GOVT 30:
Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan  
Office: Silsby 305  
Email: nyhan@dartmouth.edu  
Phone: 603/646-2894

Classroom: Silsby 113  
Schedule: TTH 10–11:50 AM  
x-period: Wed. 3–3:50 PM  
Office hours: Wed. 9–11 AM

“A wise man should be humble enough to admit when he’s wrong and change his mind based on new information.”  
–Kanye West

“[T]he pattern of stereotypes at the center of our codes largely determines what group of facts we shall see and in what light we shall see them... And since my moral system rests on my accepted version of the facts, he who denies either my moral judgments or my version of the facts is to me perverse, alien, dangerous.”  
–Walter Lippmann

“[It] is better to know less than to know so much that ain’t so.”  
–Josh Billings

Overview of the course

Why do people hold false or unsupported beliefs about politics and why are those beliefs so hard to change? This course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to political misinformation and conspiracy theories and the reasons that corrections so often fail to change their minds. We will also analyze how those tendencies are exploited by political elites and consider possible approaches that journalists and civic reformers could employ to combat misperceptions.

Instructional approach

Each class period will include a mix of lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them, class discussion, and active learning exercises in which we critically examine the ideas introduced in the readings. I will typically lecture in the first part of the class and facilitate discussion and group work in the second part.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

• Identify the psychological factors that promote belief in misperceptions;
• Explain why conspiracy theories often arise under conditions of stress, danger, or uncertainty;
• Assess the ways in which elites may promote false or unsupported claims;
• Evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to countering misperceptions and conspiracy theories;
• Assess concerns that widespread belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories undermines democracy.

I expect each student to complete and understand the assigned readings. However, we will aspire to not just learn this material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing connections between the readings, and critiquing authors' assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you take these additional steps in your thinking over the course of the quarter.

Course requirements and expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each class and to contribute to class discussion. Each student will be expected to make an especially significant contribution during one course session in which they are assigned to serve as an expert discussant. You should submit 3–5 discussion questions on the readings for that class to me by email 48 hours before the class in question. You are also expected to follow relevant political news—we will begin each class by discussing misperceptions and conspiracy theories in the news and relating those events to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

Communication

The class will run through Canvas. I will use it to email announcements to you and provide access to assigned readings. Please submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email unless otherwise instructed. However, if you have questions, please come to my office hours or email me.

Studying

Many students do not study effectively. I highly recommend Vox’s guide to improving how you prepare for exams. For more information, please contact the Academic Skills Center.
Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without my permission. You should therefore make sure to print all readings before class. This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops hinders learning not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately distracting and cognitively taxing. In addition, research suggests that students take notes more effectively in longhand than on laptops.

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding the academic integrity rules at Dartmouth. Explanations of integrity rules and principles can be found at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~uja/. Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade in the class. Details on citing sources appropriately are available at http://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials/sources-and-citations-dartmouth. Please see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Office hours

My office hours for the spring term are Wednesday from 9:00–11:00 AM. To ensure you have a time that works for you, please schedule a meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce page at http://meetme.so/BrendanNyhan. I will prioritize appointments over walk-ins though I am of course happy to meet with
Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. In general, each student is expected to attend class on time with the readings completed and to contribute thoughtfully to class discussion when appropriate. Especially thoughtful contributions to class discussion will be taken into consideration when final grades are assigned. Finally, late work will be graded down 10% for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes (10%)

During the quarter, a random subset of four or more classes will begin with a one-question quiz intended to determine if you completed the readings (one point will be awarded simply for attending class). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped. (I reserve the right to count attendance as a quiz score if there is low turnout or to use whether an assignment was completed as a quiz score.)

Midterms (50%)

The class will include two closed-book midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course (i.e., the second will only cover the portion of the course after the first midterm). These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays. A study guide for the midterms that includes more information on the exams is provided at the end of this syllabus. (Note: Both exams will be curved.)

Project: Understanding & countering misinformation (40%)

Assignment: Each student will write a paper of 3000–4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories from the course to help explain the development and spread of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory and critique the efforts that were made to counter it.

In choosing a topic, don’t put too much pressure on yourself to come up with a totally new idea. Here are two approaches that might be helpful:

1. Pick an interesting case that you think is hard to categorize or explain.
   Think about what makes that misperception surprising or puzzling and build from there. Why are standard approaches based on authors we’ve read or that you’ve found unsatisfactory? (You don’t need to have a full answer at this point in the process but at least a notion would be helpful.)
2. Don’t try to invent a new theory from scratch but instead ask “What would author X predict in case Y?” Try to identify an interesting conflict between theory and data or an important gap in a theory.

Once you have chosen a topic, you should construct a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations about the development, timing, spread, or features of the myth in question and/or the reasons that fact-checking of it was ineffective. The goal is for you to develop and explain theoretically motivated predictions about the misperception; evaluate them using historical sources, journalistic accounts, and/or quantitative data; and reflect on the implications of your findings. The final paper should specifically answer these key questions:

1. How can we use the theories in question to understand the spread of the myth?

2. Is what we observe consistent with those theories? Why or why not?

3. What implications does this case have for the theories in question (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? What implications do your findings have for our understanding of the misperception itself?

4. What implications do the theories you have identified have for the effectiveness of the fact-checking tools or content in question? How could those tools or content be improved to better counter misperceptions? (Be specific! Use real examples as case studies and make sure to ground your critique in the readings from the course or other relevant readings from the academic literature.)

5. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of misperceptions more generally?

Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to summaries of other people’s work—the goal is to make an original argument about a myth or misperception, not to recapitulate other research or recount the history of the myth in exhaustive detail.

Finally, beware of the risk of hindsight bias. It may seem obvious in retrospect that a misperception developed, but keep the contingency of history in mind. In particular, look for cases in which some aspects of the myth failed to develop and spread while others flourished. What explains the difference?

Process: We will talk throughout the term about how to do this type of writing. For useful advice on writing analytical papers in political science, please see the assigned readings for the x-period on writing, but the most important factor will be your willingness to commit to writing as an iterative process of drafting, feedback, review, and revision.

A draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 3 PM on April 25 for peer review. After making revisions
suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 5 PM on April 30. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version. A complete draft of your paper including references is due on Canvas May 16 by 3 PM for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance.\textsuperscript{1} The final version of your paper is due by 5 PM on May 27. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. Students who fail to submit complete draft proposals or papers will have their final grades on the assignment reduced by one letter grade.

Optional: For students who are interested, the paper can be modified to focus exclusively on critiquing previous fact-checks of a given myth or misperception and explaining how those motivate a new approach to fact-checking. These could include any of the following:

- Conceptual descriptions of new approaches to fact-checking that differ from those of the existing elite fact-checkers (PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, Washington Post Fact Checker)
- Proposals for new online tools to counter misinformation that improve upon or differ from existing efforts (e.g., Truth Goggles, Truth Teller, LazyTruth, etc.)
- Videos demonstrating new concepts for television ad watches (beyond those employed by, e.g., FlackCheck)

If you include a design component, your paper should answer these key questions:

1. What is your design? How would it work? What makes it different from the tools or content that were typically used to address your myth?
2. How is the design of your fact-checking tools or content motivated by theories from the course?
3. Why would this approach address the psychology of misinformation and conspiracy theories more effectively than existing fact-checking tools or content?

Articles with substantial video, graphics, or other innovative content may be somewhat shorter than the word limit. (Note: Any such content must be specifically grounded in the relevant literature. Flashy graphics and video for their own sake are not encouraged. Please consult with me if you have questions.)

\textsuperscript{1}To consult an RWIT tutor, go to RWIT’s appointment scheduler at \url{http://dartmouth.edu/writing-speech/learning/support-writing-research-and-composing-technology/students/make-appointment} or stop by the Center in 183 Baker-Berry Library, Level One (next to the Reference area) during drop-in hours.
Extra credit: Applications and case studies

Students may submit example articles about misperceptions and conspiracy theories that are particularly illustrative of or relevant to theoretical points from the academic readings to the professor. If I use your article in class or add it to the syllabus for next year, you will receive 0.5% extra credit toward your final grade (up to 1% per student).

Course materials

No books are required for this course. A few chapters from books or articles that are not publicly available will be available as PDFs on Canvas and are labeled as such below. All other assigned readings can be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the VPN to access those that are behind academic journal paywalls.)

Note: I will frequently assign blog posts and articles from the popular press to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled “Context and examples” in the schedule below to distinguish them from “Core readings.” Both are required but you should devote particular effort to the academic articles, which are typically more difficult to read and understand.

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that we will use several x-periods due to schedule conflicts or peer review sessions. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (3/29)

- Course syllabus


Experiments and statistics primer (3/30–x-period)

Experiments:


• Assignment (must be uploaded to Canvas by 1 PM before class): Submit 3–5 questions about the experimental designs in the sample article, the inferences the authors draw, and/or the statistical analyses they conducted. Read it closely! We will work through the article in detail during class.

Statistics:


• Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

**Understanding political misinformation**

**Defining and measuring misperceptions (4/5)**

Core readings:

• Robert C. Luskin, Gaurav Sood, and Joshua Blank (N.d.). “The Waters of Casablanca: Political Misinformation (and Knowledge and Ignorance).”


Context and examples:


The psychology of false beliefs (4/12)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Analytical writing (4/13–x-period)

• John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing”

• Stephen Van Evera, excerpt from *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*

• Tim Büthe, “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science”

• Assignment: Bring one-page excerpts of two previous analytical writing assignments with you to class (any subject but social science preferred)
  - One that you are proud of
  - One that you could improve on

Facts, knowledge, and misinformation (4/14)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


**Motivated reasoning: Politics (4/19)**

Core readings:


Context and examples:


**Motivated reasoning: Data, science, and health (4/21)**

Core readings:


• Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, Sean Richey, and Gary Freed (2014). “Ef-
fective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial.” Pediat-
rics. (Note: The study materials are provided in a separate online appendix.)

Context and examples:
March 29, 2011.
• Maggie Fox (2016). “Is It Really GMOs or Insecticides? What’s Behind

Information environments and elite configurations (4/26)
Core readings:
(Canvas).
• Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap (2011). “The politicization of
climate change and polarization in the American public’s views of global
• Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas (2012). “Partisan Perceptual Bias and

Context and examples:
• Brendan Nyhan (2014). “Voter Fraud Is Rare, but Myth Is Widespread.”
concerns matters.” Vox, August 1, 2014.

Peer review session (4/27–x-period)
• Due 48 hours before class: Proposal draft
• Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for
assignment
  2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the
paper that seem especially strong and two that need further develop-
ment
  3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and
constructive questions for the author that could help them think
about how best to revise the paper
• Class discussion of paper progress
• Review and discussion of peer review responses

11
Midterm (5/3)

- Midterm course survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_40IL8pnaNPdfYW1) must be submitted to take exam

Social category differences (5/5)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Rumors (5/10)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Defining and measuring conspiracy theories (5/12)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


The psychology of conspiracy theory belief (5/17)

Core readings:

- Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014). American Conspiracy Theories, Ch. 6 (Canvas).

Context and examples:

Peer review session (5/18–x-period)

- Due 48 hours before class: Paper draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review (pairs)
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for assignment
  2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and two that could be improved further
  3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise their paper
- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Moving forward: New threats and approaches

Misinformation in the mainstream media (5/19)

Core readings:


Context and examples:

Online rumors and misinformation (5/24)


Context and examples:


Combating misinformation: New tools and ideas (5/26)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Misinformation paper due (5/27, 5 PM)

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (5/31)


Midterm 2 (6/3, 3 PM – location TBD)
GOVT 30 midterm study guide

Syllabus description
The class will include two closed-book midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings and lectures from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays.

Exam details
- Each covers approximately half the class
- Closed-book; reading list provided as an appendix
- Test conceptual knowledge and understanding of readings and lectures, not tiny details of individual studies or examples
- Items may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions as well as one or more brief essays (up to one page)

Questions to review for core readings
Scientific studies (experimental/statistical):
- What is the authors’ main hypothesis?
- What is the mechanism (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their general approach to testing their theory?
- What are their key results?
- How are those results similar to/different from others we have read?

Conceptual (non-empirical):
- What are the authors’ main hypothesis or argument?
- What are the key claims or concepts in their argument?
- What are the mechanisms they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument similar to/different from others we have read?

Sample question (brief essay)
Briefly explain the difference between “fact avoidance” and “meaning avoidance” according to Gaines et al. (2007) and summarize their findings.
## Understanding and countering misinformation rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis/argument</td>
<td>Clear, strong arguments that go beyond description, address important objections</td>
<td>Discernible arguments but not strong/clear enough or too much description</td>
<td>Unclear or weak arguments; mainly description or assertion; incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>Creative new arguments or approaches—combines or applies theories in new ways</td>
<td>Some analytical originality in approach; opportunities for greater creativity</td>
<td>Little originality; relies mainly on arguments and evidence from class/sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided in support of arguments</td>
<td>Details and facts support arguments, but more needed or some lacking relevance</td>
<td>Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and/or lack relevancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of course concepts</td>
<td>Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to research topic</td>
<td>Conveys familiarity with course concepts; applies concepts to topic appropriately</td>
<td>Basic course concepts not applied appropriately; incorrect or incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization that develops argument appropriately; does not stray off topic</td>
<td>Organization not totally clear; some digressions or lack of needed structure</td>
<td>Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from agreed-upon topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of expression</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
<td>Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing</td>
<td>Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>