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Supporters attitudes towards European football governance: structural dimensions and sociodemographic patterns

Borja García^{a*} and Ramón Llopis-Goig^b

*^aSchool of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University,
Loughborough, UK.*

^bFaculty of Social Sciences, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain.

Dr Borja García (**corresponding author**).

Twitter: @DrBorjaGarcia

E mail: b.garcia-garcia@lboro.ac.uk

Dr Ramón Llopis-Goig.

Email: ramon.llopis@uv.es

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Supporters attitudes towards European football governance: structural dimensions and sociodemographic patterns

The role of fans in football governance is a topic of increasing academic and political interest. This article offers a quantitative approach to investigate supporters' opinions of governance structures in European football. It asks whether fans trust governing bodies, clubs, leagues and other stakeholders currently in charge of football governance. It also investigates the extent to which fans consider they should have a direct say on how football clubs are governed. Drawing on concepts from sports governance literature, an online survey collects opinions of football fans in six European countries (United Kingdom, Spain, Turkey, Poland, France, and Germany). The results indicate a high level of mistrust from the fans on national governing bodies and presidents and owners of football clubs. Supporters have a positive view of fan involvement in governance structures but are pessimist about the actual efficacy of supporters' activism.

Keywords: football; supporters; governance; Europe; quantitative research

Introduction

On 10th February 2016 Liverpool FC owners published an open letter to the club's supporters with an unreserved apology 'for the distress caused' by the club's ticket pricing plan for the 2016-17 season that had been announced just a month before.¹ The owners recognised that 'part of the ticketing plan we got wrong', and decided to 'make major revisions'. This was an unprecedented decision in English football and in the Premier League. The turnaround of Liverpool owners came on the back of large protests by supporters towards the new ticket price structure.

That mobilization of Liverpool FC supporters coincided with a time in which political discourses in the United Kingdom and the European Union have encouraged fan groups to organise themselves, so that they can be recognised as legitimate stakeholders into football governance structures.² The interest in empowering supporters has also received close attention in the academic literature, and we aim to add to that ongoing academic work with a quantitative study of the attitudes of supporters towards governance structures in the game in six European countries (Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Turkey and Poland).

This article relies on the ground-breaking FREE (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) project, which we were part of. Here we build specially on our already published work in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*³. This contribution is necessarily related to the work discussed in that earlier publication, which we strengthen and develop with this article in two directions. First, this article contributes to a different body of academic literature. Whereas we previously discussed and contributed to sociological research on football fan typologies,⁴ this paper addresses a body of literature in the intersection between sociology and management that has debated the benefits and shortcomings of fan activism (see section 2 below). Second,

that previous work analysed and presented data with a European perspective.⁵ That is to say, it was not disaggregated by country. In this article we present a more comparative perspective with data by country. This follows the suggestion of García and Welford to do comparative research.⁶ It also follows the trend set recently by Jamie Cleland and colleagues⁷ in one of the latest additions to the literature (see further details below in section 2).

Thus, this article's research objectives are twofold. First, we aim to identify supporters' level of trust in European football's stakeholders to improve the governance structures of the game. Second, we aim to find out the extent to which fans actually agree with policy-makers and consider supporter groups should have a say in football governance.

The article proceeds in five steps. First, we undertake a review of the relevant literature on supporter activism and football governance. Second, we outline the framework underpinning our enquiry, based on governance concepts. Third, we present our methodology. Fourth, we analyse the results of our survey. Finally, the article concludes discussing the main implications of our findings.

2. Football supporters and governance, the state of the art

The academic interest in studying football fans as something more than mere 'consumers' of the game is recent. The launch of Supporters Direct in England and Wales in 2000 marked a message of the British government to encourage fans' participation to make football more democratic.⁸ While this certainly raised the profile of the discussion, the issue had been considered before the turn of the century.⁹ Anthony King's theoretically informed analysis of English football evolution as result of the country's social transformations in the 1980s and 1990s discussed how the fans and their reality was changing.¹⁰ Similarly, Stephen Morrow pointed out, from a

business management perspective, that the economic dynamics of football were being radically transformed by the commercialisation of the game.¹¹ These studies analysed the ongoing transformations of football and raised early warnings of the impact on supporters. There was not an extensive focus on governance issues, though.

With the creation of Supporters Direct, research and political debate intensified. Using political sciences language, this could be conceptualised as a ‘focusing event’¹² that concentrated attention on supporter ownership and participation. This was reflected in several studies that explored fans’ relationship with their clubs.¹³ These works were mostly descriptive, though. The authors of some of these contributions were actively involved in supporter activism (e.g., Brian Lomax launched the Northampton Town Supporters Trust). Thus, in those contributions basically analyse the author’s own perception of fan activism and supporters trusts. Most of these do not follow the path of King or Morrow, and in consequence are not theoretically driven academic contributions, but rather a debate on the merits of the involvement of supporters in football governance, and more concretely on the benefits of the so-called Supporters Trusts. These authors painted a positive tale of the benefits of supporter involvement to improve football governance.

On the other hand, it is also possible to find a (smaller) group of works analysing the shortcomings of the English Supporters Trust model.¹⁴ These authors argue that fans and supporters trusts only have the opportunity to be ownership stakeholders in their clubs when there is an important economic crisis. Thus, they question whether supporters can actually have any real impact on club governance outside of this last-resort option, especially as vast amount of economic resources are needed to become a meaningful shareholder of professional football clubs in the major European leagues, except in Germany that retains the member-club model.¹⁵ In a

similar vein, more recent contributions problematise the real impact that supporters can have in two models traditionally considered as beacons of fan participation: The Spanish socio model,¹⁶ and the 50+1 structures of German football.¹⁷ Crucially, none of these contributions asked supporters their own perception. This is a gap that this article seeks to fill.

Beyond this debate, the literature has also analysed campaigns organised by supporter groups under this new activist agenda. This research analysed how difficult it was for fans to have an impact and influence the decisions taken by club owners;¹⁸ it also discussed the instability of supporters' commitments to the clubs.¹⁹ These studies have also examined fans' responses to issues such as the relocation of stadiums,²⁰ the increase in ticket prices,²¹ or changes in clubs' ownership.²² In these cases the actions of fans comes through their dissatisfaction. In other words, fans were reactive, not proactive.

The literature on football fans' activism has grown in the last years, and it is developing both in number and quality. The latest developments in the field are adding layers of theoretical and conceptual analysis. This is aptly seen in the recent work of Jamie Cleland and colleagues, one of the latest additions to this body of academic research. Cleland et al. have published a book that is rich both theoretically and empirically. They rely on relational sociology to explore supporter collective action in the UK and across Europe.²³ The book analyses the relationships and networks in different bouts of collective action across Europe. It is a strong development, for the theoretical framework developed in the first two chapters adds much needed conceptualisation to the field. Cleland et al. discuss, drawing on relational sociology and network theories, the elements that facilitate in depth comparative research into football fans. This is a particularly positive addition, given the heterogeneity of football fandom

structures. That framework is then used to analyse campaigns on issues such as anti-discrimination, ticketing, ownership or name changes. The book does not only map these new networks, but also calls our attention to their importance, both in academic and political terms.

Most of these studies reviewed above face limitations that should be pointed out. First, they are mainly N=1 case studies. Although they provide information about fans' perspectives, they do not go beyond the context of the club itself. There is nothing wrong, *per se*, with single qualitative case studies, but the limitations need to be acknowledged. These cases do not belong to a carefully planned research agenda, which means there is conceptual and theoretical heterogeneity. Moreover, most of the work has been done in the context of English football. It is difficult to draw a conclusion across countries at European level. It is also difficult to analyse the findings under a common framework to strengthen their collective academic value. The limitations inherent to the nature of a concatenation of N=1 case studies and their narrow geographical focus create a gap that this paper aims to fill with quantitative data from six European countries.

Second, many of these contributions were written by 'insiders'. That is to say, the authors were linked in one way or another to the club, fan group or supporters trust in question. There is only a small number of studies that draw on supporters from a variety of groups and a wider range of perspectives. As a result, the opinions about governance in the literature are narrow and not diverse enough.

Third, the aforementioned studies are based in the application of qualitative methods while the quantitative perspective is non-existent. Most of the papers adopt a qualitative and inductive research strategy. Without undervaluing the merits of qualitative research at all, we argue that a quantitative approach can also help move this

research agenda forward, contributing to the work of those scholars interested in the qualitative study of football activism at the ground level.

Thus, with these gaps in mind, this paper presents the results of a quantitative survey of supporters' opinions in six European countries. It helps to develop a European perspective of this raising phenomenon across the continent. Having identified the body of literature to which the paper contributes, we now turn to present the concepts that informed the design of the study.

3. Conceptual framework: Systemic governance and good governance

As we explained in the introduction, this article uses the data obtained in the FREE Project; therefore it shares the conceptual framework that we also used and presented in our previous work.²⁴ The framework draws on concepts of governance, as it is only logical given the research questions and objectives. In order to operationalise a concept with so many different meanings, and normally used in qualitative research, we relied on the seminal work of Ian Henry and Lee²⁵ to build the framework and design the questionnaire. Let us briefly describe the operationalisation of concepts that underpins the research and questionnaire design.

Ian Henry and Lee were some of the first academics that defined governance concepts in the very particular environment of sport. They suggested that the governance of sport can be defined under three dimensions: systemic governance, good governance, and political governance.²⁶ Systemic governance explains the structures of authority and power in sport, and the relations between different stakeholders in a sport system. Good governance, in turn, is a list of normative principles that structure the way in which sport stakeholders interact. Finally, political governance looks at the very special role of governments in regulating sport. We argue that political governance can be

conceptualised as one type of systemic governance. This reduces governance to two dimensions that can help us to build our analysis upon: Systemic governance and good governance.

This article, therefore, builds on these ideas of Henry and Lee in order to analyse (1) governance as a network that provides structure to the relations between the different stakeholders involved in football; and (2) the principles of good governance that condition those interactions with the objective of ensuring an efficient, transparent and open management of football clubs.

Systemic governance describes the administration of a structure in which there is a large number of organisations involved. Power, authority and resources do not have a single focus, and are therefore divided and diffused across the system.²⁷ The systemic governance of football is considered to be a network.²⁸ Indeed, the network of European football is formed by football clubs, national federations, leagues, UEFA and FIFA as primary stakeholders. Like any other economic or social activity, the network is regulated by governments and, in some cases, also the European Union (EU).²⁹ Football around the world, and most especially in Europe, is very dependent on television and media outlets' investment. Therefore, these companies are also now seen as an active part of the network, albeit conceptualised as secondary stakeholders.³⁰ Last, but by no means at all least, the organisations of football fans and supporters are also an active part of the network of football governance in Europe.

Thus, in order to operationalise the systemic governance dimension in our research, the first step was to follow the existing literature to identify the stakeholders participating in the network. Once that is done, we have used the concept of trust in order to understand whether fans had a negative or positive view of stakeholders in football governance. According to the literature, it is considered that good governance is

likely to generate trust. We acknowledge that trust is of course a highly interpretable concept.³¹ Indeed, given the well documented heterogeneous nature of football supporters, one cannot assume that all survey respondents will have a common, similar and shared understanding of the term in this context. And this is a limitation of our study design that we recognise. However, when designing the questionnaire, we undertook a number of focus groups with representatives of supporters' organisations to gather their most pressing views on governance issues. Furthermore, the questionnaire went through two rounds of piloting in each one of the countries before refining the final version. During the piloting phase we were satisfied that there was a relatively common understanding that in the context of this study fans were being asked about the extent to which they think each stakeholder can be trusted to improve the governance structures of football. Thus, as reflected in Q.1 (see Table 1) we understand trust as a positive (or negative) endorsement of the role of each stakeholder in football's governance network.

We move now to the second dimension of our conceptual framework: Good governance. The European Union Expert Group on Good Governance defined good governance in sport as follows:

*The framework and culture within which a sports body sets policy, delivers its strategic objectives, engages with stakeholders, monitors performance, evaluates and manages risk and reports to its constituents on its activities and progress including the delivery of effective, sustainable and proportionate sports policy and regulation.*³²

Good governance is normally defined through a number of normative principles that stakeholders are required to implement in order to earn legitimacy within the network.³³ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbot defined good governance in sport by the principles of transparency, democracy, accountability, autonomy and social responsibility.³⁴ Following on, Jean-Loup Chappelet, in the Basic Indicators for Better Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS), refined his own work and identified the principles of what he called ‘better governance’ as being ‘solidarity, accountability, democracy, integrity, and transparency’³⁵.

Building on the work of Bovens, accountability can be defined as ‘a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct’.³⁶ Accountability is closely related to transparency, whose definition refers to the possibility of stakeholders to obtain information about the way in which the organisation is managed.³⁷ Democracy relates to the extent to which stakeholders are represented in decision-making and they can influence those in office.³⁸ In football clubs this needs to be understood as the extent to which the owners of football clubs take into account the opinions of supporters or not. The principles of integrity and solidarity depart slightly from the definitions of good corporate governance, as they are ‘sport specific’.³⁹ These are recent incorporations to the list of good governance principles in sport.⁴⁰ Integrity refers to the structures, policies or processes in place to ensure the ethical development of sport, protecting the spirit of fair play and the actors and stakeholders involved.⁴¹ Solidarity, on the other hand, is defined as the extent to which sport organisations support the development of its main stakeholders. This tends to be specially linked to income redistribution⁴², and it is understood basically as taking good care of the sport in order to ensure a healthy development of all groups involved, not only the richest ones. In the context of football

fans and their clubs, integrity and solidarity are perhaps slightly more difficult to measure.

In order to operationalise the principles of good governance defined in the literature, we ‘translated’ them through ten statements that focus on supporters’ relations with their football club (included in Q.2, see Table 1 below). These statements ask whether fans believe their opinion is taken into consideration by the club; they also ask whether fans think they must have a say on the club is run and managed (democracy). In another set of statements, we enquire whether fans think they can trust what the owners say, and whether they know what owners really think (transparency, accountability). Other statements included in the survey are used to identify supporters’ opinions on whether owners have the best interest of the club at heart (integrity, as this relates to whether owners can be seen as following an ethical development of the club for the benefit of the whole community or not); and whether owners treat supporters as a stakeholder or just a customer (linked to solidarity in the sense that it asks whether fans see the owner as wanting to develop and sustain a supporters’ community that could actively participate as a stakeholder, or rather just as a paying customer with no other rights).

As explained in the methodology section, below, participants were asked whether they agreed or not with these statements, in an attempt to measure their perception of the extent to which their club is implementing good governance principles.

As we have pointed out above, good governance is a highly contextual concept. We acknowledge that the decision to operationalise the principles of good governance through relatively simple statements produces some limitations. First and foremost, we are working with charged concepts that participants might not always understand in the

same way. We would argue, however, that we have mitigated this through the piloting phase. We would also argue that the advantages of making these statements simpler outweigh the disadvantages of using concepts such as democracy or transparency directly, which are of an even wider nature.

This section has discussed our governance conceptual framework and the operationalisation of these concepts in the study. We turn now to present the methodology of our study.

4. Methods

This article draws on data from the FREE project's online survey on football culture. This is a dataset that we have used already elsewhere⁴³, and therefore the methodological design and part of the analysis strategy builds necessarily on the methods we have used previously.

The survey targeted football supporters in the United Kingdom, Turkey, Spain, Poland, Italy, Germany, France, Denmark and Austria. We chose these countries following clear criteria to have a variety of football scenes, structures and cultures. We specifically aimed to cover geographical variety, hence including countries along the north-south and east-west divide. We also selected a variety of small and big leagues, as it is widely recognised they follow different governance dynamics. The response rate in Italy, Denmark and Austria was low, though. Therefore, we have only included six countries in this article: United Kingdom, Turkey, Spain, Poland, Germany, and France.

FREE was a large research project that investigated the sociocultural importance of football in Europe. Therefore, the questionnaire covered many issues besides governance. The survey featured a total of 68 questions, and only two of them focused on governance. The two governance-related questions were formed by a total of 20

statements, with a 5-point Likert scale where participants had to record their answers (see Table 1).

Following data collection, the dataset was rigorously cleaned with the following criteria: We eliminated those responses that had not completed the sociodemographic variables; responses that had completed less than 80% of the survey were deleted. Thus, we had a total of 11,384 valid questionnaires (535 in Germany, 635 in UK, 1,800 in Spain, 1,804 in Turkey, 3,120 in France, and 3,490 in Poland). However, not all the 11,384 valid responses had answered the two governance-related questions. This finally reduced the sample used in this article to 7,360 valid responses (421 in Germany, 466 in UK, 1,266 in Spain, 1,274 in Turkey, 1,699 in Poland, and 2,234 in France).

The survey was administered online. This is an important feature that needs to be discussed, for online surveys have limitations that must be acknowledged. The most evident limitation is that online surveys produce a non-probabilistic sample, which does not allow calculating sampling error. Another limitation of the survey was the fact that participants self-selected themselves because the research team did not have total control of who was completing the survey.

In order to mitigate these limitations, we collected a large number of responses; hence making the sample of a significant size. Moreover, we disseminated the survey through a very wide network of project partners that included media companies and fan groups in each one of the targeted countries.

Another possible limitation of online research is, of course, that part of the target population might not have internet access. However, we feel this is an acceptable and minor limitation because the research was done in Europe, where there is common access to the internet, the ownership of smartphones is generalised, and it is also possible to access the internet in libraries, cafes and other public spaces.

Notwithstanding the limitations we have acknowledged here, online research and online questionnaires are increasingly popular amongst social sciences scholars due to their advantages. Manfreda and Vehovar point out that, actually, surveys that are done online offer the same quality and rigour than face-to-face or telephone surveys.⁴⁴ Moreover, two authors with a proven record in the area of football and sport, such as Cashmore and Cleland, explain that online surveys provide ‘more frankness and honesty’ in participants’ responses because the level of anonymity of the participants is higher.⁴⁵ Indeed, academic journals of excellent reputation, including *Soccer & Society*, have published articles based on online surveys.

Having regard to all this, we would argue that we have mitigated properly the limitations of this methodological design. The large number of responses, which is one of the strengths of this research, provides an important variety of supporters’ views across the six countries that are incorporated in the study; we cannot claim, though, to be representative of all fans.

Our analysis strategy included principal component analysis (PCA) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). PCA is a method used to analyse interrelationships between many variables. It explains those variables in terms of their common underlying dimensions (factors). The aim is to obtain ‘a way of condensing the information contained in a number of original variables into a smaller set of variates (factors) with a minimal loss of information’.⁴⁶ In our case the PCA reduced the 20 items (variables) in the question to six useful factors, which is one of the main reasons why we used it. Following the PCA, we undertook comparative analysis of fan’s opinions by applying an ANOVA test and using three variables included in the questionnaire’s demographic section: gender, age and country of residence.

5. Results and discussion

We present in Table 1 (below) the main results for the two governance-related questions of the survey that we are using in this article. Table 1 presents the values of the scores in each one of the six countries, as well as the overall 'European' average and standard deviation. In the first half of the table we can find the statements/descriptors that were used to find out the extent to which fans trust the different stakeholders in the governance network of the game. This is, basically, supporters' opinions on systemic governance. Here, we can see that the highest score is for fan groups/supporters' organisations, which makes them the most trusted stakeholder. It may seem unsurprising that football fans have a high level of trust in their fellow supporters. However, it is important to remind that the participation of supporters as a recognised and legitimate stakeholder in football governance is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the late 1990s it was not evident even for fans themselves that they could/should actually have a say on how the game is governed.⁴⁷

There is a second group of stakeholders that are slightly less trusted by fans. These are the governing body of European football (UEFA), the European Union and international media. Following on, we find in order of more to less trust the professional football leagues (e.g. La Liga or Bundesliga), national football federations, national media companies and, finally, FIFA. It is of interest that the lowest ranked stakeholder are national governments. This has some significance, as national governments could decide to actively legislate in football governance issues, as they have done in countries such as Spain or Turkey.⁴⁸ However, if they were to do so and adopt a hands-on approach to football governance, our results suggests that football fans would not trust their actions.

Fans tend to trust more the supranational layer of football's multi-level governance, except for FIFA. This is probably explained by the high profile scandals in

which FIFA has been involved in the last few years.⁴⁹ If we discard the special circumstances of FIFA, it is necessary to highlight the division between the supranational and the (less trusted) national/local levels of governance. Supporters are likely to have greater knowledge of governance issues in relation to the stakeholders that are closer to them, namely national FA, leagues and clubs. Moreover, despite clear globalising tendencies of the industry, football remains a strong local affair for most fans. This is a relevant finding in relation to governance theory, for it confirms the argument made by some scholars that supranational/international public bodies are better suited to keep sports governance in check given the multi-level nature of these structures.⁵⁰ The problem with this, however, is that the so-called ‘shadow of hierarchy’ of public authorities at supranational level is smaller than at national level⁵¹ and, therefore, regulation by international public authorities is more difficult.

(Table 1 around here)

In the second part of Table 1 (bottom half) we can find the statements used to measure supporters’ views on the extent to which their clubs are implementing good governance or not. In this question we find that there is much more difference between the low and the high scores. That is to say, opinions are not just divided, but also very strong. It is specially telling the fact that eight of the ten descriptors have values above 3.5. If we consider the way in which these statements were formulated, this basically means that supporters have a (rather strong) negative view of football governance and the way in which their clubs are managed. It is especially relevant the values indicating fans think they have no influence on the management of the club and that they cannot trust club owners to take the correct decisions (low transparency and accountability).

Unsurprisingly, in this question the lowest level of agreement is with the statement ‘we can be confident that club owners/presidents will always do the right thing’, again expressing a dissatisfaction with the accountability mechanisms in club management.

5.1. Six dimensions to explain fans’ views on football governance

Our statistical analysis strategy was divided in two steps. First, we did a principal component analysis. The PCA is a technique we have already used against this dataset.⁵² This article takes that analysis further with the second step, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the principal components in relation to sociodemographic variables (see further details in section 5.2. below).

As we had a large number of items (20 indicators), we carried out a PCA in order to identify the latent components of the empirical information included in those indicators. This helps to reduce the dimensionality of the variables and present a more stylised analysis. In order to undertake the PCA we decided to use the analysis of principal components and the Varimax rotation through Kaiser’s method. In this method, factor loading is used to determine the structure of each one of the components. The factor loading also indicates how to interpret the component (i.e. in a positive or negative sense) The factor saturation criterion to accept a component is of scores above 0.45, the threshold recommended as statistically significant in the academic literature on these methods.⁵³

The results of the PCA are shown in Figure 1. The analysis reveals the existence of six components, which explain 61.4% of the variance of the twenty initial items, a percentage that is accepted in social sciences research.⁵⁴ The figure presents the six components with their overall label, the items that belong to each component and the percentage of variance explained.

(Figure 1 around here)

Component 1 of the PCA refers to whether fans trust club owners and the governance structures in their football clubs. This is a bipolar component. On the one hand, it features scores that reflect a highly critical position towards the decisions of the owners and board members of their clubs. We also find items with scores that suggest there are some areas in which supporters might trust the decisions taken by club owners or presidents. Overall, though, this component shows a tendency not to trust club owners. As this is a bipolar component, the best label for it is ‘Distrust/trust in football clubs’ owners/presidents’.

The following three components of the model group together the stakeholders included in Q.1. In other words, these three components refer to systemic governance. The statistical analysis separates the 10 stakeholders into three groups: National organisations, international organisations and what we have labelled as pressure groups.

Component 2 of the PCA brings together national level stakeholders. It measures the confidence on national football federations, national governments and professional football leagues. In this case we find that these three items saturate Component 2 with a positive score. Therefore, this second component is best labelled ‘Trust in national sport governance bodies’.

Component 3 features UEFA and FIFA, the international federations. Following on from the label used for Component 2, we argue that this component is labelled ‘Trust in international football bodies’.

In Component 4 we find the European Union and the media (national and international). We propose to label this component ‘Trust in control and pressure

agents', because the European Union has often been conceptualised as a 'supervisor' that regulates sport organisations.⁵⁵

Component 5 relates to good governance, not to systemic governance. The component includes items that measure football fans' opinions and perceptions of their own activities as supporters. In other words, the elements of this component measure the extent to which supporters feel their own actions have an impact on how football is governed or not. It is important to note that the statements in the survey were written in a negative way, therefore the label we suggest is 'Supporters inefficacy'.

Component 6 incorporates items of both good governance and systemic governance because it is formed by one statement from each of the two governance-related questions. The first item in Component 6 measures the extent to which the survey participants trust organised fan groups and institutionalised supporters' organisations. The second item in Component 6 measures opinions on whether club owners and managers should be obliged to consider fans' opinion when designing the strategies of the club (e.g. in issues such as ticketing, diversity, accessibility, etc.). In other words, Component 6 measures the extent to which football fans feel they are a stakeholder in the complex governance of football or, contrariwise, they feel they are just there to follow the team and no more. This is aptly summarised in the label we have chosen for this component: 'Supporters' voice'.

When taken together, components five and six paint an interesting picture. On the one hand, supporters feel positively about the legitimacy of being involved in football in order to improve its governance. On the other hand, they feel that their actions are not really considered by clubs. This, in a nutshell, reflects very well the character of supporters' activism. It also confirms the existing academic literature. There are those authors that advocate the need of supporter involvement as a matter of

principle.⁵⁶ Fans taking our survey tend to agree with this vision. The results suggest that ‘supporters’ voice’ is an important component shaping their view of the governance of the game, to the point of explaining 6.5% of the total variance. Moreover, these items have positive values, meaning participants in our survey agree with these authors: Supporter involvement is a good thing. On the other hand, there were those authors more critical of the real efficacy of supporter activism.⁵⁷ These authors, like the respondents of the survey, do not question the principle, but are worried that the negative problems of the supporters’ trust model and other similar structures are being ignored.

5.2. Comparative analysis: Fans views per gender, age and country

Once we have identified the content and structure of each one of the six factorial components that structure the variance of opinion in relation to football governance, we turn to investigate whether fans’ opinions can be explained in relation to a number of intervening variables. For that analysis we have used three variables that were included in the questionnaire’s demographic section: gender, age and country of residence. This was performed through an analysis of variance (ANOVA) test, whose results can be seen in Table 2 (below).

(Table 2 around here)

In relation to ‘Distrust/trust in football clubs’ owners/presidents’, the ANOVA analysis reveals a higher level of distrust amongst the male respondents than the females. This, however, is turned into a more sceptical view as they mature and grow older, being more exposed to the realities of football governance. The analysis by country of residence reveals that the supporters that trust less owners and presidents are,

in order, those from Spain, United Kingdom and Turkey. On the other hand, highest level of trust can be found in France, Germany and Poland.

The results for the second component, 'Trust in national sport governance bodies' are very similar. Males show a lowest level of trust in national bodies than females. The age analysis finds the highest level of mistrust in the 21-30 years old group. Below that age, and also in those over 40, we can observe a higher level of trust, especially in the groups under 16 (15 and 16) and over 50 years old. The country analysis shows that Turkish fans have the highest level of distrust in national bodies, followed by the Spanish and the Brits. On the other side, we find French, Polish and German fans declaring a highest level of trust in national governance stakeholders.

The third component also shows that male fans tend not to trust international football bodies more than female fans, hence replicating the findings of the first two components. When we examine the values in relation to age groups, we can observe an almost perfect negative linear relation. The level of trust in international governing bodies goes down as fans' age goes up. In the country analysis we find that the German and British fans highly mistrust these international bodies, followed by the Spanish supporters (who have an almost neutral value). The highest level of trust in international bodies can be found amongst the Polish, Turkish and French fans, albeit the value for the latter is considerably lower, coming close to the middle point of the scale.

The fourth component refers to trust in 'control and pressure agents'. Here the analysis shows different dynamics. There is one similarity, though, as male fans are also more distrustful than their female counterparts, which confirms this trend clearly for all stakeholders in the governance of the game. We observe that youngest fans (under 16) tend to trust more these control and pressure agents with regards to the organisation of football, whereas fans over 50 are the most suspicious. However, between 16 and 50

values revolve around the middle point of the scale without very significant differences. Thus, we see a distribution in which the opposite points of the age continuum are in clear difference about their views of the control and pressure agents. However, the rest of the age groups converge towards a relatively neutral view of these stakeholders. The comparative country analysis suggests that Spanish, German and Polish fans (in this order) tend to trust more the media and the European Union in relation to the organisation of football. On the other hand, British and Turkish fans do not trust the stakeholders that we have conceptualised as control and pressure agents.

The fifth component includes the values referred to 'Supporters inefficacy'. The ANOVA analysis shows that differences according to gender are not statistically significant. However, age and country of residence are. As for the age, it is difficult to find a clear pattern, with variations up and down from one age group to the other. The country of residence analysis shows clearer trends. The highest feeling of supporter inefficacy is found amongst British and Turkish fans, whereas lowest levels of inefficacy perception belong to the supporters in Poland, France. Spanish and German fans hold an intermediate position with neutral values in their perception of the efficacy of supporters' activism.

The sixth component was labelled 'supporters' voice'. Here the ANOVA test does not show statistically significant results in relation to gender either. We can therefore conclude, taking together the ANOVA results in the fifth and sixth components that male and female fans hold similar views in relation to their trust in fellow supporter groups and their (lack of efficient) contribution to football governance. The age analysis presents important and significant differences, though. We find, again, a negative linear relation between age and trust on supporters' voice: As fans grow older the value for this component decreases. Thus, youngest fans are those showing a

greater belief in that they (personally, or wider fan groups) should have a say in football governance. Those levels of belief reduce progressively as supporters grow older, to the point that fans over 50 strongly disagree. This could be a problem for the supporters' movement, as they might find difficult to mobilise and engage older (hence, more experienced) fans who could contribute a wide variety of skills. This is not to say that younger fans do not possess useful skills, but it is safe to affirm that with experience and professional development one acquires a wider variety of skills.

The country analysis shows that fans in France and Spain have the lowest values. They are, therefore, the supporters with the lowest believe in the role of fans in football governance. On the other hand, British and Polish fans show the highest values, with German and Turkish supporters situated in a neutral position.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to find out European football supporters' opinions on governance. The results present quite a varied picture amongst supporters across the continent, but the overarching feeling is of dissatisfaction with the governing structures of the game. This is relevant because European football finds itself at a critical time, with debates of new competitive structures, erosion of competitive balance and even some signs of fans dis-interest.⁵⁸ There is a situation in which supporters have declared that football needs regulation given its governance problems (3.56 overall score across the six countries); however, they have little confidence that governing bodies, leagues and clubs can correct the current state of football in the continent. In this respect, it has been argued that tougher regulations from the public authorities should be the solution to improve football governance,⁵⁹ but the reality is that both EU institutions and national governments are terribly hesitant to take a hands-on approach, specially due to the insistence of the governing bodies to preserve the so-called autonomy of sport.⁶⁰

Moreover, the results of our survey suggest that fans do not think governments would do a better job, although this can well be due to the traditional view of not mixing politics with football, rather than a carefully considered debate on the advantages or disadvantages of regulatory policies.

It has been repeatedly suggested over the last few years that a way forward to improve football governance would be to empower supporters' groups. Most of this agenda has developed without major research to ascertain whether fans themselves agree with that. Our article provides much needed evidence in that respect. Here again the picture is mixed, but fans seem to agree with the idea of legitimising supporters as another stakeholder in football governance. Our findings suggest a moderate support for this agenda. This is important, because it could have an impact in football club ownership and management models across the continent. If the pressure of the fans themselves, who seem to agree in principle, augments then it will be difficult for FAs, clubs and leagues to ignore those demands for reform. Changing the forms of club ownership might need regulation, though, which is not easily forthcoming as we have discussed earlier. However, the debate is rising in the political agenda of some countries, as the reform of the Spanish National Sports Act demonstrates, where the government was proposing to allow clubs to return to the member club's structure.

Conceptually this will bring up an interesting debate, to which stakeholders and academics alike could contribute: What is the best model to ensure supporters are really considered? In this respect, the data of our article also suggest interesting findings. The German model of club ownership is normally considered a beacon of democracy for supporters, whereas the English trust model is lauded as an effort to increase representation of fans in the commercial English football.⁶¹ Our findings reveal, however, that British fans do not think the supporters trust model is really affecting

change, whereas German fans are neutral. It is actually in France and Poland where supporters perceive to be making a difference. It is therefore a challenge to see that in the two countries where supporter activism is stronger, fans are quite sceptical about the outcomes.

¹ Liverpool FC, “FSG’s Message to Liverpool Supporters.”

² European Commission, “White Paper on Sport”; UK Parliament and Office, “Football Governance - 7th Report.”

³ García and Llopis-Goig, “Club-Militants, Institutionalists, Critics, Moderns and Globalists: A Quantitative Governance-Based Typology of Football Supporters.”

⁴ García and Llopis-Goig, see especially pp. 2-4.

⁵ García and Llopis-Goig, see especially p. 7.

⁶ García and Welford, “Supporters and Football Governance, from Customers to Stakeholders: A Literature Review and Agenda for Research,” 525.

⁷ Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom: A Relational Sociological Approach*.

⁸ Football Task Force, *Investing in the Community*.

⁹ See for example Morrow, *The New Business of Football: Accountability and Finance in Football*; King, “New Directors, Customers and Fans: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s”; or Perryman, *Football United: New Labour, The Task Force and the Future of the Game*.

¹⁰ King, “New Directors, Customers and Fans: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s,” 164–65.

¹¹ Morrow, *The New Business of Football: Accountability and Finance in Football*.

¹² Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*.

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- ¹³ Hamil et al., “Recent Developments in Football Ownership”; Lomax, “Democracy and Fandom: Developing a Supporters’ Trust at Northampton Town FC”; Nash, “Contestation in Modern English Professional Football”; Watkins, “Cherries in the Black: AFC Bournemouth’s Journey from Bankruptcy to Rude Health under Supporter Leadership.”
- ¹⁴ Kennedy, “Football Stadium Relocation and the Commodification of Football: The Case of Everton Supporters and Their Adoption of the Language of Commerce”; Kennedy and Kennedy, “Supporter Trusts and Third Way Politics”; Kennedy, “Supporters Direct and Supporters’ Governance of Football: A Model for Europe?”; Kennedy and Kennedy, “‘It’s the Little Details That Make up Our Identity’: Everton Supporters and Their Stadium Ballot Debate.”
- ¹⁵ Hamil et al., “The Corporate Governance of Professional Football Clubs.”
- ¹⁶ O’Brien, “C. A. Osasuna: Identity, Ownership and Governance Is Spanish Football Clubs.”
- ¹⁷ Ziesche, “Well Governed? Fan Representation in German Professional Football Clubs.”
- ¹⁸ Brown, “‘Our Club, Our Rules’: Fan Communities at FC United of Manchester”; Cleland, “From Passive to Active: The Changing Relationship between Supporters and Football Clubs.”
- ¹⁹ Millward, “Reclaiming the Kop? Analysing Liverpool Supporters’ 21st Century Mobilizations.”
- ²⁰ Bale, “The Changing Face of Football: Stadiums and Communities”; Duke, “The Drive to Modernisation and the Supermarket Imperative: Who Needs a New Football Stadium?”; Duke, “Local Tradition versus Globalisation: Resistance to the McDonaldisation and Disneyisation of Professional Football in England.”
- ²¹ Hudson, “Critically Examining the Commercialisation of English Football: A Case for Government Intervention?”; Watkins, “Cherries in the Black: AFC Bournemouth’s Journey from Bankruptcy to Rude Health under Supporter Leadership.”
- ²² Brown, “Not for Sale? The Destruction and Reformation of Football Communities in the Glazer Takeover of Manchester United”; Coombs and Osborne, “A Case Study of Aston

Villa Football Club”; Nauright and Ramfjord, “Who Owns England’s Game? American Professional Sporting Influences and Foreign Ownership in the Premier League.”

²³ Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom: A Relational Sociological Approach*.

²⁴ García and Llopis-Goig, “Club-Militants, Institutionalists, Critics, Moderns and Globalists: A Quantitative Governance-Based Typology of Football Supporters,” 4–5.

²⁵ Henry and Lee, “Governance and Ethics in Sport.”

²⁶ Henry and Lee.

²⁷ Henry and Lee.

²⁸ Geeraert, Scheerder, and Bruyninckx, “The Governance Network of European Football: Introducing New Governance Approaches to Steer Football at the EU Level.”

²⁹ García, Niemann, and Grant, “Conclusion: A Europeanised Game?”

³⁰ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbot, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System: The Governance of World Sport*.

³¹ for a discussion of different interpretations of trust in governance see O’Boyle and Shilbury, “Exploring Issues of Trust in Collaborative Sport Governance.”

³² European Union Expert Group in Good Governance, “Deliverable 2: Principles of Good Governance in Sport,” 5.

³³ Geeraert, Alm, and Groll, “Good Governance in International Sport Organizations: An Analysis of the 35 Olympic Sport Governing Bodies.”

³⁴ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbot, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System: The Governance of World Sport*.

³⁵ Chappelet and Mrkonjic, “Basic Indicators for Better Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS): An Assessment Tool for International Sport Governing Bodies.”

³⁶ Bovens, “Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework,” 450.

³⁷ Henry and Lee, “Governance and Ethics in Sport.”

³⁸ March and Olsen, *Democratic Governance*.

³⁹ Chappelet and Mrkonjic, “Basic Indicators for Better Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS): An Assessment Tool for International Sport Governing Bodies,” 8.

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- ⁴⁰ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbot, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System: The Governance of World Sport*.
- ⁴¹ Chappelet and Mrkonjic, “Basic Indicators for Better Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS): An Assessment Tool for International Sport Governing Bodies,” 14; see also European Union Expert Group in Good Governance, “Deliverable 2: Principles of Good Governance in Sport.”
- ⁴² Chappelet and Mrkonjic, “Basic Indicators for Better Governance in International Sport (BIBGIS): An Assessment Tool for International Sport Governing Bodies.”
- ⁴³ García and Llopis-Goig, “Club-Militants, Institutionalists, Critics, Moderns and Globalists: A Quantitative Governance-Based Typology of Football Supporters.”
- ⁴⁴ Manfreda and Vehovar, “Internet Surveys.”
- ⁴⁵ Cashmore and Cleland, “Fans, Homophobia and Masculinities in Association Football: Evidence of a More Inclusive Environment,” 376.
- ⁴⁶ Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 16.
- ⁴⁷ García and Welford, “Supporters and Football Governance, from Customers to Stakeholders: A Literature Review and Agenda for Research.”
- ⁴⁸ Niemann, García, and Grant, *The Transformation of European Football: Towards the Europeanisation of the National Game*.
- ⁴⁹ Jennings, “Investigating Corruption in Corporate Sport: The IOC and FIFA”; Youd, “The Winter’s Tale of Corruption: The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Impending Shift to Winter, and Potential Legal Actions against FIFA.”
- ⁵⁰ Geeraert and Drieskens, “The EU Controls FIFA and UEFA: A Principal–Agent Perspective.”
- ⁵¹ García and Meier, “Global Sport Power Europe? The Efficacy of the European Union in Global Sport Regulation.”
- ⁵² García and Llopis-Goig, “Club-Militants, Institutionalists, Critics, Moderns and Globalists: A Quantitative Governance-Based Typology of Football Supporters.”
- ⁵³ Cea D’Ancona, *Análisis Multivariable*, 490.
- ⁵⁴ Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 107.

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- ⁵⁵ Foster, “Can Sport Be Regulated by Europe? An Analysis of Alternative Models”; Geeraert and Drieskens, “The EU Controls FIFA and UEFA: A Principal–Agent Perspective.”
- ⁵⁶ Kennedy and Kennedy, “Supporter Trusts and Third Way Politics”; Lomax, “Democracy and Fandom: Developing a Supporters’ Trust at Northampton Town FC”; UK Parliament and Office, “Football Governance - 7th Report.”
- ⁵⁷ Cleland, “From Passive to Active: The Changing Relationship between Supporters and Football Clubs”; Kennedy, “Supporters Direct and Supporters’ Governance of Football: A Model for Europe?”; Martin, “Football, Community and Cooperation: A Critical Analysis of Supporter Trusts in England”; Webber, “‘Playing on the Break’: Karl Polanyi and the Double-Movement ‘Against Modern Football.’”
- ⁵⁸ Croci, “Italy: The Least of the Great Leagues?”
- ⁵⁹ Geeraert and Drieskens, “The EU Controls FIFA and UEFA: A Principal–Agent Perspective.”
- ⁶⁰ Meier and García, “Protecting Private Transnational Authority against Public Intervention: Fifa’s Power over National Governments.”
- ⁶¹ García and Welford, “Supporters and Football Governance, from Customers to Stakeholders: A Literature Review and Agenda for Research”; Welford, García, and Smith, “A ‘Healthy’ Future? Supporters’ Perceptions of the Current State of English Football.”

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Table 1*Survey results for the six countries and European average*

	European total		Means by country					
	Mean	SD	France	Germany	Poland	Spain	Turkey	UK
Q.1. How much do you tend to trust the following institutions or bodies with regard to the organisation of football? *								
Fan groups/supporters organisations	3.48	1.052	3,07	3,68	3,91	3,49	3,20	3,73
Club management	3.23	1.050	3,43	3,51	3,66	2,36	2,93	3,41
International media	2.79	0.991	2,72	2,76	3,12	3,00	2,87	2,55
European Union	2.63	1.059	2,52	2,62	2,98	2,67	2,55	2,65
UEFA	2.60	1.198	3,00	2,36	3,45	2,38	2,62	2,32
Professional Football League	2.55	1.164	2,53	3,07	3,25	1,96	1,79	2,76
National Football Federation	2.49	1.207	2,59	3,03	3,13	2,08	1,56	2,62
National media	2.32	1.096	2,64	2,76	2,72	1,93	1,61	2,24
FIFA	2.31	1.227	2,56	1,85	3,40	2,28	2,74	1,87
National Government	2.14	1.091	2,25	2,58	2,22	1,66	1,61	2,25
Q.2. Would you please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements? **								
My opinion has no influence on what club owners/presidents do	3.99	1.208	4,35	3,97	3,87	4,02	3,74	3,94
We cannot always trust what club owners/presidents say	3.95	0.971	3,74	3,80	3,72	4,25	4,17	4,05
We never really know what club owners/presidents think	3.88	1.050	4,04	3,79	3,90	4,09	3,72	3,85
As a supporter, I believe I should have a say on the affairs of the club	3.80	1.149	3,36	3,40	3,73	3,99	4,45	4,01
Club owners/presidents are more interested in success than in what the club represents	3.69	1.032	3,60	3,50	3,48	3,95	3,81	3,83
Club owners/presidents see and treat supporters like me as nothing more than customers	3.65	1.143	3,58	3,34	3,09	4,13	3,78	3,91
Football is in need of more regulation by the authorities	3.56	1.304	3,64	3,09	2,38	4,08	3,93	3,89
Club owners/presidents often quickly forget their promises after taking control of the club	3.54	1.037	3,41	3,30	3,36	3,85	3,79	3,63
Sometimes running a football club seems so complicated that a person like me can't understand	2.67	1.286	2,68	2,79	3,17	2,45	2,80	2,31
We can be confident that club owners/presidents will always do the right thing	2.01	1.095	2,35	2,08	3,05	1,66	1,56	1,84

Source: Own interpretation of data from FREE Project on-line survey, and data previously presented in García and Llopis Goig (2019), p. 7.

* Where 1= Tend not to trust at all, 2=Tend to trust, 3=Neither distrust nor trust, 4=Tend to trust and 5=Tend to trust very much

** Where 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree to an extent, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree to an extent, and 5=Strongly agree

Table 2 *Mean differences (ANOVA)*

		Distrust/trust in football clubs owners & presidents	Trust in sport governance national bodies	Trust in international football bodies	Trust in control and pressure agents	Supporters' inefficacy	Supporters' voice
Sex	Male	.0122265	-.0225586	-.0168094	-.0143769	-.0064613	-.0055573
	Female	-.0981705	.1811305	.1349682	.1154368	.0518800	.0446215
	<i>F</i>	9.674	33.028	18.305	13.382	2.699	1.997
	Sig.	.002	.000	.000	.000	.100	.158
Age	<16	-.4684202	.5051576	1.1959108	.2701548	.1039584	.5473295
	16-20	-.1708269	.0510673	.2019387	-.0091950	.0577502	.3254990
	21-25	.0358892	-.1548049	.0722740	.0055938	-.1078769	.0527110
	26-30	.0420893	-.0980736	-.0643141	.0403712	.0386356	-.0552698
	31-40	.0962276	-.0046814	-.1215727	-.0027732	.0441411	-.1765895
	41-50	.0413613	.1720111	-.2651432	-.0046358	-.0265616	-.1368331
	>50	.0066308	.2576650	-.2546715	-.1697997	.0113431	-.2983081
	<i>F</i>	17.656	30.645	83.731	5.815	5.92	57.905
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Country	France	-.2052555	.1077052	.1833454	-.0021603	.2855212	-.3844789
	Germany	-.2930065	.5304497	-.4409380	.0662890	.0452122	.0276626
	Poland	-.5314930	.3590066	.8230362	.0258493	.3175531	.5726433
	Spain	.4699051	-.5549151	-.0145327	.1879665	-.0121100	-.1569653
	Turkey	.2292939	-.8648408	.4266324	-.1055247	-.2312912	.0596477
	UK	.2621621	.2877072	-.3247461	-.1292225	-.2291735	.1564428
	<i>F</i>	180.455	615.997	302.501	17.565	70.138	100.571
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Source: Own analysis with data from FREE Project on-line survey.

Figure 1. Principal Component Analysis

Source: Own analysis with data from FREE Project on-line survey, and data previously presented in García and Llopis Goig (2019).

First level of the diagram: name of the components; **second level:** content of the components; **third level:** percentage of variance explained by each component.

Total aggregated variance explained by the model = 61.4%.