# Talking Past Each Other Or To Each Other?

Tracking Moral Foundation 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 want 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 2016. There has been a significant increase of moral divergence since 1980, when mediatization commenced. 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 do not want 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 debates 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 (Carlin, 1989, 1992; McKinney & Carlin, 2004), although there is doubt that presidential debate does serve our democracy well by contributing to a more engaged and better informed electorate (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Unfortunately, those criticism are inevitable from either Moral Foundation Theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) or mediatization theory (S. Hjarvard, 2008; S. P. Hjarvard, 2013) perspective.

Moral Foundation Theory (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. Some people are more sensitive to one or more of these five innate systems. 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 sensitivities across all five dimensions (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

These five moral foundations are like different moral taste receptors embedded in people’s moral tongue, which will sense the moral taste of a person, an event, an organization, and so forth, and therefore determine people’s attitude toward that person, event, organization, and so forth. When talking with each other, conservatives and liberals may only focus on their own sensitive moral foundations rather than trying to understand each other, or in other words, talking past each other rather than talking to each other. For example, describing how wonderful the sweet taste of an ice cream is could be futile to those with obtuse sweet taste buds, because the sweet taste simply does not make much sense to them. However, the ice cream producer, who gets very sensitive sweet taste buds, could not imagine anything more important than the sweet taste. Similarly, during the presidential debates, it’s highly possible that each candidate could not make much sense to his debate opponent and the audience with a different political view (in terms of conservatives and liberals) due to their different moral taste sensitivities and preference, and therefore, the candidate may not be well understood by his/her opponent and the audience with a different political view.

On the other hand, during the debates, presidential candidates may not want to understand and discuss with his opponent according to mediatization theory (S. Hjarvard, 2008; S. P. Hjarvard, 2013). Mediatization theory discusses the process that media logic being internalized by other institutions of our society, such as politics, economy, culture and so forth. As a result of mediatization in politics, politicians have adapted for media logic (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck, Esser, & Lundby, 2009). Personalization has been identified as the major adaption that politicians have made, and it entails that “[performing] their public personas” has been crucial for politicians and politicians are “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion” (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013, pp. 67-69). Therefore, the presidential candidates may not have intentions to develop any real issue discussion in the debate at all. They agree to debate because the presidential debate could serve as a powerful tool for politicians to seize the public’s attention in order to build their public persona.

Drawing upon MFT as our prism, this study aims to explore how presidential candidates adapt for media logic in presidential debate. By bridging MFT and mediatization theory, this study introduces an innovative angle to explore presidential debate: how media logic has been absorbed by politics as a long-term social transformation.

**Literature Review**

**Moral Foundation Theory and Moral Taste Receptor**

Moral Foundation Theory (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)

According to MFT, human beings are innately equipped with five kinds of moral taste receptors as a result of group evolution. Some people are more sensitive or obtuse to one or more of these five innate systems. For example, 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 tastes (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Each kind of moral taste or each moral foundation has two opposite dimensions: virtue (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity) and vice (harm, cheating, betrayal, subversion, and degradation).

Moral foundation plays a very important role in the formation of public opinions such as political attitudes and appeals to public’s sensitive moral foundations could lead to very efficient communication. Koleva et al. (2012) found that endorsement of the five moral foundations underpin “culture war [such as abortion, gun control, death penalty, and similar controversial issues] attitudes” and “[could predict] judgments about these issues over and above ideology, age, gender, religious attendance, and interest in politics” (p. 184). Fernades (2020) discovered that liberals and conservatives’ engagement in consumer political actions are influenced by their unique moral sensitivities in each dimension: liberals are influenced mainly by care/harm and fairness/cheating moral concerns while conservatives are influenced mainly by loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation moral concerns. Hoover et at. (2018) claimed “consistent positive associations between moral care and loyalty framing [of social media messages] the with donation sentiment and donation motivation” (p. 1). In sum, addressing audience’s sensitive moral foundations could result in more efficient communication, but what if a conservative politician has to address some loyalty moral concerns to liberals? Those concerns are so important to conservatives whose loyalty moral taste buds are much more well developed and sensitive than liberals’.

According to Haidt and Graham (2007), liberals may not understand those loyalty moral concerns at all. They found that “political liberals have moral intuitions primarily based upon the first two foundations [which are care and fairness], and therefore misunderstand the moral motivations of political conservatives, who generally rely upon all five foundations” (Haidt & Graham, 2007, p. 98). Therefore, liberals and conservatives may not be able to develop thorough issue discussions because they lack the ability to understand each other. Implications for the problem of talking past each other instead of to each other may help to explain the lack of real clash and issue discussion (Carlin, 1989, 1992) in presidential debates.

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). A few studies explored how “political elites play in facilitating moral reasoning” during the policy debate (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 660). Clifford and Jerit (2013) found liberals and conservatives “used distinctive patterns of moral words in an effort to influence the public” in stem cell research policy debate (p. 669). Lewis (2019) found that “republican candidates [conservatives’ representatives] were more likely to use negative-valence moral terminology” (p. 1). In sum, politicians’ moral concerns are traceable as they are embedded in their political attitude expressions.

There has been rare examination of the divergence when political elites “play in facilitating moral reasoning”, while the difference of moral foundation sensitivities has greatly attributed to the polarization of our society, especially for political attitude in a bi-party environment such as the United States (Haidt, 2012; Koleva et al., 2012). We wonder, when “facing” tens of millions United States electorate of the televised presidential debates, could the candidates overcome their personal moral foundation sensitivity differences, understand their opponents’ different moral concerns, and develop real discussion with each other in order to find a solution for the society? Accordingly, here comes our research question:

RQ1: How did each party’s presidential candidates facilitate moral reasoning during the presidential debates, especially in terms of diverging/converging the moral foundation difference?

According to mediatization theory, unfortunately, the candidates may not want to understand their opponents’ different moral concerns or develop real discussions with each other when “facing” tens of millions of the viewers during televised presidential debates.

## **The Theory of Mediatization**

According to Hjarvard (2013), the founder of mediatization theory, as media gradually developed into a semi-independent social institution around 1980, media logic was integrated into other social institutions such as politics, economy, cultural, and so forth. Through the process of mediatization, “players in many different sectors have to adapt their behavior to accommodate the media’s valuations, formats, and routines” (S. P. 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.

How has politics been mediatized then? First, politicians began to abide by the media logic. Stromback et al. (2009) discovered that mediatization incentivized political actors “increasing their efforts and skills at political public relations and news management or by adopting and internalizing media logic in their own thinking and behavior”(p. 220). Mazzoleni (2008) found that mediatization in politics has put media into the central position of election campaigns, and made political actors media-driven. Bastien (2018) examined the presidential debates in Canada over 40 years (1968-2008) and found that the presidential debaters incorporated the style of how media cover topics into their own discourse.

Second, political actors’ efforts of adapting media logic enable “media-conscious politicians” (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016, p. 391) to mediatize for their own political purposes, for example legitimizing their own political agenda by influencing journalists’ agenda, and approaching the populist style (Birkner, 2015; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). Both social institutions such as politics and social actors need to “seek publicity in order to achieve authority” (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013, p. 45), while televised presidential debates could serve as a great tool for presidential candidates’ own political agenda: allowing them to seize the public’s attention, legitimize their voice, amplify their message, and in sum, make efficient and fruitful communication with the public.

Hjarvard (2013) summarized the change of political mediatization as “personalization” which entails that performing public persona became crucial for politicians and politicians are “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion”(p. 69), because news media connect political actors to the public and other political actors, increase the visibility of political actors, and alter the performing requirements for the political actors. There are findings that manifesting politicians’ personalization in presidential debates research also. McKinney, Dudash, and Hodgkinson (2003) found that “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). Lanoue and Schrott (1991) argued that “[presidential debate] viewers are far more likely to use debates to gain insight into each candidate’s personality and character…A superior ‘personal’ presentation appears to be more important to voters than accumulation of issue-oriented debating ‘points’”(p. 96). Levasseur and Dean (1996) found “ higher rates of factual evidence can lower a [president] candidate’s perceived effectiveness in a [presidential] debate”(p. 140). Drawing upon Goffman’s (1973) theater model of social interaction, Hjarvard (2013) further explained the mechanism of political personalization.

Goffman’s (1973) theater model of social interaction states that social interaction is governed by role-playing and differentiates social actors’ performances as “backstage” and “front stage”. In “backstage,” politicians may take off their suits and discuss policies more tediously with no sound bites, which does not adhere to the dictates of media logic. While politicians’ “front stage” performances, such as televised presidential debates, is dominated by media logic – carefully scripted remarks and well-planned gestures in front of the camera and the public. In “front stage” performances, heuristic cues, such as emotion appeals, and the attractiveness of the politician could be much more persuasive than the quality of his/her political arguments, which would incentivize presidential candidates focusing more on their images rather than issues.

Therefore, from a presidential debater’s perspective the debates may mainly be about seeking publicity in order to achieve authority by building each candidate’s own personal image. The presidential debaters may lack of intentions to either understand the public’s different moral concerns or develop a real discussion with their opponents, and accordingly increasingly focus on their own sensitive moral concerns. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

Since mediatization commenced around 1980 (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013),

H1: The moral foundations divergence in presidential debates between Republican presidential candidates (representing conservatives) and Democrat presidential candidates (representing liberals) has been increased.

H2: Democrat candidates have increasingly focus on care and fairness, the two moral foundations that liberals are more sensitive than conservatives.

H3: Comparing with Democrats, Republican candidates have increasingly focused on loyalty, authority, and sanctity, the three moral foundations that conservatives are more sensitive than liberals.

**Method**

This study conducted an automated content analysis to examine the moral load of each presidential candidate’s full transcript in 33 televised presidential debates of 12 presidential elections (1960-2016). Analyzing the use of language is an unobtrusive and efficient way to examine people’s different moral sensitivities (Lewis, 2019) 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 five kinds of moral loads 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 candidates (relatively conservative) and Democrat candidates (relatively liberal) began to debate in every election year. There are 12 series of presidential debates between 1960 to 2016 and 33 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. 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).

On the other hand, Moral Foundation Dictionary (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) 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). While DDR may overcome these two challenges because it measures similarity: if no exact same word in the dictionary could be found in a text due to language habit or context difference, Distributed Representations would find similar words of the dictionary words (seed words) by converting both dictionary words and text words to space vectors, and then, DDR would still be able to measure how similar this text is to the dictionary words.

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 that were posted between 10/16/2012 and 11/05/2012 and related to Hurricane Sandy, if the seed words were converted to vectors based on Google News corpus. This 4-seed-word DDR was 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 context. Plus, people’s language habit has also changed a lot over the 50 years (1960-2016). Therefore, this study adopted DDR and expanded the number of seed words to 12 (listed in Table 1) in each moral foundation in order to better address the change 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.

**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 = .32) and third level (ICC = .12), 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 five 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* = .012, 95%CI = [.006, .018]), fairness (*b* = .012, 95%CI = [.006, .018]), authority (*b* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .018]), and loyalty (*b* = .015, 95%CI = [.010, .021]), but lower loading on degradation (*b* = -.008, 95%CI = [-.013, -.002]). 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* = .987, 95%CI = [.963, 1.010], 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*(30) = 2.19, *p* = .036, *R2* = 13.8%). 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, *R2* = 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 = .77), 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 higher difference score than other rounds of debates (Round 2: *b* = -.036, 95%CI = [-.042, -0.029]; Round 3: *b* = -.010, 95%CI = [-.017, -.003]; Round 4: *b* = -.045, 95%CI = [-.063, -.028]).

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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, *R2* = 48.2%; care: *b* = .002, *t*(21) = 7.46, *p* < .001, *R2* = 72.6%; fairness: *b* = .002, *t*(21) = 4.37, *p* < .001, *R2* = 47.6%; loyalty: *b* = .002, *t*(21) = 3.21, *p* = .004, *R2* = 33.0%; subversion: *b* = .001, *t*(21) = 2.66, *p* = .015, *R2* = 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 12 presidential elections since the first televised presidential debate from 1960 to 2016. 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 debate carried more moral load than their Republican rivals across all five moral foundations, even in loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, ~~and sanctity/degradation~~, 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 (S. P. 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 (S. P. 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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