The influence of social identity theory on voting behavior in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition

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ABSTRACT, Every year again, there seems to be controversy about the winner and the voting motives of the voters (bonds coaches, captains of national teams and journalists) in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition. This thesis examines whether the social identity theory and the associating concept of in group favoritism can explain non rational voting behavior of voting captains, it examines if a captain of national a team tends to votes for players playing at the same position as he does. Voting data released by the FIFA are used to analyze the voting pattern of the captains and to compare them to the voting patterns of the bonds coaches and journalists. The choice is made not to try to find a causal relationship between playing at a certain position and voting for a player playing at that position, but to compare the voting patterns of the three voting categories and find out if the voting pattern of the captains deviates from the voting patterns of the bonds coaches and journalists, because the social identity theory and in-group favoritism are only applicable on the captains. Indications are found that there might be a relationship between the position of the captain and the player he votes for. However, it isn't sure whether these indications can be explained by the social identity theory. The results also imply that the voting behavior of the journalists deviate the most from the patterns of the other categories, meaning that there may be other, stronger, causes influencing voting behavior in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition.

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Keywords

Voting behavior, Social Identity theory, In group favoritism, Social group, Decision making, Football

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ballon d'Or is the trophy given to the football player who performed best in the previous football season. Captains of the national team, bonds coaches and journalists of the FIFA-connected countries can vote for their top three best players. The players who performed the best in their opinion receives five points, the second best player receives three points and the third best player receives one point (Fifa ballon d'or 2013). Cristiano Ronaldo is chosen as the best player of the 2012-2013 season.

Every year again, there seems to be some controversy about whether or not the best player received the trophy, or if there are other motives to vote for certain players (Ssali, 2013).The FIFA released a lot of data about votes given in the Ballon d'Or competition (Fifa ballon d'or 2013). These data allow us to critically analyze the voting behavior of the voters.

One of the theories that can explain non rational voting behavior is the social identity theory formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. The theory states that being a part of a particular social group causes in-group favoritism, referring to a pattern of favoring members of one's own group over members of another group (Tajfel, Turner, & Brown, 1979).

This thesis focuses on the voting behavior of the captains of the national teams. The question is whether they voted objectively or if there voting behavior is subjective because they are effected by the principles of the social identity theory. The captains voting for the best players play at a certain position on a field. According to the social identity theory, players playing at the same position might feel part of a social group of players playing at the same position and might show signs of in-group favoritism. This means that the voting captains may be tended to vote for players playing at the same position as he does.

The main question of this thesis is:

"Do the captains voting in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition tend to vote for a player who plays at the same position as the captain himself?"

This research question is relevant because the social identity theory influences decisions, so also decisions in which voting is involved (Kramer, Pommerenke, & Newton, 1993). These decisions can have material consequences as well as personal consequences for the people involved. That's why it is important to apply this theory on the case of the FIFA Ballon d'Or.

The thesis starts with the explanation of relevant theoretical concepts. In the chapter 'method' first is explained that a Pearson's chi-square test of independence is executed to find differences in the voting pattern between the captains, bonds coaches and journalists. Also, the data collection and the descriptive statistics are introduced. Next, the chapter 'results' shows the results found when analyzing the descriptive statistics, and the results of the chi-square tests. In the chapter 'conclusion' conclusions are drawn from the results and in the chapter 'discussion and further' the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis are discussed and suggestions are made for further research.

2. LITERATURE

2.1 Social identity theory

The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner is originally developed to understand why one group discriminates in favor of the in-group and discriminates against the out-group. The social identity theory states that being a member of a social group creates in-group favoritism (Brewer, 2003). According to this theory, a person has not one, strictly defined self. A person has several 'selves' extracted from memberships in several social groups . A social group is a set of two of more people who identify with each other or have the same goal (Macionis, Peper, & van de Leun, 2010). Members of social groups share similar charasteristics and have a sense of unity (Turner, 1982). Being part of a social group creates a social identity, the portion of an individual's self concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Oakes & Turner, 1986). Different social contexts makes a person act on the basis of membership of a particular social group. Research shows that even when two groups are formed by a simple coin-toss, members of these groups show in-group favoritism and favor their group over the other group (Tajfel, Turner, & Brown, 1979).

There is evidence that in-group favoritism is related to how people make decisions. Decision making is explained as "the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Every decision making process produces a final choice" (Reason, 1990, p53). Social identity often leads to a social bias in decision-making. People are inclined to favor other people with similar identities over people from another social group (Prada, et al., 2012).

2.2 Social identity theory in the FIFA Ballon d'Or context

The setting of the FIFA Ballon d'Or election may be a specific one, but the concept of in-group favoritism is very broad and can be used in several specific situations as long as it contains an in-group and an out-group. Football players playing at the same position can see themselves as a social group because they can identify with each other based on their role in the field.

Dasgupta (2004) studied the effect of social advantage and disadvantage on in-group favoritism. The study showed that socially advantaged groups (social groups with relatively much material resources and a positive identity) show more implicit in-group favoritism than socially disadvataged groups. Professional footballers are often well paid and seen as positive role models (Lines, 2001), so it can be assumed that football players will show relatively much in-group favoritsm.

One of the variables that defines the emergence of in-group favoritism is the extent to which the prevailing context provides ground for comparison between groups (Brewer, 2003). In this case, the several positions are chosen as groups because the position defines the player on the field, unlike for expample nationality or club. Furthermore, the votes of the captains are votes of experts. These experts know everything about their position but probably less about other positions (for example: midfielders don't exactly know how to be a good goalkeeper). The less someone knows about an outgroup, the more in-group favoritism occurs (Wright, McLaughlin-Volpe, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

Since in group-favoritism effects decision making, the decision of who to vote for in the FIFA Ballon d'Or election can be influenced by the social identity theory. Using that information, a hypothesis can be stated for the outcome of research in this context.

Using the concept of in-group favoritism described in the social identity theory, the expectation is that the captains will vote for players playing at the same position as himself. Because the

captain plays at position X, he feels part of the social group of players playing at the same position as himself. Because of the in-group favoritism that will emerge in this case, the captain favors players playing at the same position as himself. The in-group favoritism leads to a tendency to vote for players playing at the same position. According to the social identity theory and the concept of in-group favoritism, the captains will favor members of their own group (own position) over members of another group (other positions). So the hypothesis of this thesis is:

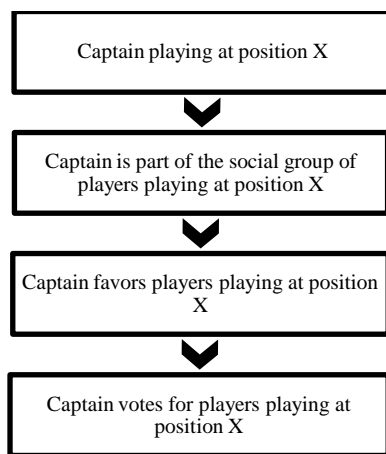"Captains tend to vote for a player who plays at the same position as the captain himself"

Figure 1. Schematic representation of how a captains makes his voting decision according to the social identity theory.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Statistical analysis
In order to test the hypothesis a Pearson's chi-square test of independence is carried out to find out if there is any statistically significant difference between the votes of the three voting groups. If the theory and the hypothesis are true, the voting pattern of the captains should be different from the voting behavior of the bonds coaches and journalists, because the concept of the social identity theory is only applicable on the captains. The captains will vote for members of their in-group: players playing at their position. The journalists and bonds coaches won't show this pattern. The test discovers whether or not there is association between variables. In this case the Pearson's chi square test of independence is conducted to see if there is any statistical difference between the voting pattern from the captains, bonds coaches and journalists.

The choice is made only to find indirect evidence (evidence that indicates that the hypothesis can be true) by comparing the voting pattern of the voting categories. No direct evidence (evidence that indicates that the specific relation stated by the hypothesis is or isn't present)is gathered by for example executing a regression analysis, because finding direct evidence would make the research design too complicated. In that case, voting bias (the difference between the amount of points given to a certain player by a voter and the average amount of point given to that player) has to be operationalized and for the effect of the high change for a forward to get votes because of the

many forwards in the dataset (table 1) has to be taken into account.

The chi-square test is executed multiple times. First, 'captains', 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' are all treated as a separate category in the test to test whether or not there is any difference between the voting behavior of the three categories. This is the more data driven approach to find any differences.

Secondly, the chi-square test is executed by treating 'captains' as a separate category and 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' as a combined group. This the more theory driven approach, because when the social identity theory influences the voting behavior of only the captains, the voting behavior of the captains should differ from the voting behavior of the bonds coaches and the journalists.

Thirdly, a chi-square test is executed without the votes for Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Franck Ribery. Together, they received a little over 68% ((410+377+318)/1623*100%,table 1) of all the votes (68% of votes from the captains, 63% of the votes from bonds coaches, 74% of the votes from the journalists), so it can be assumed that these three players were by far the three best of the previous season. The high percentage of votes makes clear that the voters couldn't ignore the quality of these players and had to vote for them. This assumption makes that the possible influence of the social identity theory on the voting behavior of the captains is weakened. To take this into account, the chi-square test is executed without the votes for these three players. This test is carried out for both the three categories separately as for the bonds coaches and journalists taken as one group.

Because one of the conditions for conducting a chi-square test is that a maximum of 20% of the cells can have a count lower than five. Players who received four or less votes from one of the voting categories are taken into one category: 'other'. From Cristiano Ronaldo to Phillipp Lahm the counts are all five or higher, except for Andrés Iniesta who received only three votes from journalists, Gareth bale who received only four votes from journalists and Andrea Pirlo who received only one vote from journalists. These exceptions fall within the maximum of 20% of cells with a count lower than five (table 1). From Xavi to Manuel Neuer, the votes are added up to the 'other' category.

3.2 Data collection
To carry out the chi-square tests, the23 nominated players, the voters and all their votes have to be in the dataset. Data from the FIFA ballon d'Or competition are available in the database on the web site of the FIFA (FIFA Ballon d'Or , 2013). In this database, the voting category of all the voters (captain, bonds coach or journalist) and their first, second and third votes are given. Also, the 23 nominated players are mentioned.

3.3 Independent variable
The independent variable in this thesis is the category to which a voter belongs. This variable can have the values 'captain', 'bonds coach', and 'journalist'. If the hypothesis is true, the voting behavior from the captains should the different from the voting behavior of the bonds coaches and the journalists because the concept of the social identity theory is only applicable on the captains. According to the hypothesis, captains tend to vote for a player playing at the same position, and this is not the case for bonds coaches and journalists.

3.4 Dependent variable
The dependent variable in this thesis is the player a voter voted for. This is because, according to the hypothesis, the role of the

voter determines the player he will vote for. Because a captain tends to vote for a player playing at the same position as he does, and the bonds coaches and journalist don't, the captains will vote for different players than the bonds coaches and the journalists.

3.5 Descriptive statistics
Before carrying out the statistical analysis, some descriptive statistics are presented to get some insight in the data. The 23 nominated players for the 2013 FIFA Ballon d'Or competition, as well as their position and the number of votes received from the three voting categories are shown.

Also, the votes from the captains, bonds coaches and journalists are displayed in percentages in a histogram, to be able to compare the differences and similarities in the voting patterns of these three categories.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics
Looking at the row 'total' in table 1, the dataset contains 552 votes from captains, 552 votes from bonds coaches and 519 votes from journalists. This means that 184 captains, 184 bonds coaches and 173 journalists voted for their favorite players because they all had three votes to give.

When looking at the column 'nominated player' in table 1, it stands out that a majority 14 of the 23 nominated players are forwards. There are 6 nominated midfielders, 2 nominated backs and 1 nominated goalkeeper in the dataset.

Table 1

Nominated players and votes received by voting category

Nominated Player	Position	Captains	Bonds coaches	Journalists	Total
Cristiano Ronaldo	Forward	147	137	126	410
Messi, Lionel	Forward	135	119	123	377
Ribéry, Franck	Forward	92	90	136	318
Ibrahimovic, Zlatan	Forward	31	43	43	117
Neymar	Forward	20	26	19	65
Iniesta, Andrés	Midfield	14	20	3	37
Van Persie, Robin	Forward	14	16	8	38
Robben, Arjen	Forward	14	12	18	44
Bale, Gareth	Forward	5	10	4	19
Pirlo, Andrea	Midfield	12	8	1	21
Falcao, Radamel	Forward	8	12	5	25
Touré, Yaya	Midfield	7	8	7	22
Lewandowski, Robert	Forward	7	10	6	23
Lahm, Philipp	Back	5	8	5	18
Xavi	Midfield	10	7	3	20
Özil, Mesut	Midfield	10	4	1	15
Schweinsteiger, Bastian	Midfield	3	4	4	11
Müller, Thomas	Forward	4	3	2	9
Suarez, Luis	Forward	5	5	2	12
Cavani, Edinson	Forward	3	5	2	10
Silva, Thiago	Back	2	1	1	4
Hazard, Eden	Forward	3	3	0	6
Neuer, Manuel	Goalkeeper	1	1	0	2
Total		552	552	519	1623

Figure 2 shows a histogram of the percentage of the votes a player received from every voting category. The votes given by the journalists seem to differ the most from the two other groups as to the first eight to nine players (Cristiano Ronaldo to Gareth Bale).
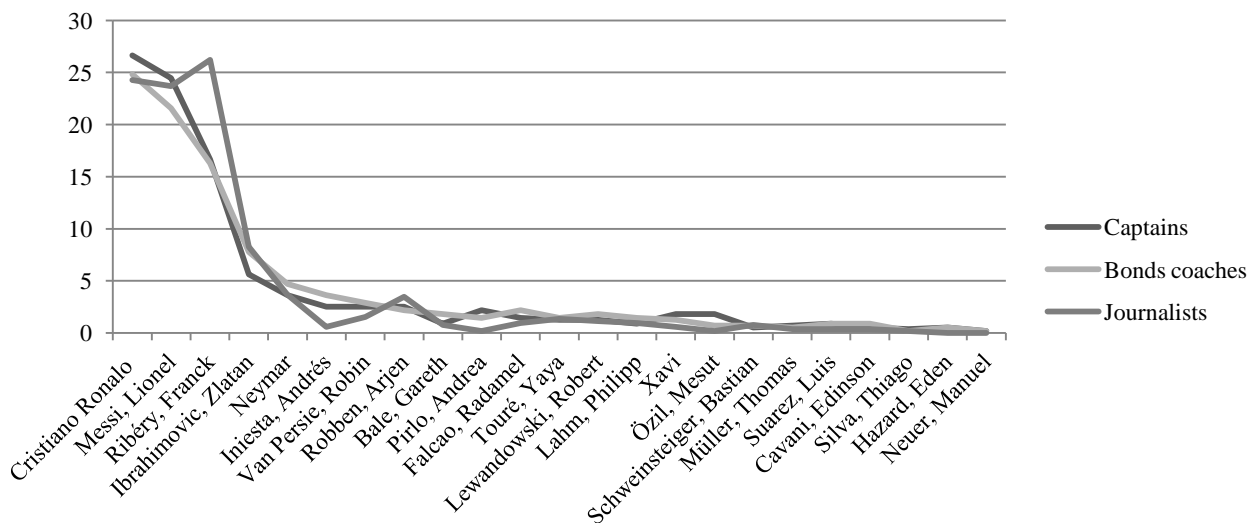

Figure 2. Distribution of votes in percentages

Figure 3 only shows the percentages of votes of the 10 players who received the most votes. The difference in voting patterns between the three voting categories is clearest here. The journalists gave more votes to Franck Ribery than the captains and bonds coaches did and captains gave the most votes to Cristiano Ronaldo. The journalists gave almost no votes to Andrés Iniesta, in contrast to the captains and bonds coaches.

Also, Andrea Pirlo received 1 vote from the journalists but 12 votes from the captains. The voting pattern of the journalists appears to different from the voting patterns of the captains and the bonds coaches that seem to be similar.
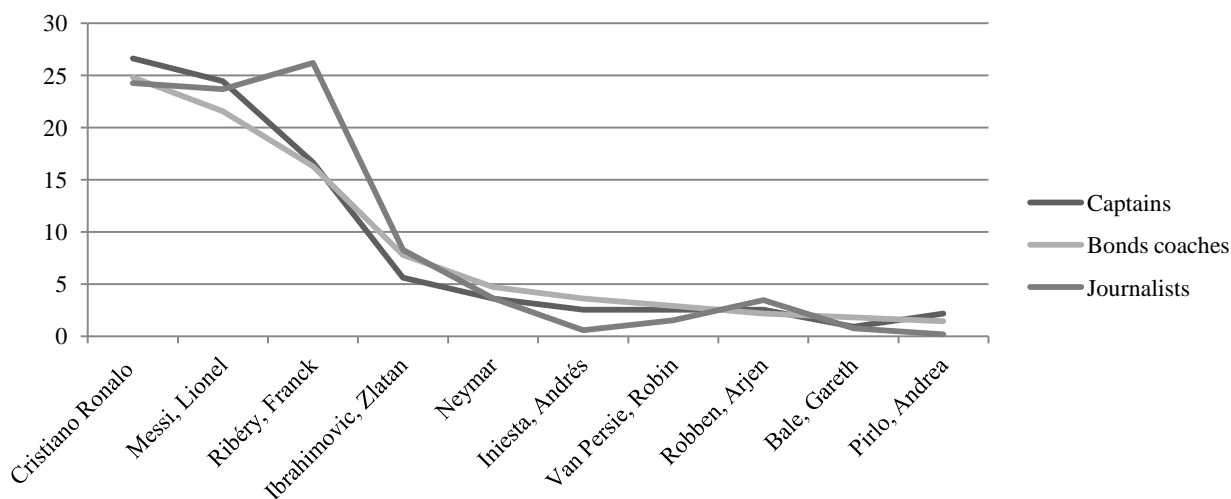

Figure 3. Distribution of votes in percentages for the top ten players who received most votes

The apparent deviating voting pattern of the journalist is an unexpected result. In the statistic analysis a Chi-square test is added to find out whether or not the voting behavior of the journalists does indeed differ from the voting pattern of the captains and journalists as a combined group.

4.2 Statistical analysis
The null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis for the chi-square test are as follows:

H_0: The voting category of a voter and the player he votes for are independent

H_1: The voting category of a voter and the player he votes for are not independent

A significance level of 0,05 is used to decide whether or not to accept or reject the null hypothesis.

Table 2.

Results from the chi-square tests

Chi-square test	Degrees of freedom	X-value	P
1. Difference in voting behavior between 'captain's, 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' separately	32	447,140	0,000
2. Difference in voting behavior between 'captains' as one group and 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' as a combined second group	16	116,267	0,000
3. Difference in voting behavior between 'captains', 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' separately without the votes for Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Franck Ribery.	24	60,925	0,000
4. Difference in voting behavior between 'captains' as one group and 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' as a combined second group without the votes for Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Franck Ribery	12	22,688	0,030
5. Difference in voting behavior between 'journalists' as one group and 'bonds coaches' and 'journalists' as a combined second group	16	415,312	0,000

The first chi-square test shows a P-value of 0,000, which is less than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. There is a relationship between the voting category of a voter and the player he votes for. The voting patterns of the three categories differ from each other

The second chi-square test shows a P-value of 0,000, which is less than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. There is a relationship between the voting category of a voter and the player he votes for. The voting patterns of the captains and the bonds coaches plus journalists differ from each other.

The third chi-square test shows a P-value of 0,000, which is less than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. There is a relationship between the voting category of a voter and the player he votes for. The voting patterns of the three categories differ from each other with the votes for the best three players left out of the analysis.

The fourth chi-square test shows a P-value of 0,030, which is less than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. There is a relationship between the voting category of a voter and the player he votes for. The voting patterns of the captains and the bonds coaches plus journalists differ from each other with the votes for the best three players left out of the analysis.

The fifth chi-square test shows a P-value of 0,000, which is less than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. There is a relationship between the voting category of a voter and the player he votes for. The voting patterns of the journalists and the bonds coaches plus journalists differ from each other.

All of the tests executed show that the voting patterns of the three voting categories are different. The voting category to which a voter belongs is related to the player he votes for.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine if the social identity theory influences the voting behavior of the captains voting in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition and if these a captains competition tend to vote for a player playing at the same position as they do. The expectation was that captains favor players playing at the same position as they do over player that don't, because of in group-favoritism.

The descriptive statistics show that there some differences in votes for certain players. For example: Andrés Iniesta receives 14 votes from captains, 20 votes from bonds coaches but only 3 votes from journalists and Zlatan Ibrahimovic who received 31 votes from captains, and 43 votes from both bonds coaches and journalists.

Also, figure 2 and 3 support the findings of table 1, they show that there are differences in the voting pattern of the voting categories.

The results from the statistical analysis support the indications of the descriptive statistics: all chi-square test show that there is no statistically significant association between the voting patterns of the captains, bonds coaches and journalist, meaning that the voting pattern of the captains does statistically differ from the voting pattern of the captains and the bonds coaches.

The hypothesis was:

"Do the captains voting in the FIFA Ballon d'Or competition tend to vote for players who play at the same position as the captain himself?"

According to the outcomes of the thesis, the hypothesis shouldn't be rejected. Indications are present that support the hypothesis.

However, due to the unexpected finding of this thesis, the deviating voting pattern of the journalists compared to the voting pattern of the captains and the bonds coaches, the support for the hypothesis weakens because when the hypothesis is true, you would expect that the captains show the most deviating voting pattern. As the journalists providing the most deviating voting pattern (X=415,312 when the X-value for the captains separately is 116,267), the evidence for the hypothesis isn't strong enough to immediately accept the hypothesis.

6. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of both the descriptive statistics and the statistical analysis show that the voting pattern of the journalists is deviating from the voting patterns of the captains and de bonds coaches. This discovery raises the question if it is possible that the journalists are in fact the voting group that stands out from the rest. It could be very interesting to find out the reason for journalists voting differently from captains and bonds coaches.

This thesis focuses on finding indications that support the hypothesis, but isn't operationalized in a way that provides enough information to reject or confirm the hypothesis with certainty. It can be a basis for future research on this topic. For example, a research design can be developed to find a direct relationship between the position of the captains and their voting behavior.

The social identity theory and the associated theory of in-group favoritism is used as a basis for voting behavior of the captains. The position from the captains is used as the in-group. Possibly, more in-groups are present in the voting behavior of the three voting categories. For example nationality, or playing at the same club or in the same competition.

This thesis only focuses on the votes of the season 2012-2013. Only investigating the votes from one season could give other outcomes than investigating the votes from multiple seasons. Maybe the midfielders, goalkeepers and backs performed poorly this season, or are there three forwards (in this case Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Franck Ribery) who simply outperformed all the other nominated players. For future research, votes from more seasons than just one could be used.

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