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

# Abstract

This study explores, from an institutional perspective, the formation of one crucial challenge that hampers US presidential debates – the lack of a genuine clash of ideas and arguments and of a thorough discussion of the issues. We will explore how the development of social media has not only transformed political discussion but complexified political debate by drawing upon mediatization theory as the prism. Specifically, this study conducted an automated content analysis on all US televised presidential debates from 1960 to 2020 using Moral Foundation Theory as the organizing theoretical basis. A recently developed natural language analyzing algorithm, Distributed Dictionary Representations (DDR), was adopted for the moral divergence examination. On one hand, the study contributes to political communication literature by diagnosing the origins of the challenge, and therefore sheds lights on the development of more fruitful means of political communication. On the other hand, it contributes to mediatization literature by reflecting on the possible effects that mediatization may have on the transformation of established democracies.

# *Keywords:* Presidential Debate, Moral Foundation, Mediatization, Political Communication, Distributed Dictionary Representations

**Introduction**

Televised presidential debates have been criticized for their lack of an authentic clash of ideas, their failure to elicit discussion of primary issues, and their excessive focus on the candidates’ preoccupation with image rather than the issues (D. P. Carlin, 1989, 1992; Clifford & Jerit, 2013; McKinney & Carlin, 2004). There can be no doubt that presidential debates serve our democracy well by contributing to a more engaged and better-informed electorate (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Unfortunately, if we use Moral Foundation Theory as a guide (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) in conjunction with mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013), we will note that a lack of discussion regarding the primary issues and a tendancy to avoid conflict when responding to the issues at hand are 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). MFT posits that human beings construct moral virtues and meanings based on five innate moral foundations (ten dimensions total): care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. It has been found that conservatives and liberals have different configurations of, or sensitivities to, the five foundations (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Accordingly, “conservatives and liberals have a hard time seeing eye-to-eye” (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 658). In other words, people with different moral foundation configurations (such as conservatives and liberals) may not understand each other very well. This same predicament would affect the debaters in presidential debates as well. They tend to talk past each other rather than to each other because of their moral divergence, that is to say their differing moral judgment as determined by moral foundation configurations.

Moreover, according to mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2008, 2013), presidential candidates may not be willing to understand and engage with the views of their opponents in televised debates because their first priority is to construct an image. Mediatization discusses the process of media logic being internalized by other institutions in our society, be they political, economic, cultural, and so forth. Personalization has been identified as a major change in political discourse as a result of mediatization, and the resut is that the desire to build a personal public image has become a top priority of politicians (Hjarvard, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008). As a media event, televised presidential debates have to abide by media logic in order to be media-friendly because the debates are designed to be broadcast (Dayan & Katz, 1992). This means that the presidential candidates may not be motivated to engage in the discussion and debate of real issues because they prefer to focus more on building their own image as media logic requires. Consequently, real conflict tends to be avoided in order to promote image building by stating one’s own issue stance and moral reasons behind it. This effort outweighs issue discussion, and the moral divergence between presidential debaters is increasingly widened.

By examining the moral loading, an indicator of moral stance (Araque, Gatti, & Kalimeri, 2020; Garten et al., 2018; Hoover, Johnson, Boghrati, Graham, & Dehghani, 2018), of every televised presidential debater’s argument relative to each moral foundation, this study quantitatively traces the moral divergence between US presidential debaters over six decades. On the one hand, it contributes to the current research by revealing one crucial challenge that presidential debates are facing – lack of real conflict and a discussion of the issues – from a mediatization perspective, and therefore sheds light on the development of ways to encourage more effective political communication. On the other hand, it reveals possible effects that mediatization may have on the transformation of established democracies.

**Literature Review**

**Moral Foundation Theory**

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

***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.

Each foundation “serves different but related social functions and the degree of sensitivity towards these foundations vary across different cultures and context” (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014, p. 133). That is, people in different groups have different configurations, or in other words sensitivities – different degrees of endorsement of each moral foundation. Generally speaking, those with a liberal perspective are more sensitive to care/harm, fairness/cheating and very obtuse to loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, while conservatives reveal a more 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 a response based on a person’s moral foundations at different levels, generate different moral concerns, and those moral concerns would then underpin, motivate, justify attitudes towards that issue. That is to say, different sensitivities towards moral foundations could lead to different moral concerns, and different moral concerns would lead to different “partisan and ideological identification along with a variety of political attitudes” (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 659). For example, Koleva et al. (2012) found that the endorsement of certain moral foundations could better predict an individual's attitudes towards different culture war issues (such as abortion, gun control, death penalty, and similar social controversies) than “ideology, age, gender, religious attendance, and interest in politics” (p. 184). Fernades (2020) discovered that people’s engagement in consumer political actions are mainly determined by moral concerns associated with their different sensitive moral foundations: liberals are mainly influenced by the moral concerns of care and fairness, while conservatives are mainly influenced by the moral concerns of loyalty, authority, and sanctity. In sum, the different moral configurations of different groups would lead to different moral concerns, and therefore lead to different moral judgment, or in other words, moral divergence, a barrier for efficient communication across groups.

Moral divergence implies that different groups may not understand each other. For example, according to Haidt and Graham (2007), liberals may not understand conservatives’ loyalty/betrayal moral concerns because their moral concerns are primarily based upon care and fairness. In other words, one would not understand another’s moral concerns if those concerns do not correspond to his or her sensitive moral foundations.

Moreover, an individual’s attitudes towards a certain issue could be determined or strongly affected by moral concerns of which he/she may not be aware (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). In other words, people may not realize where the focal point of their disagreement is since moral concerns determine one’s political attitude (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Haidt, 2012). Researchers found that moral concerns derived from unexpected moral foundations, that is to say those moral concerns that are intuitively loosely connected with the issue, could exert a stronger influence than those generated from a more obvious moral foundation (intuitively closely connected with the issue) and were more influential in affecting people's attitude towards various issues (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Haidt, 2001; Koleva et al., 2012; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, Koleva et al. (2012) claimed that the moral concerns of care/harm dominate today’s political rhetoric about gun control, abortion, and similar culture war issues, as those concerns are intuitively associated with those issues. However, it is the moral concerns of sanctity/degradation that dominate people’s attitudes towards most of the culture war issues (Koleva et al., 2012). In other words, conflicting groups may not be aware of on what and why they disagree with each other when they discuss their disagreements. This could greatly impede real issue discussion.

***Moral Consideration in Political Expression***

Because moral concerns 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 concerns should be trackable from the expression of one’s political attitude. Kraft (2018) examined moral concerns in individual political attitude expression and found "systematic patterns in the emphasis on moral concerns 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 that political elites "used distinctive patterns of moral words (that are associated with different moral foundations) to influence the public" in stem cell research policy debates: liberals focused almost exclusively on their concern about harm, whereas conservatives focused on both harm and sanctity concerns. In sum, moral concerns anchored in one’s sensitive moral foundations would be emphasized in one’s political expression.

As a presidential debate is a direct expression of a debater’s political attitude (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990), presidential candidates may focus on and emphasize different moral concerns generated from their own sensitive moral foundations in the debate. As different partisanship loyalties imply different moral foundation configurations (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Haidt, 2012), moral divergence between the two debaters seems to be inevitable and may greatly impede issue discussion and meaningful clash in presidential debates. Accordingly, we construct our hypotheses as the following:

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

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

**The Theory of Mediatization**

In presidential debates, the reasons to stress image construction over a discussion of the issues and aggressive exchange 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" can all exert an influence on the level of clash and the ratio of image arguments in the debate. Additionally, a number of studies cited 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). Some scholars mentioned the influence of being televised but without focusing on the underlying reasons. For example, McKinney, Dudash, and Hodgkinson (2003) argued that being televised could affect debaters’ strategy choices 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). However their focus is on how debate formats could make a difference. Additionally, Carlin (1989) approached the issue from a pure campaign strategy perspective, arguing that televised presidential debates are “rhetorical events occurring within the larger framework of a political campaign.” Consequently, image is destined to be the debaters’ ultimate goal because it is “the bottom line” in political campaigns (p. 213). Few studies have discussed how and why being televised could influence the presidential debate. Drawing upon mediatization as the prism, we will explore the phenomena of how image outweighs issue and leads to a lack of real clash as an inevitable consequence caused by the internalization of media in political institutions.

As a typical and successful media event, televised presidential debates have to be planned and made media-friendly because they are designed for broadcasting (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Accordingly, the protagonists of this program, the debaters, have to abide by media rules, more or less, and that is exactly how mediatization – a long-term cause of social change – could affect social actors.

Mediatization, as “an inherently process-oriented” concept (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 231), has been viewed as key to understanding the transformation of modern political communication (Blumler, 2014; Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Kriesi, 2013). It argues that as media gradually developed into an independent social institution, media logic was integrated into other social institutions such as politics, the 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 establishes the pathway for the institution of media but also shapes how other institutions function.

Evidence of mediatization has been found in a number of 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 manner by which media cover topics has not only been incorporated into but has also subsequently increased in Canadian presidential debaters’ own discourses over the decades since 1968. Hjarvard (2013) summarized the process of political mediatization as “personalization” which could impede real clash and issue discussion in political debates in general, including presidential debates.

Personalization in politics means that building a personal image has become 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 protagonists of a media event, could be focusing on rhetorical pathos rather than a logos-driven issue discussion. Therefore, issues could be mainly used to shape a presidential debater’s own image (D. P. Carlin, 1992) rather than an opportunity to explore solutions. In other words, presidential debaters may focus on self-image and self-expression – talking about their own stance on the issues – rather than responding to and discussing his or her opponent. The result is that presidential debaters may have been increasingly overly focused on their own moral concerns that derived from their own sensitive moral foundations, and this could have increased the moral divergence between debaters. Accordingly, we construct our hypotheses as the following:

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

**Method**

This study conducted an automated content analysis to examine the moral loading of each presidential candidate’s full transcripts of 35 televised presidential debates of 13 presidential elections (1960-2020). Analyzing the use of language is an unobtrusive and efficient way to examine a person’s different moral sensitivities (Araque et al., 2020) and therefore, content analysis has been widely adopted in moral foundation explorations (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Garten et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2018; Lewis, 2019). A recently developed natural language analyzing algorithm, Distributed Dictionary Representations (DDR), was adopted to examine the moral loading of each moral dimension – 2 dimensions in every moral foundation and 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 debates resumed in 1976, after which 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 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 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). Emerging from neural networks (Mikolov et al., 2013), DDR bridged psychological dictionaries to Distributed Representations to measure the “[semantic] similarity between [seed words from] 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 could index the text in dimensions of a psychological dictionary, such as the moral dimension of Moral Foundation Dictionary (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), emotional tone dimensions of emotion dictionary, and so forth.

Moral Foundation Dictionary (MFDGraham et al., 2009) has been widely adopted to quantify the moral loading under the MFT framework (Matsuo, Sasahara, Taguchi, & Karasawa, 2019) and has been adopted in DDR in several studies (Hoover et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2020) for examining the moral loadings in the 10 moral dimensions of 5 moral foundations respectively. MFD contains 324 English words, and each word relates to one or several moral foundations (for example, “care” corresponds to the care moral foundation, virtue dimension only). The algorithm of MFD is based on word count. For natural language analysis, the word count method faces two major challenges: it is impossible for any dictionary to fully cover the diverse context and the ever-changing language patterns (Garten et al., 2018). For example, the word count method would not be able to well identify the moral loading if the exact same word in the dictionary could not be found in a text due to language habit or a different context. DDR may overcome these challenges because it measures similarity; the method of distributed representations could find similar words based on the seed words (from a psychological dictionary) in the text, by converting both dictionary words and text words to space vectors, and then examining the moral loading by measuring how similar the text is to the seed words.

Moreover, similarity measurement allows DDR to achieve great performance effectiveness with small-size dictionary. Garten et al. (2018) found that 4 seed words in each dimension of MFD would enable DDR to achieve better performance than MFD in moral loading examination of Tweet texts 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 loading of Tweet texts.

Since the first televised presidential debate in 1960, there is no doubt that people’s language habits have changed a lot. Plus, each series of presidential debates ­has had a different social context. Therefore, this study adopted DDR and expanded the number of seed words to 12 in each moral dimension in order to better address the changing social context and natural language changes brought about 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 level 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 variances 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 therefore 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 loading on care (*b* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .019]) and fairness (*b* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .019]), supporting H1. Republicans had higher moral loading 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 was very small. The largest difference was in loyalty, and had only a .28 standard deviation. We also tested the association 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 were small.

Chart, bar chart

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

*Note*. Error bars indicate 95%CI. Asterisks (\*) indicate significant differences at α = .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 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 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 being the lowest).

We also found that the first round of debates usually had the highest difference scores (see Figure 2). To test it, we built a two level 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 scoresthan 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]).

Chart, scatter chart

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

In addition, 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 variables. We expected to find significant interactions between year and party, which could indicate whether 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 loadings over time, the pattern in each moral dimension is not clear. The reasons might be: first, we only have 32 debates as variables, limiting the statistic power to detect small effects; and second, the load in some years like 2004, 2008, and 2012 violated the trend found 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.

# A picture containing timeline Description automatically generated

**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 loading and then examines the moral divergence of all the televised United States presidential debates across 13 presidential elections from the first televised presidential debate in 1960 to 2020. It introduces mediatization as a prism through which to eplore presidential debates from an institutional perspective – exploring the “transformative process” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 153) in political institutions caused by the development of media 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). Moreover, by quantitatively exploring how mediatization could have influenced the political debate from a historical perspective, this study overcomes the 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 communication and mediatization literature.

Our results show a moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates, and a significant increase of moral divergence that tracks 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 loading 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 of which liberals are supposed to possess much less moral loading than conservatives because liberals are supposedly less sensitive to these moral foundations than conservatives according to MFT. Our findings shed light on the two fundamental questions that are essential in order that presidential debates better serve our democracy: can Democrat and Republican candidates understand each other and discuss issues together and do they want to understand each other’s positions and discuss them with each other?

**Whether They Could?**

As aforementioned, people may not understand those moral concerns in the moral foundation categories to which they are not innately sensitive, but our results imply that presidential candidates have the ability to overcome this innate obstacle. First, our results show positive relationships among the moral loadings 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 concerns in terms of moral foundations may detect moral concerns from other moral foundations also, if there is enough sensitivity. This raises an interesting question for future research: would this kind of sensitivity compensation happen in other contexts, such as debates in Congress?

Secondly, Democrat candidates’ moral loadings are almost always higher than Republican candidates’ moral loadings across all five moral foundations. This is a very interesting finding that could imply violations of MFT within the context of presidential debates. MFT predicts that liberals would possess higher moral loadings in care and fairness foundations, while conservatives would possess higher moral loading in the other three moral foundations. This prediction has been supported by numerous previous studies (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Fernandes, 2020; Hoover et al., 2018) that examined moral loadings in 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 in their public persona. We leave this interesting question for a future study, as here, we focus only on the point that Democrat candidates did express stronger moral concerns than Republican candidates in moral foundations to which they are supposedly less sensitive than Republicans according to MFT. That is to say, the presidential candidates are capable of understanding and expressing moral concerns 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 loadings 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 moral loading values of Democrats and Republicans were very strong, indicating that there were no substantial discrepancies between presidential debaters and they were able to respond to their rivals’ moral concerns, even moral concerns from their less/non-sensitive moral foundations. A similar finding has been documented by Clifford and Jerit (2013) in the policy debates of stem cell technology. Political elites respond to opponents’ moral concerns with their own moral arguments, and the increase of proponents’ moral loading increased the moral loading of opponents in the same moral foundation. Therefore, the presidential debaters could not only respond to rivals’ moral concerns, but also align the response within the same moral foundation.

In sum, presidential debaters could understand, express, and respond to the moral concerns generated from their own less/non-sensitive moral foundations, which means that they could develop real issue discussion and engage in a real clash over the issues with each other. So, the fundamental question becomes: do they want to?

**Whether They Want to Engage More Forcefully?**

Unfortunately, they may not. As suggested by the scenario discovered by Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979), presidential debaters may respond to questions with their own agenda in mind, that is to say, discussing some issue they want to talk about, no matter whether it is relevant to the questions posed or not. Presidential debaters may respond to moral concerns by elaborating upon their own moral concerns to build their own image rather than engage in or generate real issue discussions, explore possible solutions, or find a way to collaborate with each other.

Our results show that the moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates has been increasingly widening after 1980, reflecting the acceleration of mediatization after the full launch of mediatization around 1980 (Hjarvard, 2013). After 1980, media gained more autonomy as an institution. In other words, media began to focus on following its own valuations, formats, and routines (Kristensen, 2000; Schudson, 1981), which accelerated the integration of media logic into other social spheres (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 since there are only two series of presidential debates before 1980 – 1960 and 1976. So, our results may not represent accurately what happened before 1980.

The increasingly widening moral divergence suggests that mediatization has been exerting an influence on political communication. It implies that political actors would emphasize media logic over political bargaining logic by prioritizing their own issue-stances and moral reasoning – their personalization – in certain circumstances such as presidential debates. This could have both positive and negative effects on democracy. Regarding positive effects, adapting media logic could help the institution of politics attract more media coverage which could lead to more public attention and participation in democracy (i.e., more voters). For example, an election campaign is highly susceptible to mediatization – adapting and internalizing more media logic – because the goal is to involve as many citizens as possible in the democratic process (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014).

As for negative effects, the first would be that the internalization of media logic compels politicians to address the public “in a more popular idiom and to court popular support” (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 220) and therefore entails political populism (Mazzoleni, 2014). Second, media logic orients political decisions towards short-term (i.e. a news cycle) media benefits (will it look good in media) rather than long-term sustainable considerations. Therefore mediatization may limit the possible solutions that the public could be made aware of (Blumler, 2014). For example, the way media interpret the presidential debate could exert a strong influence on the audience’s perception of the candidates (Lowry, Bridges, & Barefield, 1990; McKinnon & Tedesco, 1996; McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993; Steeper, 1978). Politicians have to focus on what media want instead of what society needs in order to be regarded in as promising a way as possible in news coverage.

**The Degree of Mediatization Is Situational**

Although mediatization in politics is inevitable as a long-term social change process, it is situational (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). That is, the degree of mediatization in politics varies according to different contexts and situations. Our results imply that politicians could at least choose how much media logic to adhere to in presidential debates.

We found that the first debate in each election year almost always has the biggest moral divergence. This finding supports Van Aelst et al’s (2014) argument that “politicians react to the media because they want to, not only because they have to” (p. 211). The first debate is more important than the following debates because it usually attracts the highest viewership. Plus, by the time of the second debate, many voters would have already voted. Consequently, image building in the first debate could be more efficient for candidates if they hope to attract ballots. The first debate has the most self-centered speech, and thus the biggest moral divergence. In other words, presidential candidates chose to abide by more media logic in the first round of presidential debates.

It is worth mentioning that it would not be fair to blame the presidential candidates themselves for wanting to internalize media logic because there is a systematic driving force from the political communication system in the United States:

Weakened political parties and image campaigns; technological channel abundance and widespread media use by campaign organizations and voters; journalistic autonomy fostered by an institutional vacuum; a political logic that requires campaigns to use and manage (news) media; a press corps eager to tell stories about a political logic bound to mediation – these and other characteristics signal that the commercial imperatives, production routines, message formats, and narrative interpretations of mass media organizations have moved to the center of the contemporary U.S. presidential election, becoming threaded into the operations of political campaigns and transforming party-based elections into mediatized elections. (D’Angelo, Büchel, & Esser, 2014, p. 160)

Actually, election campaign is highly susceptible to mediatization not only in U.S. but also in other Western democratic systems because those campaigns are highly dependent on involving more citizens to participate (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). Accordingly, presidential debates need to be further explored from an institutional perspective, which could prevent debaters’ moral divergence from being further widened, could minimize personalization caused by mediatization that makes the debate less a debate, help the election campaign focus more on long-term sustainable solutions, and archive more efficient political communication.

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