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World Cup Format Change

Introduction

FIFA has announced their plans to change the format of the World Cup for the upcoming 2026 edition. The biggest change is that the new format will allow for more teams to qualify (48 vs. current 32).

This means that a lot more teams will get to play in the World Cup, and the skill level of the teams that play may not be as prestigious as it has been in the past.

Additionally, confederations like CONCACAF (North/Central America), CAF (Africa), and AFC (Asia) have big increases to the number of teams that will represent them in the new format.

Introduction (cont.)

These changes are sure to affect the outcome of the World Cup in the future. With more teams being allowed to play, as well as an expanded knockout stage, teams will have to win more games to be crowned the champion of the World Cup.

Along with this, we can expect to see many new teams playing in the World Cup, which might lead to the competition being more globally accessible.

Finally, the qualification for the World Cup might become easier for some countries. This is especially true in confederations such as CONMEBOL (South America), which has 10 countries eligible, and up to 7 of them can qualify.

Questions to Answer

How will the changes to the World Cup format affect the different number of teams that will win the competition in the future?

How do the changes affect the teams attempting to qualify for the World Cup?

Which teams will benefit from the changes, and which teams will suffer?

• How will the changes be looked at? Will people agree or disagree with the changes?

Data Description

Team Ratings^{1,2}: FIFA's official ratings as of October 6, 2022 (ratings right before the 2022 World Cup)

Formats^{3,4}: From FIFA's official website, the 2026 knockout stage format is not yet confirmed, but there are reports as to what it will likely be.

Team Ratings

2022 Ratings (partial)

Team	Ratings	Adjusted Ratings	Rank
Brazil	1841.3	100	1
Belgium	1816.7	98.66	2
Argentina	1773.9	96.34	3
France	1759.8	95.57	4
England	1728.5	93.87	5
Spain	1715.2	93.15	6
Netherlands	1694.5	92.03	7
Portugal	1676.6	91.05	8
Denmark	1666.6	90.51	9
Germany	1650.2	89.62	10
Croatia	1645.6	89.37	11
Mexico	1644.9	89.33	12
Uruguay	1638.7	89	13
Switzerland	1635.9	88.85	14
USA	1627.5	88.39	15
Senegal	1584.4	86.05	16
Wales	1569.8	85.26	17
Iran	1564.6	84.97	18
Morocco	1563.6	84.92	19

Projected 2026 Ratings (partial)

Team	Ratings	Adjusted Ratings	Rank
Brazil	1841.3	100	1
Belgium	1816.71	98.66453049	2
Argentina	1773.88	96.33845653	3
France	1759.78	95.57269321	4
England	1728.47	93.87226416	5
Italy	1726.14	93.74572313	6
Spain	1715.22	93.15266388	7
Netherlands	1694.51	92.02791506	8
Portugal	1676.56	91.05306034	9
Denmark	1666.57	90.51050888	10
Germany	1650.21	89.62200619	11
Croatia	1645.64	89.37381198	12
Mexico	1644.89	89.33307989	13
Uruguay	1638.71	88.99744746	14
Switzerland	1635.92	88.84592408	15
USA	1627.48	88.38755227	16
Colombia	1611.04	87.49470483	17
Senegal	1584.38	86.04681475	18
Wales	1569.82	85.25606908	19
Iran	1564.61	84.97311682	20

Note that teams such as Italy and Colombia are in the 2026 ratings, as with the new format they are involved in the World Cup, while they didn't play in 2022.

Changes to the Format

2022 World Cup:

- 8 groups of 4 teams (32 total)
- Top 2 from each group advance
- Round of 16 is a one game playoff

2026 World Cup:

- 12 groups of 4 teams (48 total)
- Top 2 from each group advance
- Top 8 third place teams advance
- Round of 32 is a one game playoff
- Playoff format not yet confirmed

2022 Knockout Stage Format



Projected 2026 Knockout Stage Format



2022 World Cup Simulation

Group Stage

Group A											Team 1	Score	Score	Team 2	Result
Team	Games Played	Wins	Draws	Losses	Goals For	Goals Against	Goal Diff.	Points	AdjPoints	Rank	Netherlands	4 v.	0	Qatar	Netherlands
Netherlands	3	2	! (0 1	. 9	5	4	6	60409.1	. 1	Netherlands	4 v.	2	Senegal	Netherlands
Qatar	3	1		1 1	. 6	7	-1	. 4	39906.1	. 3	Netherlands	1 v.	3	Ecuador	Ecuador
Senegal	3	0		1 2	6	9	-3	1	9706.06	4	Senegal	2 v.	3	Ecuador	Ecuador
Ecuador	3	2	. (0 1	. 7	7	0	6	60007	2	Senegal	2 v.	2	Qatar	Draw
											Ecuador	1 v.	4	Qatar	Qatar

Knockout Stage

	Round of 16	i	Quarter Finals	Quarter Finals		Semi Finals		Final			Semi Finals		G	Quarter Finals		Round of 16		5
1A	Netherlands	3														3	England	1B
2B	Iran	1														2	Ecuador	2A
			Netherlands	2 (pens)										3 England				
1C	Saudi Arabia	2	Tunisia	2										4 Argentina	1 [3	Australia	10
2D	Tunisia	4														4	Argentina	2C
					Netherlands	5		Netherlands		2	3	Argentina						
1E	Costa Rica	1			Portugal	1		Argentina		1	2	Croatia			(pens)	4	Croatia	1F
2F	Morocco	3														4	Spain	2E
			Morocco	1										3 Croatia				
1G	Switzerland	1	Portugal	3										1 Serbia	(pens)	0	Uruguay	1H
2H	Portugal	2														0	Serbia	2G
								Champion	Netherlands									

2022 World Cup Simulation Results (5000 Runs)

Team	Relative Rank	RO16	RO16%	QF	QF%	SF	SF%	Final	Final%	Champion	Champion%
Brazil	1	3123	62.46%	1808	36.16%	1014	20.28%	555	11.10%		
Belgium	2	3050	61.00%	1671	33.42%	919	18.38%	511	10.22%	292	5.84%
Argentina	3	3032	60.64%	1689	33.78%	912	18.24%	480	9.60%	253	5.06%
England	5	2856	57.12%	1554	31.08%	860	17.20%	442	8.84%	239	4.78%
France	4	2884	57.68%	1568	31.36%	844	16.88%	439	8.78%	229	4.58%
Netherlands	7	2948	58.96%	1539	30.78%	795	15.90%	408	8.16%	213	4.26%
Spain	6	2757	55.14%	1401	28.02%	749	14.98%	373	7.46%	205	4.10%
Portugal	8	2844	56.88%	1434	28.68%	717	14.34%	369	7.38%	204	4.08%
Uruguay	13	2840	56.80%	1385	27.70%	683	13.66%	376	7.52%	199	3.98%
Switzerland	14	2472	49.44%	1277	25.54%	662	13.24%	349	6.98%	197	3.94%
Germany	10	2573	51.46%	1316	26.32%	661	13.22%	344	6.88%	178	3.56%
Denmark	9	2691	53.82%	1380	27.60%	697	13.94%	347	6.94%	178	3.56%
Croatia	11	2555	51.10%	1308	26.16%	678	13.56%	357	7.14%	175	3.50%
Mexico	12	2577	51.54%	1277	25.54%	658	13.16%	331	6.62%	171	3.42%
USA	15	2494	49.88%	1309	26.18%	614	12.28%	307	6.14%	161	3.22%
Wales	17	2351	47.02%	1178	23.56%	572	11.44%	296	5.92%	134	2.68%
Senegal	16	2586	51.72%	1217	24.34%	589	11.78%	265	5.30%	129	2.58%
Serbia	20	2329	46.58%	1172	23.44%	590	11.80%	274	5.48%	119	2.38%
Korea Republic	23	2412	48.24%	1129	22.58%	523	10.46%	259	5.18%	118	2.36%
Morocco	19	2348	46.96%	1159	23.18%	568	11.36%	268	5.36%	118	2.36%
Iran	18	2299	45.98%	1169	23.38%	576	11.52%	273	5.46%	116	2.32%
Cameroon	28	2076	41.52%	986	19.72%	432	8.64%	213	4.26%	114	2.28%
Japan	21	2376	47.52%	1126	22.52%	527	10.54%	251	5.02%	113	2.26%
Costa Rica	25	2294	45.88%	1107	22.14%	516	10.32%	259	5.18%	111	2.22%
Australia	26	2166	43.32%	1008	20.16%	487	9.74%	232	4.64%	109	2.18%
Tunisia	24	2259	45.18%	1057	21.14%	508	10.16%	234	4.68%	104	2.08%
Poland	22	2365	47.30%	1114	22.28%	560	11.20%	255	5.10%	103	2.06%
Ecuador	29	2279	45.58%	1032	20.64%	483	9.66%	206	4.12%	94	1.88%
Canada	27	2047	40.94%	912	18.24%	426	8.52%	196	3.92%	89	1.78%
Qatar	30	2187	43.74%	1002	20.04%	441	8.82%	193	3.86%	82	1.64%
Saudi Arabia	31	2026	40.52%	907	18.14%	404	8.08%	187	3.74%	81	1.62%
Ghana	32	1904	38.08%	809	16.18%	335	6.70%	151	3.02%	58	1.16%

 Not much variation in teams with high win percentage

 Bottom ranked teams have the lowest win percentage, as expected

 Teams like Uruguay and Switzerland overperformed, while Denmark and Poland underperformed.

2022 World Cup Sim Data Brazil Belgium Argentina France England: Spain Netherlands Portugal Denmark Germany Croatia Mexico Uruguay Final Appearances Switzerland USA 450 Senegal Wales 350 Iran 250 Morocco Serbia Japan Poland Korea Republic Tunisia Costa Rica Australia Canada Cameroon Ecuador Qatar Saudi Arabia Ghana 100 200 300 Wins

Our Findings

Again, we see
little variation in teams
with high win
percentage

 Lower ranked teams have the lowest win percentage and final appearances, as expected

 Overperformance and underperformance are easier to see with this visual

Our Findings (cont.)

 Europe has the most teams by a large margin in the 2022 World Cup

Confederation	Number of Teams	Proportion
UEFA (Europe)	13	36.11%
CAF (Africa)	5	13.89%
AFC (Asia)	6	16.67%
CONMEBOL (South America)	4	11.11%
CONCACAF (North/Central America)	4	11.11%
Oceania	0	0.00%

Oceania had no teams in the 2022World Cup

 Asia and Africa had more teams than South America

2026 World Cup Simulation

Group Stage

Group A													Team 1	Score	Score	Team 2	Result
Team	Games Played	Wins	Draws	Losses	Goals For	Goals Against	Goal Diff.	Points		AdjPoints	Rank		Canada	2 v		3 Nigeria	Nigeria
Canada	3	1	L	0 2	. 7	9	-2		3	29807.1	3		Canada	1 v		3 Colombia	Colombia
Nigeria	3	1	l	0 2	2 4	8	-4		3	29604	4		Canada	4 v		3 Serbia	Canada
Colombia	3		3	0 0	10	3	7		9	90710.1	1		Nigeria	0 v	ı. :	2 Serbia	Serbia
Serbia	3	1	L	0 2	. 6	7	-1		3	29906.1	2		Nigeria	1 1	1.	4 Colombia	Colombia
													Serbia	1 \		3 Colombia	Colombia

Knockout Stage

	Round of 32	2		Round o	of 16	Quarter Fi	nals		Semi Fina	s	Final] [Semi F	inals	Quarter	Finals	Rou	nd of 16	F	Round of 32	
1A	Colombia	1																		4	Argentina	1G
2B	Denmark	0																		2	Ivory Coast	2H
	Serbia	1																		1	Mali	2G
2C	USA	0		Colombia	0													4 .	Argentina	2	Costa Rica	21
				Serbia	3													2 1	Costa Rica			
1B	Mexico	4	(pens)																	2	Germany	1H
3.1	Croatia	4				Serbia	3									4	Argentina			1	Canada	3.5
				Croatia	1	Portugal	4									2	Germany	4 1	Germany			
1C	Japan	0		Portugal	2													0 :	Sweden	3	Sweden	11
3.2	Portugal	1							Portugal	2	France	0	ī [3	Argentina					0	Chile	3.6
									France	3	Argentina	0	1 [2	Panama							
1D	England	2		Korea Republ	1						(pens)							2 1	Panama	4	Panama	1J
2E	Korea Republ	4		France	2	France	3	(pens)								3	Panama	1 :	Spain	2	Italy	2K
						Belgium	3									2	Tunisia					
2D	Switzerland	2	(pens)			_														1	Spain	2J
2D 2F	France	2	1	Belgium	3						Champion	Argentina						0 1	Ecuador	0	Ukraine	2L
				Morocco	1													1	Tunisia			
1E	Belgium	4																		4	Ecuador	1K
1E 3.3	Iran	1																		3	Iraq	3.7
1F	Morocco	4	1																	4	Tunisia	1L
3.4	Qatar	1	1																	2	UAE	3.8
																				-		

2026 World Cup Simulation Results (5000 Runs)

Team	Relative Rank	RO32	RO32%	RO16	RO16%	QF	QF%	SF	SF%	Final	Final%	Champion	Champion%
Brazil	nelative Natik	3867	77.34%	2207	44.14%	1213	24.26%	690	13.80%	417	8.34%	228	4.56%
Argentina	3	3941	78.82%	2237	44.74%	1215	25.90%	714	14.28%	375	7.50%	216	4.32%
Belgium	2	4140	82.80%	2305	46.10%	1288	25.76%	694	13.88%	378	7.56%	211	4.22%
England	5	3751	75.02%	2050	41.00%	1145	22.90%	616	12.32%	329	6.58%	180	3.60%
France	4	3871	77.42%	2133	42.66%	1154	23.08%	638	12.76%	331	6.62%	179	3.58%
Spain	7	3761	75.22%	2006	40.12%	1113	22.26%	621	12.42%	333	6.66%	168	3.36%
Switzerland	15	3500	70.00%	1875	37.50%	960	19.20%	522		266	5.32%	154	3.08%
Netherlands	8	3823	76.46%	2119	42.38%	1131	22.62%	582	11.64%	313	6.26%	151	3.02%
Mexico	13	3451	69.02%	1840	36.80%	972	19.44%	487	9.74%	259		146	2.92%
Italy	6	3719	74.38%	2022	40.44%	1039	20.78%	549	10.98%	279	5.58%	145	2.90%
Portugal	9	3593	71.86%	1876	37.52%	963	19.26%	500	10.00%	262	5.24%	141	2.82%
Uruguay	14	3656	73.12%	1886	37.72%	979	19.58%	480	9.60%	243	4.86%	138	2.76%
Germany	11	3641	72.82%	1902	38.04%	953	19.06%	501	10.02%	272	5.44%	126	2.52%
Croatia	12	3626	72.52%	1906	38.12%	958	19.16%	480	9.60%	240	4.80%	126	2.52%
USA	16	3553	71.06%	1833	36.66%	916	18.32%	482	9.64%	258	5.16%	126	2.52%
Colombia	17	3578	71.56%	1769	35.38%	897	17.94%	465	9.30%	249	4.98%	124	2.48%
Denmark	10	3488	69.76%	1824	36.48%	966	19.32%	492	9.84%	238	4.76%	121	2.42%
Wales	19	3482	69.64%	1789	35.78%	913	18.26%	447	8.94%	224	4,48%	115	2.30%
Morocco	22	3396	67.92%	1698	33.96%	853	17.06%	423	8.46%	228	4,56%	112	2.24%
Japan	24	3348	66.96%	1758	35.16%	860	17.20%	437	8.74%	216	4.32%	111	2.22%
Serbia	21	3391	67.82%	1657	33.14%	819	16.38%	407	8.14%	209	4.18%	109	2.18%
Iran	20	3199	63.98%	1634	32.68%	816	16.32%	405	8.10%	189	3.78%	107	2.14%
Peru	23	3241	64.82%	1632	32.64%	835	16.70%	426	8.52%	224	4.48%	102	2.04%
Senegal	18	3260	65.20%	1660	33.20%	848	16.96%	405	8.10%	200	4.00%	101	2.02%
Nigeria	32	3235	64.70%	1585	31.70%	786	15.72%	378	7.56%	189	3.78%	97	1.94%
Sweden	25	3437	68.74%	1705	34.10%	849	16.98%	441	8.82%	212	4.24%	83	1.66%
Chile	29	3277	65.54%	1613	32.26%	753	15.06%	350	7.00%	169	3.38%	83	1.66%
Poland	26	3337	66.74%	1626	32.52%	822	16.44%	411	8.22%	176	3.52%	82	1.64%
Costa Rica	31	3315	66.30%	1639	32.78%	776	15.52%	363	7.26%	173	3.46%	80	1.60%
Korea Republic	28	3500	70.00%	1691	33.82%	841	16.82%	415	8.30%	195	3.90%	79	1.58%
Australia	34	3034	60.68%	1395	27.90%	637	12.74%	294	5.88%	142	2.84%	77	1.54%
Ukraine	27	3120	62.40%	1501	30.02%	744	14.88%	347	6.94%	161	3.22%	76	1.52%
Algeria	33	3206	64.12%	1505	30.10%	720	14.40%	334	6.68%	157	3.14%	74	1.48%
Egypt	35	3098	61.96%	1459	29.18%	680	13.60%	307	6.14%	155	3.10%	69	1.38%
Tunisia	30	3100	62.00%	1459	29.18%	703	14.06%	340	6.80%	160	3.20%	68	1.36%
Canada	36	3150	63.00%	1457	29.14%	681	13.62%	325	6.50%	149	2.98%	68	1.36%
Cameroon	37	3143	62.86%	1470	29.40%	667	13.34%	310	6.20%	146	2.92%	68	1.36%
Ivory Coast	41	3053	61.06%	1377	27.54%	596	11.92%	279	5.58%	129	2.58%	67	1.34%
Ecuador	38	3002	60.04%	1432	28.64%	677	13.54%	307	6.14%	139	2.78%	61	1.22%
Jamaica	45	2789	55.78%	1215	24.30%	534	10.68%	241	4.82%	110	2.20%	59	1.18%
Mali	39	3126	62.52%	1461	29.22%	703	14.06%	341	6.82%	146	2.92%	58	1.16%
UAE	47	2764	55.28%	1219	24.38%	535	10.70%	248	4.96%	112	2.24%	56	1.12%
Paraguay	40	3296	65.92%	1508	30.16%	736	14.72%	322	6.44%	143	2.86%	55	1.10%
Saudi Arabia	43	2886	57.72%	1353	27.06%	618	12.36%	282	5.64%	132	2.64%	53	1.06%
Qatar	42	2980	59.60%	1376	27.52%	655	13.10%	302	6.04%	129	2.58%	53	1.06%
Panama	44	2856	57.12%	1307	26.14%	581	11.62%	255	5.10%	108	2.16%	44	0.88%
Iraq	46	2678	53.56%	1138	22.76%	473	9.46%	217	4.34%	89	1.78%	34	0.68%
New Zealand	48	2342	46.84%	891	17.82%	347	6.94%	128	2.56%	47	0.94%	19	0.38%

 More variation in teams with high win percentage

 Bottom ranked teams have the lowest win percentage, as expected

 Teams like Mexico and Switzerland overperformed, while Denmark and Senegal underperformed.

2026 World Cup Sim Data Belgium Argentina France England Netherlands Senegal Final Appearances Serbia 400 300 Sweden Poland 200 Ukraine Korea Republic Tunisia Costa Rica Nigeria Canada Cameroon Paraguay Qatar Saudi Arabia Panama Jamaica New Zealand 150 Wins

Our Findings

 Again, we see more variation in teams with high win percentage

 Lower ranked teams have the lowest win percentage and final appearances, as expected

Overperformance and underperformance are easier to see with this visual

Our Findings (cont.)

Europe still has the most teams (by a smaller margin)

Confederation	Number of Teams	Proportion
UEFA (Europe)	16	33.33%
CAF (Africa)	9	18.75%
AFC (Asia)	9	18.75%
CONMEBOL (South America)	7	14.58%
CONCACAF (North/Central America)	6	12.50%
Oceania	1	2.08%

Oceania has a team representing them in 2026

 South America has a bigger proportion of total teams than in 2022

Conclusions

- Note that only 8 teams of the 80 that have competed in the World Cup have won, and no team outside of UEFA (Europe) and CONMEBOL (South America) has ever won.⁵
- We saw that the expanded World Cup format led to more variation among the top teams, meaning that it is likely to see more teams winning the competition in the future. We will also get more competitors in the future that have never played in the cup.
- The format changes will make the World Cup more accessible to teams across the world, making the competition true to its name.

Conclusions (cont.)

- The teams that will benefit most from these changes are likely to be teams that are in the mid to upper tier of teams across the world. These changes make it more likely for them to win the World Cup.
- The teams that will suffer most from these changes are likely to be the top tier teams. This is because winning the competition will be slightly more difficult for them, as they will have to win an extra game to be crowned champions.
- Because the format changes will make the World Cup more accessible to teams across the world, as well as open the door to new winners, the changes will likely be looked at positively among fans across the world.

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