

Are French Football Fans Sensitive to Outcome Uncertainty?*

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The idea that competitive balance increases the utility of fans, and therefore their spending and the revenue of professional clubs, lies at the heart of sports economics in general and the economics of football in particular. This notion of competitive balance is often invoked to explain the decisions of professional leagues to change the rules of competitions or the distribution of TV rights. However, the empirical literature shows that the relationship between competitive balance and fan demand is far from obvious.

Methodology

We analyse football fans' perception of the competitive balance on the basis of the survey '*Quel supporter êtes-vous?*' (What kind of fan are you?) on the website of the French sports newspaper *L'Équipe* (lequipe.fr). This survey was made available online at the end of the 2015-2016 season, for a period of three days. The final database contains 21,716 observations.

Main results

- Fans believe the suspense of championships varies depending on the competition.
- The perceived competitive balance has several dimensions that depend on the specific competitions considered. The balance of Ligue 1 is explained as much by medium- and long-term uncertainty: the name of the Champion and repeat titles. For the Champions League it is more a matter of long-term suspense linked to the repeat titles. As a result, Ligue 1 tends to be perceived as less uncertain than the Champions League.
- Outcome uncertainty is far from being the only factor explaining the demand for football since around 30% of fans report that they would still be willing to attend or watch games even in the hypothetical case of not any suspense left.

Conclusions

To explain fans' demand for football, it is necessary to take into account other factors than the outcome uncertainty:

- Sporting performance: the better the team performs, the higher the level of attendance at the stadium.
- The quality of matches: the greater the quality of the two teams, the greater the number of spectators. Thus, the lower the team's ranking in the league table, the lower stadium attendance tends to be.
- Comfort: the newer the stadium, the greater the likelihood of supporters travelling to watch games; supporters are also sensitive to weather conditions and match schedules.
- Price, although fans' sensitivity to ticket prices depends on which teams are playing.