GOVT 30:
Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

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“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

“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 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.
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

You will frequently make use of computers in this course to conduct statistical analysis in Stata. Please be respectful of your instructor and peers by using your computers only for class-related purposes. Please also make sure to put your phone away before class starts and not take it out during class.

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 bring your textbook to class and print all other 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 at Dartmouth: https://students.dartmouth.edu/judicial-affairs/policy/academic-honor-principle. 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. 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.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities who may need disability-related academic adjustments and services for this course are encouraged to see me privately as early in the term as possible. Students requiring disability-related academic adjustments and services must consult the Student Accessibility Services office (205 Collis Student Center, 646-9900, Student.Accessibility.Services@Dartmouth.edu).
Once SAS has authorized services, students must show the originally signed SAS Services and Consent Form and/or a letter on SAS letterhead to me. As a first step, if you have questions about whether you qualify to receive academic adjustments and services, you should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and discussions will remain confidential. (Students with disabilities who require an exception to the laptop policy described above will be granted one; please let me know if we need to discuss this option.)

**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.

**Student wellness**

I recognize that the academic environment at Dartmouth is challenging, that our terms are intensive, and that classes are not the only demanding part of your life. There are a number of resources available to you on campus to support your wellness, including: your undergraduate dean (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~upperde/), Counseling and Human Development (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chd/), and the Student Wellness Center (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/). I encourage you to use these resources and to speak with me if you have concerns.

**Office hours**

My office hours for the spring term are typically Wednesday 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% for each day it is submitted after a deadline.
Quizzes (10%)

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 (one point will be awarded simply for attending class; probability of quiz = 25 + [the number of consecutive classes without a quiz × 10]). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped. Absences will not be excused except for illness or required team travel for varsity athletes.

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.¹

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

¹Make 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.
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 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 8 PM on April 23 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 8 PM on April 29. 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 14 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 RWIT.
for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 PM on May 26. 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.)

Extra credit: Applications and case studies

Students may send me articles or clips that are particularly illustrative of or relevant to theoretical points from readings we have discussed. If I use what you send me in class, 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 articles behind 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 (3/27)

- Course syllabus

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2To consult an RWIT tutor, go to RWIT’s appointment scheduler at 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.
Understanding and studying misperception belief

Defining and measuring misperceptions and misinformation (4/3)

Core readings:


Context and examples:

- Jesse Walker (2016). “Pollsters Made Up a Conspiracy Theory, and Then 32.5% of the People They Questioned Endorsed It.” Reason, October 25, 2016.

The psychology of false beliefs (4/10)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


**Experiments and statistics primer (4/11–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)

**Facts, knowledge, and misinformation (4/12)**

Core readings:


• Brittany S. Liu (N.d.). “Knowledge, attitudes, and biased evaluation of science: Testing the expertise paradox.”

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? (4/17)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Analytical writing (4/18–x-period)

- 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)
- John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing”
• 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 is fine but social science is preferred)
  – One that you are proud of
  – One that you could improve on

Motivated updating and interpretations (4/19)

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:


Social category differences and misperceptions of outgroups (4/24)

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)


Peer review session (4/25–x-period)

• Due 8 PM on 4/23: 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 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 progress

• Review and discussion of peer review responses

Information environments and elite cues (4/26)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Midterm (5/1)

• Midterm course survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_a4zon0eQKRxiFM1) must be submitted to take exam

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and beliefs (5/3)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


The psychology of conspiracy theory belief (5/9–x-period)

Core readings:


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

Context and examples:


Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors (5/10)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Online rumors and misinformation (5/15)

Core readings:


• Chengcheng Shao, Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Onur Varol, Alessandro Flammini, and Filippo Menczer (N.d.). “The spread of misinformation by social bots.”

Context and examples:


• Craig Timberg and Drew Harwell (2018). “We studied thousands of anonymous posts about the Parkland attack and found a conspiracy in the making.” *Washington Post*, February 27, 2018.


**Peer review session (5/16–x-period)**

• Due 8 PM on 5/14: 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

**“Fake news” and online misinformation in 2016 and after (5/17)**

Core readings:


• Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). *Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the Consumption of Fake News During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign*
• Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone Cannon, and David G. Rand (N.d.). “Implausibility and Illusory Truth: Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News but Has No Effect on Entirely Implausible Statements.”

Context and examples:


The media’s role in misinformation: Pro and con

Misinformation in the mainstream media (5/22)

Core readings:


Context and examples:


Special guest: Lisa Lerer, Associated Press (3:30–4:15)
Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (5/24)

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:

Misinformation paper due (5/26, 8 PM)

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (5/29)

Midterm 2 (6/4, 11:30 AM–1:20 PM)
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>
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<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>
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