



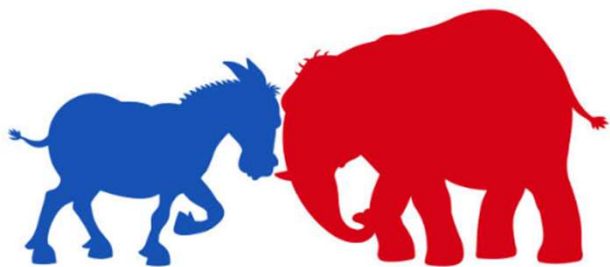
BRIDGING PARTISAN DIVIDES THROUGH

SPORTS FANDOM



Mariah Warner, PhD – May 20, 2025

WHY UNITING AMERICANS MATTERS— AND WHY SPORTS MIGHT BE THE ANSWER

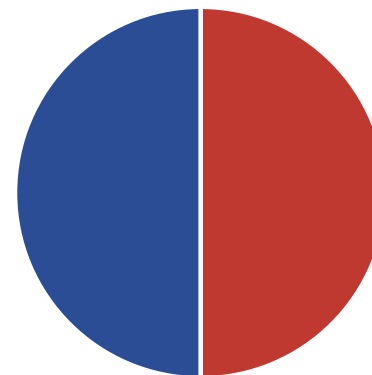


400%

Increase in Americans who strongly dislike the opposition party over the last 20 years



Share of Americans that identify as sports fans



50/50

Sports fans are nearly evenly split between Republicans and Democrats

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND WHY THEY MATTER

Research Question

Why It Matters to Fox Sports Strategy, or any companies in this space

1. How is being a sports fan different from other hobbies – and how might it help people connect across political or social divides?

- Highlights sports as uniquely **socially cohesive**, unlike other forms of entertainment
- Supports the idea that **sports fandom is a cultural glue**
- Reinforces Fox Sports' position as a **cultural force**, not just a content provider

2. Do sports fans tend to be more open-minded toward people who vote differently than they do?

- Suggests fandom could **reduce political polarization**, offering a rare **cross-partisan space**
- Useful for **brand storytelling** and proving sports' **inclusive social impact**
- Bolsters Fox's value to **advertisers** and partners seeking diverse, united audiences

3. When you ask fans directly, how do they think being a fan affects how they relate to people with different political views?

- Centers the **fan's self-perception**, giving insight into **identity-based messaging**
- Offers insights into **how to speak to fans** in a way that resonates
- Helps Fox show it understands **not just what fans watch, but what fandom means**



QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

SPORTS FANS ARE MORE OPEN MINDED.

- People who are more engaged with sports tend to view the *other* political party more positively.

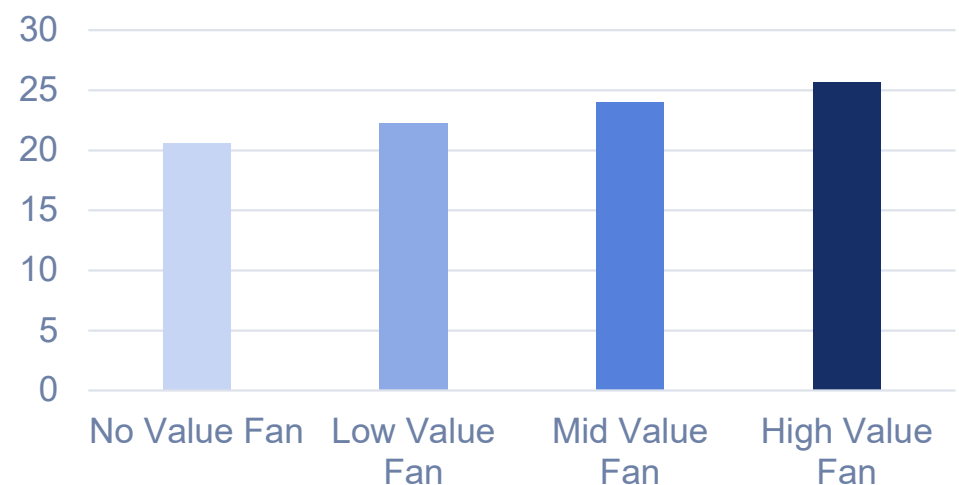
- Fandom measured three different ways:

Fan Value Level: aggregate measure of fandom, including activities and emotional investment

Activities Index: how fans *do* fandom

Obsession Index: how much fans *care* about their teams

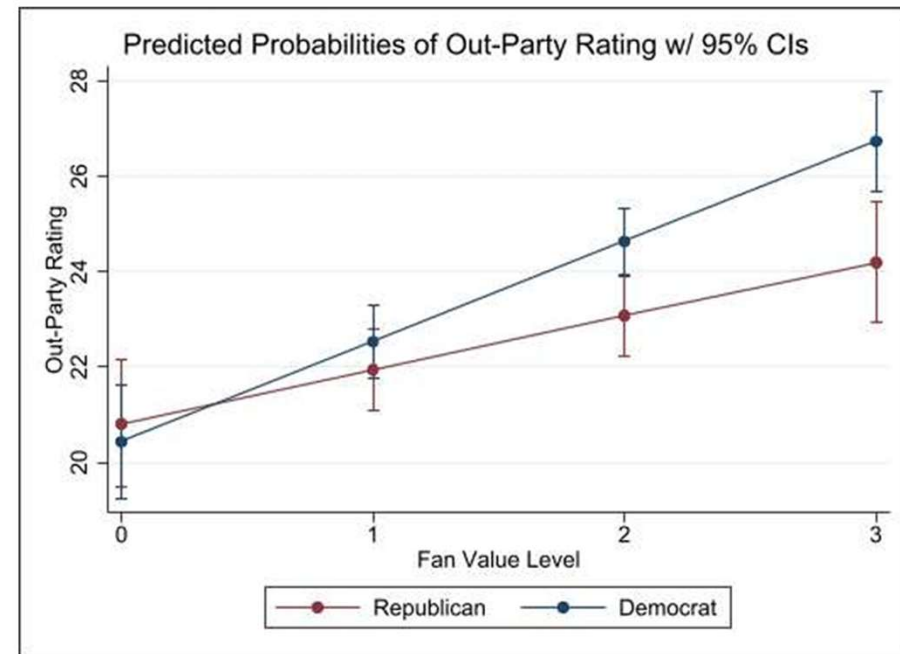
Out-Party Rating by Fan Value Level*



- All three measures showed the same trend: **More Fandom → More Tolerance**

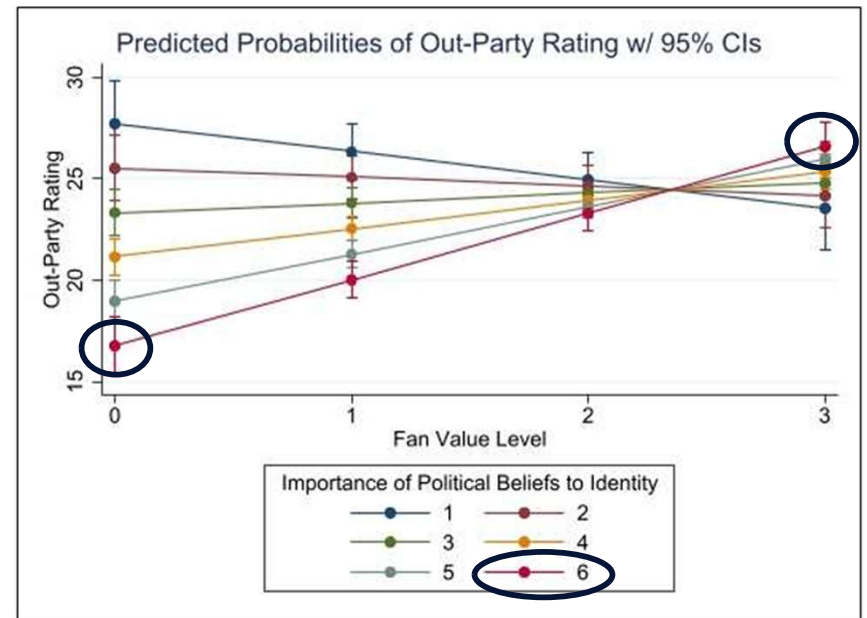
PARTY ALSO SHAPES THE EFFECT.

- Who you vote for changes how fandom works:
 - For Democrats, the more into sports they are, the more positively they rate Republicans
 - For Republicans, the relationship is weaker—and sometimes there's no effect at all
- *In short: Sports fandom reduces political hostility more for Democrats than Republicans*



BELIEFS MATTER TOO.

- The role of political intensity:
 - Sports fandom **has the biggest impact** when someone says their political beliefs are really important to them.
 - In other words, **the most politically engaged** fans see the most benefit from sports fandom when it comes to seeing the other side as human.
- *In short: sports may be especially powerful at softening partisanship among the politically intense.*



BUT IT'S NOT JUST *BEING* A FAN, IT'S *HOW* YOU FAN.

- Different aspects of fandom have different effects:

ALL-IN FAN

watches multiple sports, plays fantasy, goes to games, buys merch, talks sports constantly with others

- *Most politically tolerant: they live and breathe sports with others*

SOCIAL FAN

watches games with friends, chats in group texts, joins tailgates and watch parties

- *Still more tolerant: even casual fandom in community makes a difference*

SOLO OBSESSED FAN

follows one or more sport religiously, knows every stat but mostly consumes fandom alone

- *Smaller boost in tolerance: passion without people doesn't move the needle*

Fan Value Level	1.687***
Activities Index	0.324***
Obsession Index	0.252***

- Bottom line: Not just being a fan—*doing fandom with others*—matters the most.



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

DATA AND METHODS

- 20 interviews and >40 hours of participant observation

PATRIOTS FANCLUB OF COLUMBUS



PATRIOTS NATION 'NATI



FROM BAR CHANTS TO FANTASY LEAGUES, FANS DESCRIBED FOUR KEY WAYS SPORTS HELP BRIDGE POLITICAL DIVIDES:



1. NEUTRAL TERRITORY

- Sports offer a *safe* topic. “We can argue about coaching decisions instead of politics.”
- *Some* fans consciously avoid political talk to protect the space—but they are still aware that they’re around *good people* who think differently from them.



2. SHARED IDENTITY > POLITICAL IDENTITY

- Being a fan comes first. “He’s a Patriots guy—that matters more in the moment than who he votes for.”
- Disagreements exist, but *team loyalty builds bridges*.



3. RITUAL AND REPETITION MATTER

- Weekly watch parties, fantasy drafts, and insided jokes create bonds over time.
- “Every Sunday, same crew, same chants—you just build trust.”



4. DISPLACEMENT STRENGTHENS CONNECTION

- Fans living outside their team’s home base (like New Englanders in Ohio) lean *harder* into their fandom.
- That shared “outsider” status *pulls people together*, politics aside.

Bottom line: When sports fandom is shared, repeated, and emotionally resonant, it can build real community—even across red/blue lines.

NEXT STEPS – STRATEGY FROM THE STANDS

This isn't just theory. It's a playbook.

1. Activate the Social Layer of Fandom

Fandom builds tolerance and connection *when it's shared*.

- Focus on formats that encourage co-viewing, discussion, and ritual: watch parties, fantasy leagues, etc.
- Build campaigns and platforms that amplify the behaviors—not just content consumption, but connection

2. Reimagine the Sports Bar

Fans want to watch *with others*, but don't always know where to go.

- There's real potential in a digital tool that connects fans to bars and restaurants showing their team.
- Think: *OpenTable for Sports Viewing* – where fans find their game, and venues get visibility.
- Monetization through featured listings, sponsorships, or in-app ads.

3. Design for Fan Personas

Different fans engage differently—and shapes what works.

- “All-In” fans, “Social” fans, and “Obsessed” solo fans all have distinct needs and behaviors.
- Use those insights to segment audiences and build strategies tailored to how people *do* fandom—not just who they root for.



THANK YOU!

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