# Talking Past Each Other Or To Each Other?

Tracking Moral Foundation Divergence in Presidential Debate Over 40 Years

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# Key Words

Presidential Debate, Moral Foundation Theory, Mediatization,

**Introduction**

Televised presidential debate has been criticized for lack of real clash, failed to develop real issue discussion, too much focus on candidates’ image instead of issue discussion (Carlin, 1989, 1992), although there is no question 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 (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) or mediatization (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 libertarian 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 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, 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 preference.

On the other hand, during the debates, president 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. Hjarvard (2013) found it has been crucial for politicians to “perform their public personas” (p. 67) and politicians “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion” (p. 69), which manifests the mediatization in politics – politicians began to abide by media logic. Therefore, the candidates may not have intentions to develop any real issue discussion in debate at all. They agree to debate because presidential debate offers a perfect tool for both politicians and media 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 president candidates adapted for media since the commence of mediatization around 1980. By bridging MFT and mediatization theory, this study introduces an innovative angel to explore presidential debate as an indicator showing long-term social transformations – how media interacting with politics.

**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 six 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 libertarian 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).

Moral foundations play a very important role in the formation of public opinion including political attitudes and appeals to public’s sensitive moral foundation could lead to more 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 and fairness moral concerns while conservatives are influenced mainly by loyalty, authority, and sanctity 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 efficient communication, but what if a conservative politician has to address some loyalty moral concerns to liberals? As those concerns are so important to conservatives whose loyalty moral taste buds are much more well developed 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, and therefore misunderstand the moral motivations of political conservatives, who generally rely upon all five foundations.” (p. 98) Therefore, liberals and conservatives may not able to talk at some moral foundations because they lack the ability to understand each other. Implications for the problem of talking past each other instead of to each other may 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” (p. 1031): liberals talk more about care and fairness considerations, while conservatives emphasize on loyalty considerations. Moral foundation sensitivity difference has been attributed to the polarization of our society, especially for political attitude in a bi-party environment such as the United State (Haidt, 2012; Koleva et al., 2012). A few studies explored how “political elites play in facilitating moral reasoning” (Clifford & Jerit, 2013, p. 660) during the policy debate. Clifford and Jerit found (2013) 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 found (2019) that “republican candidates [conservatives’ representatives] were more likely to use negative-valence moral terminology” (p. 1). However, there has been rare examination of the divergence when political elites paly in facilitating moral reasoning. We wonder, when “facing” tens of millions U.S. electorate in televised presidential debates, could the candidates overcome their personal moral foundation sensitivity differences, understand their opponents’ different moral concerns, 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 president candidates play in facilitating moral reasoning during the presidential debates 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, develop real discussion with each other when “facing” tens of millions U.S. electorate in televised presidential debates.

## **The Theory of Mediatization**

According to Hjarvard (2013), 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 media institutions, but also shapes how other institutions function.

How politics has been mediatized then? 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”. Mazzoleni (2008) found that mediatization in politics has put media into the central position of election campaign, and made political actors media-driven. On the other hand, 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). While, in televised debates, what are president candidates’ political purposes besides persuading electorate to vote for themselves? In other words, what are president candidates’ mediatized political strategy to attract more votes?

In the process of mediatization process, 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, which led to the personalization of politics (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013). According to S. P. Hjarvard (2013) Political personalization has two major characteristics, and the first is that performing public persona has become crucial for politicians. Goffman’s (1973) theater model of social interaction, which states that social interaction is governed by role-playing and differentiates social actors’ performances as “backstage” and “front stage,” may offer a clear illustration of politician’s performance of public persona. 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 debate, is dominated by media logic – carefully scripted remarks and well-planned gestures in front of the camera and the public. Both social institutions such as politics and media outlets need to “seek publicity in order to achieve authority” (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013, p. 45). While televised presidential debates served as such a great “front stage” for president candidates to seize the public’s attention, legitimize their voice, amplify their message, and communicate with the public, that each candidate would make the most use of it. Therefore, president candidates agree to attend televised debate with their own political purpose: building their own public personas. In other words, they attract votes by building their personal images as an inevitable outcome of mediatization in politics. In other words, the president candidates may lack of intentions to either understand the public’s different moral concerns or develop a real discussion with their opponents. They debate for their own images, which entails that the debate is more about the candidates themselves rather than other people.

The second characteristic of political personalization is that politicians “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion” (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013, p. 69). 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 president candidates focusing more on their images rather than issues, accordingly, focusing more on their own sensitive moral concerns rather than trying to understand each other. Thus, we propose following hypnoses:

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

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

H2: Democrats 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 focus 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 president candidate’s full speech in presidential debates over 40 years (1976-2016). 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 was adopted to examine the five kinds of moral load embedded each president candidate’s speech in each debate.

**Data**

The first televised presidential debate was held in 1960 and resumed in 1976, since when both Republican candidate (conservative) and Democrats candidate (liberal) began to debate in every election year. As we want to track the moral divergence caused by mediatization while mediatization commenced around 1980 according to Hjarvard (2013), the founder of the mediatization theory, we focused on the 11 series presidential debates between 1976 to 2016. The number of debates in each series varies from 1 to 3 and there are 29 debates in total. The unit of analysis is what each candidate said 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 develop for decades to help computer better understand our natural language and therefore, 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 computer 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) and its algorithm is based on word count. For natural language analysis, word count method faces two major challenges: the variety of context and the dynamic of language, because no dictionary could fully cover 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 word of the dictionary word (seed word) 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 posted between 10/16/2012 and 11/05/2012 and related to Hurricane Sandy, if the seed words are 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 president debate ­– election ­has different context. Plus, people’s language habit has also changed over the 40 years (1976-2016). Therefore, this study adopted DDR and expanded the number of seed word to 12 in each moral foundation in order to better adapt the change brough by time. The seed words were randomly selected from MFD and listed in Table 1. And Google New corpus was adopted for vectorization of each word.

**Results**

First, we analyzed how Democrats generally differ from Republicans in moral dimensions. We built a three levels random intercept multi-level model by using *lme4* (). 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. Each round of debates and each election year were the second level and third level group variables.

Our results show that substantial variance in moral loading occurs 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 are substantially correlated, suggesting that individuals are likely to simultaneously invoke several moral domains. 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 (*β* = .012, 95%CI = [.006, .018]), fairness (*β* = .012, 95%CI = [.006, .018]), authority (*β* = .013, 95%CI = [.007, .018]), and loyalty (*β* = .015, 95%CI = [.010, .021]), but lower loading on degradation (*β* = -.008, 95%CI = [-.013, -.002]).

Chart, bar chart

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*Figure 1 Moral loadings on ten moral dimensions.*

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

Hypothesis 1 proposes that the moral foundations divergence in presidential debates between Republican president candidates and Democratic president candidates has increased 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-year (*b* = .005, *t*(30) = 2.19, *p* = .036, *R2* = 13.8%). We noticed that 2012 is special. Its mean total moral loading difference of three debates 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%).

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 occurs 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: *β* = -.036, 95%CI = [-.042, -0.029]; Round 3: *β* = -.010, 95%CI = [-.017, -.003]; Round 4: *β* = -.045, 95%CI = [-.063, -.028]).

Chart, scatter chart

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We further 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 two parties (two lines) diverged after 1976 but then merged again in 2004. If we excluded these three years, we could get significant interaction effects for care, fairness, cheating, and authority.

# A picture containing timeline Description automatically generated

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