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Youth Perceptions of Democracy in Relation to UEFA Rankings in EU Countries

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Democracy plays a vital role in the functioning of the European Union (EU). All levels of political representation, including the European Parliament—which reflects the voices of citizens across the 27 member states—are democratically elected. However, democracy also relies on the active participation of its citizens. In contrast, football represents a domain of mass participation that, in certain cases, can give rise to ochlocracy (mob rule), thereby undermining democratic principles. Countries where citizens express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy—both at the national and EU levels—tend to exhibit higher levels of mass mobilization, which is often reflected in the strength and popularity of their football associations, as measured by UEFA rankings and scores. This paper investigates the relationship between young people's perceptions of democracy within the EU and their respective countries' UEFA scores. If football is a reflection of mass culture and democracy a product of civic engagement, one might hypothesize that in contexts where democratic satisfaction is low, football serves as a compensatory outlet for collective identity and expression.

Keywords: *Democracy, Ochlocracy, Youth, European Union, Fans, Football, Sports, UEFA.*

Introduction

Youth and sports have been closely connected since the time of the ancient Olympics. While there is no legal age discrimination in sports participation, biological constraints do exist. Young people are more engaging, playing a dual role in sports: as active spectators (consumers) and as players (producers).

Sports—especially team sports such as football—are closely intertwined with politics, and by extension, with democracy. History teaches us that the youth of the world compete either on the battlefields of real wars or on the metaphorical battlefields of sports stadiums. Needless to say, sane individuals, if given the choice, would prefer the latter.

Nevertheless, sports competition in contemporary European societies is not immune to violence, which, in some cases, results in serious injuries or fatalities. A recent incident in Athens involved premeditated violence by football supporters directed at law enforcement, culminating in the tragic death of a police officer. This event underscores the more troubling aspects of sports culture and its entanglement with democratic values.

In the Athenian case, the incident quickly escalated into a political issue, with voices from both sides expressing concern that democratic principles were under

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threat. The owner of Greece's largest football club—a prominent and influential public figure—publicly accused the government of political persecution following his indictment. Conversely, hooliganism has not only compromised the integrity of football but has also been interpreted as a broader challenge to democratic institutions. Far-right and neo-Nazi groups have frequently exploited the organizational structures of major football clubs, using the guise of fandom to disseminate extremist ideologies and evade scrutiny.

Democracy is the central focus of this paper. We draw on data from the most recent Eurobarometer survey, which investigates the perspectives of young EU citizens on democratic values. The target population consisted of EU citizens aged 16 to 30, and the survey was conducted between February 11 and 20, 2025, with a sample size of 25,993 respondents. This study employs simple descriptive statistics to identify notable differences in youth attitudes across the 27 EU member states.

In addition, we incorporate the 2025 Union of European Football Associations. (UEFA)[1] scores of men's European football associations to examine the potential relationship between young people's satisfaction with democracy—both at the EU level and within their respective countries—and national football performance. If football functions as the "opium of the masses," a negative association would be expected between levels of democratic satisfaction and the success of national football associations.

Including this introduction, the paper is organized into five sections. The second section presents a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the relationship between democracy and football. The third section discusses young people's opinions about democracy in their respective countries and in the EU. The fourth section explores the association between democratic satisfaction and UEFA scores, using descriptive statistical analysis. The final section offers concluding remarks.

A Conceptual Model

Democracy is an ideal political system where people participate in making decisions about their current and future affairs. I have examined various aspects of democracy in a series of studies (Papanikos, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2025). I developed five criteria to evaluate democracy and argued that democracy has a bright future through education. If education is missing, the required active people's participation may turn into a political system known since antiquity as ochlocracy (mob rule).

Democracy requires citizens, and ochlocracy requires masses (mobs). Similar in sports especially popular team sports such as football in Europe require participation. People attending football are called fans. Like in democracy they are called spectators and enjoy the game and behaving with virtue. Some of these fans

[1]UEFA has been the subject of many studies. This journal has dealt with various aspects of UEFA; see the studies by Cincimino (2014), Espita Escuer & Garcia Cebrian (2016), Nunes & Valério (2020), and Zambom Ferraresi et al. (2017).

may turn into a mass/mob using violence against all "others" however the latter are defined.[2]

From a different perspective, the biggest threat to democracy lies in populist policies and populist leaders. Particularly during periods of economic crisis, these leaders often exploit the most popular sport—football, especially in EU countries—to draw supporters to their political agendas.

A common trait shared by populist leaders and popular football teams is fanaticism: a fervent loyalty that often disregards core democratic values such as human rights, equality, and non-discrimination. The most visible expression of this behavior can be observed in popular team sports. It is no surprise, then, that UEFA has been committed to eliminating fanaticism from football.

I have attempted to incorporate this discussion into a conceptual model, illustrated in Figure 1. The model begins with the premise of active popular participation, which is a prerequisite for both democracy and ochlocracy. In contrast, other political systems—such as tyranny (dictatorship) and aristocracy (oligarchy)—do not rely on any form of political participation by the people.

Political participation may come from either *citizens*, defined here as ethical individuals who have received a basic education, or the *masses*, defined as people lacking virtue. The distinction lies in the outcome of their participation: citizens give rise to democracy, while masses lead to ochlocracy.

The dashed line between masses and citizens in the model represents the continuous and dynamic flow between these two groups, which is largely influenced by economic conditions. This flow is bidirectional. In times of economic prosperity and strong social cohesion, more people tend to become citizens. Conversely, during severe economic crises—especially when not addressed by inclusive policies—citizens on the margins may shift into the category of the masses or mob.

This transition often finds its initial expression in settings where large crowds gather, such as football stadiums. As more citizens become part of the masses, the risk increases that democracy will be undermined and replaced by authoritarian leadership.

History teaches us that even through democratic processes, a majority can elect authoritarian regimes, which may then consolidate power either through outright dictatorship or in the form of what are now termed *illiberal democracies*. Hitler, for instance, rose to power through democratic elections.

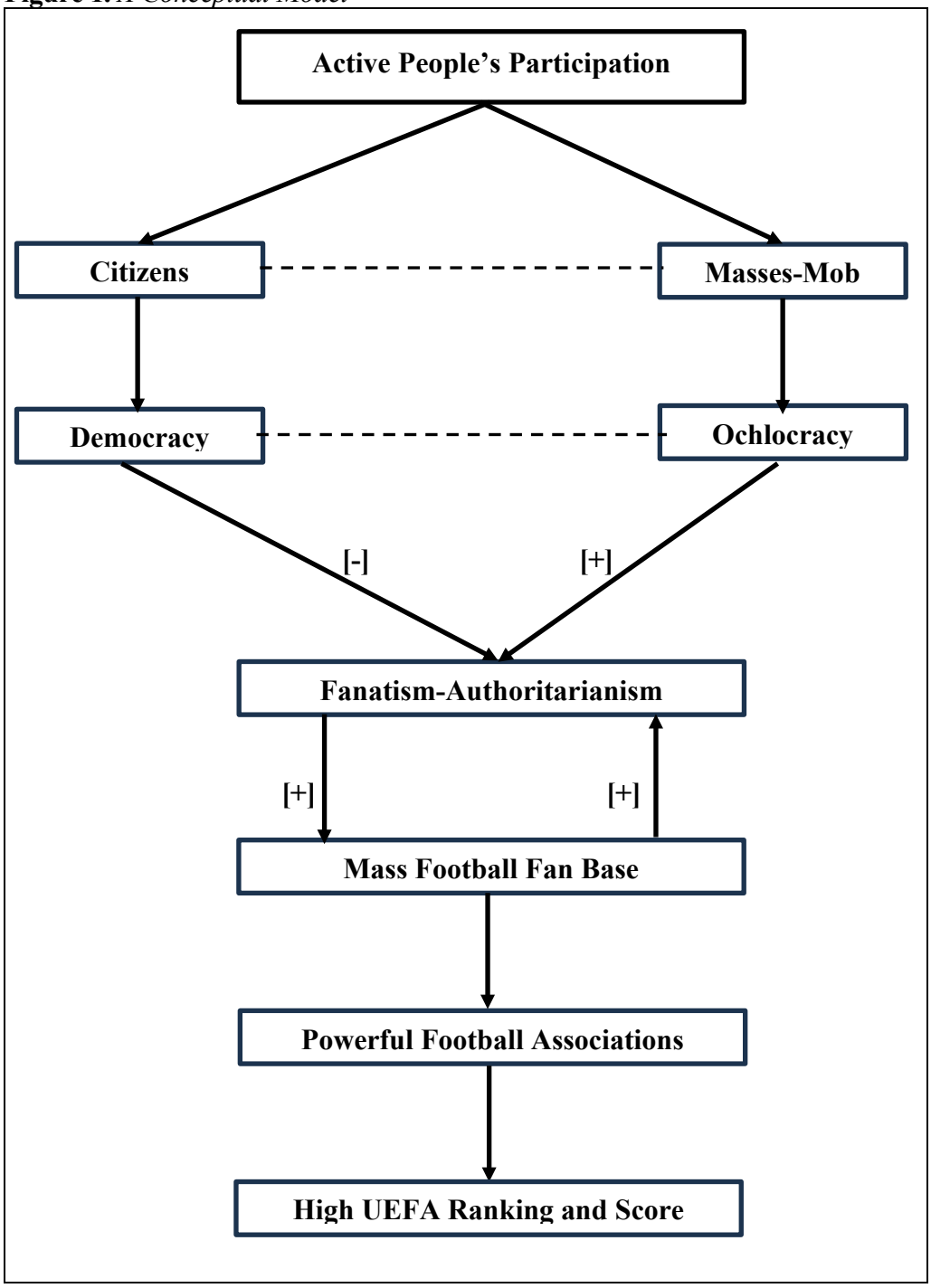
It is often said that democracy is based on majority rule—but this must be coupled with respect for minority rights. Hitler infamously used sports as propaganda to advance his dangerous political goals. The spectacle of the 1936 Olympic Games was the most dramatic display of this strategy, taking place just before the outbreak of war in Europe.

The flow of the diagram illustrates the negative relationship between democracy and fanaticism, and the positive relationship between ochlocracy and authoritarianism. Fanaticism in society often translates into fanaticism in football. The masses

[2]The role of fans in sports—especially in popular sports such as football in Europe—has received considerable attention in both research and the mass media. Many studies have appeared in this journal that examine the role of fans, including those by Binjwaied et al. (2015), Borges (2018), Ibrahim (2014), and Özgen & Argan (2017).

organize themselves around football clubs, which then become a pretext for undermining social cohesion—and ultimately, the political system.

Figure 1. *A Conceptual Model*



Strong support for football teams fosters strong national team identities, with competition playing out not only at the national level but also on the international stage. In UEFA club competitions, stadiums across Europe become symbolic

battlefields in a new kind of "war"—one that too often escalates into real violence, sometimes even resulting in the loss of lives.

The above analysis suggests a negative relationship between citizens' appreciation of democracy and the strength of football fanaticism. Large groups of people become loyal fan bases, which are often leveraged by club owners to further strengthen their teams. One measure of this strength is the ranking of national football associations in European competitions.

This negative relationship—between support for democracy and UEFA scores/ rankings—is empirically examined in the following two sections of the paper. The next section analyzes youths' responses to two questions related to their perception of democracy.

Measuring Youth Satisfaction with Democracy

The following two questions were included in the Eurobarometer survey (European Union, 2025):

1. On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way democracy works in your country?
2. On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the EU?

Respondents were asked to choose one of five options: *very satisfied*, *rather satisfied*, *rather dissatisfied*, *very dissatisfied*, or *don't know*. Tables 1 and 2 present the responses to the first and second questions, respectively. Sixty-five percent of young EU citizens are *very* or *rather satisfied* with democracy at the EU level, while 59% are satisfied with the democracy that exists in their own country. The corresponding dissatisfaction rates were 38% and 29%, respectively.

The correlation between the two satisfaction rates is 0.8148. However, the means differ: satisfaction with democracy among EU citizens is lower for their country than for the EU. A t-test of the difference in means shows that this difference is statistically significant at the 1% level ($t = 2.76$).

Tables 1 and 2 do not provide a clear picture of the variations within individual countries. Table 3 presents summary statistics for the two variables. To provide a clearer view, we created the category "satisfaction with democracy," defined as the sum of *very satisfied* and *rather satisfied* responses at both the country and EU levels. The mean is now calculated across countries rather than across the entire sample. This country-level mean is higher than the overall sample mean because youth in smaller countries, in terms of population, tend to be more satisfied with democracy than those in larger countries.

In any case, the focus of this study is on variations. The first notable differences are in the maximum and minimum values. The minimum satisfaction percentage was found in Italy (46% for democracy at the country level) and in France (56% for democracy at the EU level). In Italy, 56% of its youth are satisfied with EU-level democracy. Incidentally, as we shall see in the next section, Italy has the highest

UEFA score, followed by Germany, Spain, and France. The maximum satisfaction values—90% for country-level democracy and 86% for EU-level democracy—were recorded in Luxembourg.

There appear to be greater variations among youth regarding democracy at the country level compared to the EU level. The range (maximum minus minimum value) is 44 percentage points for democracy at the country level and 30 percentage points for EU-level democracy. The standard deviation is 12 for country-level democracy and 8 for the EU level.

Table 1. *Satisfaction with Democracy at the National Level*

	Very satisfied	Rather satisfied	Rather dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
EU27	17	42	26	12	3
Belgium	36	48	12	2	2
Bulgaria	36	32	21	9	2
Czechia	14	59	19	4	4
Denmark	33	52	10	4	1
Germany	12	44	29	12	3
Estonia	29	50	15	4	2
Ireland	40	42	12	4	2
Greece	29	30	22	19	0
Spain	12	37	31	17	3
France	11	38	30	17	4
Croatia	26	33	26	12	3
Italy	8	38	34	18	2
Cyprus	30	42	19	8	1
Latvia	22	46	22	6	4
Lithuania	34	44	15	4	3
Luxembourg	48	42	8	1	1
Hungary	24	34	20	18	4
Malta	44	34	14	7	1
Netherlands	25	53	15	6	1
Austria	29	45	18	6	2
Poland	14	50	22	5	9
Portugal	21	50	23	4	2
Romania	32	42	18	8	0
Slovenia	26	43	21	7	3
Slovakia	19	38	27	14	2
Finland	31	50	14	3	2
Sweden	14	48	24	9	5

Skewness measures the asymmetry of a data distribution. A skewness value of zero indicates that the distribution is symmetric (i.e., normal). At the country level, the skewness is -0.29, which indicates a slight negative skew—meaning the distribution has a small leftward tail. This suggests the distribution is nearly symmetrical, with a minor tendency for lower values to occur more frequently than higher ones.

Table 2. *Satisfaction with Democracy at the EU Level*

	Very satisfied	Rather satisfied	Rather dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
EU27	15	50	22	7	6
Belgium	31	51	11	3	4
Bulgaria	32	45	15	4	4
Czechia	10	56	20	6	8
Denmark	26	52	13	5	4
Germany	11	48	28	8	5
Estonia	25	52	15	2	6
Ireland	35	50	11	2	2
Greece	22	49	23	5	1
Spain	10	50	24	8	8
France	10	46	26	10	8
Croatia	23	45	20	7	5
Italy	8	57	22	8	5
Cyprus	21	55	18	4	2
Latvia	22	56	14	3	5
Lithuania	28	50	15	3	4
Luxembourg	38	48	11	1	2
Hungary	28	44	17	6	5
Malta	36	44	14	3	3
Netherlands	21	51	18	6	4
Austria	24	49	17	8	2
Poland	11	55	18	6	10
Portugal	19	59	16	2	4
Romania	29	51	16	3	1
Slovenia	23	49	20	4	4
Slovakia	18	55	17	6	4
Finland	24	53	13	5	5
Sweden	8	52	21	8	11

At the EU level, the skewness is also negative, at -0.50. This represents a moderate negative skew, indicating a somewhat longer or heavier left tail. It suggests a more pronounced asymmetry compared to the country level, with a greater concentration of values toward the higher end, but still a noticeable tendency for lower values to occur.

Kurtosis measures the "tailedness" or sharpness of the peak in a data distribution. It indicates how much of the variance is due to outliers (extreme values) and how the data are distributed around the mean.

A kurtosis value of -0.79, as seen in the case of country-level democracy, suggests a platykurtic distribution—meaning the data has a flatter peak and lighter tails than a normal distribution. This indicates the data is more evenly spread out, with fewer extreme outliers, and suggests less frequent occurrence of extreme values compared to a normal distribution.

Table 3. *Variations of Satisfaction (Sum of Very and Rather Satisfied)*

Statistic	Satisfaction (Country)	Satisfaction (EU)
Mean	69	73
Median	71	73
Mode	78	78
Minimum	46	56
Maximum	90	86
Range	44	30
Standard Deviation	12	8
Skewness	-0.29	-0.50
Kurtosis	-0.79	-0.46

Similarly, a kurtosis value of -0.46 for EU-level democracy also indicates a platykurtic distribution, though the flattening of the peak is less pronounced than in the country-level case. This means the distribution is still flatter than a normal distribution, but the difference between the peak and the tails is less significant.

The variations in young people's appreciation of democracy in their respective EU countries are contrasted in the next section with the UEFA ranking of national men's football associations. The hypothesis is that lower satisfaction with democracy is associated with a higher football ranking.

UEFA Scores and Democracy

This section is purely descriptive in nature. Ideally, we would develop a regression model in which UEFA rankings depend on a range of variables reflecting economic, social, cultural, and other country-specific conditions, as well as the level of democracy. However, this is left for future research.

Figure 2 shows the UEFA rankings and scores in descending order for the 27 EU countries. The rankings are calculated as a weighted average over the last five football seasons, starting with the 2020–21 season and ending with the 2024–25 European football season.

The four largest football associations are Italy, Spain, Germany, and France. There is a strong correlation with population (0.8122), but there are notable exceptions—small countries in terms of population with relatively high UEFA rankings, such as Cyprus. This is important issue is not discussed here.

Figures 3 and 4 depict the scatter diagrams of the UEFA scores and youth satisfaction with democracy at both the country and EU levels. There appears to be a strong negative relationship between the strength of the national football association of the men's team and satisfaction with democracy.

Both figures show a negative non-linear association. As youth satisfaction with democracy increases, the UEFA ranking (score) decreases at a decreasing rate. Luxembourg has the lowest UEFA score but the highest youth satisfaction rate regarding its democracy. Luxembourg has a population of 691,000 people, making it the second smallest after Malta, which has a population of 587,000. Malta has the

fourth-lowest UEFA ranking. Of interest is the case of Cyprus, which ranks relatively high in the UEFA rankings—13th among the 27 EU countries—with a population of 949,000 people. On the other hand, there are also variations in the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and GDP per capita, which may also explain variations in the UEFA rankings, assuming the cause runs from these variables to UEFA scores. As mentioned, this more important issue is left for future research.

Figure 2. *UEFA Score in EU Countries*

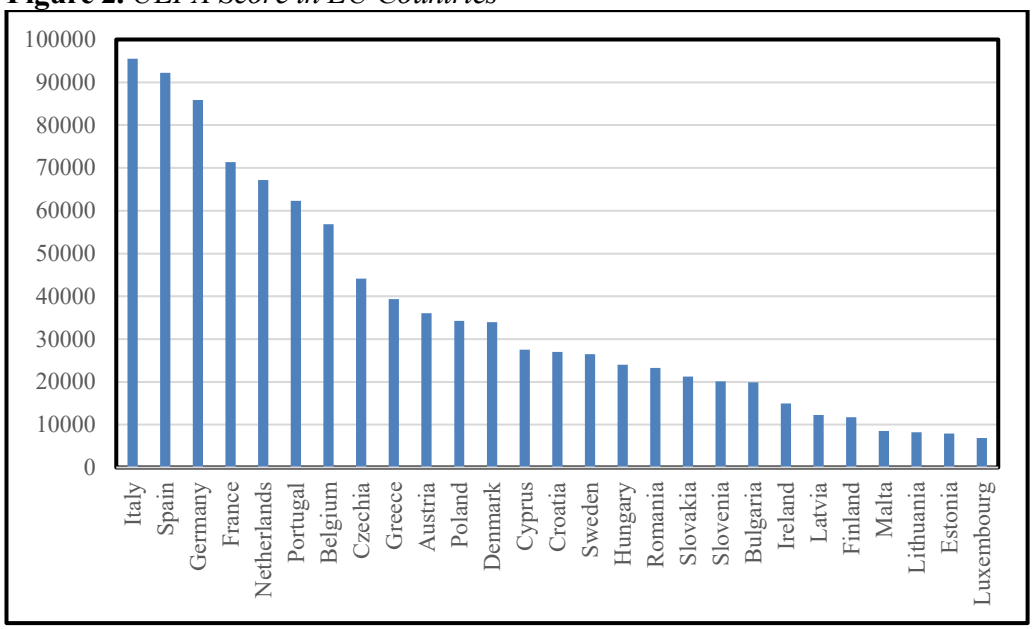
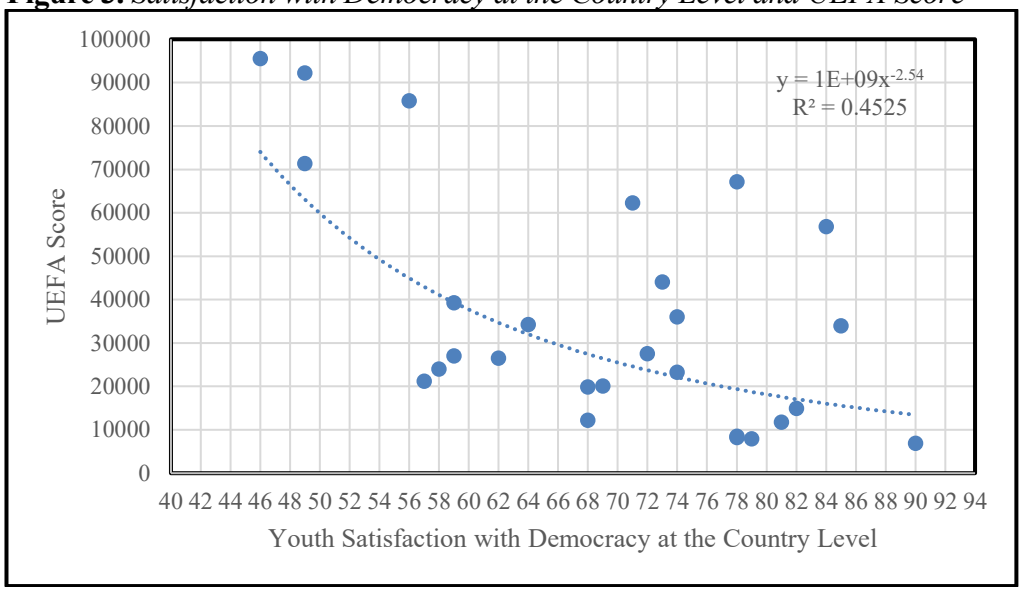


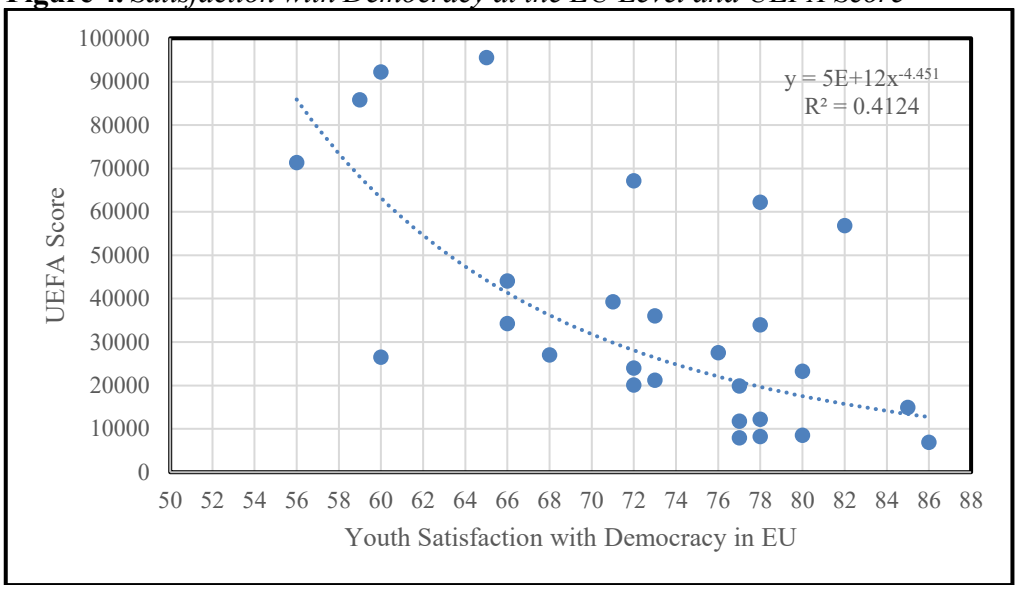
Figure 3. *Satisfaction with Democracy at the Country Level and UEFA Score*



There are many ways one could evaluate this descriptive evidence of the negative relationship. One obvious interpretation is that people who value democracy may view football as an inferior good, suitable only for the uneducated masses who,

under the right circumstances, could turn into a mob and undermine democracy by imposing the worst form of popular rule—ochlocracy.

Figure 4. *Satisfaction with Democracy at the EU Level and UEFA Score*



Of course, causality may run the other way. A lack of democracy, often accompanied by social exclusion, may lead young people to seek social recognition through affiliation with football fan communities. These fanatic supporters are usually organized into clubs that go beyond simply watching their favorite team play. The club becomes a kind of family, and members spend significant time together engaging in subcultural activities, which may include the abuse of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. As a result, they distance themselves from politics and democratic processes. This phenomenon may be especially prominent in large cities and countries with substantial populations.

Conclusions

Drawing from the UEFA ranking and the Eurobarometer data on youth appreciation of democracy, a negative association was established between the two variables. This is a descriptive approach and a more analytical study is needed to examine the cause-effect relation between democracy and UEFA rankings.

This study raises more questions than it answers, which are left for future research to address. Two directions for future research have been identified. First, a more formal model should be developed and tested to explore how economic and social variables may affect variations in UEFA rankings. Additionally, time-series data, either at the country level or as a panel of countries, may shed light on how changes in the perception of democracy by the EU's youth may influence their interest in association football and, consequently, UEFA rankings.

The preliminary evidence presented in this study cannot reject the hypothesis that democracy and football do not go hand-in-hand. It seems that better football

performance is associated with less satisfaction with democracy. Alternatively, it may suggest that lower satisfaction with democracy among the youth of EU countries drives them into the mass of people who participate in football.

This negative association explains why UEFA is struggling to promote respect for human rights, equality, and non-discrimination in football. I believe UEFA is on the right track, but even more attention and additional initiatives may be needed to improve the situation. This is of great interest because football could potentially be used to foster democratic values, thus having a positive effect on establishing more democratic societies. In other words, football, instead of being a threat, could become an opportunity to enhance EU youth satisfaction with democracy. How to achieve this becomes another important issue for future research.

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