

# GOVT 30: Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan      Schedule: Silsby 213; TTH 2:25–4:15 PM  
Office: Silsby 122                      x-period: Silsby 213; Wed. 4:35–5:25 PM  
Email: [nyhan@dartmouth.edu](mailto:nyhan@dartmouth.edu)      Office hours: Wed. 9 AM–12 PM  
Phone: 603/646-2773                      (appts.: <https://go.oncehub.com/Nyhan>)

“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 are false and unsupported beliefs about politics and public policy so prevalent and hard to address? This course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to misperceptions and conspiracy theories and the reasons that corrections so often fail to reduce the prevalence of these phenomena. We will also analyze how those tendencies are exploited by political elites and consider possible approaches that journalists, civic reformers, government officials, and technology platforms 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 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 misinformation and conspiracy theories;
- Assess the ways in which elites and the media 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 do so 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 and course materials

The class will run through Canvas. I will use it to email announcements to you and to provide access to the assigned readings (this PDF also includes hyperlinks to almost all of the readings). You should submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email unless otherwise instructed. For all other concerns or questions, though, please see me before or after class, come to my office hours, or email me so we can communicate directly.

## Course materials

No books are required for this course. All core articles are posted as PDFs in Canvas under Assignments and can be commented on there using the **Hypothes.is** online annotation system. Almost all assigned readings can also 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 paywalls.)

Note: I frequently assign news articles and other types of non-academic content to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled “Context and examples” 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. (Note: The “Context and examples” readings are not posted in Canvas for annotation.)

## Studying

Many students do not study as effectively as they could. I highly recommend [Vox's guide](#) to improving how you study. For more information, please contact

the [Academic Skills Center](#) and/or see this list of resources from the [Center for Research on Learning and Teaching](#).

## Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all of the readings if you wish to consult them during 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 long-hand than they do on laptops. (Exceptions will of course be made for students with disabilities who need to use a laptop or for other special circumstances. Please contact me if you would like to discuss your learning needs further.)

## Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding and following [the academic integrity rules](#) at Dartmouth. 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. Details on citing sources appropriately are available from the [Institute for Writing and Rhetoric](#). 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 contact me *immediately* if you have *any* questions or concerns about academic integrity standards.

## 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.

## 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 Col-lis Student Center, 646-9900, [Student.Accessibility.Services@Dartmouth.edu](mailto: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 course laptop policy will be granted one; please contact me.)

## 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](#), [Counseling and Human Development](#), and the [Student Wellness Center](#). I encourage you to use these resources and to speak with me if you have concerns.

## Office hours

Office hours are designated times that faculty members set aside each week specifically for students to ask questions about the course material or college in general on a one-on-one basis. Many students come to office hours to ask about how to prepare for upcoming exams or what they could have done better on past exams. I'm very happy to talk about both topics, of course, but I would also encourage you to bring substantive questions about the course material that come up in your reading or writing where I might be able to help you understand a concept or assist you in developing or expressing an idea.

My office hours for the winter term are typically Wednesday from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM. **To ensure you have a time that works for you and to minimize your wait time, please schedule a meeting with me at <https://go.oncehub.com/Nyhan>** (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. Alternatively, if you cannot make it to office hours, please email me and we can schedule an alternate meeting time.

## Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below.

### Quizzes (5%)

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

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.

### **In-class and online participation (10%)**

I expect students to be prepared to ask questions and engage with material from the readings and lectures — in other words, to be active participants in the learning process. Merely attending class does not constitute adequate participation. In grading participation, I am looking for evidence that you have completed the readings and are engaging with the course material deeply (in other words, quality > volume). This type of intellectual engagement can include posing questions, identifying relevant examples, making connections between topics, critiquing theoretical claims or empirical findings, referencing news or other articles that illustrate course concepts, and presenting arguments that are grounded in the course material. I recognize that students vary in the extent to which they are comfortable speaking in class and thus will evaluate contributions that take place both during class and in the `Hypothes.is` online annotation system. The latter also allows students to ask questions about specific points of confusion in the readings, which are often difficult and technical, and to answer them for each other. These are each important forms of participation as well.

### **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.)

### **Analytical paper: The development of a myth (35%)**

*Assignment:* Each student will write a social science 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.<sup>1</sup> This paper 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 questions that were not adequately considered in class or the readings).

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:

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<sup>1</sup>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.

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 in question to understand the myth's spread?
2. Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
3. What implications does this case have for the theory in question?
4. What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
5. What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?

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 draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on January 27 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 8 PM on February 2. 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 by 8 PM on February 17 for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft based on that feedback and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance.<sup>2</sup> The final version is due by 8 PM on March 1. The rubric I will use to evaluate it is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Note: Late work, including paper proposals and drafts, will result in a reduction of your final grade on the paper by one letter grade for each day it is submitted after a deadline.)

### **Extra credit: Applications and case studies**

Students may send me articles, clips, or other examples that are particularly relevant to the points 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 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 (1/7)**

- Course syllabus

### **Understanding misperception belief**

#### **Defining and measuring misperceptions and misinformation (1/9)**

Core readings:

- James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert F. Rich (2000). “**Misinformation and the currency of democratic citizenship.**” *Journal of Politics* 62(3): 790–816.
- Erik Peterson and Shanto Iyengar (N.d.). “**Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?**”

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<sup>2</sup>To consult an RWIT tutor, **make an appointment online** or stop by during **drop-in hours**.

- Matthew H. Graham (2018). “Self-Awareness of Political Knowledge.” *Political Behavior*.

Context and examples:

- Kathy Frankovic (2016). “Belief in conspiracies largely depends on political identity.” YouGov, December 27, 2016.
- Kathy Frankovic (2018). “Russia’s impact on the election seen through partisan eyes.” YouGov, March 9, 2018.
- Glenn Kessler and Scott Clement (2018). “Trump routinely says things that aren’t true. Few Americans believe him.” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018.
- Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks (2017). “This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama’s.” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2017.

### The psychology of false beliefs (1/14)

Core readings:

- R. Kelly Garrett, Daniel Sude, and Paolo Riva (2019). “Toeing the Party Lie: Ostracism Promotes Endorsement of Partisan Election Falsehoods.” *Political Communication*.
- Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand (2018). “Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 147(12): 1865–1880.
- Gillian Murphy, Elizabeth F. Loftus, Rebecca Hofstein Grady, Linda J. Levine, and Ciara M. Greene (2019). “False Memories for Fake News During Ireland’s Abortion Referendum.” *Psychological Science*.

Context and examples:

- Glenn Kessler (2015). “Trump’s outrageous claim that ‘thousands’ of New Jersey Muslims celebrated the 9/11 attacks.” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2015.
- Ben Brumfield and Nadia Kounang (2015). “5 myths surrounding vaccines – and the reality.” CNN, September 17, 2015.

### Experiments and statistics primer (1/15–x-period)

Experiments:

- Rachel Glennerster and Kudzai Takavarasha (2013). *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Excerpts from Chapter 2 (Canvas).

- Sample article: Anthony Bastardi, Eric Luis Uhlmann, and Lee Ross (2011). “Wishful Thinking: Belief, Desire, and the Motivated Evaluation of Scientific Evidence.” *Psychological Science* 22(6): 731–732.
- 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:

- William D. Berry and Mitchell S. Sanders (2000). *Understanding Multivariate Research*, pp. 1–39, 45–49 (Canvas).
- Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

### **Bias in information exposure, processing, and interpretation (1/16)**

Core readings:

- Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro (2011). “Ideological segregation online and offline.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126(4): 1799–1839.
- Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge (2006). “Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3): 755–769.
- Martin Bisgaard (2019). “How Getting the Facts Right Can Fuel Partisan-Motivated Reasoning.” *American Journal of Political Science*.

Context and examples:

- Ozan Kuru, Josh Pasek and Michael Traugott (2016). “If my candidate is behind, the poll must be biased.” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2016.
- Daniel Dale (2017). “Donald Trump voters: We like the president’s lies.” *Toronto Star*, March 26, 2017.
- Ed Lavandera and Jason Morris (2017). “As the seas around them rise, fishermen deny climate change.” CNN, May 31, 2017.

### **Assessing the evidence for motivated reasoning (1/21)**

Core readings:

- James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (2019) “The evidence for motivated reasoning in climate change preference formation.” *Nature Climate Change* 9: 111–119.
- Dan M. Kahan, Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic (2017). “Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government.” *Behavioral Public Policy* 1(1): 54–86.

- Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand (2019). “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning.” *Cognition* 188: 39–50.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). “Political Knowledge Does Not Guard Against Belief In Conspiracy Theories.” YouGov Model Politics, November 5, 2012.
- Josh Clinton and Carrie Roush (2016). “Poll: Persistent Partisan Divide Over ‘Birther’ Question.” NBC News, August 10, 2016.
- Brendan Nyhan (2016). “Fact-Checking Can Change Views? We Rate That as Mostly True.” *New York Times*, November 5, 2016.

### Group identity and misperceptions (1/23)

Core readings:

- Ashley Jardina and Michael Traugott (2019). “The Genesis of the Birther Rumor: Partisanship, Racial Attitudes, and Political Knowledge.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 4(1): 60–80.
- Brendan Nyhan and Thomas Zeitzoff (2018). “Fighting the Past: Perceptions of Control, Historical Misperceptions, and Corrective Information in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” *Political Psychology* 39(3): 611–631.
- R. Kelly Garrett, Erik C. Nisbet, and Emily K. Lynch (2013). “Undermining the corrective effects of media-based political fact checking? The role of contextual cues and naïve theory.” *Journal of Communication* 63(4): 617–637.

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2016). “Will I Know Anyone at This Party?” October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)
- Caitlin Dickerson (2017). “How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down.” *New York Times Magazine*, September 26, 2017.
- More in Common (2019). “The Perception Gap.” (Take the quiz first.)

### Information environments and elite cues (1/28)

Core readings:

- John Zaller (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Chapter 6 (Canvas).
- Michael Tesler (2018). “Elite Domination of Public Doubts About Climate Change (Not Evolution).” *Political Communication* 35(2): 306–326.

- Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas (2012). “Partisan Perceptual Bias and the Information Environment.” *Journal of Politics* 74(3): 672–684.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2014). “Voter Fraud Is Rare, but Myth Is Widespread.” *New York Times*, June 10, 2014.
- Jim Rutenberg and Jackie Calmes (2009). “False ‘Death Panel’ Rumor Has Some Familiar Roots.” *New York Times*, August 13, 2009.
- Ezra Klein (2014). “Why Neil deGrasse Tyson’s dismissal of anti-GMO concerns matters.” *Vox*, August 1, 2014.

### Academic writing/proposal review (1/29–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)
- Optional reading: John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing”
- Optional reading: Tim Büthe, “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science”
- Due 8 PM on 1/27: Proposal draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review
  1. Consider the key questions for the assignment:
    - How can we use the theory in question to understand the myth’s spread?
    - Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
    - What implications does this case have for the theory in question?
    - What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
    - What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?
  2. With these questions in mind, identify at least two specific aspects of the proposal that seem especially strong and at least two that need further development.
  3. With these questions in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions that could help the author think about how best to develop the ideas expressed in the proposal.
- Class discussion of paper assignment
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

## Applications: Climate change (1/30)

Core readings:

- Sander van der Linden, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Edward Maibach (2018). “Scientific agreement can neutralize politicization of facts.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 2: 2–3.
- John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ullrich K. H. Ecker (2017). “Neutralizing misinformation through inoculation: Exposing misleading argumentation techniques reduces their influence.” *PLOS One*.
- Hunter Gehlbach, Carly D. Robinson, Christine C. Vriesema (2019). “Leveraging cognitive consistency to nudge conservative climate change beliefs.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 61: 134–137.
- Matthew H. Goldberg, Abel Gustafson, Matthew T. Ballew, Seth A. Rosenthal, and Anthony Leiserowitz (2019). “A Social Identity Approach to Engaging Christians in the Issue of Climate Change.” *Science Communication* 41(4): 442–463.

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2013). “Hot In My Backyard.” May 17, 2013 (Acts One and Two).
- Brad Plumer (2019). “How the Weather Gets Weaponized in Climate Change Messaging.” *New York Times*, March 1, 2019.
- Tracy Jan (2018). “In North Carolina, hurricanes did what scientists could not: Convince Republicans that climate change is real.” *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.

## Midterm 1 (2/4)

- Midterm course survey ([http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_emK0ndb0vig5Rfn](http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_emK0ndb0vig5Rfn)) must be submitted before class

## Applications: Crime (2/6)

Core readings:

- Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Oliver Wright (1996). “Crime in Black and White: The Violent, Scary World of Local News.” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1.3: 6–23.
- Nicola Mastroiocco and Luigi Minale (2018). “News media and crime perceptions: Evidence from a natural experiment.” *Journal of Public Economics* 165: 230–255.

- Jane Esberg and Jonathan Mummolo (N.d.). “Explaining Misperceptions of Crime.”

Context and examples:

- John Gramlich (2018). “5 facts about crime in the U.S.” Pew Research Center, January 30, 2018.
- Michelle Ye Hee Lee (2017). “Fact-checking Trump’s rhetoric on crime and the ‘American carnage.’” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2017.

## Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

### Conspiracy theories: Definitions and beliefs (2/11)

Core readings:

- Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009). “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(2): 202–227.
- Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*, Ch. 6 (Canvas).
- J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (2014). “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 952–966.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2017). “Why More Democrats Are Now Embracing Conspiracy Theories.” *New York Times*, February 15, 2017.
- Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum (2019). “Conspiracy Without the Theory.” *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2019.
- Charlie Warzel (2019). “Epstein Suicide Conspiracies Show How Our Information System Is Poisoned.” *New York Times*, August 11, 2019.

### The psychology of conspiracy theory belief (2/13)

Core readings:

- Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart (2016). “Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 824–844.
- Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson (2016). “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions.” *Political Research Quarterly* 69(1): 57–71.

- Roland Imhoff, Pia Lamberty, and Olivier Klein (2018). “Using Power as a Negative Cue: How Conspiracy Mentality Affects Epistemic Trust in Sources of Historical Knowledge.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44(9): 1364–1379.

Context and examples:

- Spencer Ackerman (2018). “There’s Been a George Soros for Every Era of Anti-Semitic Panic.” *The Daily Beast*, October 12, 2018.
- Jared Holt (2019). “How far-right conspiracy theories informed Trump’s Ukraine call.” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2019.
- Jana Winter (2019). “Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat.” Yahoo News, August 1, 2019.

## Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

### Rumors and online misinformation (2/18)

Core readings:

- Adrien Friggeri, Lada A. Adamic, Dean Eckles, and Justin Cheng (2014). “Rumor Cascades.” AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM), June 2, 2014.
- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018). “The spread of true and false news online.” *Science* 359(6380): 1146–1151.
- Nicolas M. Anspach and Taylor N. Carlson (2018). “What to Believe? Social Media Commentary and Belief in Misinformation.” *Political Behavior*.

Context and examples:

- Donie O’Sullivan (2019). “A Facebook rumor about white vans is spreading fear across America.” CNN, December 4, 2019.
- Amanda Taub and Max Fisher (2018). “Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match.” *New York Times*, April 21, 2018.
- Snigdha Poonam and Samarth Bansal (2019). “Misinformation Is Endangering India’s Election.” *The Atlantic*, April 1, 2019.
- Katie Rafter (2014). “Curfew rumors false, officials say.” *The Dartmouth*, October 17, 2014.

### **Paper draft peer review (2/19–x-period)**

- Due 8 PM on 2/17: Paper draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review (pairs)
  1. Read the paper carefully
  2. Consider where the author performs well and where the author could improve in addressing the key questions for the assignment:
    - How can we use the theory in question to understand the myth’s spread?
    - Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
    - What implications does this case have for the theory in question?
    - What do your findings clarify about the origins of the misperception itself?
    - What do your findings suggest about how to best reduce misperceptions?
  3. Consider where the author performs well and where the author could improve in meeting the rubric criteria described at the end of the syllabus:
    - Thesis/argument
    - Originality
    - Evidence
    - Use of course concepts
    - Organization
    - Quality of expression
  4. Using the assignment questions and rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and at least two that could be improved further.
  5. Using the assignment questions and rubric criteria, 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 2016–2020 (2/20)**

Core readings:

- Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). “Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 U.S. election.” (Canvas)

- Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer (2019). “Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” *Science* 363(6425): 374–378.
- Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker (2019). “Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook.” *Science Advances* 5(1): aau4586.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2019). “Why Fears of Fake News Are Overhyped.” Medium, February 4, 2019.
- Bob Moser (2019). “Interference 2020.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, fall 2019.
- Eliza Mackintosh (2019). “Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it’s learned may be crucial to Western democracy.” CNN.

Special guest: Rebecca Waite ’12, Product Policy Manager, Global Elections, Facebook (3:30–4:15)

## Media coverage and fact-checking

### “Balance” and misinformation in mainstream media coverage (2/25)

Core readings:

- Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff (2004). “Balance as bias: global warming and the US prestige press.” *Global environmental change* 14(2): 125–136.
- Derek J. Koehler (2016). “Can journalistic ‘false balance’ distort public perception of consensus in expert opinion?” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 22(1): 24–38.
- Eric Merkley (N.d.). “Are Experts (News)Worthy? Balance, Conflict and Mass Media Coverage of Expert Consensus.”

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). “Enabling the jobs report conspiracy theory.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 8, 2012.
- Derek Thompson (2018). “Trump’s Lies Are a Virus, and News Organizations Are the Host.” *The Atlantic*, November 19, 2018.
- Phillip Bump (2018). “Why untrue tweets from Trump shouldn’t be unchallenged in headlines.” *Washington Post*, June 13, 2018.

## Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (2/26–x-period)

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.”
- Oscar Barrera, Sergei Guriev, Emeric Henry, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya (2020). “Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics.” *Journal of Public Economics* 182: 104123.
- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2015). “The Effect of Fact-checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on U.S. State Legislators.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 628–640.

Context and examples:

- Cary Spivak (2011). “The Fact-Checking Explosion.” *American Journalism Review*, December 2, 2010.
- Katie Knibbs (2018). “The Fact-Checkers Who Want to Save the World.” *The Ringer*, July 23, 2018.
- Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact (2019). “Fact checking doesn’t work (the way you think it does).”

## Misinformation paper due (3/1, 8 PM)

### Fighting misinformation online (3/3)

Core readings:

- Katherine Clayton et al. (2019). “Real Solutions for Fake News? Measuring the Effectiveness of General Warnings and Fact-Check Banners in Reducing Belief in False Stories on Social Media.” *Political Behavior*.
- Gordon Pennycook, Ziv Epstein, Mohsen Mosleh, Antonio A. Arechar, Dean Eckles, and David G. Rand (N.d.). “Understanding and reducing the spread of misinformation online.”
- Andrew Guess, Benjamin Lyons, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). “A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India.” (Canvas)

Context and examples:

- Guy Rosen and Tessa Lyons (2019). “Remove, Reduce, Inform: New Steps to Manage Problematic Content.” Facebook, April 10, 2019.
- Google (2019). “How Google Fights Disinformation.” February 2019.

- YouTube (2019). “The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 2: Raising authoritative content and reducing borderline content and harmful misinformation.” December 3, 2019.

### **Misinformation: Implications for democracy (3/5)**

Core readings:

- Brendan Nyhan (2018). “How Misinformation and Polarization Affect American Democracy.” In “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature,” Joshua Tucker, ed., Hewlett Foundation, pages 49–53.
- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2018). “The New Conspiracists.” *Dissent*, Winter 2018.

Context and examples:

- David Roberts (2017). “America is facing an epistemic crisis.” Vox, November 2, 2017.
- Lydia Polgreen (2019). “The collapse of the information ecosystem poses profound risks for humanity.” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2019.
- Ethan Porter and Thomas J. Wood (2020). “No, We’re Not Living in a Post-Fact World.” *Politico*, January 4, 2020.
- Yochai Benkler (2019). “Cautionary Notes on Disinformation and the Origins of Distrust.” MediaWell, October 17, 2019.
- Paul Musgrave (2017). “Democracy requires trust. But Trump is making us all into conspiracy theorists.” *Washington Post*, March 7, 2017.
- David Karpf (2019). “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths.” MediaWell, December 10, 2019.

**Midterm 2 (3/10, 3:00–4:50 PM, location TBD)**

# Exam 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 but the relevant portion of the class reading list is provided as an appendix
- Tests *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 is 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.

## Analytical paper rubric

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