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

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We do not have any interests that might be interpreted as influencing the research, and APA ethical standards were adhered to in the research process

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# Abstract

Under the theoretical framework of Moral Foundation Theory, this study examined the moral loadings embedded in each televised U.S. presidential debater’s arguments in the five innate moral foundations using DDR, a computational method based on distributed representation. Our results show a significant increase in moral divergence between Democrat and Republican candidates since 1980, and therefore provide a quantitative description (evidence?) of a major challenge that has been faced by televised presidential debates – the lack of real conflict and a discussion of the issues – in terms of moral judgments. Moreover, from a mediatization perspective, media have been systematically changing all social actors’ acting based on media logic and accordingly politicians have prioritized self-image building over political bargaining. So, our results imply that televised presidential debaters have been increasingly focusing on their own issue stances and moral reasoning to build their personal images. On the one hand, this study contributes to the literature by shedding light on the development of ways to encourage more effective political communication. On the other hand, it shows the potential of the distributed representation method, a milestone of machine learning, in future communication explorations.

**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 (Carlin, 1989, 1992b; 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). However, if we use Moral Foundation Theory as a guide (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004), those critiques could have been predictable.

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. Therefore, presidential debaters may have been talking past each other rather than to each other because of their different moral judgments – moral divergence.

According to Heltzel and Laurin (2020), misperception and avoidance have been fueling the rise of polarization in the U.S. However, it is unclear whether the misperception and avoidance between the televised presidential debaters has been widening. Taking the televising context into consideration under the framework of MFT, this study explores the evolution of the moral divergence between presidential debaters from a mediatization perspective. Mediatization discusses how media have been exerting a systematic influence on all social actors’ acting as a social change process (Hjarvard, 2013). Politicians have been more likely to prioritize their personal image building over political bargaining due to the mediatization in politics (Hjarvard, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008). Accordingly, presidential debaters may not be willing to talk to each other because their priority is to talk about themselves for image building. They might have been increasingly focus more on stating their own issue stances and moral reasons rather than discussing other people’s stances and moral reasons, which would entail an increase of their moral judgment difference.

Concretely, this study quantitatively traces the moral judgments of every televised presidential debater’s argument (1960-2020) in each moral foundation over six decades with moral loading, an indicator of moral judgments (Araque et al., 2020; Garten et al., 2018; Hoover et al., 2018). It provides a quantitative description of presidential debaters’ moral judgments using DDR, a computational method based on distributed representation. The longitudinal focus of this study allows for the examination of shifts and evolutions in presidential debaters’ moral divergence. This study sheds light on the development of ways to encourage more effective political communication. Additionally, it demonstrates the potential of applying distributed representation, a milestone of computational methods especially in term of natural language processing, in political communication.

**Literature Review**

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). As 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 Foundation Theory (MFT, Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012) posits that human beings are equipped with 5 innate moral foundations: protecting others and preventing harm (care/harm); ensuring fair distributions of outcomes (fairness/cheating); promoting group interests and loyalty (loyalty/betrayal); respecting authority and hierarchy (authority/subversion); and avoiding disgusting and upholding sacred things (sanctity/degradation); each moral foundation issues snap moral judgments automatically; and those moral judgments would guide human beings judgments of right and wrong. Being concerned with the protection of individual rights and well-being, care/harm, and fairness/cheating are considered individual-focused moral foundations, while being concerned with binding individuals to form stable groups, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation are considered group-focused moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009).

People in different groups have different configurations, or in other words sensitivities – different degrees of endorsement of each moral foundation. This is because According to MFTindividual-focused moral foundationsare more sensitive to group-focused moral foundations. Different sensitivities towards moral foundations could lead to different moral judgments, and different moral judgments 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). Moreover, different moral judgments may lead to moral divergence, a barrier for efficient communication among groups.

***Divergence***

On the one hand, the moral judgments that one group attaches importance to may not be recognized by other groups. Fernades (2020) discovered that people’s engagement in consumer political actions are mainly determined by moral concerns associated with their own sensitive moral foundations: liberals are mainly influenced by individual-focused moral concerns, while conservatives are mainly influenced by group-focused moral concerns. Moreover, different groups may not understand each other’s important moral concerns. 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 may not understand another’s moral concerns if those concerns do not correspond to his/ her sensitive moral foundations.

On the other hand, 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). 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 sum, people may not realize where the focal point of their disagreement is in terms of moral judgments. Without recognizing the moral divergence underpinning different groups’ disagreements, conflicting groups would just focus on their own sensitive moral concerns when discuss with each other. This could greatly impede real issue discussion.

***Moral Judgments in Political Expression***

As 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), they would be traceable 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. 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 expressions.

As a presidential debate is a direct expression of a debater’s political attitude (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990), presidential candidates may focus on and emphasize moral concerns anchored in their own sensitive moral foundations in the debate. As different partisanship loyalties imply different moral foundation configurations (Clifford & Jerit, 2013; Haidt, 2012), we construct our hypotheses as the following:

H1: Comparing with Republican, Democratic presidential candidates (relatively liberal) are more sensitive to individual-focused moral foundations, and therefore they have emphasized more individual-focused moral concerns in their arguments.

H2: Comparing with Democratic, Republican presidential candidates (relatively conservative) are more sensitive to group-focused moral foundations, and therefore they have emphasized more group-focused moral concerns in their arguments.

Televised presidential debates have been criticized for talking past each other for decades (Carlin, 1989, 1992b; Clifford & Jerit, 2013; McKinney & Carlin, 2004), however, it is still unclear how this situation has been evolved over time. According to Mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2013), media have been influencing all social actors’ acting based on media’s valuations, formats, and routines. Therefore, we take the televising context into consideration, and explore the evolution of presidential debaters’ moral divergence from a mediatization perspective.

**The Theory of Mediatization**

addescribes the process that media’s valuations, formats, and routines being absorbed and internalized by other social sectors such as politics, economics, religions, and so forth (Hjarvard, 2013).

As a result of mediatization, social actors outside of media, have to adapt their behavior to accommodate media logic more or less (Hjarvard, 2013).

As an result of mediatization, political actors have become media-driven (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). 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. As a typical and successful media event, televised presidential debates have to be planned and produced media-friendly because they are designed for broadcasting (Dayan & Katz, 1992). The debaters accordingly have to abide by media logic, more or less. Hjarvard summarized politicians changes caused by mediatization as “personalization”, which means building a personal image has become increasingly crucial for politicians (Hjarvard, 2013). So, issues could be mainly used to shape a presidential debater’s personal image (Carlin, 1992a) rather than an opportunity to discuss solutions. Presidential debaters may have been increasingly talking about themselves such as their own stances and moral judgments in order to build personal images. The more they talk about themselves, the less they could respond to and discuss with each other especially within limited time, and therefore the more moral divergence would ensue. Accordingly, we construct our hypotheses as the following:

H3: The moral divergence between Democratic (relatively liberal) and Republican (relatively conservative) presidential candidates has been 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 et al., 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 et al., 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 et al., 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 News corpus.

**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 et al., 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 years were the second level and third level group variables.

Our results show that the intraclass correlations (ICC) in the multilevel model are relatively high at the second (debate rounds; ICC = .343) and third (election years; ICC = .173) level groups. ICC indicates the ratio of the variance within groups to the total variance. ICC of the second level substantial variances in moral loading occurred at the second and third level, 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 the moral loading embedded in donation messages 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.

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]).

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.

# Discussion and Future Direction

This research examines the moral loadings of all televised United States presidential debates across 13 presidential elections, from the first televised presidential debate in 1960 to 2020. It quantitatively descripts presidential debaters’ moral judgments based on Moral Foundation Theory using Natural Language Processing tools based on distributed representation. The moral judgments difference – moral divergence – between the debaters could be an important attributor to one of the major challenges that have been faced by televised presidential debates for decades: the lack of real conflict and a discussion of the issues. On the one hand, this research sheds light on the development of efficient political communication among different groups based on their moral judgments. On the other hand, it shows the potential of distributed representation (a more advanced computational method than word count) in future communication investigations.

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 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 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 televised presidential debates. MFT predicts that liberals would possess higher moral loadings in care and fairness foundations, while conservatives would possess higher moral loadings 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 all debaters 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 their rivals’ moral concerns, but also align their responses within the same moral foundation.

In sum, presidential debaters could understand, express, and respond to the moral concerns corresponding to 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?**

The significant increase of moral loading difference between debaters over time suggests that they may not. It is very interesting that the moral divergence has been widened after decades of democratic discussions that aim to decrease the moral divergence.

Our results show that this moral divergence has been increasingly widening after 1980, which aligns with the acceleration of mediatization after 1980 due to the development of media (Hjarvard, 2013; Kristensen, 2000). In politics, “a growing importance of symbolic politics” since 1980 was found by Kepplinger (2002), which implies that political actors have been forced to accept media logic because of media’s ability to sway the formation of public opinions (p. 972). According to Strömbäck (2008), the more important the symbolic (prioritizing image building) politics is, the more likely politicians would trade off political bargaining logic for media logic. In political debate, the growing importance of symbolic politics could lead to a trend of prioritizing own issue-stances and moral reasoning over issue discussing, and therefore imply a growth of the symbolic politics, as reflected by the increase of moral divergences in our results. In other words, ping anding. From a mediatization perspective, a presidential debater is more likely to focus on personal image building to sway the formation of public’s voting opinion rather than ing

The mediatization in politics could have both positive and negative effects on democracy. Regarding positive effects, adapting media logic could attract more media coverage which would lead to more public attention and participation in democracy (i.e., more voters). For example, election campaigns have been highly susceptible to mediatization, because the goal is to involve as many citizens as possible in the democratic process (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). mediatization may limit the possible solutions that the public could be made aware of (Blumler, 2014) because of two reasons. The f(Lowry et al., 1990; McKinnon & Tedesco, 1996; McKinnon et al., 1993; Steeper, 1978)increasingly Consequently, the more politicians adapted to media, the more they would focus on themselves, the less they could focus on how to collaborate with each other, especially within the limited time of a televised debate, therefore, the more difference among their moral judgments would ensue.

It's worth to mention that mediatization is just one of the attributors of the symbolic politics 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; Carlin et al., 2001). Some scholars mentioned the influence of being televised but without focusing on the underlying reasons. This study echoes their arguments that connected media with debate strategies. For example, McKinney et al. (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). Drawing the increase of moral divergence in the lens of mediatization, this study discusses how and why being televised could influence the presidential debate: debaters would be more motivated to build their personal image than discussing with each other as a result of mediatization, which could be quantitatively reflected by their moral divergence.

**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 et al., 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, televised presidential debates need to be further explored from an mediatization perspective, which could prevent debaters’ moral divergence from being further widened, 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.

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 could not statistically represent accurately what happened before 1980.

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# Table x. Multilevel Regression of Moral Dimensions and Partisanship on Moral Loadings

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variables | b | se | 95% CI |
| Intercept | .438 | .003 | [.432, .443] |
| partyR | -.014 | .003 | [-.02, -.008] |
| moral(betrayal) | -.112 | .003 | [-.117, -.106] |
| moral(care) | .027 | .003 | [.021, .033] |
| moral(cheating) | -.083 | .003 | [-.089, -.078] |
| moral(degradation) | -.113 | .003 | [-.118, -.107] |
| moral(fairness) | -.012 | .003 | [-.018, -.007] |
| moral(harm) | .009 | .003 | [.003, .015] |
| moral(loyalty) | -.014 | .003 | [-.019, -.008] |
| moral(sanctity) | -.117 | .003 | [-.122, -.111] |
| moral(subversion) | -.091 | .003 | [-.097, -.085] |
| party(R) x moral(betrayal) | .014 | .004 | [.006, .022] |
| party(R) x moral(care) | .001 | .004 | [-.007, .009] |
| party(R) x moral(cheating) | .009 | .004 | [.001, .017] |
| party(R) x moral(degradation) | .021 | .004 | [.013, .029] |
| party(R) x moral(fairness) | .001 | .004 | [-.007, .009] |
| party(R) x moral(harm) | .009 | .004 | [.001, .018] |
| party(R) x moral(loyalty) | -.002 | .004 | [-.01, .006] |
| party(R) x moral(sanctity) | .012 | .004 | [.004, .02] |
| party(R) x moral(subversion) | .011 | .004 | [.002, .019] |
|  | ICC (debate rounds) = .343 | | |
|  | ICC (election years) = .173 | | |
|  | N = 680 | | |