

Ronaldo or Messi? Turns Out, Your Politics Might Predict Your Choice

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Lionel Messi, or Cristiano Ronaldo? The quiet genius, or the relentless athlete? It's one of the fiercest debates in football and in sports, right up there with “Jordan vs Lebron” and “Federer vs Nadal or Djokovic.”

But according to a new study, it's also right there with “liberal vs conservative,” because, it turns out, this preference might be correlated with people's politics.

Across 26 countries and more than 10,000 respondents, more liberal respondents tended to favor Messi. More conservative respondents tended to favor Ronaldo. But why?

A Curious Debate

The “GOAT” (greatest of all time) debates are always biased. Sure, you can bring stats, trophies, and individual achievements into it, but at the end of the day, there's something subjective that stats can never capture. That's especially true when you have a rivalry like the Messi/Ronaldo one.

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo dominated the same era. For a few years, they played for rival teams (FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, respectively). They both gathered huge followings and built stunningly successful careers. Take anyone who's even remotely interested in football and the odds are they'll have a strong opinion on it.

But the authors of the new study argue that this preference might not just be about football. Messi is often perceived as modest, team-oriented and understated. Ronaldo is often read as assertive, self-promoting, and centered on personal excellence. This is not to say that the two players *are* like this, but rather that this is what they project to most people. They map onto broader social values: cooperation versus dominance, deference versus hierarchy, collective success versus individual triumph.

Saifuddin Ahmed of NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, who led the study, suggests that political identity may be associated with such cultural preferences.

"Messi and Ronaldo project markedly different public personas. Messi is commonly associated with a quieter, team-oriented image, while Ronaldo is known for openly expressing his ambition and celebrating individual achievement. People may be more drawn to the player whose public image aligns with their broader values."

The Ronaldocracy

Overall, eight countries leaned significantly toward Messi, 11 leaned significantly toward Ronaldo, and seven showed no significant difference.

The country-by-country results were striking. Unsurprisingly, Argentina showed the strongest Messi preference, followed closely by South Korea. But the home-country effect wasn't symmetrical. Argentina's preference for Messi was much stronger than Portugal's preference for Ronaldo. Portugal, Ronaldo's home country, wasn't even the most Ronaldo-leaning country in the sample; Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Egypt and Malaysia all leaned more strongly in his direction.

The study tested whether national football strength affected the results, but that didn't seem to be the case. Politics, however, did seem to be correlated with this preference.

People who scored higher on authoritarianism (measured through approval of a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections) leaned more toward Ronaldo. So did people with higher self-esteem. Cognitive reflection, a measure of analytic thinking, predicted a Messi lean (but not by much). Empathy didn't seem to affect preference. Overall, however, more liberal-leaning people seemed to prefer Messi.

Traditional media news use also didn't seem to matter. However, short-form video news use did. People who got more news through short videos in scrolling feeds were more likely to prefer Ronaldo, even after accounting for ideology, demographics, personality and other factors. This is presumably because of how he presents himself and how social media

propagates this image, the study argues. Ronaldo's public image is especially suited to high-frequency, highly performative media environments. The authors suggest that platform exposure may shape cultural attachment in ways separate from ideology itself.

What This Actually Says

The researchers argue that the rivalry is unusually useful because the two players are both globally famous, hugely accomplished, and evaluated by audiences around the world. That means the "object" of debate stays fairly constant while the audience changes across countries and political systems.

Objectively speaking, there's not that much separating the two; certainly not enough to have a strong preference. Rather, it seems that the preference is indicative of people's personal biases, which are also linked to their politics. Of course, this doesn't mean that every liberal likes Messi; it's a slight difference. Plus, the study has serious limitations.

Ideology and authoritarianism were each measured with single survey items. The study cannot prove that political identity causes people to prefer one player over the other. And the researchers relied on journalistic descriptions of the two public personas rather than directly asking respondents how they perceived Messi's and Ronaldo's traits.

But the Messi-Ronaldo debate may be about more than just football; it could carry a social significance. Fans may think they are choosing between two kinds of greatness but they may also be choosing between two kinds of self.

The study [can be read here](#).