

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 (19th century American humorist)

“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

“Only News Source Man Trusts Has Logo Of Eyeball In Crosshairs”

–The Onion

Class schedule and office hours

Class (Dartmouth Hall 106): TTH 10:10 AM–12:00 PM (x-period Friday 3:30–4:20 PM)

Office hours (Silsby 122 or Zoom): MWF 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 a \(Quantitative\) Journal Article](#)” by Greta Krippner (assigned below), “[How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps](#)” by Amanda Hoover Green (optional), or “[How to Read a Journal Article in Social Psychology](#)” by Christian H. Jordan and Mark P. Zanna (optional), which present approaches you can 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.

Large language model policy (e.g., ChatGPT)

Use of AI tools such as ChatGPT is permitted in this course for the following purpose:

- Asking for help understanding concepts or research studies as background (note: please remember that it is a tool that can be used to aid understanding, *not* a substitute for actual reading or thinking)

Please provide a description of exactly how you used AI tools in any assignment you submit in which they were employed. As always, please remember that you are ultimately responsible for the work you submit, including verifying that it is correct and adheres to Dartmouth's academic integrity standards (see above).

The following uses of AI tools, including ChatGPT, are not permitted in this course for the following purposes:

- Submitting AI-generated text (either verbatim or in edited form) in papers or other written assignments

Submitting AI-generated text as your own constitutes an academic integrity violation. If you have questions about this policy, ask me!

Religious observances

Dartmouth has a deep commitment to support students' religious observances and diverse faith practices. 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 course adjustments.

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.)

Mental health and 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 [The Counseling Center](#), which allows you to book triage appointments online; the Student Wellness Center, which offers wellness check-ins; and [your undergraduate dean](#). The student-led [Dartmouth Student Mental Health Union](#) and their peer support program may be helpful if you would like to speak to a trained fellow student support listener. If you need immediate assistance, please contact the counselor on-call at (603) 646-9442 at any time. Please make me aware of anything that will hinder your success in this course.

Title IX

At Dartmouth, we value integrity, responsibility, and respect for the rights and interests of others, all central to our Principles of Community. We are dedicated to establishing and maintaining a safe and inclusive campus where all have equal access to the educational and employment opportunities Dartmouth offers. We strive to promote an environment of sexual respect, safety, and well-being. In its policies and standards, Dartmouth demonstrates unequivocally that sexual assault, gender-based harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking are not tolerated in our community.

[The Sexual Respect Website at Dartmouth](#) provides a wealth of information on your rights with regard to sexual respect and resources that are available to all in our community.

Please note that, as a faculty member, I am obligated to share disclosures regarding conduct under Title IX with Dartmouth's Title IX Coordinator. Confidential resources are also available, and include licensed medical or counseling professionals (e.g., a licensed psychologist), staff members of organizations recognized as rape crisis centers under state law (such as WISE), and ordained clergy (see [this list of resources](#) from the Title IX Office).

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dartmouth's Title IX Coordinator. Their contact information can be found on [the sexual respect website](#).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

I seek to create a learning environment that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences and that honors your identities. My intention is to create a classroom that is conducive to everyone's learning. I have an expectation that we will treat each other with respect and collegiality and that we will be open to perspectives that challenge our own. If you have a concern about the policies or content of the class or would like to use a different name or pronouns than those provided by the College, please contact me.

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, Wednesday, 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 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 critically analyze the extent to which one or more existing theories help explain the development and spread of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory.¹ The goal of the assignment is for you to (a) identify a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations, (b) to evaluate those predictions using historical sources, journalistic accounts, or quantitative data, and (c) to reflect on the implications of your findings for the theory or theories in question. You should seek to add new ideas or analysis beyond just applying a theory from class and to engage with a larger scholarly literature outside of assigned 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 explanations (i.e., those offered by 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 specific case — for example, author A argues that X increases Y but 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

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.

C. Powner on “From Research Topic to Research Question” from *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student’s Practical Guide*.

In general, 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 questions like these (note: you do *not* have to answer all of them):

1. What would the theory or theories in question predict? Why?
2. Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
3. What implications does this evidence have for their theory (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? How could it be improved?
4. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of your topic more generally?

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 19 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 8 PM on April 24. 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 14 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 28. 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 (3/28)

- Course syllabus
- Pre-course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_72F9M3aCMWIjx7E)

Understanding misperception belief

What is a misperception? Who is misinformed? (3/30)

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.
- Joel Rose (2020). “[Even If It’s ‘Bonkers,’ Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories.](#)” National Public Radio, December 30, 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.

- 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 (3/31 [x-period])

Experiments:

- Michael C. Frank et al. (2023). *Experimentology: An Open Science Approach to Experimental Psychology Methods*, Chapter 1
- 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:

- Greta Krippner (2000). “How to Read a (Quantitative) Journal Article.”

The psychology of false beliefs (4/4)

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.
- 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.

Context and examples:

- Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell and Jesse Holcomb (2016). “Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion.” Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016.
- Glenn Kessler and Joe Fox (2021). “The false claims that Trump keeps repeating.” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2021.
- Glenn Kessler and Scott Clement (2018). “Trump routinely says things that aren’t true. Few Americans believe him.” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018.

Group identities and factual beliefs (4/6)

Core readings:

- Ao Wang, Shaoda Wang, and Xiaoyang Ye (N.d.). “When Information Conflicts With Obligations: The Role of Motivated Cognition.”
- Nicolas Ajzenman, Patricio Dominguez, and Raimundo Undurraga (forthcoming). “Immigration, Crime, and Crime (Mis)Perceptions.” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*.

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Context and examples:

- This American Life (2016). “Will I Know Anyone at This Party?” October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)
- Loveday Morris and Will Oremus (2022). “Russian disinformation is demonizing Ukrainian refugees.” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2022.
- More in Common (2019). “The Perception Gap.” (Take the quiz first.)

Partisan differences in information exposure, processing, and interpretation (4/11)

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.
- Matthew H. Graham and Shikhar Singh (forthcoming). “An Outbreak of Selective Attribution: Partisanship and Blame in the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *American Political Science Review*.

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2013). “Hot In My Backyard.” May 17, 2013 (Act Two).

- David Kestenbaum (2021). “Until The Cows Come Home.” *This American Life*, November 12, 2021.
- Rachel Weiner and Scott Clement (2012). “Why Obama gets less blame than Bush for high gas prices.” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2012.

Assessing the evidence for motivated reasoning (4/13)

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.
- Allegra Maguire, Emil Persson, Daniel Västfjäll, and Gustav Tinghög (2022). “COVID-19 and Politically Motivated Reasoning.” *Medical Decision Making* 42(8): 1078–1086.

The effect of elite cues on public beliefs (4/18)

Core readings:

- Michael Tesler (2018). “Elite Domination of Public Doubts About Climate Change (Not Evolution).” *Political Communication* 35(2): 306–326.
- Martin Bisgaard and Rune Slothuus (2018). “Partisan Elites as Culprits? How Party Cues Shape Partisan Perceptual Gaps.” *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2): 456–469.

Context and examples:

- 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.
- Jack Nicas, Flávia Milhorange and Ana Ionova (2022). “How Bolsonaro Built the Myth of Stolen Elections in Brazil.” *New York Times*, October 25, 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 (4/20)

Core readings:

- Ethan Porter, Yamil Velez, and Thomas J. Wood (2023). “Correcting COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation in Ten Countries.” *Royal Society Open Science*.

- [Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, and Thomas J. Wood \(2022\)](#). “Time and skeptical opinion content erode the effects of science coverage on climate beliefs and attitudes.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119(26): e2122069119.

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 (4/21 [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

Application: COVID (4/25)

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.”

Partisan and ideological (a)symmetry (4/27)

Core readings:

- Brian Guay and Christopher D. Johnston (2022). “Ideological Asymmetries and the Determinants of Politically Motivated Reasoning.” *American Journal of Political Science* 66(2): 285–301.
- Brian Guay, Adam J. Berinsky, Gordon Pennycook, and David Rand (N.d.). “Examining Partisan Asymmetries in Fake News Sharing and the Efficacy of Accuracy Prompt Interventions.”

Context and examples:

- Maggie Macdonald and Megan A. Brown (2022). “Republicans are increasingly sharing misinformation, research finds.” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2022.
- Study!

Midterm 1 (5/2)

- Midterm course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5yICgvutAXHsBEi) must be submitted before class

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and conditions (5/4)

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:

- 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.
- Phillip Bump (2022). “Nearly half of Republicans agree with ‘great replacement theory.’” *Washington Post*, May 9, 2022.
- Catherine Rampell (2022). “An inflation conspiracy theory is infecting the Democratic Party.” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2022.
- Jack Shafer (2022). “Alex Jones and the Lie Economy.” *Politico*, August 10, 2022.

Who believes in conspiracy theories? (5/9)

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:

- Taylor Orth (2022). “Which groups of Americans are most likely to believe conspiracy theories?” YouGov, March 30, 2022.
- Jigsaw. “Conspiracy Theories.” *The Current*.
- Matthew Rosenberg and Maggie Haberman (2020). “The Republican Embrace of QAnon Goes Far Beyond Trump.” *New York Times*, August 20, 2020.
- Kaleigh Rogers (2022). “What Can Happen When An Election Official Believes The Big Lie” FiveThirtyEight, April 15, 2022.

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and online misinformation (5/11)

Core readings:

- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018). “The spread of true and false news online.” *Science* 359(6380): 1146–1151.
- Ziv Epstein, Nathaniel Sirlin, Antonio Arechar, Gordon Pennycook, and David Rand (2023). “The social media context interferes with truth discernment.” *Science Advances* 9(9).

Context and examples:

- Stuart A. Thompson (2022). “How News About Maricopa County’s Ballot-Counting Machines Went Viral.” *New York Times*, November 9, 2022.
- Tyler Kingkade, Ben Goggin, Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny (2022). “How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point.” NBC News, October 14, 2022.
- Elizabeth Dwoskin and Jeremy B. Merrill (2022). “Trump’s ‘big lie’ fueled a new generation of social media influencers.” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2022.
- Charlie Warzel (2023). “People Aren’t Falling for AI Trump Photos (Yet).” *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2023.

“Fake news” and online misinformation 2016– (5/16)

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 (5/18)

Core readings:

- Graham N. Dixon and Christopher E. Clarke (2012). “Heightening Uncertainty Around Certain Science: Media Coverage, False Balance, and the Autism-Vaccine Controversy.” *Science Communication* 35(3): 358–382. (Canvas)
- Eric Merkle (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.

Student meetings to discuss peer review:

- Due 11:59 PM on 5/14: 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 (5/23)

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)
- Andrea Mattozzi, Samuel Nocito, and Francesco Sobbrío (N.d.). “[Fact-Checking Politicians.](#)”

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 \(the way you think it does\).](#)”

Fighting misinformation online (5/25)

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 Reifer, 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:

- 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.
- Naomi Nix (2022). “[This year, GOP election deniers got a free pass from Twitter and Facebook.](#)” *Washington Post*, November 6, 2022.
- Jody Serrano (2022). “[How Will Twitter’s Birdwatch Community Debunking Actually Work? A VP Answers Our Questions.](#)” *Gizmodo*, September 9, 2022.
- Shirin Ghaffary (2022). “[Does banning extremists online work? It depends.](#)” *Recode*, February 3, 2022.

Misinformation paper due (5/28, 11:59 PM)

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (5/30)

Core readings:

- Daphne Keller (2022). “[Lawful but Awful? Control over Legal Speech by Platforms, Governments, and Internet Users.](#)” *University of Chicago Law Review Online*.
- Isabelle Freiling, Nicole M. Krause, and Dietram A. Scheufele (2023). “[Science and Ethics of ‘Curing’ Misinformation.](#)” *AMA Journal of Ethics*, March 2023.

Context and examples:

- Sean Illing (2021). “[The fantasy-industrial complex gave us the Capitol Hill insurrection.](#)” *Vox*, January 8, 2021.
- Gilad Edelman (2022). “[Beware the Never-Ending Disinformation Emergency.](#)” *Wired*, March 11, 2022.
- Barry Yeoman (2022). “[‘That’s Fake News!’](#)” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 6, 2022.
- Ashley Gold and Sarah Fischer (2022). “[Why misinformation didn’t wreck the midterms.](#)” *Axios*, November 18, 2022.
- Gary Marcus (2023). “[Why Are We Letting the AI Crisis Just Happen?](#)” *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2023.

Midterm 2 (6/4, 11:30 AM–1:20 PM)

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 questions (unassigned readings)

Multiple choice

Which of the following is an example of a quantity that [Ahler and Sood \(N.d.\)](#) argue people have difficulty estimating?

- A. The probability that a person from the South is a Republican
- B. The probability that a person is from the South and is a Republican (correct)
- C. The probability that a Republican is from the South
- D. The probability that a person is neither a Republican nor from the South

[Goldberg et al. \(2019\)](#) found which of the following?

- A. A stewardship message was the most popular reason for preventing climate change among Christians
- B. A stewardship message was the least popular reason for preventing climate change among non-Christians
- C. Terminology choices undermined the effect of a stewardship message
- D. Terminology choices did not change the effect of a stewardship message (correct)
- E. Terminology choices enhanced the effect of a stewardship message

Brief essay

Explain who [Miller, Sanders, and Farhart \(2016\)](#) find is most likely to believe in conspiracy theories, how they believe the relevant factors interact, and how/why they believe those effects differ along political lines.

Sample answer:

Miller, Sanders, and Farhart (2016) find that a particular type of person — knowledgeable about politics, low in trust, and (notably) conservative — is most likely to believe in a conspiracy theory. They posit that trust has a mitigating effect on political knowledge, overriding preconceived known truths for conservatives (for Democrats, the existence of either high political knowledge or high trust mitigated conspiracy belief). For conservatives, knowledge and trust interact with each other directly — knowledgeable conservatives are more likely to make ideologically-motivated endorsements, especially when their trust is low. Miller et al. give a few potential reasons for the partisan divide in this phenomenon — the first being that some conservative conspiracies might be easier to believe (Obama birthers as opposed to Bush orchestrating 9/11) and the second being the political context: conservatives were out of power at the time of the study and therefore more likely to engage in conspiracy theory belief.

In your own words, explain the competing theories that [Jefferson, Neuner, and](#)

Pasek (2020) tested, what they found empirically, and what they ultimately concluded about those theories.

Sample answer:

The two competing theories that Jefferson et. al (2020) analyzed were the “biased processing based on priors hypothesis” and the “motivated reasoning hypothesis.” In the context of police brutality, the first theory states that Black and white people will react to an incident differently because of prior biases and experiences with the police, while the second theory states that Black and white people react differently to an incident because they seek out information consistent with protecting their own racial groups. Overall, the study found that whites were more likely to believe an officer’s actions were appropriate in a hypothetical police shooting, and Blacks were more likely to side with the victim. The authors concluded that there was mixed evidence for race-based motivated reasoning: racial priming failed to change the outcomes much, but people did seek info more closely aligned with their racial in-group. There also seemed to be some evidence supporting belief updating — judgements of the shooting coincided with prior police experiences for many participants.

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