

GOVT 30: Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Prof. Brendan Nyhan
nyhan@dartmouth.edu

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

“It takes strength to admit you don’t know everything. Weakness is thinking you don’t need expert advice and only listening to sources that confirm what you want to believe.”
–Arnold Schwarzenegger

“What we’ve seen is what some people call truth decay... the sense that not only do we not have to tell the truth, but the truth doesn’t even matter.”
–Barack Obama

Class schedule and office hours

Class (Silsby 213): TTH 10:10 AM–12:00 PM (x-period Friday 3:30–4:20 PM)

Office hours (Silsby 122 or Zoom): Monday 9–10 AM ET, Wednesday 10–11 AM ET, Friday 9–10 AM ET (sign up at <https://go.oncehub.com/nyhan>)

Course overview

Why are false and unsupported beliefs about politics and public policy seemingly 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 and apply 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 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 contribute to class discussion and to be respectful of others in the class.

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?

Slack for class discussion and questions

Students often want to ask questions about the scientific articles we read for class or share interesting material they encountered that is related to what we are studying. We will use Slack to facilitate these conversations — the app makes it possible for you to more effectively learn from each other outside of class and also to benefit from my answers to other people's questions. Please note that you can of course email me privately at any time, come to office hours, etc. With that said, I will often encourage you to post questions and/or answers we discuss via email to Slack because it allows us to benefit from the collective intelligence of the class as a group. In particular, I will ask you to post comments and questions on the readings before each class on Slack.

Communication and course materials

I will use Canvas to email official announcements to the class and to provide access to assigned readings that are not available online (this PDF 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 talk to 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. Almost all assigned readings can also be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. The remainder will be posted on Canvas. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the VPN to access articles behind paywalls.) News articles and other types of non-academic content are labeled “Context” 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.

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 as soon as possible (before the end of the second week of the term at the latest) to discuss appropriate accommodations. Dartmouth has a deep commitment to support students' religious observances and diverse faith practices.

Students with disabilities

Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are required to register with Student Accessibility Services (see the [Getting Started with SAS webpage](#), email Student.Accessibility.Services@Dartmouth.edu, or call 603/646-9900) and to request that an accommodation email be sent to me in advance of the need for an accommodation. Students should then schedule a follow-up meeting with me to determine relevant details such as what role SAS or its Testing Center may play in accommodation implementation. This process works best for everyone when completed as early in the quarter as possible. If students have questions about whether they are eligible for accommodations or have concerns about the implementation of their accommodations, they 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 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. My office hours are Monday 9–10 AM, Wednesday 10–11 AM, and Friday from 9–10 AM. Please schedule an in-person or virtual meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce page at <https://go.oncehub.com/nyhan>. (If you cannot meet with me during any of those times, please email me to request an alternate time.)

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. All work is due at the time specified in the syllabus and on Canvas unless otherwise noted. Late work will not be accepted without prior permission. (I recognize that our current circumstances are challenging for many students. Please contact me immediately if there are circumstances beyond your control that affect your ability to submit work on time.)

In-class / online participation (7.5%)

I expect students to be prepared to ask questions in class 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. These contributions can take place during lectures, class discussion, or when students report back after small-group discussion. 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 on Slack. 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.

Discussion questions (7.5%)

Starting in the second week of the course, students will be required to post a comment or question of up to three sentences on each of the core readings to Slack by 8 AM ET on the day of class. You may skip five classes during the quarter without penalty (just post “Skip.”). These posts can be factual questions about the study design and results or comments you want to offer on the findings and their implications. I may ask you to elaborate on these thoughts during class. For grading purposes, I will evaluate these comments and questions for how thoughtful and constructive they are and how much they contribute to the class conversation.

Midterms (50%)

There will be two closed-book midterms (25% each) administered via blue books that will test your knowledge and understanding of the readings from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short

answer questions, and/or brief essays. An exam study guide with sample questions from a past version of the course is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Note: These will be curved! Don't panic about your raw score.)

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.¹ 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:

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 initially but at least a notion would be helpful.)
2. Don't try to invent a new theory from scratch but instead try to identify an interesting conflict between theory and data or an important gap in a theory. For instance, one author may state that $X \rightarrow Y$, but you might predict that X only affects Y under condition Z and test that in the context of a misperception of interest. Alternatively, you might test competing predictions in the context of a relevant case — for example, author A argues that X increases Y and author B argues that X decreases Y .

For more ideas, see John Gerring on “Finding a research question” from *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework* (excerpt on Canvas) and Leanne C. Powner on “[From Research Topic to Research Question](#)” from *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*.

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

¹Again, 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.

historical sources, journalistic accounts, and/or quantitative data; and reflect on the implications of your findings. Ideally you will be adding new ideas or analysis beyond what we have discussed in class. You should seek to engage with a larger scholarly literature outside of the assigned readings, which will help you go beyond the theories we've discussed and/or look at more detailed evidence. The citations in the works we read in class are excellent guides to the relevant literature as well as who is citing research of interest in Google Scholar (click on "Cited by ..."). Please contact Wendel Cox, the Government Department librarian, at wendel.cox@dartmouth.edu and/or consult with me if you need further assistance in conducting research for the paper.

The final paper should specifically answer questions like these (note: you do *not* have to answer all of them):

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

You should make sure your answers to these questions engage with relevant specifics about your case where possible — beware of vague assertions about its prevalence or circulation. With that said, 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 of the assignment is for you 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 April 20 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 8 PM on April 25. 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 11:59 PM on May 15 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.² The final version is due by 11:59 PM on May 29. The rubric I will use to evaluate it is provided at the end of the syllabus.

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. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (3/29)

- Course syllabus
- Pre-course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6V9P546eubejJ8q)

Understanding misperception belief

What is a misperception? Who is misinformed? (3/31)

Core readings:

- Emily K. Vraga and Leticia Bode (2020). “[Defining Misinformation and Understanding its Bounded Nature: Using Expertise and Evidence for Describing Misinformation.](#)” *Political Communication* 37(1): 136–144.
- Jianing Li and Michael W. Wagner (2020). “[The Value of Not Knowing: Partisan Cue-Taking and Belief Updating of the Uninformed, the Ambiguous, and the Misinformed.](#)” *Journal of Communication* 70(5): 646–669.

Context and examples:

- Daniel A. Cox and John Halpin (2020). “[Conspiracy theories, misinformation, COVID-19, and the 2020 election.](#)” American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, October 13, 2020.

²To consult an RWIT tutor, you can make an appointment online or submit your paper for asynchronous feedback — see [the instructions](#) provided on their website for details.

- Joel Rose (2020). “Even If It’s ‘Bonkers,’ Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories.” National Public Radio, December 30, 2020.
- 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.
- Lane Cuthbert and Alexander Theodoridis (2022). “Do Republicans really believe Trump won the 2020 election? Our research suggests that they do.” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2022.

Experiments and statistics primer (4/1 [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 2:30 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; optional for those who have taken GOVT 10 or equivalent but helpful review for all)
- Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

Reading journal articles:

- Christian H. Jordan and Mark P. Zanna (1999). “How to Read a Journal Article in Social Psychology.” In Roy F. Baumeister, ed., *The Self in Social Psychology*, Psychology Press.

The psychology of false beliefs (4/5)

Core readings:

- Benjamin A. Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Andrew M. Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (2021). “Overconfidence in news judgments is associated with false news susceptibility.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* June 8, 2021 118 (23) e2019527118.

- Lisa Fazio, Raunak Pillai, and Deep Patel (2022). “The effects of repetition on belief in naturalistic settings.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Context and examples:

- Glenn Kessler and Joe Fox (2021). “The false claims that Trump keeps repeating.” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2021.
- 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.

Group identities and factual beliefs (4/7)

Core readings:

- Douglas Ahler (2014). “Self-Fulfilling Misperceptions of Public Polarization.” *Journal of Politics* 76(3): 607–620.
- Alberto Alesina, Matteo F. Ferroni, and Stefanie Stantcheva (N.d.). “Perceptions of Racial Gaps, Their Causes, and Ways to Reduce Them.”

Context and examples:

- Adam Serwer (2015), “Why We’re Finally Taking Down Confederate Flags,” BuzzFeed, June 24, 2015.
- This American Life (2016). “Will I Know Anyone at This Party?” October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)
- More in Common (2019). “The Perception Gap.” (Take the quiz first.)

Bias in information exposure, processing, and interpretation (4/14)

Core readings:

- Erik Peterson and Shanto Iyengar (2021). “Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?” *American Journal of Political Science* 65(1): 133–147.
- Martin Bisgaard (2019). “How Getting the Facts Right Can Fuel Partisan-Motivated Reasoning.” *American Journal of Political Science*. 63(4): 824–839.

Context and examples:

- Ed Lavandera and Jason Morris (2017). “As the seas around them rise, fishermen deny climate change.” CNN, May 31, 2017.

- David Kestenbaum (2021). “Until The Cows Come Home.” *This American Life*, November 12, 2021.
- Glenn Kessler and Scott Clement (2018). “Trump routinely says things that aren’t true. Few Americans believe him.” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018.

Assessing the evidence for motivated reasoning (4/15 [x-period])

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.
- Camilla Strömbäck, David Andersson, Daniel Västfjäll, and Gustav Tinghög (2021). “Motivated reasoning, fast and slow.” *Behavioural Public Policy*.

The effect of elite cues on public beliefs (4/19)

Core readings:

- Michael Tesler (2018). “Elite Domination of Public Doubts About Climate Change (Not Evolution).” *Political Communication* 35(2): 306–326.
- Katherine Clayton, Nicholas T. Davis, Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, Timothy J. Ryan, and Thomas J. Wood (2021). “Elite Rhetoric Can Undermine Democratic Norms” June 8, 2021 118 (23) e2024125118.

Context and examples:

- Vera Bergengruen (2020). “How Republicans Are Selling the Myth of Rampant Voter Fraud.” *Time*, October 22, 2020.
- Ashley Parker, Amy Gardner, and Josh Dawsey (2022). “How Republicans became the party of Trump’s election lie after Jan. 6.” *Washington Post*, January 5, 2022.
- Ezra Klein (2014). “Why Neil deGrasse Tyson’s dismissal of anti-GMO concerns matters.” *Vox*, August 1, 2014.

The effects of misinformation and corrections of it (4/21)

Core readings:

- Ethan Porter, Yamil Velez, and Thomas J. Wood (N.d.). “Factual Corrections and COVID-19 Misinformation: Evidence From Simultaneous Experiments in Ten Countries.”

- Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, and Thomas J. Wood (N.d.). “Time and skeptical opinion content erode the effects of science coverage on climate beliefs and attitudes.” (Canvas)

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2010). “Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate.” *The Forum* 8(1).

Academic writing/proposal review (4/22 [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 4/20: 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 (4/26)

Core readings:

- Chad Hazlett and Matto Mildenberger (2020). “Wildfire Exposure Increases Pro-Environment Voting within Democratic but Not Republican Areas.” *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 1359–1365.
- Matto Mildenberger and Dustin Tingley (2017). “Beliefs about Climate Beliefs: The Importance of Second-Order Opinions for Climate Politics.” *British Journal of Political Science* 49(4): 1279–1307

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2013). “Hot In My Backyard.” May 17, 2013 (Acts One and Two).
- Tracy Jan (2018). “In North Carolina, hurricanes did what scientists could not: Convince Republicans that climate change is real.” *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.
- Mark Blumenthal (2021). “In 2021, even the weather is politicized.” YouGov America, August 17, 2021.

Applications: COVID (4/28)

Core readings:

- Hunt Allcott, Levi Boxell, Jacob Conway, Matthew Gentzkow, Michael Thaler, and David Yang (2020). “Polarization and public health: Partisan differences in social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.” *Journal of Public Economics* 191: 104254. (Skip the model in Section 2.)
- Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Justin Stoler, and Joseph Uscinski (N.d.). “Do Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation Cause Vaccine Hesitancy and Refusal?”

Context and examples:

- Liz Hamel, Lunna Lopes, Ashley Kirzinger, Grace Sparks, Mellisha Stokes, and Mollyann Brodie (2021). “KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation.” Kaiser Family Foundation, November 8, 2021.
- Jonathan Rothwell and Dan Witters (2021). “U.S. Adults’ Estimates of COVID-19 Hospitalization Risk.” Gallup, September 27, 2021.
- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General (2021). “A Community Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation.”

Midterm 1 (5/3)

- Midterm course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9nUJgWuJ950cCjQ) must be submitted before class

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and conditions (5/5)

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)

Context and examples:

- Jose A. Del Real (2021). “‘An American Tradition’: Lessons from a year covering conspiracy theories.” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2021.
- Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, and Sander van der Linden (2020). “How to Spot COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories.” George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.
- J. David Goodman (2022). “How a Butterfly Refuge at the Texas Border Became the Target of Far-Right Lies.” *New York Times*, February 6, 2022.
- Danny Hakim, Jo Becker, and Alan Feuer. “Texts Show Ginni Thomas’s Embrace of Conspiracy Theories.” *New York Times*, March 26, 2022.

Who believes in conspiracy theories? (5/10)

Core readings:

- 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.
- Adam M. Enders, Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, Stefan Wuchty, Michelle Seelig, John Funchion, Manohar Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Justin Stoler (2021). “Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism.” *Journal of Politics*.

Context and examples:

- Matthew Rosenberg and Maggie Haberman (2020). “The Republican Embrace of QAnon Goes Far Beyond Trump.” *New York Times*, August 20, 2020.

- Daniel A. Cox (2021). “Social Isolation and Community Disconnection Are Not Spurring Conspiracy Theories.” American Enterprise Institute Survey Center on American Life, March 4, 2021.
- Adam Nagourney (2022). “A Kennedy’s Crusade Against Covid Vaccines Anguishes Family and Friends.” *New York Times*, February 26, 2022.

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and online misinformation (5/12)

Core readings:

- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018). “The spread of true and false news online.” *Science* 359(6380): 1146–1151.
- M. Asher Lawson and Hemant Kakkar (2021). “Of Pandemics, Politics, and Personality: The Role of Conscientiousness and Political Ideology in the Sharing of Fake News.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Context and examples:

- Jessica Contrera (2021). Washington Post, December 16, 2021.
- Daniel Dale (2021). “Fact-checking the misinformation about Oklahoma hospitals and ivermectin.” CNN, September 7, 2021.
- Joshua Zeitz (2017). “Lessons From the Fake News Pandemic of 1942.” *Politico Magazine*, March 12, 2017.
- Katie Rafter (2014). “Curfew rumors false, officials say.” *The Dartmouth*, October 17, 2014.

“Fake news” and online misinformation 2016–2022 (5/17)

Core readings:

- 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, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (2020). “Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 U.S. election.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4: 472–480.

Context and examples:

- Craig Silverman (2016). “This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook.” BuzzFeed, November 16, 2016.

- Brendan Nyhan (2019). “Why Fears of Fake News Are Overhyped.” Medium, February 4, 2019.
- Election Integrity Partnership (2020). “Repeat Offenders: Voting Misinformation on Twitter in the 2020 United States Election.” October 29, 2020.

Media coverage and fact-checking

Addressing misinformation in mainstream media coverage (5/19)

Core readings:

- Graham N. Dixon and Christopher E. Clarke (2013). “Heightening Uncertainty Around Certain Science: Media Coverage, False Balance, and the Autism-Vaccine Controversy.” *Science Communication* 35(3): 358–382.
- Eric Merkley (2020). “Are Experts (News)Worthy? Balance, Conflict and Mass Media Coverage of Expert Consensus.” *Political Communication* 37(4): 530–549.

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.
- Marc Tracy (2021). “Trump Is Gone, but the Media’s Misinformation Challenge Is Still Here.” *New York Times*, July 27, 2021.
- Elahe Izadi (2020). “The QAnon problem facing local journalism this election season.” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2020.

Student meetings to discuss draft peer reviews (5/20 [x-period])

- Due 11:59 AM on 5/15: 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.

Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (5/24)

Core readings:

- Jianing Li, Jordan M. Foley, Omar Dumdum, and Michael W. Wagner (2021). “The Power of a Genre: Political News Presented as Fact-Checking Increases Accurate Belief Updating and Hostile Media Perceptions.” *Mass Communication and Society*. (Canvas)
- 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:

- Review – fact-checkers: [PolitiFact.com](#), [Washington Post Fact Checker](#), [Factcheck.org](#), [Snopes](#)
- Anya van Wagtenonk (2022). “Can fact-checking solve the misinformation pandemic?” *Grid*, January 12, 2022.
- Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact (2019). “Fact checking doesn’t work (the way you think it does).”
- Will Oremus (2022). “To fight misinformation, Twitter expands project to let users fact-check each other’s tweets.” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2022.

Fighting misinformation online (5/26)

Core readings:

- Gordon Pennycook, Ziv Epstein, Mohsen Mosleh, Antonio A. Arechar, Dean Eckles, and David G. Rand (2021). “Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online.” *Nature*.
- Andrew Guess, Michael Lerner, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and Neelanjan Sircar (2020). “A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(27): 15536–15545.

Context and examples:

- Barbara Ortutay (2021). “Twitter rolls out redesigned misinformation warning labels.” Associated Press, November 17, 2021.
- Zeve Sanderson, Megan A. Brown, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker (2021). “Twitter flagged Donald Trump’s tweets with election misinformation: They continued to spread both on and off the platform.” *Misinformation Review*, August 24, 2021.
- Shirin Ghaffary(2022). “Does banning extremists online work? It depends.” *Recode*, February 3, 2022.

Misinformation paper due (5/29, 11:59 PM)

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (5/31)

Core readings:

- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2018). “The New Conspiracists.” *Dissent*, Winter 2018.
- Nicole M. Krause, Isabelle Freiling, and Dietram A. Scheufele (N.d.). “The ‘infodemic’ infodemic: Toward a more nuanced understanding of truth-claims and the need for (not) combatting misinformation.”

Context and examples:

- David Karpf (2019). “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths.” *MediaWell*, December 10, 2019.
- Sean Illing (2021). “The fantasy-industrial complex gave us the Capitol Hill insurrection.” *Vox*, January 8, 2021.
- Joseph Uscinski (2021). “Why We (Still) Shouldn’t Censor Misinformation.” *Reason*, April 2021.
- Gilad Edelman (2022). “Beware the Never-Ending Disinformation Emergency.” *Wired*, March 11, 2022.

Midterm 2 (6/3, 11:30 AM–1:20 PM ET)

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)

In your own words, briefly explain the difference between “fact avoidance” and “meaning avoidance” according to [Gaines et al. \(2007\)](#) and summarize their findings (note: not assigned this year).

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