# Talking Past Each Other Or To Each Other?

Tracking Moral Divergence in Presidential Debates Over 50 Years

# Abstract

By bridging mediatization and Moral Foundation Theory, this study explored the two fundamental questions underlying the challenges that the United States presidential debates are facing – whether the presidential debaters could, and whether they are willing to understand and develop real discussion with each other? Distributed Dictionary Representations was adopted to quantitatively examine the moral load of each presidential candidate’s transcript in every televised presidential debate from 1960 to 2020. There has been a significant increase of moral divergence since 1980, when mediatization accelerated. Our data imply that the presidential candidates could overcome the communication obstacles caused by the difference of human being’s innate moral sensitivities. But unfortunately, they are not willing to understand and develop real discussion with each other, which may be attributed to politicians’ personalization, a major change caused by mediatization in politics. The implication of presidential debaters talking past each other rather than to each other could lead to difficult but fruitful conversations and enable presidential debate to better serve our democracy.

# *Keywords:* Presidential Debate, Moral Foundation Theory, Mediatization

**Introduction**

Televised presidential debate has been criticized for lack of real clash, failed 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 are inevitable in 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), while political debates including presidential debates serve as a direct expression of different political attitudes in the United States (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990). Therefore, MFT could offer unique insights for 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.

On the other hand, during the debates, presidential candidates 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 that caused by mediatization, and it entails that building a personal public image has become one of politicians’ top priorities. As a media event, televised president 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 of intentions to develop any real issue discussion in the debate because they would focus more on building their own image. Consequently, real clash may be further impeded, image may increasingly outweigh issue discussions, and the moral divergence between presidential debaters may be increasingly widened.

By examining the moral load of every televised presidential debater’s arguments in each moral foundation, this study quantitatively traced the difference and change of presidential debaters’ moral considerations in each moral foundation in the last six decades. It contributes to the literature by discovering the formation of one critical challenge that presidential debate is facing – lack of real clash and issue discussion – from a social change perspective, manifesting how the individual factor of moral foundation sensitivity and the societal factor of mediatization interactively contribute to this critical challenge, and shedding lights to the development of difficult but fruitful political conversations that may enable presidential debates to better serve our democracy.

**Literature Review**

**Moral Foundation Theory**

In United States, political debates including presidential debates serve as a direct expression 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 specific to facilitate issue discussion and embark on real clash – could be lack of issue discussion and real clash.

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).

Different sensitivities of each moral foundation would lead to different moral considerations. 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). 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. Different moral considerations would lead to different “partisan and ideological identification along with a variety of political attitudes” (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 1). For example, Koleva et al. (2012) found that different sensitivities of the five moral foundations would lead to different judgement and therefore could predict individual’s political attitude on culture war issues (such as abortion, gun control, death penalty, and similar controversial issues). Meanwhile, as different moral considerations influence the formation of political attitudes, they would be reflected in political expressions.

Sensitive moral foundation could generate more moral considerations and then would be more emphasized in political 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 on loyalty considerations (p. 1031). Clifford and Jerit (2013) found political elites “used distinctive patterns of moral words in an effort 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.

Therefore, presidential debaters may focus on different moral considerations generated from their different sensitive moral foundations, which entails moral divergence in the debates. It’s very difficult for presidential debaters “seeing eye-to-eye” because their moral considerations are generated from “different configurations of the five foundations” (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 658). In other words, moral divergence between presidential debaters could impede issue discussion and real clash in their debates. 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 phenomenon of image outweighing issue and lack of real clash has been identified and discussed in a spate of political debate research. Various factors may exert an influence, “a candidate’s standing in the polls at the time of the debate, candidates’ debating skills, impression management, 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 (D. B. Carlin, Morris, & Smith, 2001). While most of the research effort focused on different debate strategies associated with different debate formats (in terms of town hall, podium, and commentator settings) as a major attribution (Beck, 1996; Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bilmes, 1999; D. B. Carlin et al., 2001). While, 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, D. P. 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 destinated to be debaters’ ultimate goal because it is “the bottom line” in political campaigns (p. 213). However, societal factors that may exert a more powerful influence 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, as the protagonists of this TV program, presidential debaters have to abide by some media rules more or less, 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, cultural, 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. 1). 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, instead of issue discussion, building personal image might become their top priority. In other words, presidential debaters’ top priority could become self-expression rather than discussion, and accordingly the debaters may overly focus on their own moral considerations generated by their own sensitive moral foundations. Consequently, image would outweigh issue, real clash would be impeded, and moral divergence between every pair of debaters would be widened. We therefore construct our hypotheses as following:

H3: Democratic presidential candidates (relatively liberal) have been increasingly focusing on care and fairness moral considerations, therefore carrying more moral load of these foundations in their arguments since the first televised presidential debate in 1960.

H4: Republican presidential candidates (relatively conservative) have been increasingly focusing on loyalty, sanctity, and authority moral considerations, therefore carrying more moral load of these foundations in their arguments since the first televised presidential debate in 1960.

**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 each presidential candidate’s speech in each 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 and converted to a 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, achieve 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). And Moral Foundation Dictionary (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) 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.

Moral Foundation Dictionary has been widely adopted to quantify the moral load under the MFT framework (Matsuo, Sasahara, Taguchi, & Karasawa, 2019). MFD contains 324 English words related to one or several moral foundations (for example, “care” corresponds to care moral foundation (virtue 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 fully covering 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 at. (2018) to examine the moral load of the same batch of Tweets text.

There is no doubt that each series of presidential debate ­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 was 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 loading 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 loading occurred at the second level (ICC = .34) and third level (ICC = .17), which indicates that the moral loadings 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 loadings on care (*b* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .019]), fairness (*b* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .019]), authority (*b* = .014, 95%CI = [.008, .020]), and loyalty (*b* = .016, 95%CI = [.010, .022]), but lower loading on degradation (*b* = -.007, 95%CI = [-.013, -.001]). However, 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 loadings of Democrats and Republicans within each election year (we used standardized moral loading of Republicans to predict the standardized moral loading 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, *β* = .990, 95%CI = [.967, 1.013], further reflecting that the differences in moral loadings within each election year was small.

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*Figure 1 Moral loadings on ten moral dimensions (five pairs).*

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

Hypothesis 1 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 loading 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 loading difference increases .005 points every four years (*b* = .005, *t*(32) = 2.52, *p* = .017, *R2* = 16.6%), supporting H1.

~~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). If we exclude 2012, the model has a much better fit (~~*~~b~~* ~~= .007,~~ *~~t~~*~~(30) = 3.77,~~ *~~p~~* ~~< .001,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 34.5%). Therefore, our results generally support H1.~~

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, -0.011]) 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]).

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*Figure 2 The change of total moral loading difference over years.*

H2 and H3 proposed that Democrat candidates increasingly focus more on care and fairness than Republicans over time, while Republicans increasingly focus more on loyalty, authority, and sanctity than Democrats. To test them, we examined the moral loading change in each moral dimension. We used the moral loading 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). The reason might be, first, that we only have 32 debates as variables, limiting the statistic power to detect small effects. Second, the loading 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 loading of Democrats was higher than Republicans during 1976 to 2000 and 2016, but was lower during 2004 to 2012. ~~If we excluded these three years, we could get significant interaction effects for care, fairness, cheating, and authority.~~

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*Figure 3 The change of Democrats’ and Republicans’ moral loading in each dimension over years.*

~~We further analyzed the absolute difference score in each moral dimension. The results (see Figure 4) show that, although 2004, 2008, and 2012 were again a little different from other years, the general trends in authority, care, fairness, loyalty, and subversion increased over years. If excluding these three years, the increasing trends in regressions were significant (authority:~~ *~~b~~* ~~= .002,~~ *~~t~~*~~(21) = 4.42,~~ *~~p~~* ~~< .001,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 48.2%; care:~~ *~~b~~* ~~= .002,~~ *~~t~~*~~(21) = 7.46,~~ *~~p~~* ~~< .001,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 72.6%; fairness:~~ *~~b~~* ~~= .002,~~ *~~t~~*~~(21) = 4.37,~~ *~~p~~* ~~< .001,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 47.6%; loyalty:~~ *~~b~~* ~~= .002,~~ *~~t~~*~~(21) = 3.21,~~ *~~p~~* ~~= .004,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 33.0%; subversion:~~ *~~b~~* ~~= .001,~~ *~~t~~*~~(21) = 2.66,~~ *~~p~~* ~~= .015,~~ *~~R~~~~2~~* ~~= 25.2%). Therefore, H2 was partially supported; Democrats indeed increasingly focused more on care and fairness than republicans if excluding the data of 2004, 2008, and 2012. H3 was not supported. Instead, our data show an opposite trend—rather than Republicans, it was Democrats that increasingly focused more on authority and loyalty if excluding the data of 2004, 2008, and 2012.~~

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*Figure 4 The change of moral loading difference in each dimension over years.*

# Discussion

This research quantitatively explores the moral divergence of the televised United States presidential debates across 13 presidential elections since the first televised presidential debate from 1960 to 2020. It introduces an innovative angle to explore presidential debates by bridging mediatization with MFT. It is also the first study to operationalize moral divergence as a key indicator of mediatization, and it completes the three main tasks for a mediatization research agenda: 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). The implications that the presidential debaters have increasingly been talking past each other rather than to each other, could be valuable to develop difficult but fruitful conversations.

Our results show a clear moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates, and 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 than Conservatives. Our findings shed light to 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 discus with each other.

**Whether they could?**

According to MFT, the moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates is mainly caused by Liberals and Conservatives’ different innate moral sensitivities. Generally speaking, 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 load of each moral foundation in each candidate’s speech of every presidential debate. This means that none of the five moral foundation 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.

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 shows violations of MFT in a 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 Democrats or Liberals 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 great in moral foundations that they are less sensitive than Republican candidates. Therefore, the presidential candidates are capable to understand different moral concerns and develop real discussions, even it might be a different scenario for the majority of Republicans and Democrats.

Thirdly, although the moral loadings of Democrat and Republican candidates were significantly different in some moral dimensions, the effect size of these differences were very small, and the correlation between all loadings of Democrats and Republicans was very strong, indicating that there was no substantial discrepancies between president debaters and they were able to respond to their rivals’ moral concerns no mater 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 the debate. Our results show that the debaters not only responded to rivals’ moral concerns, but they also could keep the respond in the same moral foundation. Therefore, here comes the other fundamental question: whether they wanted to?

**Whether they wanted to?**

Unfortunately, they may not. Our results show that the moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates has been increasingly widened since 1980. The divergence is mainly from the moral foundations of care (mainly virtue), fairness (mainly virtue), authority (both virtue and vice), and loyalty (mainly virtue). The absence of active engagement from sanctity foundation (both virtue and vice) aligns with previous studies (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Lewis, 2019).

The increasingly widened moral divergence manifests the politician’s personalization – politician’s adaption to the mediatization which is a long-term process of social change and far beyond politics. Both media and audience have been influenced by mediatization also. 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 opinion (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 public have adapted for mediatization also. For example, they pay more attention and therefore, learn more information of candidates’ image 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, no matter if they realized their change or not.

Therefore, politicians have no choice but to adapt to these changes brought by mediatization in media and the audience. On the other hand, personalization summarized their adaptions 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 concerns rather than focusing on real discussions with others, because they want to focus on themselves, especially in terms of image.

**They could, but they did not want** to

Based on their moral loads, we argue that the presidential candidates could but did not want to develop real discussions based on understanding of each other in terms of moral concerns in different moral foundations. This could offer an explanation to another interesting finding in this study: the first debate in each election year always has the biggest moral divergence. 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 all be mediatized more or less in this social change process of mediatization. The challenges that the presidential debate is facing need to be further explored from a social change perspective. For example, is it possible to prevent the moral divergence from being further widened? Or how could we prevent mediatization, or personalization from making the debate less of a debate? We leave these questions to future study.

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