PUBPOL 750.308:
Topics: Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories about Politics and Public Policy

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan  Office: 4129 Weill Hall / 4408 ISR
Classroom: 1210 Weill Hall  Office hours: Thursday 9 AM–12 PM (Weill)
Term: Winter 2019  (appts.: http://meetme.so/BrendanNyhan)
Schedule: MW 2:30–3:50 PM  Email: bnyhan@umich.edu

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

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

“Fearful Americans Stockpiling Facts Before Federal Government Comes To Take Them Away”
–The Onion

Overview of the course

Why do people hold false or unsupported beliefs about politics and public policy and why are those beliefs so hard to change? This three-credit graduate course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to 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, civic reformers, and government officials could employ to combat misperceptions. Students will develop substantive expertise in how to measure, diagnose, and respond to false beliefs about politics and public policy; methodological expertise in reading and analyzing quantitative and experimental research in social science; and writing skills in preparing a policy memo making recommendations for how to address a prominent misperception and a final research paper analyzing the development of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory.

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.

Course 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. I do not expect you to understand every technical detail — we will work through the readings in class together — but you should read each one carefully (see below for tips on how to read them effectively). Each student will be expected to make an especially significant contribution during one session in which they are assigned to serve as an expert discussant. You should email me 3–5 discussion questions on the readings 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 them to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

Reading scientific articles

If you find deciphering scientific articles to be difficult, I recommend consulting guides like “How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps” by Amanda Hoover Green or “How to Read a (Quantitative) Journal Article” by Greta Krippner, which present approaches you might use to help you identify the most important elements of each study.

This set of questions might also be useful to guide your reading and to help you assess your understanding of the assigned articles:
Experimental/statistical studies:
- 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 articles:
- 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?

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.

Laptop/electronic device policy
Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not otherwise be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all of the readings. 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 when they write on laptops. (Exceptions will be made for students with disabilities who need to be able to use a laptop.)

Academic integrity
Students are responsible for understanding and following the academic integrity rules of the Ford School and the University of Michigan (see http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations for further details). Ignorance will not
be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an 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://guides.lib.umich.edu/AcademicIntegritySPH. In general, you should always err on the side of caution in completely avoiding the use of language from authors you have read or from your classmates absent proper attribution. Please see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

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.

Ford School of Public Policy inclusivity statement

Members of the Ford School community represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We are committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

• share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
• be open to the views of others
• honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
• appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other in this community
• value one another’s opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
• keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
• use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in Ford classes and across the UM community

Accommodations for students with disabilities

If you believe you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of courses can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, I can work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office to help
determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information you provide will be treated as private and confidential. (Students with disabilities who require an exception to the laptop policy described above will be granted one; please let me know if we should discuss this option.)

Student mental health and well-being resources

The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. We acknowledge that a variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, and depression, directly impacts students’ academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and/or University Health Service (UHS). For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, please visit http://umich.edu/~mhealth/.

Office hours

My office hours for the winter term are Thursday from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM. 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 (consulting the schedule will also tell you if I have had to reschedule office hours in a given week). I will prioritize appointments over walk-ins though I am of course happy to meet with any student if time permits. (If you cannot make it to office hours, please email me to schedule an alternate meeting time.)

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% (i.e., one letter grade) for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes (20%)

During the quarter, a random number generator will be used at the start of each class starting in the second week to determine if we have a brief one-question quiz to measure whether students completed the readings (a point will be awarded simply for attending class; probability of quiz = 30 + [the number

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1Please review additional information and policies regarding academic expectations and resources at the Ford School of Public Policy at this link: http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations.
of consecutive classes without a quiz \times 10\%). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped. Absences will not be excused except for illness.

**Strategy memo: Countering policy misperceptions (30\%)**

**Assignment:** Each student will write a memo of 2000–2500 words (excluding references) in which you apply the theories of public opinion and political psychology that we consider in the first part of the course to a relevant misperception in a policy area of your choosing in which you have expertise.\(^2\) You should write the memo as a briefing to a relevant policymaker or public official. You can define the audience that you believe is most relevant given the issue and context (e.g., foreign or domestic policy; local, state, or national politics; a country other than the U.S.; etc.). The paper should clearly summarize the misperception(s) and its relationship to the policy or issue in question; provide an explanation grounded in social science of the genesis and persistence of this belief; offer an evidence-based assessment of its magnitude and potential effects; and make specific, actionable recommendations for how to most effectively address the misperception that are grounded in the policy history and social science insights you have marshaled.

**Process:** A one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on February 3. 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 on February 23 by 8 PM for peer review. I recommend that you carefully edit the draft before and after receiving feedback from your colleague and specifically recommend consulting the Ford Writing Center or the Sweetland Center for Writing for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 PM on March 1. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Failure to meet any of these deadlines will result in a reduced grade on the final paper.)

**Analytical paper: The development of a myth (50\%)**

**Assignment:** Each student will write a social science paper of 4000–5000 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.\(^3\) This paper should cover a different topic than the strategy memo and ideally should explore intellectual terrain we have not covered in detail in the course (either by choosing a less familiar misperception or by investigating new contexts or lines of inquiry that we have not adequately considered in class and in the readings).

\(^2\)Make sure the topic is a misperception or a conspiracy theory! Many interesting beliefs do not qualify according to the definitions we use in this course. Please see me if you have questions about a potential topic.

\(^3\)Again, please make sure the topic is a misperception or a conspiracy theory as we define it in this course! Please see me if you have questions.
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. Don’t try to explain everything! It’s better to go deeper in making a novel argument about one aspect of your topic than to offer a laundry list of explanations or to recapitulate the conventional view. (You can even assume or briefly summarize a conventional view and then show how your argument goes beyond it to emphasize what is most new and different.) The goal is for you to develop and explain one or more 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 theory or 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 fact-checking? How could we 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 class on academic 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 one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on March 12. 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 April 1 by 8 PM for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to the Ford Writing Center or the Sweetland Center for Writing for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 PM on April 29. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Failure to meet any of these deadlines will result in a reduced grade on the final paper.)

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 university VPN to access articles behind journal paywalls.)

Note: I 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.

I also designate some readings as “Optional” that I intend to discuss in class and believe are especially useful for understanding the topic. As the name suggests, these are not mandatory to read before class.

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. 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 (1/9)

- Course syllabus

Understanding and studying misperception belief

Defining and measuring misperceptions and misinformation (1/14)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


The psychology of false beliefs (1/16)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Experiments and statistics primer (1/23)

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)

Political interest/knowledge and (mis)information (1/28)

Core readings:

• Andrew M. Guess (N.d.). “(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans’ Online Media Diets.”


Context and examples:


• Morgan Polikoff. “The more people know about Common Core, the less they know about Common Core.” September 8, 2015.

**Motivated reasoning about facts: How bad is it? (1/30)**

Core readings:


Context and examples:


**Differing factual interpretations (2/4)**

Core readings:

• James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (N.d.) “The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning In Climate Change Preference Formation.”


Context and examples:


Social category differences and misperceptions of outgroups (2/6)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


• This American Life (2016). “Will I Know Anyone at This Party?” October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)

• This American Life (2017). “Fear and Loathing in Homer and Rockville.” July 21, 2017. (0:00–41:08 or transcript)


National identity and historical memory (2/11)

Core readings:


**Context and examples:**


**Information environments and elite cues (2/13)**

**Core readings:**


**Context and examples:**


**Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences**

**Conspiracy theories: Definitions and beliefs (2/18)**

**Core readings:**


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

Context and examples:


The psychology of conspiracy theory belief (2/20)

Core readings:


Context and examples:

Effective writing and peer review (2/25)

- Midterm course survey (https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bf4906aLUQVKBKyt) must be submitted before class
- Due 8 PM on 2/23: Memo 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 development
  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 assignment
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and word-of-mouth (2/27)

Core readings:

- Optional: Taylor N. Carlson (N.d.). “Through the Grapevine: Informational Consequences of Interpersonal Political Communication.”

Context and examples:

Online rumors and misinformation (3/11)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


“Fake news” and online misinformation in 2016 and after (3/13)

Core readings:

- Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). “Fake news consumption and behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election” (Canv as).

Context and examples:


• Paul Resnick (2018). “Unlike in 2016, there was no spike in misinformation this election cycle.” The Conversation, November 5, 2018.

Academic writing + bots, YouTube, and fake images and video (3/18)

Academic writing:

• Erin Ackerman (2015), “‘Analyze This:’ Writing in the Social Sciences,” in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (eds.), They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, 3rd ed. (Canvas)

• Tim Büthe (N.d.). “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science.”

Core readings:


Context and examples:

• Jack Nicas (2018). “YouTube Drives Viewers to the Internet’s Darkest Corners — Video site’s algorithm often recommends divisive or misleading fare” Wall Street Journal, February 8, 2018. (Canvas)


Media coverage and fact-checking

Misinformation in mainstream media coverage (3/20)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (3/25)

Core readings:

- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (N.d.). “Do People Actually Learn From Fact-Checking? Evidence from a longitudinal study during the 2014 campaign.”


Context and examples:


Online fact-checking (3/27)

Core readings:

- Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand (N.d.). “The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake News Stories Increases Perceived Accuracy of Stories Without Warnings.”


Context and examples:


- Georgia Wells and Lukas I. Alpert (2018). ‘People Hold Backup Role In Facts War — Facebook relies more on computers to fight misinformation, says humans can’t keep up.” Wall Street Journal, October 19, 2018. (Canvas)


Public policy applications

Crime (4/1)

Core readings:


Context and examples:

Peer review (4/3) — student session
• Review: Erin Ackerman (2015), “‘Analyze This:’ Writing in the Social Sciences,” in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (eds.), They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, 3rd ed. (Canvas)
• Review: Tim Büthe (N.d.). “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science.”
• Due 8 PM on 4/1: 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

Inequality and redistribution (4/8)
Core readings:
• Optional: Michael Kraus, Iwuoma Onyeador, Natalie Daumeyer, Julian Rucker, and Jennifer Richeson (N.d.). “The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality.”

Context and examples:


Climate change (4/10)

Core readings:


• Hunter Gehlbach, Carly D. Robinson, Christine C. Vriesema (N.d.). “Climate conversations: Seeking a common starting point.”


• Review: James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (N.d.) “The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning In Climate Change Preference Formation.”

Context and examples:


Health, medicine, and health care reform (4/15)

Core readings:


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

Context and examples:


**Misinformation by and in authoritarian regimes (4/17)**

Core readings:

- Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts (2017). “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distrac-
  tion, Not Engaged Argument.” *American Political Science Review* 111(3):
  484–501.
  Science.*

Context and examples:

- Alexis C. Madrigal (2018). “Russia’s Troll Operation Was Not That So-

**Misinformation: Implications for democracy (4/22)**

Core readings:

  acists.” *Dissent,* Winter 2018.
- Henry Farrell and Bruce Schneier (N.d.). “Common-Knowledge Attacks on Democracy.”

Context and examples:


Misinformation paper due (4/29, 8 PM)
## Strategy memo rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>Clear, strong explanations that go beyond description, address important objections</td>
<td>Discernible explanations but not strong/clear enough or too much description</td>
<td>Unclear or weak explanations provided; mainly description or assertion; incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>Creative recommendations or approaches that combine or apply theories in new ways</td>
<td>Some analytical originality in approach; opportunities for greater creativity</td>
<td>Little originality; relies mainly on points raised in class/readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of course concepts</td>
<td>Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to 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>Evidence</td>
<td>Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided that support diagnosis and recommendations</td>
<td>Details and facts provided, but more needed or some lacking relevance</td>
<td>Some details and facts provided, but not enough and/or lack relevancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization that develops recommendations 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>
## Analytical paper 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/readings</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>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>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>
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