

GOVT 30: Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

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“After President Biden won the election nearly three years ago, three of every 10 Americans believed the false narrative that his victory resulted from fraud, a poll found. In the years since, fact checkers have debunked the claim in lengthy articles, corrections posted on viral content, videos and chat rooms. This summer, they received a verdict on their efforts in an updated poll from Monmouth University: Very little has changed. Three of every 10 Americans still believed the false narrative.”

–*New York Times*, September 29, 2023

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

Class schedule and office hours

Class (Thornton 102): TTH 10:10 AM–12:00 PM (x-period Fri. 3:30–4:20 PM)

Office hours (Silsby 122): M 10–11 AM, T 2–3 PM, W 3:30–4 PM, TH 2:30–3
(sign up at <https://go.oncehub.com/nyhan>)

Contents

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.

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 policies

Instructional approach

Each class period will begin with a brief lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them. The remainder of the course period will consist of class discussion and active learning exercises in which we critically examine those ideas.

I expect each student to come to class having completed all assigned readings and prepared to discuss them. However, we will aspire to not just learn the assigned 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 learn to think analytically about political misinformation and conspiracy theories in this way.

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.

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.)

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.

These links may be useful for accessing context readings:

- How to access the New York Times: <https://libanswers.dartmouth.edu/faq/227897>
- How to access the Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/subscribe/free-access>
- How to access the Wall Street Journal: <https://libanswers.dartmouth.edu/faq/29196>

If you can't get access to an assigned reading, please post on Slack or email me ASAP so I can help you get it or make a PDF available on Canvas.

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.

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 purposes:

- Asking for help understanding concepts or research studies
- Asking for [feedback](#) on a paper or [tutoring](#) on a concept
- Asking for help brainstorming or outlining
- Asking for help identifying and correcting grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors

The following uses are not permitted:

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

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).

In general, I encourage you to reflect on how to most effectively use AI tools. First, depending on them may undermine your own learning and hinder

understanding of class concepts. Second, large language models often give wrong answers that are difficult for non-experts to detect. You are responsible for the accuracy and quality of the work that you submit.

If you have questions about this policy, please ask me!

Socioeconomic differences and financial difficulty

Our community is composed of students from a variety of financial backgrounds. Socioeconomic diversity can be invisible, and you may be experiencing financial difficulties related to the cost of textbooks, materials, or other necessities for our class of which I am not aware.

If you encounter financial challenges related to this class, there may be sources of support for you. If you feel comfortable sharing your experience with me, you may. You may also consider meeting with a financial aid officer to discuss options, reaching out to the First-Generation Office if you are a first-generation student, browsing the [Funding Resources](#) page, or, for unexpected expenses, applying to the Barrier Removal Fund through the Financial Aid tile in [DartHub](#).

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.

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 community members have equal access to Dartmouth's educational and employment opportunities. We strive to promote an environment of sexual respect, safety, and well-being. Through the Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct Policy (SMP), Dartmouth demonstrates that sex and gender-based discrimination, sex and gender-based harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, etc., are not tolerated in our community.

For more information regarding Title IX and to access helpful resources, visit [Title IX's website](#). As a faculty member, I am required to share disclosures of sexual or gender-based misconduct with the Title IX office.

If you have any questions or want to explore support and assistance, please contact the Title IX office at 603-646-0922 or TitleIX@dartmouth.edu. Speaking to Title IX does not automatically initiate a college resolution. Instead, much of

their work is around providing supportive measures to ensure you can continue to engage in Dartmouth's programs and activities.

Students with disabilities

Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are required to register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS; [Apply for Services webpage](#); ; 1-603-646-9900) and to request that an accommodation email be sent to me in advance of the need for an accommodation. Then, students should 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.

Student wellness

I recognize that the Dartmouth academic environment is challenging, our terms are intensive, and 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 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.

Inclusion and dialogue

I seek to create a learning environment that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. 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 any related issue, 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 10–11 AM, Tuesday 2–3 PM, Wednesday 3:30–4 PM, and Thursday 2:30–3 in Silsby 122. Please reserve a slot during those times 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.)

Course advice

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 offer approaches that 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?

Improving your performance

This course can be challenging. One reason is that many students do not study effectively. I highly recommend [Vox’s guide](#) to improving how you prepare for exams by using strategies like answering questions under test conditions, using flash cards, and spaced repetition rather than just re-reading at the last minute.¹

¹For more information about how to study more effectively, please contact the [Academic Skills Center](#).

Sleeping more is another way to improve your performance. [One recent study](#) found that offering incentives to sleep at least seven hours per night improved semester GPA by 0.075 (0.10 standard deviations) and had persistent effects on GPA in the next term.

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. Makeup exams will not be given, and students who miss exams will receive a score of 0 absent extraordinary circumstances.

Discussion questions (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 in the #general channel by 8:30 AM on the day of class. You may skip five classes during the quarter without penalty (just post “Skip” and indicate how many skips you have used during the term — e.g., “Skip, 1/5”). 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.

In-class / online participation (10%)

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.

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.² 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 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

²Again, 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.

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?

Most importantly, your paper must engage in depth with direct statements of the claim or viewpoint in question. Avoid sweeping assertions about what advocates say or believe; your analyses should be grounded in specific examples and evidence.

Other notes and suggestions:

- You don't need to do data collection as such, but you should think about how to reasonably evaluate a prediction or expectation. For instance, I wouldn't expect you to code all of the media coverage of false claims that President Obama wasn't born in this country, but you might examine articles on that topic from a key media outlet or at a key time period to evaluate whether they are consistent with your expectations. Again, make sure to collect numerous examples of the claim or viewpoint in question so you can examine them in detail.
- Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to factual background and summaries of other people's research. The goal of the assignment is for you to make an original argument, not to recapitulate other research or recount the history of your case in exhaustive detail.
- Please make sure your theories are not about proper names. For example, you would want to write a paper using theories about racial or ethnic difference to help explain the prevalence and durability of the Obama birther myth, not write a paper about Obama myths as such.
- 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 24 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a proposal on Canvas by 5 PM on May 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 11:59 PM on May 18 for peer review. I will also provide preliminary suggestions and feedback on your draft. I recommend that you then edit the draft based on that feedback and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance.³ The final version is due by 11:59 PM on June 1. 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 (4/1)

- Course syllabus
- Pre-course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eeQcrQslhXu8AYu)

Understanding misperception belief

What is a misperception? Who is misinformed? (4/3)

Core readings:

³To 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.

- 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:

- Taylor Orth (2023). “Which conspiracy theories do Americans believe?” YouGov, December 8, 2023.
 - Survey questionnaire
- Taylor Orth and Carl Bialik (2024). “How views of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump changed after their debate.” YouGov, September 17, 2024.
 - Survey questionnaire
- John Burn-Murdoch (2023). “Should we believe Americans when they say the economy is bad?” *Financial Times*, December 1, 2023.
- Lane Cuthbert and Alexander Theodoridis (2022). “Do Republicans really believe Trump won the 2020 election? Our research suggests that they do.” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2022.

The psychology of false beliefs (4/8)

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. (skip the section titled “Residualizing Perceived Ability”)
- 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.
- Karen Yourish and Charlie Smart (2024). “Trump’s Pattern of Sowing Election Doubt Intensifies in 2024.” *New York Times*, May 24, 2024.
- Glenn Kessler, Scott Clement, and Emily Guskin (2024). “Which Trump lies stick? Republicans believe some falsehoods more than they did six years ago, our poll finds.” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2024.

Group identities and factual beliefs (4/10)

Core readings:

- Nicolas Ajzenman, Patricio Dominguez, and Raimundo Undurraga (2023). “Immigration, Crime, and Crime (Mis)Perceptions.” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 15(4): 142–176. (skip results sections B and C)
- Ursula Daxecker, Hanne Fjelde, and Neeraj Prasad (forthcoming). “Misinformation, Narratives, and Intergroup Attitudes: Evidence from India.” *Journal of Politics*.

Context and examples:

- Megan Specia (2024). “How Disinformation Fed a Far-Right Riot After a Deadly Stabbing in England.” *New York Times*, July 31, 2024.
- Stuart A. Thompson (2024). “How False Claims About Immigrants and Dead Pets Became a Trump Talking Point.” *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2024.
- Phillip Bump (2024). “Republicans are more likely to believe false claims about immigrants.” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2024.

Experiments and statistics primer (4/11 [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.”

Partisan differences in information exposure, processing, and interpretation (4/15)

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:

- This American Life (2013). “Hot In My Backyard” (Act Two only). May 17, 2013.
- 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 (4/17)

Guest speaker: Gov. Chris Sununu (11 AM–12 PM)

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.
- Matthew H. Graham and Shikhar Singh (2024). “An Outbreak of Selective Attribution: Partisanship and Blame in the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *American Political Science Review*.

Context and examples:

- Taylor Orth and Carl Bialik (2024). “Trust in Media 2024: Which news sources Americans trust — and which they think lean left or right” YouGov, May 30, 2024.

The effect of elite cues on public beliefs (4/22)

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:

- Jack Nicas, Flávia Milhorange and Ana Ionova (2022). “[How Bolsonaro Built the Myth of Stolen Elections in Brazil](#).” *New York Times*, October 25, 2022.
- Dan Barry and Alan Feuer (2025). “[‘A Day of Love’: How Trump Inverted the Violent History of Jan. 6](#).” *New York Times*, January 5, 2025.
- Stuart A. Thompson, Kaleigh Rogers, and Steven Lee Myers (2024). “[These Voters Want to ‘Stop the Steal.’ Top Democrats Aren’t Interested](#).” *New York Times*, December 18, 2024.

The effects of misinformation and corrections of it (4/24)

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 (4/25 [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 4/24: 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

Midterm 1 (4/29)

- Midterm course survey (https://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4PE0dPZDIib0Eke) must be submitted before class

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and conditions (5/6)

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:

- Brandy Zadrozny (2024). “‘Big lie’ 2.0: How Trump’s false claims about noncitizens voting lay the groundwork to undermine the election.” NBC News, October 25, 2024.
- Neil Bedi, Lazaro Gamio, Ishaan Jhaveri, Devon Lum, Haley Willis, and Karen Yourish (2024). “Inside Trump’s Truth Social Conspiracy Theory Machine.” *New York Times*, October 29, 2024.
- Tiffany Hsu, Sheera Frenkel, and Ken Bensinger (2024). “The Gunshots Rang Out. Then the Conspiracy Theories Erupted Online.” *New York Times*, July 15, 2024.

Who believes in conspiracy theories? (5/9 – [x-period])

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:

- Dannagal G. Young (2020). “I was a conspiracy theorist, too.” Vox, May 15, 2020.
- Eli Saslow (2024). “A Republican Election Clerk vs. Trump Die-Hards in a World of Lies.” *New York Times*, June 6, 2024.
- Taylor Lorenz (2024). “‘BlueAnon’ conspiracy theories flood social media after Trump rally shooting.” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2024.

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and online misinformation (5/13)

Core readings:

- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018). “The spread of true and false news online.” *Science* 359(6380): 1146–1151.
- Jennifer Nancy Lee Allen, Duncan J Watts, and David Rand (2024). “Quantifying the impact of misinformation and vaccine-skeptical content on Facebook.” *Science* 384(6699): eadk3451.

Context and examples:

- Maxine Joselow, Will Oremus, Gerrit De Vynck and Mark Berman (2024). “Helene response hampered by misinformation, conspiracy theories.” *Washington Post*. October 5, 2024.
- Michael Wilson, Alyce McFadden and Tracey Tully (2024). “How Drone Fever Spread Across New Jersey and Beyond.” *New York Times*. December 24, 2024.
- Brianna Sacks and Kevin Crowe (2024). “Some N.C. residents distrust FEMA so much they’re hesitant to apply for hurricane aid.” *Washington Post*. December 15, 2024.

“Fake news” and online misinformation 2016– (5/15)

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:

- Ceren Budak, Brendan Nyhan, David M. Rothschild, Emily Thorson, and Duncan J. Watts (2024). “Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation.” *Nature* 630 45–53.

Media coverage and fact-checking

Addressing misinformation in mainstream media coverage (5/20)

Core readings:

- Eric Merkley (2020). “Are Experts (News)Worthy? Balance, Conflict and Mass Media Coverage of Expert Consensus.” *Political Communication* 37(4): 530–549.
- Erik Peterson, Shannon C. McGregor, and Ryan Block (2025). “Election Denial as a News Coverage Dilemma: A Survey Experiment with Local Journalists.” *Political Communication*.

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.
- Isabella Simonetti (2024). “ABC’s Fact Checks Draw Attention in Harris-Trump Debate.” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2024.

Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (5/22)

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 Sobbrino (N.d.). “Fact-Checking Politicians.”

Context and examples:

- Anya van Wagtenonk (2022). “Can fact-checking solve the misinformation pandemic?” *Grid*, January 12, 2022.
- Tiffany Hsu and Stuart A. Thompson (2023). “Fact Checkers Take Stock of Their Efforts: ‘It’s Not Getting Better.’” *New York Times*, September 29, 2023.
- Tyler Austin Harper (2024). “Fact-Checking Is Not a Political Strategy.” *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2024.

Paper draft peer review (5/23 [x-period])

- Due 11:59 PM on 5/18: 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:
 - What would the theory or theories in question predict? Why?
 - Is what we observe consistent with that theory? Why or why not?
 - What implications does this evidence have for their theory (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? How could it be improved?
 - What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of your topic more generally?
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.

Fighting misinformation online (5/27)

Core readings:

- 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.
- Isaac Slaughter, Axel Peytavin, Johan Ugander, and Martin Saveski (N.d.). “Community Notes Moderate Engagement With and Diffusion of False Information Online.”

Context and examples:

- Naomi Nix, Will Oremus, and Aaron Gregg (2025). “Meta ends fact-checking, drawing praise from Trump.” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2025.

- Dave Lee and Carolyn Silverman (2025). “Community Notes Can’t Save Social Media From Itself.” *Bloomberg Opinion*, March 18, 2025.
- Cecilia Kang and Adam Satariano (2024). “Social Media Companies Face Global Tug-of-War Over Free Speech.” *New York Times*, December 30, 2024.

New issues and future threats

AI and (mis)information: Hype versus reality (5/29)

Core readings:

- Soubhik Barari, Christopher Lucas, and Kevin Munger (forthcoming). “Political Deepfakes Are as Credible as Other Fake Media and (Sometimes) Real Media.” *Journal of Politics*.
- Thomas H. Costello, Gordon Pennycook, and David G. Rand. “Durably reducing conspiracy beliefs through dialogues with AI.” *Science* 385(6714): eadq1814.
 - [Conversation Browser](#) (conversations from the study)

Context and examples:

- Sayash Kapoor and Arvind Narayanan (2024). “We Looked at 78 Election Deepfakes. Political Misinformation Is Not an AI Problem.” *AI Snake Oil*, December 13, 2024.
- McKenzie Sadeghi (2024). “NewsGuard Monthly AI Misinformation Monitor of Leading AI Chatbots” (Canvas). NewsGuard, December 2024.
- Nilesh Christopher and Varsha Bansal (2024). “Indian Voters Are Being Bombarded With Millions of Deepfakes. Political Candidates Approve.” *Wired*. May 20, 2024.

Misinformation paper due (6/1, 11:59 PM)

Misinformation: Conclusions and implications for democracy (6/3)

Core readings:

- End-of-term expert survey (https://dartmouth.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_42vRYZ90afjoHUG) — due 6/2 10 PM
- Kai Kupferschmidt (2024). “A field’s dilemmas.” *Science*, October 31, 2024.
- Dan Williams (2023). “The Fake News about Fake News.” *Boston Review*, June 7, 2023.

Context and examples:

- Laurie Clarke (2025). “‘Nobody was tricked into voting for Trump’: Why the disinformation panic is over.” Politico, January 2, 2025.
- Steven Lee Myers and Stuart A. Thompson (2025). “In His Second Term, Trump Fuels a ‘Machinery’ of Misinformation.” *New York Times*, March 24, 2025.
- Dan Williams (2024). “Misinformation and disinformation are not the top global threats over the next two years.” Conspicuous Cognition, January 17, 2024.

Midterm 2 (6/9, 3–4:50 PM)

Exam and paper guidance

Midterm exam study guide

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.

- 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)

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

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 in-complete
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