# Talking Past Each Other Or To Each Other?

Tracking Moral Foundation Divergence In Presidential Debate Over 40 Years

Mengyao Xu, Lingshu Hu

Missouri School of Journalism

# 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 dimensions rather than trying to understand each other, or in other words, talking pass 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 audience with a different political view (in terms of conservatives and liberals), including his debate opponent also.

On the other hand, during the debates, president candidates may not want to understand and discuss with people (including his debate opponent) with a different political view 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.

This study aims to explore how presidential debates have been mediatized since the first televised presidential debate (1960) till 2016 drawing upon MFT as a prism. This study is the first that bridges MFT and mediatization, which allows us to explore presidential debates 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). It’s obvious that 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) Implications for the problem of talking past each other instead of to each other may offer opportunities for more pointed and substantive communication that leads to difficult but fruitful conversations. 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). However, could the political elites overcome their personal moral foundation sensitivity differences, understand their opponents’ different moral concerns, develop real discussion with each other, and find a solution for our society?

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). While there has been rare examination of the divergence when political elites paly in facilitating moral reasoning. Therefore, here comes our research question:

RQ1: How the president candidates play in facilitating moral reasoning during the presidential debates in terms of diverging/converging the moral foundation difference?

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. Would time make any difference among all televised presidential debates? The second research question came as following:

RQ2: Have president candidates’ moral reasoning changed since 1960 and how?

We resort the mediatization theory to explore our research questions.

## **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.

According to Hjarvard (2013) one major change in mediatization of politics is that performing public persona has become crucial for politicians, and accordingly politicians “prone to make use of rhetorical pathos than the often logos-driven discussion” (p. 69). This is 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 (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013). 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. Televised debate serves as such a great “front stage” to seize the public’s attention in order to legitimize their voice and amplify their message communicate with the public, that each candidate would make the most use of it.

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. Therefore, 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 rather focus on their own sensitive moral concerns to build their own public persona. Accordingly, we propose following hypnoses:

H1: The moral foundations divergence in presidential debates between Republican president candidates (representing conservatives) and Democrats presidents candidates (representing liberals) has increased since mediatization started around 1980 (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013).

H2: Republican candidates focused

H3:

**Method**

there has been little examination of the role

contemporary political elites play in facilitating moral

reasoning.

moral rhetoric has had a substantial effect on

public attitudes regarding the fundamental considerations underpinning the debate.

oral

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). However, could the United State leaders overcome their own moral foundation sensitivity differences, understand their opponents’ different moral concerns, develop real discussion with each other, and find a solution for our society?

political di and find a

ations related to care and fairness, whereas conservatives are

more likely to emphasize the moral foundation of loyalty

Moral foundations theory (MFT) suggests that individuals on the political left draw upon moral intuitions relating primarily to *care*and *fairness*, whereas conservatives are more motivated than liberals by *authority*, *ingroup*, and *purity* concerns. The theory of conservatism as motivated social cognition (CMSC) suggests that conservatives are more attuned than liberals to threat and to negative stimuli.

It is the first study to explore presidential debate from a mediatization perspective and operationalize moral foundation Load as a key indicator of mediatization. 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).

My hypothesis: presidential candidates’ response to the same question by focusing on different moral foundations. Since 1980, when the mediatization began (S. P. Hjarvard, 2013), the proportion of them communicating on the same moral foundation has been decreasing.

I am teaming up with Hu, Lingshu who is also a PhD student form Journalism School and will help me with the programming and quantitative analysis. We are doing a pilot this week and we may not be able to analyze all the data for my final, but we’ll be able to finish enough data to support or reject our hypothesis.

**Research Design**

This study will conduct a computerized content analysis to examine moral load in presidential debates over 60 years. Content analysis has been widely used in communication studies (Lacy, Watson, Riffe, & Lovejoy, 2015, p. 78) because it allows researchers to use statistical models “to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014, p. 57). In the case of this study, content analysis allows us to measure the moral load of each candidate’s speech during the debates in each moral foundation, situate them into our theoretical framework, and link them to a broader context of mediatization.

**Data Collection**

The unit of analysis is each candidates’ full response to each question or topic that the moderator threw out. The scripts of the presidential debates were accessed through [www.debates.org](http://www.debates.org). The population of our study includes candidates’ response to moderators’ questions that were replied by both candidates during the debates from 1960 to 2020.

**Measurement**

We will adopt the moral rhetorical measure package (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014) which is developed based on Moral Foundation Dictionary (MFD) and Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) (Deerwester, Dumais, Furnas, Landauer, & Harshman, 1990; Landauer & Dumais, 1997). MFD is a keyword-based instrument to measure the moral load of the whole text in each moral dimension. It is similar to Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015) which is one of the most popular keyword-based computerized content analysis tools. Sagi and Dehghani (2014) upgraded MFD with LSA, one of the most popular models to detect how relevant is the text with a certain topic:

In particular we measure the similarity of the contexts in which specific keywords appear to the contexts in which words from the Moral foundation Dictionary appear. Our measure of moral loading is then based on this similarity - the more similar the contexts of a particular keyword to those of the words associated with a specific moral dimension, the higher the loading on that dimension. (Sagi & Dehghani, 2014, p. 135)

The package enables us to fucus on moral loads of text that are relevant to moderator’s question, although the candidates may insert other topics from their own agenda instead of answering the moderator’s question (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979).

**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

Description automatically generated

*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

Description automatically generated

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

# References

Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1979). *Media Logic*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1988). Toward a theory of mediation. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 11*(1), 194-223.

Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1991). *Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Carlin, D. P. (1989). A defense of the “debate” in presidential debates. *The Journal of the American Forensic Association, 25*(4), 208-213.

Carlin, D. P. (1992). Presidential debates as focal points for campaign arguments.

Clifford, S., & Jerit, J. (2013). How words do the work of politics: Moral foundations theory and the debate over stem cell research. *The Journal of Politics, 75*(3), 659-671.

Deerwester, S., Dumais, S. T., Furnas, G. W., Landauer, T. K., & Harshman, R. (1990). Indexing by latent semantic analysis. *Journal of the American society for information science, 41*(6), 391-407.

Ekström, M., Fornäs, J., Jansson, A., & Jerslev, A. (2016). Three tasks for mediatization research: Contributions to an open agenda. *Media, culture & society, 38*(7), 1090-1108.

Fernandes, D. (2020). Politics at the Mall: The Moral Foundations of Boycotts. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39*(4), 494-513.

Goffman, E. (1973). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Woodstock, New York Overlook Press.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 47, pp. 55-130): Elsevier.

Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*: Vintage.

Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research, 20*(1), 98-116.

Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus, 133*(4), 55-66.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The mediatization of society. *Nordicom review, 29*(2), 102-131.

Hjarvard, S. P. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hoover, J., Johnson, K., Boghrati, R., Graham, J., & Dehghani, M. (2018). Moral framing and charitable donation: Integrating exploratory social media analyses and confirmatory experimentation. *Collabra: Psychology, 4*(1).

Jackson-Beeck, M., & Meadow, R. G. (1979). The triple agenda of presidential debates. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 43*(2), 173-180.

Koleva, S. P., Graham, J., Iyer, R., Ditto, P. H., & Haidt, J. (2012). Tracing the threads: How five moral concerns (especially Purity) help explain culture war attitudes. *Journal of Research in Personality, 46*(2), 184-194.

Kraft, P. W. (2018). Measuring morality in political attitude expression. *The Journal of Politics, 80*(3), 1028-1033.

Lacy, S., Watson, B. R., Riffe, D., & Lovejoy, J. (2015). Issues and best practices in content analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 92*(4), 791-811.

Landauer, T. K., & Dumais, S. T. (1997). A solution to Plato's problem: The latent semantic analysis theory of acquisition, induction, and representation of knowledge. *Psychological review, 104*(2), 211.

Lewis, P. G. (2019). Moral Foundations in the 2015-16 US Presidential Primary Debates: The Positive and Negative Moral Vocabulary of Partisan Elites. *Social Sciences, 8*(8), 233.

McKinney, M. S., & Carlin, D. B. (2004). Political campaign debates. *Handbook of political communication research*, 203-234.

Pennebaker, J. W., Boyd, R. L., Jordan, K., & Blackburn, K. (2015). *T​he Development and Psychometric Properties of LIWC2015*. Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin.

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F. (2014). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (2 ed.). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Sagi, E., & Dehghani, M. (2014). Measuring moral rhetoric in text. *Social science computer review, 32*(2), 132-144.

Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics. *The international journal of press/politics, 13*(3), 228-246.