

**Tracking Moral Divergence with DDR in Presidential Debates Over 60 Years****Abstract**

This study discovered the formation of one crucial challenge that US presidential debate is facing – lack of real clash and issue discussion – from an institutional perspective, manifesting how the transformative process in politics caused by mediatization contribute to this challenge drawing upon Moral Foundation Theory as a prism, and therefore shedding lights to the development of more pointed and fruitful political conversations that may better serve our democracy.

***Keywords:*** Presidential Debate, Moral Foundation Theory, Mediatization, Distributed Dictionary Representations

## Introduction

Televised presidential debate has been criticized for lack of real clash, failing to develop real issue discussion, and too much focus on candidates' image instead (D. P. Carlin, 1989, 1992; Clifford & Jerit, 2013; McKinney & Carlin, 2004), although there is no doubt that presidential debate does serve our democracy well by contributing to a more engaged and better-informed electorate (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Unfortunately, according to Moral Foundation Theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) and mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013), lack of issue discussion and real clash is inevitable in televised presidential debates.

Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) offers an innovative tool to understand the formation of political attitudes (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Graham et al., 2011; Weber & Federico, 2013). As political debates including presidential debates are direct expressions of different political attitudes in the United States (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990), MFT may offer some unique insights into the challenges that presidential debates are facing, however, it has been rarely adopted in political debate research. MFT posits that human beings construct moral virtues and meanings based on five innate moral foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, while conservatives and liberals have different sensitivities of each moral foundation (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Accordingly, "conservatives and liberals have a hard time seeing eye-to-eye because they make moral judgments using different configurations of the five foundations" (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 658). In other words, presidential debaters may just talk past each other rather than talking to each other because of their moral divergence – the difference in their moral considerations in terms of moral foundations/dimensions.

On the other hand, during the debates, presidential candidate may not willing to understand and discuss with his opponent according to mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013). Mediatization discusses the process that media logic being internalized by other institutions of our society, such as politics, economy, culture, and so forth. Personalization has been identified as a major change of politicians caused by mediatization, and it entails that building a personal public image has become one of politicians' top priorities. As a media event, televised presidential debate and its social actors have to abide by media logic to be media-friendly because it is designed to be broadcasted (Dayan & Katz, 1992). This means that the presidential candidates may lack intentions to develop any real issue discussion in the debate because they would focus more on building their own image as the result of abiding by media logic. Consequently, real clash may be further impeded, image building – stating one's own issue stance – outweighs issue discussions, and the moral divergence between presidential debaters may have been increasingly widened.

By examining the moral load – an indicator of moral consideration – of every televised presidential debater's arguments in each moral foundation, this study quantitatively traced the moral divergence between US presidential debaters over six decades. It contributes to the literature by discovering the formation of one crucial challenge that presidential debate is facing – lack of real clash and issue discussion – from an institutional perspective, manifesting how the “transformative process” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 153) in politics caused by mediatization contribute to this challenge from a moral psychology perspective, and therefore shedding lights to the development of more pointed and fruitful political conversations that may better serve our democracy.

## **Literature Review**

### **Moral Foundation Theory**

In the United States, political debates including presidential debates are direct expressions of different political attitudes and it “reveals problem-solving abilities, habits of mind, and electoral appeal” (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990, p. 37). As Moral Foundation Theory (MFT) offers an innovative tool to understand the formation of political attitudes by exploring people’s moral minds (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Weber & Federico, 2013), it may offer some unique insights on why a debate – a communication format designed specifically to facilitate issue discussion and embark on real clash – could be lack of issue discussion and real clash.

### ***Moral Consideration as the Focal Point of Disagreement***

MFT argues that human beings:

construct moral virtues, meanings, and institutions in variable ways by relying to varying degrees, on five innate psychological systems. Each system produces fast, automatic gut-reactions of like and dislike when certain patterns are received in the social world, which in turn guide judgments of right and wrong. (Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012, p. 185)

Each moral foundation has two opposite dimensions: virtue (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity) and vice (harm, cheating, betrayal, subversion, and degradation) – 5 pairs in total.

People have different sensitivities of each moral foundation. Generally speaking, one with a liberal perspective is more sensitive to care/harm, fairness/cheating and very obtuse to loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, while conservatives have even sensitivity across all five kinds of moral foundations (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012; Haidt &

Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). At a given time, a certain issue would trigger people's moral foundations at different levels, generate different moral considerations, and those moral considerations would then underpin, motivate, justify their attitudes towards that issue. In other words, different sensitivities of moral foundations could lead to different moral considerations, and different moral considerations would lead to different "partisan and ideological identification along with a variety of political attitudes" (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 659). Koleva et al. (2012) found that different sensitivities of the five moral foundations would lead to different judgment and therefore could predict an individual's political attitude on culture war issues (such as abortion, gun control, death penalty, and similar controversial issues); Fernades (2020) discovered that liberals and conservatives' engagement in consumer political actions are influenced by their unique moral sensitivities in each dimension: liberals are mainly influenced by care and fairness moral concerns, while conservatives are mainly influenced by loyalty, authority, and sanctity moral concerns. Consequently, moral divergence – a difference of moral considerations in terms of moral foundations/dimensions – may become one of the major barriers for liberals and conservatives to communicate with each other.

First, they may not understand each other. According to Haidt and Graham (2007), liberals may not understand those conservatives' loyalty moral concerns because their moral concerns are primarily based upon care and fairness. Second, an individual's attitudes towards a certain issue could be determined or strongly affected by moral considerations that he/she may not aware (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). Researchers found that moral considerations generated from unexpected moral foundations – intuitively loosely connected with the issue – could exert a stronger influence than those generated from obvious moral foundations – intuitively closely connected with the issue – in determining people's attitude towards various issues (Clifford &

Jerit, 2013; Haidt, 2001; Koleva et al., 2012; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). In sum, Liberals and Conservatives may not be aware of what and why they disagree with each other, which could greatly impede real issue discussion.

### ***Moral Consideration in Political Expression***

As different moral considerations generated from the five innate moral foundations could determine the formation of an individual's political attitude (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Weber & Federico, 2013), moral considerations should be trackable from one's political attitude expressions. Kraft (2018) examined moral concerns in individual political attitude expression and found "systematic patterns in the emphasis on moral considerations among liberals and conservatives for three foundations": liberals talk more about care and fairness considerations, while conservatives emphasize loyalty considerations (p. 1031). Clifford and Jerit (2013) found political elites "used distinctive patterns of moral words to influence the public" in stem cell research policy debate: liberals focused almost exclusively on harm, conservatives put quite some efforts on sanctity which is "surprisingly uncommon in [political] debate" (p. 669). In sum, moral concerns in one's sensitive moral foundations would be emphasized in his/her political expression.

As presidential debate is a direct expression of debaters' political attitude (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990), presidential debaters may focus and emphasize different moral considerations generated from their own sensitive moral foundations in the debate. That is, moral divergence between the two debaters seems to be inevitable and may greatly impede issue discussion and real clash in presidential debate. Accordingly, we construct our hypotheses as following:

H1: Democratic presidential candidates (relatively liberal) focus more on care and fairness moral considerations, therefore carrying more moral load of these foundations in their arguments.

H2: Republican presidential candidates (relatively conservative) focus more on loyalty, sanctity, and authority moral considerations, therefore carrying more moral load of these foundations in their arguments.

### **The Theory of Mediatization**

The reason for the phenomenon of image outweighing issue and lack of real clash in presidential debate are likely diverse. Most of the previous research explored how individual and campaign factors could exert an influence. Carlin et al. (2001) claimed that "a candidate's standing in the polls at the time of the debate, candidates' debating skills, impression management, the timing of the debate within the larger campaign, and feedback from past performances" all can exert an influence on the level of clash and the ratio of image arguments in the debate. And a number of studies focused on different debate strategies associated with different debate formats (in terms of the town hall, podium, and commentator settings) as a major attribution (Beck, 1996; Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bilmes, 1999; D. B. Carlin et al., 2001). For example, McKinney, Dudash, and Hodgkinson (2003) mentioned that being televised could also affect debaters' strategy choice because "televised debates function more on the level of image analysis than issue knowledge" and "meticulous recitation of facts and figures" may not be a good strategy to support one's positions in televised debates (p. 57). Additionally, Carlin (1989) discussed from a pure strategy perspective, arguing that televised presidential debates are "rhetorical events occurring within the larger framework of a political campaign", so image is destined to be debaters' ultimate goal because it is "the bottom line" in political campaigns (p.

213). However, the more influential factors at the meso level – such as changes caused by mediatization in the institution of politics – have been ignored, unfortunately.

As a typical and successful media event, televised presidential debate has to be planned and implemented media-friendly because it is a TV program (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Accordingly, the protagonists of this TV program, presidential debaters have to abide by some media rules more or less, and that is exactly how mediatization – a long-term social change – would affect social actors.

Mediatization, as “an inherently process-oriented” concept (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 231), “relates to changes associated with communication media and their development” (Schulz, 2004, p. 88). Mediatization theory argues that as media gradually developed into an independent social institution, media logic was integrated into other social institutions such as politics, economy, culture, and so forth (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013). Accordingly, social actors in different institutions “have to adapt their behavior to accommodate the media’s valuations, formats, and routines” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 11). Those valuations, formats, and routines are captured by the concept of media logic. Building on Altheide and Snow’s (1979, 1988, 1991) study of media logic, Strömbäck (2008) defined media logic as:

the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention. (p. 233)

In other words, media logic not only sets the path for the institution of media but also shapes how other institutions function.

As a long-term social change, evidence of mediatization has been found in different institutions including politics. Media has been put into the “central position in most political



routines, such as election campaigns, government communication, public diplomacy and image building, and national and international celebrations” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 3047). Accordingly, political actors have become media-driven (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Similarly, Esser (2013) and Stromback et al. (2009) claimed that political actors have adopted and internalized media logic in their thinking and behavior to a significant extent. For example, Bastien (2018) found that the style of how media cover topics has not only been incorporated but also subsequently grown in Canadian presidential debaters’ own discourses during the following four decades of 1968. Hjarvard (2013) summarized the process of political mediatization as “personalization” which could impede real clash and issue discussion in political debate, including presidential debate.

Personalization in politics means that building personal image becomes crucial for politicians and accordingly, politicians are “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion”(Hjarvard, 2013, p. 69). Accordingly, presidential debaters as the protagonists of a media event, would have to adapt to personalization more or less. Therefore, issue could be mainly used to shape presidential debater’s own image (D. P. Carlin, 1992) rather than being discussed in order to explore solutions. In other words, presidential debaters may focus on self-expression – talking about their own issue stance – rather than responding and discussing with each other. That entails presidential debaters may have been increasingly overly focusing on their own moral considerations generated by their own sensitive moral foundations, and therefore moral divergence between every pair of debaters could have been widened. Accordingly, we construct our hypotheses as following:

H3: The moral divergence between Democratic (relatively liberal) and Republican (relatively conservative) presidential candidates have been increasingly widened.

## **Method**

This study conducted an automated content analysis to examine the moral load of each presidential candidate's full transcript in 35 televised presidential debates of 13 presidential elections (1960-2020). Analyzing the use of language is an unobtrusive and efficient way to examine people's different moral sensitivities (Araque, Gatti, & Kalimeri, 2020) and therefore, content analysis has been widely adopted in moral foundation explorations (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Garten et al., 2018; Hoover, Johnson, Boghrati, Graham, & Dehghani, 2018; Lewis, 2019). A recently developed natural language analyzing algorithm, Distributed Dictionary Representations (DDR) was adopted to examine the moral loads of each moral dimension – 2 dimensions in every moral foundation and so 10 dimensions in total – embedded in every presidential candidate's speech in every presidential debate.

## **Data**

The first televised presidential debate was held in 1960 and resumed in 1976, since when both Republican and Democrat presidential candidates began to debate in every election year. There are 13 series of presidential debates from 1960 to 2020 and 35 debates in total. The number of debates in each series varies from 1 to 3. The unit of analysis is each candidate's full transcript in each debate. The full transcript of each debate was accessed via [debates.org](https://debates.org) and converted to plain text for DDR analysis.

## **Distributed Dictionary Representations (DDR)**

DDR is based on Distributed Representations which has been developed for decades to help computers better understand our natural language and achieve better performance in Natural Language Processing tasks such as machine translation, writing, and so forth. Distributed representations means distributed representations of words in a vector space (generally with 1 to

1000 dimensions) – converting a word to a vector, which enables computers to group similar words and therefore, achieves better semantic analysis (Mikolov, Sutskever, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013). Emerged from neural networks (Mikolov et al., 2013), DDR bridged psychological dictionaries to distributed representations to measure the “[semantic] similarity between [words of] dictionaries and spans of text ranging from complete documents to individual words” (Garten et al., 2018, p. 344). In other words, similarity could be measured via DDR and index the text in the dimensions of a psychological dictionary, such as moral dimension of Moral Foundation Dictionary (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) emotion tone dimensions of emotion dictionary, and so forth.

Moral Foundation Dictionary (MFD) (Graham et al., 2009) has been widely adopted to quantify the moral load under the MFT framework (Matsuo, Sasahara, Taguchi, & Karasawa, 2019) and has been adopted in DDR by several studies (Hoover et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2020) for examining the moral loads in the 10 moral dimensions of 5 moral foundations respectively. MFD contains 324 English words related to one or several moral foundations (for example, “care” corresponds to care moral foundation (virtue dimension only)) and its algorithm is based on word count. For natural language analysis, the word count method faces two major challenges: the variety of context and the dynamics of language, because it is impossible for any dictionary to fully cover the diverse context and the ever-changing language (Garten et al., 2018). For example, the word count method would not be able to identify the moral load if no exact same word in the dictionary could be found in a text due to language habit or context difference. While DDR may overcome these challenges because it measures similarity: Distributed Representations could find similar words of the seed words (dictionary words) in the text, by converting both dictionary words and text words to space vectors, and then examine the

moral loads by measuring how similar the text to the dictionary words is.

Moreover, similarity measurement allows DDR to achieve great performance with small-size dictionary. Garten et al. (2018) found 4 seed words in each dimension of MFD would enable DDR to achieve better performance than MFD in moral value examination of Tweets text if the seed words were converted to vectors based on Google News corpus. This 4-seed-word DDR was also adopted by Hoover et al. (2018) to examine the moral load of the same batch of Tweets text.

There is no doubt that each series of presidential debates has a different social context. Plus, people's language habit has also changed a lot over the 60 years (1960-2020). Therefore, this study adopted DDR and expanded the number of seed words to 12 in each moral dimension in order to better address the change of social context and natural language brought by time. The seed words were randomly selected from MFD and listed in Table 1. The vector representations of each word were generated by Word2Vec (Mikolov et al., 2013) with Google New corpus.

No.	care	harm	fairness	cheating	authority	subversion	loyalty.txt	betrayal	sanctity	degradation
1	safe	suffer	fairness	dishonest	authority	subversion	loyal	betray	purity	impiety
2	peace	cruel	equality	preference	obey	disobey	solidarity	treason	limpid	depravity
3	compassion	hurt	justice	unfair	respect	disrespect	patriot	disloyal	sacred	stain
4	empathy	harm	rights	injustice	tradition	riot	together	traitor	wholesome	unchaste
5	care	war	evenness	bigot	preserve	defector	nation	spy	pious	disgust
6	protect	violent	constant	bias	duty	alienate	family	renegade	virgin	sin
7	shield	exploit	reasonable	inequitable	order	denounce	group	imposter	austerity	slut
8	benefit	spurn	tolerant	unscrupulous	father	remonstrate	cadre	miscreant	upright	gross
9	defend	abandon	impartial	exclusion	hierarch	protest	joint	deserting	modesty	trashy
10	guard	stomp	balance	favoritism	permit	oppose	cohort	apostate	innocent	blemish
11	amity	ruin	homologous	dissociate	comply	mutinous	ally	individual	refined	pervert
12	sympathy	ravage	reciprocal	discriminate	supremacy	insurgent	guild	sequester	immaculate	wanton

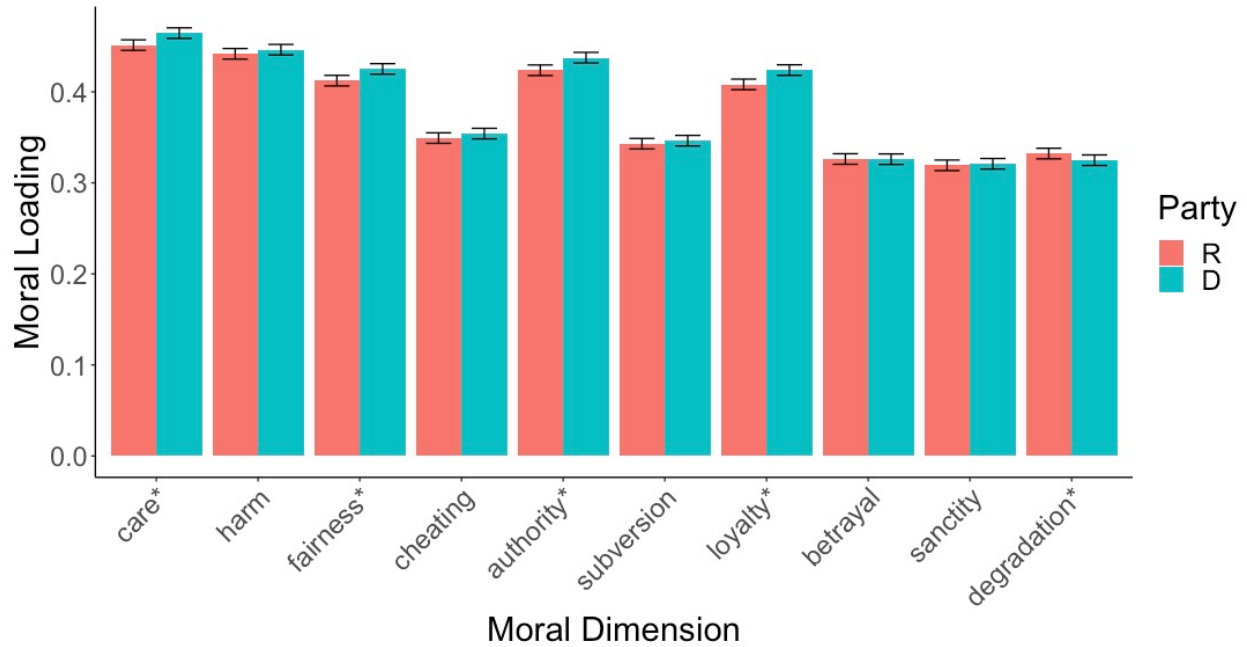
*Table 1: DDR moral seed words***Results**

First, we analyzed how Democrats generally differ from Republicans in each dimension of moral foundations. We built a three levels random intercept multi-level model by using *lme4* (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2014). In this model, our dependent variable was moral load and our fixed effects were moral dimensions (e.g., care, harm, etc.), partisanship (Democrats and Republicans), and their interactions. The debate rounds and the election year were the second level and third level group variables.

Our results show that substantial variance in moral load occurred at the second level ( $ICC = .34$ ) and third level ( $ICC = .17$ ), which indicates that the moral loads of a given debate on the 10 moral dimensions (5 pairs) are substantially correlated, suggesting that individuals are likely to simultaneously invoke several moral domains. We further tested the correlations between every two moral dimensions and found that among 45 pairs of correlations, only four correlation coefficients were below .25 and non-significant, further supporting the above argument. This finding aligns with Hoover and associates' (2018) study about donation on social media.

The results (see Figure 1) from the multi-level model further reveal that Democrats generally had significantly higher moral loads on care ( $b = .013$ ,  $95\%CI = [.007, .019]$ ) and fairness ( $b = .013$ ,  $95\%CI = [.007, .019]$ ), supporting H1. Republicans had higher moral load on degradation ( $b = -.007$ ,  $95\%CI = [-.013, -.001]$ ), partially supporting H2. However, Republicans also had lower loads on authority ( $b = .014$ ,  $95\%CI = [.008, .020]$ ) and loyalty ( $b = .016$ ,  $95\%CI = [.010, .022]$ ), violating H2. Therefore, only H1 was supported. Nevertheless, although these differences were significant, their effect size were very small. The largest difference was in loyalty, and only was .28 standard deviation. We also tested the correlation between all moral

loads of Democrats and Republicans within each election year (we used standardized moral load of Republicans to predict the standardized moral load of Democrats and fitted the data into a two level multi-level model with year as the second level group variable) and found a strong positive relationship,  $\beta = .990$ , 95%CI = [.967, 1.013], further reflecting that the differences in moral loads within each election year was small.



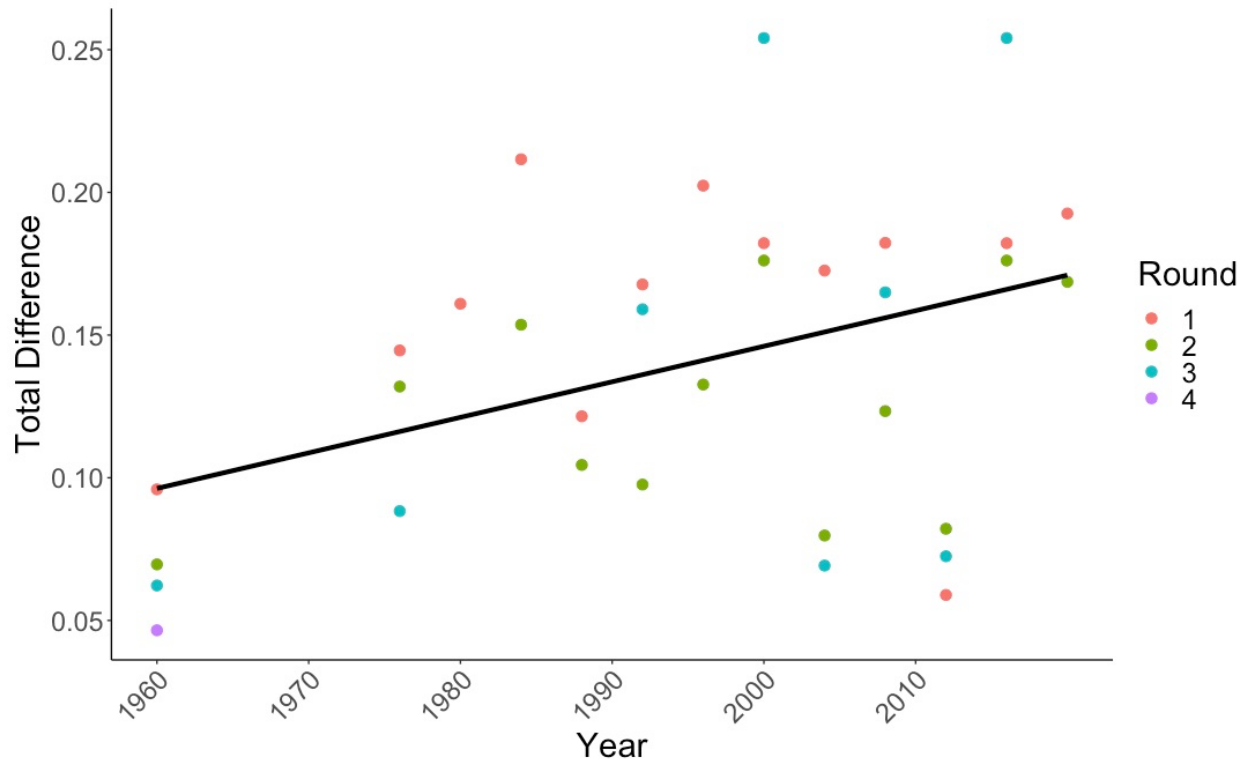
**Figure 1** *Moral Loads on Ten Moral Dimensions (Five Pairs).*

*Note.* Error bars indicate 95%CI. Asterisks (\*) indicate significant differences at  $\alpha = .05$ . Purity refers to sanctity.

H3 proposes that the moral foundations divergence in presidential debates between Republican presidential candidates and Democratic presidential candidates has been increasing since 1980. To test it, we calculated the load difference between Democrats and Republicans on each moral dimension during each debate. We added up the absolute value of them to form a unidimensional score to reflect the total difference between Democrats and Republicans in each debate. Then we fit the data to an OLS regression. The results (see Figure 2) show that the total

moral load difference increases .005 points every four years ( $b = .005$ ,  $t(32) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $R^2 = 16.6\%$ ), supporting H3. We noticed that 2012 is special. The mean difference score of the three debates in 2012 was the second lowest among all years (1960 was the lowest).

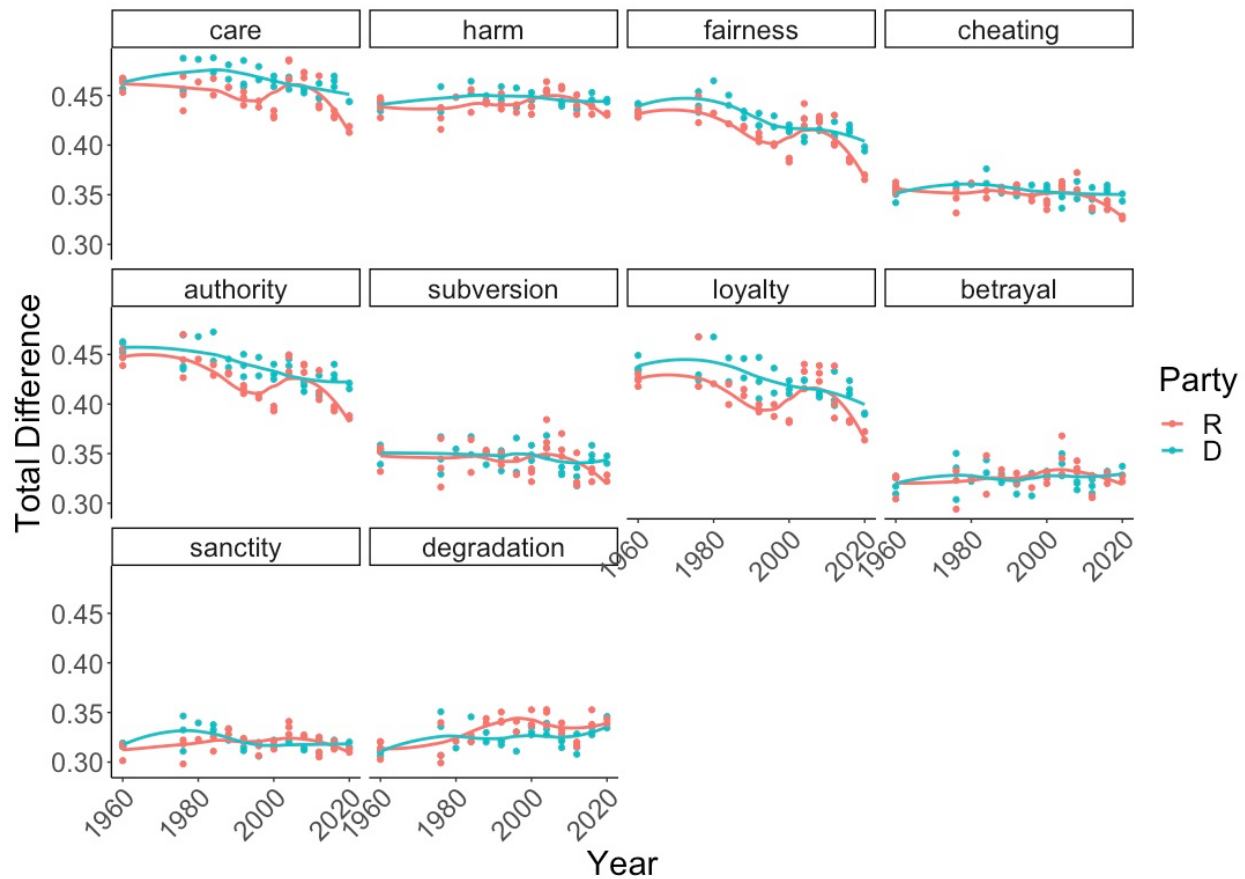
We also found that the first round of debate usually had the highest difference score (see Figure 2). To test it, we built a two levels random intercepts multi-level model. In this model, the total difference score was our dependent variable, the round of debates was our fixed effect, and the year was our second level group variable. Our results show that substantial variance in difference score occurred at the second level ( $ICC = .63$ ), indicating that the variance in years was larger than that in debate rounds. Our results also show that, controlling for the influence of years, the round 1 debates on average had a significantly higher difference score than round 2 debates (Round 2:  $b = -.035$ ,  $95\%CI = [-.059, -.011]$ ) and also higher than round 3 and 4 debates, though not statistically significant due to the fewer number of round 3 and 4 debates (Round 3:  $b = -.012$ ,  $95\%CI = [-.040, .016]$ ; Round 4:  $b = -.056$ ,  $95\%CI = [-.128, .013]$ ).



**Figure 2** *The Change of Total Moral Load Difference Over Years.*

In addition, we examined the moral load change in each moral dimension. We used the moral load of each dimension as dependent variable and year, party and their interaction as independent variable. We expected to find significant interactions between year and party, which could indicate the differences between party increased or decreased. However, no significant effects were detected (see Figure 3), indicating that although there is an increasing overall divergence in moral loads over time, the pattern in each moral dimension is not clear. The reason might be, first, that we only have 32 debates as variables, limiting the statistic power to detect small effects. Second, the load in some years like 2004, 2008, and 2012 violated the trend of it in previous years. For example, in the care dimension, we can observe that the load of Democrats was higher than Republicans during 1976 to 2000 and 2016 but was lower during 2004 to 2012.





**Figure 3** *The Change of Democrats' and Republicans' Moral Load in Each Dimension Over Years.*

### Discussion and Future Direction

This research quantitatively explores the moral divergence of all the televised United States presidential debates across 13 presidential elections since the first televised presidential debate from 1960 to 2020. It introduces mediatization as a prism for presidential debate exploration from an institutional perspective – exploring the “transformative process” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 153) in political institution caused by mediatization within the presidential debate context. This institutional perspective at the meso level enables us to “make generalizations across the situational contexts of micro-social encounters” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 154) such as a

specific debate format (in terms of the town hall, podium, and commentator) in a specific year. Moreover, by operationalizing moral divergence (with moral load) as a key indicator of mediatization, this study overcomes three main challenges of mediatization research: historicity (“longitudinal studies or cross-temporal comparisons”), specificity (“differentiating and specifying the currently too general talk of mediatization”), and measurability (“quantitative measurability”) (Ekström, Fornäs, Jansson, & Jerslev, 2016, p. 1098). So, the current study contributes to both political debate and mediatization literature.

Our results show a clear moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates, and a significant increase of moral divergence along with the development of mediatization since 1980. We also found that the first debate of each election debate series almost always diverges more than the rest of the debates. Moreover, almost every Democrat presidential candidate’s speech in the debates carried more moral load than their Republican rivals across all five moral foundations (except the vice dimension of sanctity foundation), even in loyalty/betrayal and authority/subversion, the two moral foundations that Liberals are supposed to care much less moral load than Conservatives. Our findings shed light on the two fundamental questions that are essential for presidential debates to better serve our democracy: whether Democrat and Republican candidates could understand and discuss with each other, and whether they wanted to understand and discuss with each other.

### **Whether They Could?**

As aforementioned, people may not understand moral concerns in the moral foundations that they are not innately sensitive enough, but our results imply that presidential candidates have the ability to overcome this innate obstacle. First, our results show positive correlation among the moral loads of each moral foundation in each candidate’s speech in every presidential debate.

This means that none of the five moral foundations is isolated. The sensitivity in one moral foundation could make up for other obtuse moral foundations. In other words, the receptors of certain kinds of moral foundations may sense some moral taste of other moral foundations also, if they are sensitive enough. This brings an interesting question for future research: would this kind of sensitivity compensation happen in other context than presidential debate?

Secondly, Democrat candidates' moral loads are almost always higher than Republican candidates' moral loads across all five moral foundations. This is a very interesting finding that violates MFT within the context of presidential debates. MFT predicts liberals possessing higher moral loads in care and fairness foundations, while conservatives are higher in the other three moral foundations. This prediction has been supported by plenty of previous studies (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Fernandes, 2020; Hoover et al., 2018) that examined moral loads in different situations other than presidential debates. It is quite possible that Democratic or Liberal politicians are more prone to rely on moral rhetoric when they perform their public persona. We leave this interesting question for future study, and here, we focus on the point that Democrat candidates did express a lot, actually more moral considerations than Republican candidates in moral foundations that they are supposed to be very obtuse, at least less sensitive than Republicans according to MFT. That is, the presidential candidates are capable to understand and express moral considerations generated from all the five innate moral foundations even it might be a different scenario for the majority of Republicans and Democrats.

Thirdly, although the moral loads of Democrat and Republican candidates were statistically significantly different in some moral dimensions, the effect size of these differences was very small, and the correlations between all loads of Democrats and Republicans were very strong, indicating that there were no substantial discrepancies between president debaters and

they were able to respond to their rivals' moral concerns no matter they are sensitive with those concerns or not. A similar finding has been claimed by Clifford and Jerit (2013), in the policy debates of stem cell technology, that political elites respond to opponents' moral concerns with their own moral arguments, and the increase of proponents' moral load increased the moral load of opponents in the first half of their data. Our results show that the debaters could not only respond to rivals' moral concerns, but also keep the response in the same moral foundation.

In sum, presidential debaters could understand, express, and respond to the moral considerations generated from their own obtuse moral foundations, which means that they could develop real issue discussion and engage in real clash with each other. So, here comes the other fundamental question: whether they wanted to? Similar to the scenario discovered by Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979): presidential debaters may respond to questions with his own agenda – something he wanted to talk about – no matter his agenda is relevant to the questions or not, presidential debaters may respond to moral considerations in their obtuse moral foundations by elaborating his own moral considerations in the same dimension to build his own image rather than developing real discussion to find a solution in order to collaborate with each other.

### **Whether They Want?**

Unfortunately, they may not. Our results show that the moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates has been increasingly widened since 1980, which aligns with the development of mediatization. With regard to 1980 as a watershed moment, Hjarvard (2013) identified media shifts before and after 1980: from 1920 to 1980, media could be considered the “representation of society’s common interests in the public arena,” while after 1980, the main purpose of media changed to “servicing of audiences, sales to target groups in a differentiated media system” (p. 26). As “an inherently process-oriented” concept (Strömbäck,

2008, p. 231), mediatization “relates to changes associated with communication media and their development” (Schulz, 2004, p. 88). Therefore, the mediatization process mainly refers to the gradual development of media into a semi-independent social institution during the 1980s, and the integration of media logic into other social institutions such as politics, economy, culture, and so forth (Hjarvard, 2013). Accordingly, the mediatization of politics accelerated around the 1980s as a result of the development of media (Kepplinger, 2002), which implies the moral divergence between presidential debaters began to expand around 1980. However, our study is limited with the population size of televised presidential debates, especially there are only two series of presidential debates before 1980 – 1960 and 1976.

The increasingly widened moral divergence manifests the politician’s personalization – a major transformative process caused by mediatization in politics. Actually, politicians have to abide by the media logic because as a long-term process of social change, the influence of mediatization is far beyond politics, which leaves politicians no choice. For example, for presidential debate, media as an institution, has been mediatized as well. By examining Canadian presidential debates over 4 decades (1968-2008), Bastien (2018) found that “reports on leaders’ debates have become less factual as journalists have increased the share of analytical and judgmental styles in their stories,” manifesting the mediatization in the institution of media: media are able to follow their own logic versus deeply depending on politics before mediatization (p. 1743). Another major change caused by mediatization in media is that media have become the main information source of the public (Hjarvard, 2013). Media could shape public opinions (Lang & Lang, 2002; Tuchman, 1978), and a number of presidential debate studies found that how media interpret the debate could exert a strong influence on audience’s perception of the candidates (Lowry, Bridges, & Barefield, 1990; McKinnon & Tedesco, 1996;

McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993; Steeper, 1978). Chaffee and Dennis (Chaffee & Dennis, 1979) claimed that the media's interpretation of the debate is more influential on the electorate than is the debate itself. If a politician wants to be heard or known by the electorate, he/she has to rely on the help of media – the main information source of the electorate, and he/she has to abide by the media logic to get the media's help because of media's autonomy.

The audience/public has adapted for the development of media as well. For example, they pay more attention and therefore, learn more information of candidates' images than issues from the televised presidential debate (McKinney et al., 2003), although "Citizens feel strongly that debate discussion should reflect a public policy agenda, focusing on campaign issues most relevant to the public instead of campaign strategy or matters relating to candidate character" (McKinney & Carlin, 2004, p. 220). The audience of the presidential debate would be more attracted to image information, consciously or unconsciously.

Therefore, politicians have no choice but to adapt to these transformative processes brought by mediatization in different social institutions. And personalization summarized their adaptations and manifested the political mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013). From this perspective, it is inevitable that presidential debaters increasingly focused on their own public persona, own moral considerations rather than real discussions with each other, because they want and need to exhibit and discuss about themselves, their own issue stance in order to build their own image.

### **They Could, But They Did Not Want**

Another interesting finding in this study is that the first debate in each election year almost always has the biggest moral divergence. This finding could support our argument: they could, but they did not want to. The first debate is more important than its following debates because it usually attracts the highest viewership. Plus, by the time of the second debate, lots of

voters would have voted. Therefore, it is more crucial for the candidates to perform their own public persona in the first debate, which could result in the most self-centered speech during the first debate, thus the biggest moral divergence.

It is worth mentioning that it would be not fair to blame the presidential candidates for “not wanting to”. The audience, the media, and the institution of politics are all driving forces of the moral divergence in presidential debate, because they have all been mediatized more or less in this social change process of mediatization. The challenge that the presidential debate is facing needs to be further explored from an institutional perspective in order to find solutions to prevent the moral divergence from being further widened, and stop personalization caused by mediatization from making the debate less of a debate.

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