Nassr holds the emotional crown.

South Africa, Japan, the Philippines, Brazil, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands are places where there is a degree of indifference or where the popularity of these two superstars is roughly equal.

In particular, the "hometown" factor brings very different advantages. While Argentinians absolutely adore Messi, in Portugal, Ronaldo receives only moderate favoritism. In fact, fans in Indonesia and Malaysia admire Ronaldo more than those in Portugal. This demonstrates that preferences don't simply stem from nationality, but from deeper psychological layers.

Beyond the overt political perspective, the research also uncovers **other complex psychological layers that shape individual preferences**, such as authoritarianism, self-esteem, the video age on social media, and cognitive dissonance.

Individuals who tend to idolize strong leaders and respect hierarchy will have a strong psychological connection with Ronaldo. They see in him a supreme "ruler" on the pitch.

People with high self-esteem admire Ronaldo. According to psychological theory, idolizing a symbol of brilliant success and constant display of excellence helps them maintain and reinforce their self-worth through a psychological mechanism called "basking in reflected glory" (BIRGing). This term was defined by social psychologist Robert Cialdini in 1976.



Ronaldo was disappointed after Portugal's draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo in the group stage of the 2026 World Cup at the Houston Stadium in Houston, Texas, USA on June 17, 2026. Photo: *Reuters*

The way individuals view football news also changes their idols . Research shows that those who consume a lot of short video news on TikTok or Reels tend to choose Ronaldo. The algorithms of these social media platforms favor Ronaldo's high-frequency performance style, explosive celebratory moments, and sharp statements, thereby continuously reinforcing and deepening fans' attachment to him.

Meanwhile, those with a more analytical mindset, who enjoy re-examining issues, tend to lean slightly toward Messi, although this percentage isn't very high.

The generational gap is also highlighted in this study, with the connection between political ideology and football preferences being most emphasized among the younger generation.

The link between "liberal - Messi" and "conservative - Ronaldo" ideologies is most evident among young and middle-aged people, then fades and loses its statistical significance in older generations. The authors explain that today's youth are growing up in a highly polarized and identity-shaping social media environment. For them, political choice is not just about voting, but also about lifestyle, permeating every jersey and every name they cheer for in the stands.

Scientists caution against these results for two reasons: the study has not undergone peer review, and while the statistical effects are real, they are still quite modest. However, this research shows that when debating whether Messi or Ronaldo is greater, individuals are not simply talking about football. They are revealing their worldview, personality, self-esteem, and even their deepest ideologies. Football is fascinating because it accurately reflects human society. And the "battlefield" between Messi and Ronaldo is also a place where humanity can reflect on itself and better understand itself.