

Politicizing Mindshaping

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Abstract

To better navigate social interactions, we routinely (consciously or unconsciously) categorize people based on their distinctive features. One important way we do this is by ascribing political orientations to them. For example, based on certain behavioral cues, we might perceive someone as politically liberal, progressive, conservative, libertarian, Marxist, anarchist, or fascist. Although such ascriptions may appear to be mere descriptions, I argue that they can have deeper, regulative effects on their targets, potentially politicizing and polarizing them in ways that remain underexplored in research on political polarization. To capture this dynamic, I introduce the notion of ‘politicizing mindshaping,’ distinguish it from other types of politicization, and review evidence suggesting that politicizing mindshaping is likely common. Finally, I contend that the pernicious effects of politicizing mindshaping may currently be significantly underestimated. This is because, unlike in many other cases of social labeling, negativity in political labeling is, to some extent, widely tolerated – even encouraged – and largely unconstrained by social norms in democratic countries.

Keywords: mindshaping; politicization; behavioral confirmation; polarization

1. Introduction

People are often not indifferent to how they are classified, labeled, or perceived by others. When we ascribe psychological or behavioral characteristics to individuals, in some cases, this might lead them to change in ways that confirm our ascriptions to them (Hacking, 2006). Here are three examples:

- (1) A teacher (falsely) believes a particular student's academic performance is above average and so gives him challenging material, encourages him, and communicates high expectations. Because of that, the student increases his efforts, gradually resulting in exceptional performance.
- (2) A colleague (falsely) believes you are angry with her, which leads her to begin avoiding you, leading you to start getting angry with her.
- (3) Being told that black people are predisposed to crime, a young black man starts thinking "So I'm a born criminal! No use in even trying to stay away from the things I'm told not to do", which predisposes him to committing crimes (Hacking, 2004, p. 298).

When ascriptions of psychological or behavioral features to people elicit conformist responding and so regulate individuals' actions or thinking such that they align with the expectations related to the ascriptions, this has been called 'mindshaping' in philosophy (Mameli, 2001; Zawidzki, 2013).¹

Philosophical contributions on mindshaping have so far predominantly focused on questions related to the function of psychological ascriptions (e.g., explanation, prediction, manipulation of behavior) (for a critical discussion, see Peters, 2019). However, recently, several philosophers have also turned their attention to the ethical and political consequences of mindshaping. Specifically, they have highlighted the harm caused by gender, racial, or ethnic stereotypes, which may lead to ascriptions of negative traits to members of certain groups (e.g., being less competent, violent, submissive). These ascriptions can produce expectations and social pressure on targets (e.g., women, African Americans) to conform, thereby reinforcing unjust aspects of social environments and the political status quo (Haslanger, 2019; McGeer, 2019; Maiese, 2022).

Highlighting these political implications of mindshaping is important. However, alongside ascriptions of gender, race,² or ethnicity, ascriptions of *political orientations* may result in politically relevant mindshaping too – a phenomenon that has gone largely unnoticed in the philosophical literature on mindshaping. Political orientations are what individuals would, if asked, report as their system of social, political, and economic beliefs, attitudes, or values about the proper functioning and organization of society (Jost et al., 2009).

¹ The term is sometimes used more broadly for any kind of change in a person's mindset. On this view, simply telling a person *S* that *p* (e.g., in educational settings) could count as shaping *S*'s mind if the testimony leads *S* to believe that *p*. However, if mindshaping is construed this broadly, we risk overlooking the distinctiveness of the cases illustrated in (1)-(3) in which the regulation of *S*'s action and thinking happens *indirectly* (e.g., via the ascription of the belief that *p* versus, e.g., teaching that *p*). I will thus use 'mindshaping' only to refer to these indirect effects.

² I use the term 'race' to refer to socially constructed categories.

Two internationally common political orientations that people often report or ascribe are the *left-wing* orientation, including, for instance, progressive, liberal, Democratic, Labour, or Marxist viewpoints, and the *right-wing* orientation, including, for instance, conservative, Republican, libertarian, or fascist viewpoints (Heywood, 2015). Despite national differences, globally, people with left-wing orientations are thought to believe in social progress, economic equality, personal freedom (e.g., on gender identity or abortion), workers' right, public welfare, environmentalism (e.g., combatting climate change), internationalism, and state intervention to help the poor. In contrast, people with right-wing orientations are thought to more strongly believe in and value tradition (the status quo and social stability), free market capitalism (i.e., weak state interference in the economy), personal responsibility (versus state provision), strong law enforcement to maintain social order, national sovereignty (stricter policies on immigration), patriotism, and meritocracy (Rosas & Ferreira, 2013; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018).

Both orientations are diverse (ranging from slightly to extremely left-wing or right-wing viewpoints) and multi-dimensional (Jost et al., 2009). One might be socially left-wing (e.g., favour abortion rights) but economically right-wing (e.g., reject state interventions in the economy), or socially right-wing (e.g., reject abortion rights) but economically left-wing (e.g., endorse state interventions into the economy) (Crawford et al., 2017).

Regardless of these complexities, which make the left versus right dichotomy a simplification of political reality, what matters here in the context of mindshaping is that people *do* frequently label each other as left-wing, progressive, liberal, right-wing, conservative, and so on. Indeed, whether people we meet are “engines of change or preservers of the status quo” is thought to be one of the most “fundamental dimensions on which [we] spontaneously distinguish social groups” and individuals (Koch et al., 2016, p. 702).

This distinction and the related political ascriptions may happen even after observing only a single behavioral cue, and it often has important implications. For instance, if you claim abortion is murder (climate change is a hoax, immigrants harm the economy, etc.), people may swiftly perceive you as conservative and treat you accordingly. Conservatives may welcome you. Progressives may try to avoid you. Unsurprisingly, then, political actors often use, exaggerate, and exploit these binary political labels for people to mobilize and instil loyalty in individuals through creating ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narratives (Javanbakht, 2019). Ascriptions of political orientations may thus have some of the most problematic mindshaping effects.

However, while there is much research in psychology on how our political conceptions about people affect our social interactions (Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020), their potential mindshaping effects remain underexplored. The goal here is to help rectify this by analyzing the notion that we may confer, extend, or reinforce political views through attributing them and the related attitudes, values, or traits to people. I begin by distinguishing this notion from different concepts of politicization that may be used in the context of mindshaping. I then review evidence that suggests that this kind of mindshaping is likely common, especially in democratic countries, and can exacerbate political polarization in seemingly innocuous ways because, unlike in many

other cases of social labeling, negative political stereotypes are widely tolerated in these countries, even encouraged, and largely unconstrained by social norms.

Two clarifications are in order. First, many political orientations fall outside the broad two types outlined above. I am here focusing only on left-wing and right-wing orientations because they are very common and well-studied (Jost et al., 2009; Heywood, 2005). Second, when speaking of left-wing, right-wing, liberals, conservatives, and so on, I do not mean to refer to fixed, clearly demarcated, homogenous groups but to groups of heterogenous individuals presenting with relatively stable but fluid, interconnected, internationally diverse political beliefs, attitudes, and values.

2. Types of politicization and their relation to mindshaping

There are different notions of politicization. I begin by introducing the here most relevant one related to mindshaping and then distinguish it from other notions.

The key idea is that categorizing people politically may itself be a political act if it instils or promotes certain political values in people. Such categorizations can then themselves be viewed as *politicizing* based on the dictionary definition of “politicize”, meaning “to make something or someone political, or more involved in or conscious of political matters” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Correspondingly, the process of conferring, reinforcing, or changing political views in people through attributing political orientations and the related attitudes, values, or traits to them can be construed as *politicizing mindshaping*.

Before introducing examples of politicizing mindshaping, since ‘politicization’ is a loaded notion (Lyons et al., 1977), it is useful to distinguish the politicization involved in politicizing mindshaping from three other kinds. These are what national security researchers have called (1) *partisan politicization*, i.e., the process in which an issue has “become a point of contention” between political groupings, (2) *analytic politicization*, i.e., the “distortion of analysis by setting aside or otherwise failing to meet the standards of objectivity in setting forth information and judgments in order to support a world view or policy preference” (Marrin, 2013, p. 33), and what can be called (3) *descriptive politicization*, i.e., the process of relating the political dimension to a field of research and exploring whether differences in political orientations may produce or account for variations in responding to psychological tasks. To indicate how these three notions might bear on mindshaping, I will briefly outline some connections.

Partisan politicization. Mindshaping can be a point of contention between left-wing and right-wing theorists. Members of the first group may view the socially constructive character of social cognition and its economic and political background as a primary, powerful cause of social injustices because the regulative dimension of, for instance, negative social stereotypes is thought to reinforce unjust inequalities, sexism, and racism (Haslanger, 2019; McGeer, 2019; Maiese, 2022). In contrast, right-wing theorists may view indirect mindshaping effects of social conceptions as less powerful or negative in causing social inequalities³ because these theorists generally treat the

³ While being skeptical about indirect mindshaping effects of negative stereotypes, many conservatives do, however, also emphasize and often advocate explicit (conservative) value-based education to

individual as more responsible for their situation than the socioeconomic conditions (Schlenker et al., 2012). This potential clash of political orientations is illustrated in the related debate in psychology on self-fulfilling prophecies and the accuracy of stereotypes. Right-wing theorists tend to emphasize the weakness of self-fulfilling prophecies and accuracy of stereotypes (Jussim, 2012) whereas left-wing theorists highlight the (potentially accumulative) strength of self-fulfilment effects and frequent inaccuracy of stereotypes (Mallon, 2018; Peters, 2020). While the term ‘mindshaping’ isn’t used in this debate, the debate (see, e.g., Jussim, 2017) suggests that the phenomenon that this term refers to can be a point of contention between researchers of different political convictions.

Analytic politicization. If different political orientations can lead to different views of, for instance, the power or direction of mindshaping, there might also be cases in which researchers consciously or unconsciously engage in a “distortion of analysis by setting aside or otherwise failing to meet the standards of objectivity in setting forth information and judgments in order to support a world view or policy preference” (Marrin, 2013, p. 33). For instance, an egalitarian outlook may lead theorists to primarily only survey empirical studies that suggest that negative social stereotypes have strong mindshaping effects and to overlook evidence that speaks against such effects. Conversely, a conservative outlook may lead theorists to primarily only survey studies that suggest that negative stereotypes have weak mindshaping effects and accurately represent states of affairs. To what extent such cases of analytic politicization occur in research on mindshaping remains to be investigated.

Descriptive politicization. People of different political orientations may engage differently in social categorization (Stern, 2022), affecting mindshaping. Studies found that while “liberals tended to focus on the moral principle of care/harm”, i.e., the ability to feel and be disturbed by others’ pain, “conservatives tended to emphasize individual responsibility”, which “may constrain how compassion is expressed” (Cameron & Rapier, 2017, p. 391), suggesting that the two political orientations can support different attribution styles. Specifically, it is thought that “liberals often attribute external causes to people’s plight (e.g., perceive unjust social practices and structures as causes of poverty) and feel more sympathy toward them, while conservatives attribute internal causes (e.g., perceive laziness and drug use as causes of poverty) and feel less sympathy” (Hasson et al., 2018, p. 1450). If such attributions become self-fulfilling, political differences in mindshaping are to be expected. Relatedly, studies found that (cultural) conservatives versus liberals more “negatively evaluated and economically penalized people who deviated from stereotypes, because those stereotypes helped them to efficiently categorize people into groups, which provides a greater sense of certainty about the world” (Stern et al., 2015, p. 15337). A higher need for certainty, stability, control, and safety, which is linked to a conservative orientation (Koch et al., 2016), may make conservatives more likely to engage in mindshaping via stereotyping.⁴ Reversely, conservatives and liberals might differ in willingness to regulate themselves so as to conform to social expectations, as conservatives were found to value social conformity more than liberals (Panagopoulos, & van der Linden,

promote more predictable action and thinking (discipline, self-control, patriotism, etc.) (Doherty et al., 2014).

⁴ While conservatives may be more skeptical about the negative effects of mindshaping (e.g., in the contexts of stereotype-based ascriptions), if they penalize stereotype-deviating people more, they may therewith contribute to boosting the effects they seem unwilling to grant.

2016). Finally, studies found that while conservatives harboured more negative stereotypes against racial and religious minorities, liberals had stronger negative stereotypes against more politically powerful groups (e.g., Whites) (Beyer, 2022), potentially resulting in systematic differences in attributions influencing mindshaping. The extent to which this is the case remains underexplored.

All three notions of politicization just outlined (i.e., partisan, analytic, descriptive politicization) can thus be related to mindshaping and raise interesting questions for future investigations. I shall here set them aside. I want to focus on the distinct kind of politicization involved in politicizing mindshaping, namely the conferral, extension, or reinforcement of political views through the attribution of these views and related attitudes, values, or traits to people.

3. Is politicizing mindshaping real?

If we accept that mindshaping itself is real, then there are grounds to predict *politicizing* mindshaping to be especially common and powerful. Consider a case where we ascribe certain beliefs or other mental states to an individual *S* and so impose expectations on her to act and think in line with the ascribed states. There are likely significant differences in how much we care about whether *S* subsequently conforms to our ascriptions depending on the *content* of the state we ascribe. If we ascribe to *S*, for instance, the mundane belief that it is raining, and subsequently see her act as if she believed it was sunny, we might be surprised and flag the apparent inconsistency to her, thus indicating that our expectations about her were violated. However, not much hinges on *S*'s conforming to our ascription in that specific case. We are not much invested in *S* holding the belief that it's raining, as we do not stand to lose or gain much if she holds this belief or not.

Compare this with a situation in which we ascribe to *S* *political* beliefs, attitudes, or values we share. Suppose we are politically progressive and, based on her action, ascribe to *S* the beliefs that abortion should be a choice, immigration benefits a country, transwomen are women, etc. That is, suppose we ascribe to *S* the same left-wing orientation we endorse ourselves. If *S* subsequently acts in ways that violate our expectations in that she, for instance, proclaims that abortion is murder, we will be more invested (than when she deviated from the weather belief) because our ascriptions of shared political convictions to her have made her a political in-group member for us (Conover, 1984). An expectation violation in that case may be felt as betrayal because it is more closely related to our own self-concept and trust in in-group members (for evidence, see Jaffe & Johnson, 2018, Lis, 2019; Mendonca, 2024).⁵ Correspondingly, our sanctioning of people is likely harsher, conformity pressure higher, and mindshaping more pronounced when it comes to ascriptions of political orientations rather than states with politically neutral contents.

Importantly, since ascriptions of political orientations to individuals can be based on evidence of a single political belief (e.g., a public claim that abortion is murder) but the ascription target may not (yet) also hold other orientation related (conservative) beliefs,

⁵ The existence of such feeling of 'political' betrayal is also supported by studies finding "intra-ideological hostility," where, for instance, moderately left-leaning people displayed willingness to discriminate against strongly left-leaning people (potentially expecting them, as in-group members, to be more moderate) and vice versa (Peters et al., 2020).

it is not difficult to see how in-group pressure can trigger politicizing mindshaping: If, on the basis of behavioral evidence of one key political belief, an entire political orientation is (truly or falsely) ascribed to a *S*, she will subsequently likely be exposed to in-group loyalty demands to also believe other orientation-related political propositions even if she does not (yet) hold them. This may (especially if *S* depends on the group) gradually nudge her to regulate herself so as to align her mindset to others' social perception of her.

While this point concerns *in*-group pressure on group members to conform, social pressure on individuals to conform to the political views attributed to them may also originate from *outsiders*, i.e., people that do not themselves belong to the group whose political view is at issue. For instance, Roberts et al. (2020) introduced their study participants to pairs of groups described with contrasting (fictive) ideological beliefs, followed by description of (fictive) individual members of the groups who held either a belief conforming to the group's ideology, or a belief misaligned with it. Participants' disapproval of the agent's belief(s) was then measured. Participants were found to be more disapproving of the agent whose belief was misaligned with the in-group's orientation, suggesting that ascriptions of ideological positions would have created conformity demands⁶ even from outside the in-group.

But do the targets of ascriptions of political beliefs or orientations ever regulate themselves accordingly? Many people who are labeled as conservative, liberal, etc., may reject these ascriptions and resist conformist pressure (Hacking, 2006).

However, when the ascription target is a subordinate in a power structure that they cannot easily change, conformity effects are likely, even when the target disfavours the ascription (Copeland 1994, p. 264f). Similarly, if you are surrounded at work, in your neighbourhood, social network, or family by people that ascribe a certain political orientation to you, to retain your social relationships and avoid ostracism, you may be forced to regulate yourself so that you do not violate the related social expectations (Peters, 2022a).

In fact, many studies found that when individuals self-ascribed a particular in-group's political orientation, they displayed "motivated reasoning", altering their political opinions to conform to positions that they believed to be endorsed by the in-group, in that they selectively drew upon values that allowed them to accept claims made by in-group members without inconsistency (Cohen, 2003; Smith et al., 2012; Kahan, 2016). People's inclination to accept information from politically like-minded individuals was also found to generalize to domains other than politics, for instance, the categorization of geometric shapes, even when evidence shown to people revealed that the like-minded individuals were less knowledgeable in those domains than individuals with dissimilar political views (Mark et al., 2019). Similarly, studies found that supporters of a right-wing party indicated higher agreement with political statements when the statements were labeled as being accepted by the party versus not labeled, i.e., simply labeling the very same political statement as accepted by their political in-group influenced people's agreement with it (Neumann et al., 2020). A desire to stay aligned in one's thinking and acting with one's political group may thus lead people to adopt

⁶ Given the earlier mentioned preference of conservatives for stability and predictability, there are likely significant variations in these 'outsider' demands between left-wing versus right-wing individuals. Unfortunately, this was not controlled for.

even seemingly epistemically imprudent or unmotivated conduct, indicating that when people view themselves as belonging to a specific political group, they may be particularly willing to meet others' expectations about their thoughts and behavior.

It might be objected that ascriptions of political orientations are not common and so a prerequisite of politicizing mindshaping is not common either. However, in democratic countries, many people regularly take a political stance and vote for parties or candidates in elections, as political decisions affect their own lives. Additionally, it is well known that in several Western democracies, many people are polarized over immigration, climate change, gender rights, and abortion, which can affect interpersonal relationships even in non-political domains of life such as one's family (Talisso, 2019), work, or academia (Peters et al., 2020), raising the chances of politicization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Relatedly, in the media (and academic literature), people are routinely described in terms of their political identity with *generics*, i.e., unquantified generalizations that refer to a whole category of people, not quantified subsets or specific individuals (e.g., 'conservatives favor anti-immigration policies' vs. '*some* conservatives favor anti-immigration policies') (Peters, 2021). Generics gloss over variations between individuals and, in doing so, when the label is political, ascribe political features to individuals that may not (yet) have them, thus (e.g., through communicating "descriptive norms") facilitating mindshaping (Peters, 2023).

Even without explicit signalling, clothing (Genova, 2020), zip codes (e.g. liberals living in cities vs. conservatives in rural areas; Parker et al., 2018), social media post ('Black Lives Matter' hash tags), bumper stickers ('Choose Life'), or – problematically – just facial features are sometimes used for categorizing people politically (Rule & Ambady, 2010; Kosinski et al., 2024). Moreover, even without interacting, people may still become politically labeled. Consider personalization algorithms that people encounter daily on websites. These algorithms are designed to infer (inter alia) the political orientations of website users from their browsing to enable websites to tailor contents to them (Lambiotte & Kosinski, 2014). This can trigger mindshaping. Studies found that after receiving a personalized advert for an environmentally friendly product, participants (aware of the personalization) subsequently rated themselves as more politically "green" while also indicating more willingness to buy the product and donate to an environmental charity than controls (Summers et al., 2016). This points to a subtle but potentially pervasive form of politicizing mindshaping online via "implied social labeling" (Peters, 2022b).

4. When politicizing mindshaping is problematic

It is not difficult to appreciate the problematic impact that politicizing mindshaping can have. If ascriptions of political orientations to individuals reinforce their political views by promoting behavioral confirmation of the related expectations, this may drive political opponents further apart, thus fuelling social division.

One way in which this might happen was already noted above. Suppose a group of conservatives ascribes to *S* a conservative viewpoint because she has claimed (e.g.) that abortion is murder, and so they include her in their group. If *S* afterwards acts in ways indicating she does not hold other conservative beliefs, she may become subject to criticism for inconsistency (betrayal, etc.) by group members, creating social pressure on her to regulate herself to act and think such that she also acquires other beliefs

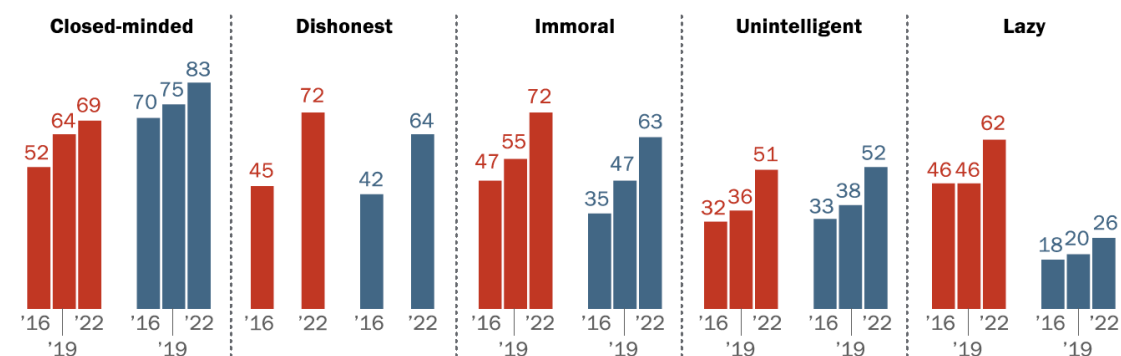
belonging to a conservative outlook. If *S* is closely connected or dependent on the group, this may push her further away from neutrality and the opposite political camp.

There is another way in which ascriptions of political orientations, especially to political opponents, can increase political polarization via mindshaping. Notice first that such ascriptions often come with a host of ascriptions of *negative* features based on stereotypes. While this point holds to some extent globally (Carothers, & O’Donohue, 2019; Schepisi et al., 2019), I will focus on the US because it offers a clear and well researched example. For instance, studies found that for many US conservatives, liberals had an “‘anything goes’ morality that says everything should be permitted for the sake of inclusion and diversity, no matter how bizarre or depraved” – whereas for many liberals, conservatives lacked “‘basic moral compassion, especially for oppressed groups,” and took a “‘perverse joy in seeing the rich get richer while innocents suffer in poverty” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 1). Relatedly, a survey by the Pew Research Center confirmed that between 2016 and 2022, many US Democrats and Republicans increasingly described each other as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral, unintelligent, and lazy (see Figure 1).

Shares of partisans describing members of the other party in negative terms has risen since 2016

% who say members of the **other** party are a lot/somewhat more ___ compared to other Americans

- Republicans say Democrats are more ...
- Democrats say Republicans are more ...



Note: Partisans do not include those who lean to each party.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 27-July 4, 2022.

Figure 1. Examples of negative political ascriptions to political opponents in the US context (Data from Pew Research Center, 2022, as cited in Doherty, 2022).

If the conceptions that political opponents have about each other were accurate, this would not necessarily raise problems related to mindshaping. However, studies exploring the moral stereotypes of liberals and conservatives uncovered that “both liberals and conservatives exaggerated the ideological extremity of moral concerns for the in-group as well as the out-group” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 1; Crawford et al., 2013). Relatedly, in media reports on political polarization, one often finds claims to the effect that, especially in the US and Western Europe, “affective polarization” among political opponents (referring to people’s aversive feelings, dislike, and distrust toward others with the opposite political orientation) is pervasive (Peters, 2021). Yet, studies found that in fact only about 20% of US Americans were truly affectively polarized (Klar et

al., 2019). That is, while many reports claim the US is deeply politically divided (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020), these claims may present polarization as more pervasive than it is (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Klar et al., 2019).

The problem with this in the context of mindshaping seems clear. If people hold false negative conceptions of their political opponents, and, more generally, view others as more polarized than they really are, then, to the extent that these conceptions have regulative effects, they can boost polarization. Specifically, ascriptions and expectations of mutual dislike and distrust among political opponents can reduce their willingness to search for compromises on policy issues and increase the “sorting” of society into politically homogenous, hostile groups (Bishop, 2009; Talisse, 2019). The political stereotypes tied to ascriptions of political orientations (depicting opponents as close-minded, etc.) can thus become self-fulfilling.

To illustrate, consider a group of liberals and conservatives who are repeatedly exposed to the assertion that liberals and conservatives deeply dislike each other. Group members may then expect individuals of their opposite political camp to act accordingly, potentially prompting conformist responding. For instance, if you expect *S* to be politically polarized, closed-minded, and so on that might lead you to act in a more aloof way toward *S* than otherwise, potentially causing her to become more hostile toward you than otherwise (Stinson et al., 2009). This, in turn, may lead you to become more opposed to her and her political group, increasing political polarization. Similarly, if political polarization and hostility is (mis)ascribed to individuals, this might make them feel relieved of responsibility for restraining themselves, potentially unleashing aversion further.

Is any of this news? In the literature on the causes of political polarization, partisan cable networks (e.g., Fox News) and social media are commonly thought to be the key culprits, as they frequently present users primarily with one-sided, user-favored political content (often content that makes viewers angrier with their political opponents) to keep them engaged (Barrett et al., 2021). Another proposal is that political polarization happens because the increasing political in-group/out-group sorting on social media, in neighbourhoods, at work, and so on means that people are increasingly surrounded by like-minded individuals who share their political beliefs (Bishop, 2009). In discussions, over time, they become more politically entrenched, as they will primarily be presented with arguments supporting their views while systemically ignoring counterarguments and counterevidence (Sunstein, 2009). While these social cognitive processes do perhaps significantly influence political polarization, the notion of politicizing mindshaping adds a novel and potentially powerful indirect factor to the lists of causes of political polarization.

Politicizing mindshaping is not necessarily detrimental, however. When ascriptions of political orientations trigger expectations that regulate a target’s thinking and acting, this may help confer viewpoints that can *reduce* societal ills. If a left-wing outlook is more likely to result in true beliefs by making people more likely to recognize (e.g., capitalist) power structures or reject conspiracy theories (van der Linden et al., 2021), instilling such outlook via mindshaping may benefit society. Relatedly, if a ‘green’ outlook helps make people fully appreciate the risks related to climate change and implement policies to tackle it (Baldwin & Lammers, 2016), mindshaping promoting this outlook would again be desirable. Similarly, if a conservative orientation involves

strong patriotism, faith, or self-control, and these features are desirable (Clarkson et al., 2015), the related mindshaping can have benefits too. Additionally, politicizing mindshaping may help make people become politically active, promote voting, or provoke reflection and social criticism. Whether politicizing mindshaping is overall more problematic than beneficial thus remains an interesting question for future research. Before concluding, I will point to some social factors that are worth keeping in mind when considering this question.

5. Why harmful effects of politicizing mindshaping might be underestimated

In a democracy, people with different political orientations compete for political power to implement their favored policies, and individuals may often need to adopt political stances and act collectively with their political in-group against political opponents to achieve their policy goals. Tension between political opponents is hence normal. But this tension may increase to political incivility and hostility, which in turn can increase the chance of negative politicizing mindshaping.

Consider first some examples of political incivility that have gone largely unchallenged. In 2019 and 2020, in the UK, some politicians used “greased piglet” (David Cameron on Boris Johnson) or “useless fuckpigs” (Dominic Cummings on the Cabinet) to describe other politicians (McDonald, 2023). Similarly in the US, Donald Trump recently called his opponent (Kamala Harris) “dumb as a rock”, labeled Democrats as “lunatics,” and tweeted “only a dead Democrat is a good Democrat” (Taylor, 2016; Zurcher, 2024). Relatedly, a 2019 study ($N = 10,170$ US adults) found that when it comes to ridiculing one’s political opponent, or saying that their positions are evil, only 40% and 26% of Republicans (respectively) found this always unacceptable (Pew Research Center, 2019). More recently, researchers surveying 5,140 US adults reported that, overall, 29% said officials should be able to use heated language without worrying about how some people may react⁷ (Van Green, 2024).

The problem is that the acceptability of hostility against political opponents can boost people’s negative political stereotyping and bias, which may in some contexts already be particularly pronounced. For instance, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found that Democratic participants showed an implicit bias against Republican participants (and vice versa), and this implicit political bias exceeded the bias white participants showed for black people (and vice versa): participants more quickly associated their political opponents (and party) with negative features. To help explain this difference in responding to political and racialized groups, Iyengar et al. (2019) write that unlike, for instance, ethnicity, where group-related attitudes and behaviors are subject to social norms, there are in the US no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents (p. 133).

In fact, it is to be expected that in Western democracies some aversion between people of different political orientations is common and tolerated because it can energize the electorate, and calls for political civility might in these contexts even have the negative function of silencing or subjugating a marginalized group (Jamieson et al., 2017).

⁷ Among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, the result was 43%. By contrast, among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, 83% said elected officials should avoid using heated language (Van Green, 2024).

Hence, political incivility and open aversion amongst political opponents might in some contexts be justified and even encouraged in a functioning democracy (Kennedy, 2001).

Obviously, this does not hold for anyone's aversion, bias, or hostility against people based on their gender or ethnicity. Fortunately, there are strong, albeit potentially still insufficient (see below) social norms in place to keep them in check. That this is not equally the case when it comes to political aversion, bias, and hostility in Western societies marks an important difference relevant for work on mindshaping and social justice. This is because the relative absence of social norms against negative political labeling and stereotyping can facilitate the mindshaping effects of the social conceptions involved. This can exacerbate social divisions, which, in turn, may also undercut efforts to achieve gender, race, and other minorities' equality because, in a democracy, political change often requires compromise with political opponents (Bishop, 2009).

Indeed, the negative effects of politicizing mindshaping may bleed into the harmful effects of mindshaping based on gender or ethnic stereotypes. For instance, in the US, young women, African Americans, and Jews tend to vote for Democrats, indicating a link between political orientation and gender and ethnicity (Doherty et al., 2018). Given this intersectionality, the harmful effects of pre-existing gender (racial, etc.) stereotypes may be exacerbated by unsanctioned political hostility – a phenomenon partly indicated by evidence that female politicians face greater harassment from constituents compared to men (Håkansson, 2024). Relatedly and disconcertingly, one study with German respondents found that 43% believed that “women in politics have to endure attacks online because it is part of their job”, 45% said that “women in politics themselves contribute to attacks on social media when they make certain statements”, and 34% considered it acceptable for people to insult female politicians (HateAid, 2024). Given the typically muted repercussions for verbal hostility, incivility, and negative stereotyping between political opponents in many Western countries, the societal dangers tied to this form of mindshaping, and its role in perpetuating social injustice may be underestimated and particularly difficult to recognize.

6. Conclusion

Mindshaping can arise from many different ascriptions of psychological or behavioral features to people. The focus here has been on ascriptions of political convictions and the related attitudes, values, or traits. This topic has until now not been explored in philosophical research on mindshaping. The goal here has been to change this by introducing the notion of politicizing mindshaping, distinguishing it from other kinds of politicization, reviewing evidence suggesting that it is common, and highlighting societal problems that this kind of mindshaping may create, especially in environments where social norms against negative political labeling are weak. However, I also noted that mindshaping is not *per se* problematic. It might be beneficial, depending on which political orientation is promoted. To disentangle benefits from harmful effects, more research on politicizing mindshaping is desirable.

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