GOVT 30:
Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan
Office: Silsby 305
Email: nyhan@dartmouth.edu
Phone: 603/646-2894

Classroom: TBD
Schedule: TTH 2–3:50 PM
x-period: Wed. 4:15–5:05 PM
Office hours: Friday 9–11 AM

Overview of the course

Why do people hold false or unsupported beliefs about politics and why are so those beliefs so hard to change? This course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to political misinformation and conspiracy theories and the reasons that corrections so often fail to change their minds. We will also analyze how those tendencies are exploited by political elites and consider possible approaches that journalists and civic reformers could employ to combat misperceptions.

Instructional approach

Each class period will 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.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Identify the psychological factors that promote belief in misperceptions;
- Explain why conspiracy theories often arise under conditions of stress, danger, or uncertainty;
- Assess the ways in which elites may promote false or unsupported claims;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to countering misperceptions and conspiracy theories;
- Assess concerns that widespread belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories undermines democracy.

I expect each student to complete and understand the assigned readings. However, we will aspire to not just learn this material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing

connections between the readings, and critiquing authors' assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you take these additional steps in your thinking over the course of the quarter.

Course requirements and expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned reading before each class. You are also expected to follow relevant political news—we will begin each class by discussing misperceptions and conspiracy theories in the news and relating those events to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

Communication

The class will be run through Blackboard. I will use it to email announcements to you and provide access to assigned readings. Please submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email. However, if you have questions, feel free to come to my office hours or email me.

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding the academic integrity rules at Dartmouth. Explanations of integrity rules and principles can be found at `http://www.dartmouth.edu/~uja/`. Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade in the class. Details on citing sources are available at `http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/sources`. Please see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your

participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. In general, each student is expected to attend class on time with the readings completed and to contribute thoughtfully to class discussion when appropriate. Especially thoughtful contributions to class discussion will be taken into consideration when final grades are assigned. I also reserve the right to grade students down for using laptops for any purpose other than taking notes because it often distracts other students. Finally, late work will be graded down 10% for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes (10%)

During the quarter, several classes will begin with a one-question quiz intended to determine if you completed the readings (one point will be awarded simply for attending class). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped.

Midterms (50%)

The class will include two closed-book in-class midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings 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.

Project: Understanding and countering misinformation (40%)

Each student will write a paper of 3000–4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories from the course to help explain the development and spread of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory and critique the efforts that were made to counter it. You should make a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations about the development, timing, spread, or features of the myth and the reasons that fact-checking was ineffective that you can evaluate using historical sources, journalistic accounts, or quantitative data. Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to description and summaries of other people's work—the goal is to make an original argument about a myth or misperception, not to recapitulate other research or recount the history of the myth in exhaustive detail.

In the course of making your argument, your paper should answer these key questions:

1. How can we use the theories in question to understand the spread of the myth?

2. Is what we observe consistent with those theories? Why or why not?

3. What implications does this case have for the theories in question (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? What implications do your findings have for our understanding of the misperception itself?

4. What implications do the theories you have identified have for the effectiveness of the fact-checking tools or content in question? How could those tools or content be improved to better counter misperceptions? (Be specific! Use real examples as case studies and make sure to ground your critique in the readings from the course or other relevant readings from the academic literature.)

5. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of misperceptions more generally?

A draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) is due by 5 PM on April 22. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version. A complete draft including references is due May 13 by 2 PM for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 AM on June 3. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus.

Optional: For students who are interested, the paper can be modified to focus exclusively on critiquing previous fact-checks of a given myth or misperception and explaining how those motivate a new approach to fact-checking. These could include any of the following:

- Conceptual descriptions of new approaches to fact-checking that differ from those of the existing elite fact-checkers (PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, Washington Post Fact Checker)

- Proposals for new online tools to counter misinformation that improve upon or differ from existing efforts (e.g., Truth Goggles, Truth Teller, LazyTruth, etc.)

- Videos demonstrating new concepts for television ad watches (beyond those employed by, e.g., FlackCheck)

If you include a design component, your paper should answer these key questions:

1. What is your design? How would it work? What makes it different from the tools or content that were typically used to address your myth?

2. How is the design of your fact-checking tools or content motivated by theories from the course?

3. Why does this approach better address the psychology of misinformation and conspiracy theories than existing fact-checking tools or content?

Articles with substantial video, graphics, or other innovative content may be somewhat shorter than the word limit. (Note: Any such content must be specifically grounded in the relevant literature. Flashy graphics and video for their own sake are not encouraged. Please consult with me if you have questions.)

Course materials

No books are required for this course—all readings are available on Blackboard unless otherwise noted. Note: I will frequently assign blog posts and articles from the popular press to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled "Context and examples" in the schedule below to distinguish them from "Core readings." Both are required but you should devote particular effort to the academic articles, which are typically more difficult to read and understand.

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that certain classes have been replaced with x-periods due to holidays and/or schedule conflicts. Two other x-periods will be used for peer review of paper proposals and drafts. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Blackboard for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (3/26)

- Course syllabus

Survey evidence and case studies (3/28)

Core readings:

- Clay Ramsay, Steven Kull, and Evan Lewis (2003). "Misperceptions, the media, and the Iraq war." *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(4): 569–598 (read 569–578 only).
- Clay Ramsay, Steven Kull, Evan Lewis, and Stefan Subias (2010). "Misinformation and the 2010 Election: A Study of the US Electorate." WorldPublicOpinion.org (read 1–18 only).
- Brendan Nyhan (2010). "Why the 'Death Panel' Myth Wouldn't Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate." 2010. *The Forum* 8(1).

Context and examples:

- Example: Seth Mnookin (2011). *The Panic Virus*, *New York Times* excerpt, March 29, 2011.

Experiments and statistics primer (4/2)

- Annabel Ness Evans and Bryan J. Rooney (2011). *Methods in Psychological Research*, Second Edition: Chapters 4 and 7.
- Dana S. Dunn (2012). *Research Methods for Social Psychology*, 2nd Edition: Chapter 4.
- Sample article 1: 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.
- Sample article 2: David Gal and Derek D. Rucker (2010). "When in Doubt, Shout! Paradoxical Influences of Doubt on Proselytizing." *Psychological Science* 21(11): 1701–1707.
- Due before class: 3–5 questions about the experimental designs in the sample articles, the inferences the authors draw, or the statistical analyses they conducted. Read them closely! We will work through them in detail during class.

Understanding political misinformation

Knowledge and misinformation (4/4)

Core readings:

- James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert F. Rich (2000). "Misinformation and the currency of democratic citizenship." *Journal of Politics*, 62(3): 790–816.
- Brian J. Gaines, James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Buddy Peyton, and Jay Verkuilen (2007). "Same Facts, Different Interpretations: Partisan Motivation and Opinion on Iraq." *Journal of Politics*, 69(4). 957–974.

Context and examples:

- John Sides (2010). "Why do more people think Obama is a Muslim?" Washington Post Wonkblog, August 26, 2010.
- Ryan D. Enos (2010). "Know Anybody Making $250,000?" YouGov Model Politics. October 29, 2010.
- Ryan D. Enos (2010). "Are Illegal Immigrants Everywhere? Will it Change Your Vote?" YouGov Model Politics. November 1, 2010.

- Ezra Klein (2011). "The submerged state in one graph." Washington Post Wonkblog, February 11, 2011.
- Suzanne Mettler (2011). "Revealing the Submerged State." The Monkey Cage, November 7, 2011.

Motivated reasoning (4/9)

Core readings:

- Kari Edwards and Edward E. Smith (1996). "A disconfirmation bias in the evaluation of arguments." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71(1): 5–24.
- Larry M. Bartels (2002). "Beyond the running tally: Partisan bias in political perceptions." *Political Behavior*, 24(2): 117–150.
- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2010). "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32(2): 303–330.

Context and examples:

- Chris Mooney (2011). "The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science." *Mother Jones*, May/June 2011.
- Larry Bartels (2012). "Dueling Tax Truths." The Monkey Cage, October 15, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Political Knowledge Does Not Guard Against Belief In Conspiracy Theories." YouGov Model Politics. November 5, 2012.

Belief perseverance (4/10–x-period)

- Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper (1980). "The perseverance of beliefs: Empirical and normative considerations." In R. A. Shweder (ed.), *Fallible judgment in behavioral research: New directions for methodology of social and behavioral science*, Vol. 4: 17–36.
- John Bullock (2007). "Experiments on partisanship and public opinion: Party cues, false beliefs, and Bayesian updating." Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, Chapter 2.

Information environments and elite configurations (4/16)

- John Zaller (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Chapter 6.
- Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas (2012). "Partisan Perceptual Bias and the Information Environment." *Journal of Politics* 74(3): 672–684.

- Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap (2011). "The politicization of climate change and polarization in the American public's views of global warming, 2001–2010." *Sociological Quarterly* 52(2): 155–194.

Cognitive errors and faulty memories (4/18)

Core readings:

- Daniel M. Wegner, Richard Wenzlaff, R. Michael Kerker, and Ann E. Beattie (1981). "Incrimination Through Innuendo: Can Media Questions Become Public Answers?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40(5): 822–832.
- Ruth Mayo, Yaacov Schul, and Eugene Burnstein (2004). "'I am not guilty' vs 'I am innocent': Successful misperception negation may depend on the schema used for its encoding." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(4): 433–449.
- Norbert Schwarz, Lawrence J. Sanna, Ian Skurnik, and Carolyn Yoon (2007). "Metacognitive experiences and the intricacies of setting people straight: Implications for debiasing and public information campaigns." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 39: 143–153 only (full article: 127–161).

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "The World's Dumbest Press Conference: How coverage of Joe Arpaio's birtherism threatens to make the myth worse." *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 5, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Journalists: do no harm! If you must cover the birthers, here's an annotated how-to." *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 31, 2012.

Social category differences (4/23)

- Geoffrey D. Munro and Peter H. Ditto (1997). "Biased Assimilation, Attitude Polarization, and Affect in Reactions to Stereotype-Relevant Scientific Information." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23(6): 636–653.
- Spee Kosloff, Jeff Greenbern, Tom Schmader, Tom Dechesne, and David Weise (2010). "Smearing the Opposition: Implicit and Explicit Stigmatization of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Current U.S. President." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 139(3): 383–398.
- R. Kelly Garrett, Erik C. Nisbet, and Emily K. Lynch (N.d.). "Undermining the corrective effects of media-based political fact checking? The role of contextual cues and naïve theory." Forthcoming, *Journal of Communication.*

Peer review session (4/24–x-period))

- Due 48 hours before class: Proposal draft
- Due before class: One-page peer review (pairs)
    1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for assignment
    2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that seem especially strong and two that need further development
    3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise the paper
- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Rumors and the social dissemination of (mis)information (4/25)

- Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2006). *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches*: Introduction, Chapters 6–7.
- Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo (2006). "Psychological Motivations in Rumor Spread." In Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*.
- R. Kelly Garrett (2011). "Troubling consequences of online political rumoring." *Human Communication Research* 37(2): 255–274.

Midterm (4/30)

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Historical context and contemporary case studies (5/2)

Core readings:

- Richard Hofstadter (1965). "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*.
- Michael Barkun (2001). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Chapter 1.
- Ted Goertzel (2011). "The Conspiracy Meme." Skeptical Inquirer, January/February 2011.

Context and examples:

- Farhad Manjoo (2008). *True Enough*, Ch. 4.
- Ben Smith (2009). "Culture of conspiracy: the Birthers." Politico. March 1, 2009.
- Adam Berinsky (2012). "The Birthers Are Back." YouGov Model Politics.
- Justin Elliot (2011). "Trig Trutherism: The definitive debunker." Salon.com.
- Cavan Sieczkowski (2013). "Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory Video Debunked By Experts." Huffington Post, January 16, 2013. (Peruse the Sandy Hook conspiracy video embedded in the article.)

The psychology of conspiracy theories (5/7)

Core readings:

- Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (N.d.). "Conspiracy Theories, Magical Thinking, and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion." Unpublished manuscript.
- Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009). "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(2): 202–227.
- Katherine Levine Einstein and David Glick (N.d.). "I think BLS data are BS: The Consequences of Exposure to, and Questions About, Conspiracy Theories." Unpublished manuscript.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2001). "Truth and Dissembling on Central Asian Oil Politics." Spinsanity, October 15, 2001.
- Bryan Keefer (2002). "Return of Rall: Oil conspiracy redux." Spinsanity, April 12, 2002.
- Brendan Nyhan (2004). "Fahrenheit 9/11: The temperature at which Michael Moore's pants burn." Spinsanity, July 2, 2004.

Lack of control and the search for causes (5/9)

- Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky (2008). "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception." *Science* 322(5898): 115–117.
- Daniel Sullivan, Mark J. Landau, and Zachary K. Rothschild (2010). "An existential function of enemyship: Evidence that people attribute influence to personal and political enemies to compensate for threats to control." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(3): 434–449.

- Albert A. Harrison and James Moulton Thomas (1997). "The Kennedy Assassination, Unidentified Flying Objects, and Other Conspiracies: Psychological and Organizational Factors in the Perception of 'Cover-up.'" *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 14(2): 113–128.

Moving forward: New threats and approaches

Misinformation in old & new media; improving media practice (5/14)

Core readings:

- Ariel Malka, Jon A. Krosnick, Matthew Debell, Josh Pasek, and Daniel Schneider (2009). "Featuring Skeptics in News Media Stories About Global Warming Reduces Public Beliefs in the Seriousness of Global Warming." Woods Institute for the Environment, Stanford University. (Read study summary, technical paper, figures, and videos.)
- Regina G. Lawrence and Matthew L. Schafer (2012). "Debunking Sarah Palin: Mainstream news coverage of 'death panels.'" *Journalism* 13(6): 766–782.
- Anna Kata (2012). "Anti-vaccine activists, Web 2.0, and the postmodern paradigm: An overview of tactics and tropes used online by the anti-vaccination movement." *Vaccine* 30(25): 3778–3789.
- John Cook and Stephen Lewandowsky (2011). *The Debunking Handbook*.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Countering Misinformation: Tips for Journalists." *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 29, 2012.

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Another factchecking fiasco: Journalistic failure in coverage of Harry Reid and his mysterious source." *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 7, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Enabling the jobs report conspiracy theory." *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 8, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan (2013). "Boosting the Sandy Hook truther myth." *Columbia Journalism Review*, January 22, 2013.

Peer review session (5/15–x-period)

- Due 48 hours before class: Paper draft
- Due before class: One-page peer review (pairs)
    1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the key questions for assignment

2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and two that could be improved further
3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise their paper

- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Are ad watches effective? (5/16)

Core readings:

- Michael Pfau, and Allen Louden (1994). "Effectiveness of Adwatch Formats in Deflecting Political Attack Ads." *Communication Research* 21(3): 325–341.
- Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1994). "Broadcast Adwatch Effects: A Field Experiment." *Communication Research* 21(3): 342–365.
- Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1996). "Can the Press Monitor Campaign Advertising?" *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1(1): 72–86.
- Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella (1997). "Setting the Record Straight: Do Ad Watches Help or Hurt?" *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2(1): 13–22.

Context and examples:

- FlackCheck (2012). "A Guide to Effective Factchecking On Air and Online." FlackCheck.org online report and video.
- The Walter Cronkite Award (2013). "Cronkite Award 2013 Winners Announced." Cronkite/Jackson Prize winners.

Combating misinformation: New tools and ideas (5/21)

- Lucas Graves (2013). "Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 119–136, 230–236.
- Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer (2012). "The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012." New America Foundation report.
- Michael Scherer (2012). "Blue Truth, Red Truth." *Time*, October 3, 2012.

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Does Fact-Checking Work? False Statements are Wrong Metric." *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 30, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Ignored factchecks and the media's crisis of confidence." *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 30, 2012.
- Jim Giles (2012). "Reality checker: How to cut nonsense from the net." *New Scientist*, September 19, 2012.
- Craig Silverman (2012). "A New Age for Truth." *Nieman Reports*, Summer 2012.
- R. Kelly Garrett and Brian E. Weeks (2013). "The Promise and Peril of Real-Time Corrections to Political Misperceptions." Unpublished manuscript.

Normative challenges and consequences (5/23)

- Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon (2008). "Do the facts speak for themselves? Partisan disagreement as a challenge to democratic competence." *Critical Review* 20(1–2): 115–139.
- Jonathan Bendor and John G. Bullock (2008). "Lethal Incompetence: Voters, officials, and systems." *Critical Review* 20(1–2): 1–23.
- James N. Druckman (2012). "The Politics of Motivation." *Critical Review* 24(2): 199–216.

Midterm 2 (5/28)

Misinformation paper due (6/3)

Understanding and countering misinformation 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/sources
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
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
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