PUBPOL 750.308:
Topics: Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories about Politics and Public Policy

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan
Classroom: 1210 Weill Hall
Term: Winter 2019
Schedule: MW 2:30–3:50 PM

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> "It is better to know less than to know so much that ain't so."
> –Josh Billings

> "A wise man should be humble enough to admit when he's wrong and change his mind based on new information."
> –Kanye West

> "Fearful Americans Stockpiling Facts Before Federal Government Comes To Take Them Away"
> –The Onion

Overview of the course

Why do people hold false or unsupported beliefs about politics and public policy and why are those beliefs so hard to change? This three-credit graduate course will explore the psychological factors that make people vulnerable to 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, civic reformers, and government officials 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 policy memo making recommendations for how to address a prominent misperception and a final research paper analyzing the development of a specific misperception or conspiracy theory.

Instructional approach

Each class period will include a mix of lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them, class discussion, and active learning exercises in which we critically examine the ideas introduced in the readings.

Course objectives

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

- Identify the psychological factors that promote belief in 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 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 read them effectively). Each student will be expected to make an especially significant contribution during one session in which they are assigned to serve as an expert discussant. You should email me 3–5 discussion questions on the readings 48 hours before the class in question. You are also expected to follow relevant political news — we will begin each class by discussing misperceptions and conspiracy theories in the news and relating them to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

Reading scientific articles

If you find deciphering scientific articles to be difficult, I recommend consulting guides like "How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps" by Amanda Hoover Green or "How to Read a (Quantitative) Journal Article" by Greta Krippner, which present approaches you might use to help you identify the most important elements of each study.

This set of questions might also be useful to guide your reading and to help you assess your understanding of the assigned articles:

Experimental/statistical studies:

- What is the authors' *main hypothesis*?
- What is the *mechanism* (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their *general approach to testing* their theory?
- What are their *key results*?
- How are those results *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Conceptual articles:

- What are the authors' *main hypothesis* or *argument*?
- What are the *key claims or concepts* in their argument?
- What are the *mechanisms* they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument *similar to/different from* others we have read?

Communication

The class will run through Canvas. 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 unless otherwise instructed. However, if you have questions, please come to my office hours or email me.

Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not otherwise be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all of the readings. 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 longhand than when they write on laptops. (Exceptions will be made for students with disabilities who need to be able to use a laptop.)

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding and following the academic integrity rules of the Ford School and the University of Michigan (see `http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations` for further details). Ignorance will not

be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an 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 appropriately are available at http://guides.lib.umich.edu/AcademicIntegritySPH. 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 see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

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.

Ford School of Public Policy inclusivity statement

Members of the Ford School community represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We are committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

- share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
- appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other in this community
- value one another's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
- use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in Ford classes and across the UM community

Accommodations for students with disabilities

If you believe you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of courses can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, I can work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office to help

determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information you provide will be treated as private and confidential. (Students with disabilities who require an exception to the laptop policy described above will be granted one; please let me know if we should discuss this option.)

Student mental health and well-being resources

The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. We acknowledge that a variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, and depression, directly impacts students' academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and/or University Health Service (UHS). For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, please visit http://umich.edu/~mhealth/.[1]

Office hours

My office hours for the winter term are Thursday from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM. To ensure you have a time that works for you, please schedule a meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce page at http://meetme.so/BrendanNyhan (consulting the schedule will also tell you if I have had to reschedule office hours in a given week). I will prioritize appointments over walk-ins though I am of course happy to meet with any student if time permits. (If you cannot make it to office hours, please email me to schedule an alternate meeting time.)

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. Finally, late work will be graded down 10% (i.e., one letter grade) for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes (20%)

During the quarter, a random number generator will be used at the start of each class starting in the second week to determine if we have a brief one-question quiz to measure whether students completed the readings (a point will be awarded simply for attending class; probability of quiz = 30 + [the number

[1] Please review additional information and policies regarding academic expectations and resources at the Ford School of Public Policy at this link: http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations.

of consecutive classes without a quiz $\times$ 10]%). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped. Absences will not be excused except for illness.

Strategy memo: Countering policy misperceptions (30%)

Assignment: Each student will write a memo of 2000–2500 words (excluding references) in which you apply the theories of public opinion and political psychology that we consider in the first part of the course to a relevant misperception in a policy area of your choosing in which you have expertise.[2] You should write the memo as a briefing to a relevant policymaker or public official. You can define the audience that you believe is most relevant given the issue and context (e.g., foreign or domestic policy; local, state, or national politics; a country other than the U.S.; etc.). The paper should clearly summarize the misperception(s) and its relationship to the policy or issue in question; provide an explanation grounded in social science of the genesis and persistence of this belief; offer an evidence-based assessment of its magnitude and potential effects; and make specific, actionable recommendations for how to most effectively address the misperception that are grounded in the policy history and social science insights you have marshaled.

Process: A one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on February 3. 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 on February 23 by 8 PM for peer review. I recommend that you carefully edit the draft before *and* after receiving feedback from your colleague and specifically recommend consulting the Ford Writing Center or the Sweetland Center for Writing for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 PM on March 1. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Failure to meet *any* of these deadlines will result in a reduced grade on the final paper.)

Analytical paper: The development of a myth (50%)

Assignment: Each student will write a social science paper of 4000–5000 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.[3] This paper should cover a different topic than the strategy memo and ideally should explore intellectual terrain we have not covered in detail in the course (either by choosing a less familiar misperception or by investigating new contexts or lines of inquiry that we have not adequately considered in class and in the readings).

[2] Make sure the topic is a misperception or a conspiracy theory! Many interesting beliefs do not qualify according to the definitions we use in this course. Please see me if you have questions about a potential topic.

[3] Again, please make sure the topic is a misperception or a conspiracy theory as we define it in this course! Please see me if you have questions.

In choosing a topic, don't put too much pressure on yourself to come up with a totally new idea. Here are two approaches that might be helpful:

1. Pick an interesting case that you think is hard to categorize or explain. Think about what makes that misperception surprising or puzzling and build from there. Why are standard approaches based on authors we've read or that you've found unsatisfactory? (You don't need to have a full answer at this point in the process but at least a notion would be helpful.)

2. Don't try to invent a new theory from scratch but instead ask "What would author X predict in case Y?" Try to identify an interesting conflict between theory and data or an important gap in a theory.

Once you have chosen a topic, you should construct a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations about the development, timing, spread, or features of the myth in question and/or the reasons that fact-checking of it was ineffective. Don't try to explain everything! It's better to go deeper in making a novel argument about one aspect of your topic than to offer a laundry list of explanations or to recapitulate the conventional view. (You can even assume or briefly summarize a conventional view and then show how your argument goes beyond it to emphasize what is most new and different.) The goal is for you to develop and explain one or more theoretically motivated predictions about the misperception; evaluate them using historical sources, journalistic accounts, and/or quantitative data; and reflect on the implications of your findings.

The final paper should specifically answer these key questions:

1. How can we use the theory or 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 fact-checking? How could we 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?

Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable and minimize the space you devote to summaries of other people's work—the goal is to make an original argument about a myth or misperception, not to recapitulate other research or recount the history of the myth in exhaustive detail.

Finally, beware of the risk of hindsight bias. It may seem obvious in retrospect that a misperception developed, but keep the contingency of history in mind. In particular, look for cases in which some aspects of the myth failed to develop and spread while others flourished. What explains the difference?

Process: We will talk throughout the term about how to do this type of writing. For useful advice on writing analytical papers in political science, please see the assigned readings for the class on academic writing, but the most important factor will be your willingness to commit to writing as an iterative process of drafting, feedback, review, and revision.

A one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on March 12. 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 April 1 by 8 PM for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to the Ford Writing Center or the Sweetland Center for Writing for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 8 PM on April 29. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Failure to meet *any* of these deadlines will result in a reduced grade on the final paper.)

Course materials

No books are required for this course. A few chapters from books or articles that are not publicly available will be available as PDFs on Canvas and are labeled as such below. All other assigned readings can be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the university VPN to access articles behind journal paywalls.)

Note: I 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.

I also designate some readings as "Optional" that I intend to discuss in class and believe are especially useful for understanding the topic. As the name suggests, these are not mandatory to read before class.

Course schedule

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

Introduction to the course

The fight over political reality (1/9)

- Course syllabus

Understanding and studying misperception belief

Defining and measuring misperceptions and misinformation (1/14)

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.
- Matthew H. Graham (2018). "Self-Awareness of Political Knowledge." *Political Behavior.*
- Optional: Markus Prior, Gaurav Sood, and Kabir Khanna (2015). "You Cannot be Serious: The Impact of Accuracy Incentives on Partisan Bias in Reports of Economic Perceptions." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10(4): 489–518.
- Optional: Adam Berinsky (2018). "Telling the Truth about Believing the Lies? Evidence for the Limited Prevalence of Expressive Survey Responding." *Journal of Politics* 80(1): 211–224.

Context and examples:

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

The psychology of false beliefs (1/16)

Core readings:

- Daniel T. Gilbert, Romin W. Tafarodi, and Patrick S. Malone (1993). "You can't not believe everything you read." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65(2): 221–233 (Canvas).

- Adam J. Berinsky (2015). "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation." 47(2): 241–262.
- Optional: Lisa K. Fazio, B. Keith Payne, Nadia M. Brashier, and Elizabeth J. Marsh (2015). "Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144(5): 993–1002.

Context and examples:

- Jenna Johnson (2016). " 'A lot of people are saying ... ': How Trump spreads conspiracies and innuendoes." *Washington Post*, June 13, 2016.
- Ben Brumfield and Nadia Kounang (2015). "5 myths surrounding vaccines – and the reality." CNN, September 17, 2015.

Experiments and statistics primer (1/23)

Experiments:

- Annabel Ness Evans and Bryan J. Rooney (2011). *Methods in Psychological Research*, Second Edition: Chapters 4 and 7 (Canvas).
- Rachel Glennerster and Kudzai Takavarasha (2013). *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Excerpts from Chapter 2 (Canvas).
- Sample article: Anthony Bastardi, Eric Luis Uhlmann, and Lee Ross (2011). "Wishful Thinking: Belief, Desire, and the Motivated Evaluation of Scientific Evidence." *Psychological Science* 22(6): 731–732.
- Assignment (must be uploaded to Canvas by 1 PM before class): Submit 3–5 questions about the experimental designs in the sample article, the inferences the authors draw, and/or the statistical analyses they conducted. Read it closely! We will work through the article in detail during class.

Statistics:

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

Political interest/knowledge and (mis)information (1/28)

Core readings:

- Andrew M. Guess (N.d.). "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets."
- Dan M. Kahan (2015). "Climate-Science Communication and the Measurement Problem." *Advances in Political Psychology*, 36(S1): 1–12 only (full article: 1–43).

- Optional: Ian Anson (2018). "Partisanship, Political Knowledge, and the Dunning-Kruger Effect." *Political Psychology.*

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Political Knowledge Does Not Guard Against Belief In Conspiracy Theories." YouGov Model Politics, November 5, 2012.
- Josh Clinton and Carrie Roush (2016). "Poll: Persistent Partisan Divide Over 'Birther' Question." NBC News, August 10, 2016.
- Morgan Polikoff. "The more people know about Common Core, the less they know about Common Core." September 8, 2015.

Motivated reasoning about facts: How bad is it? (2/4)

Core readings:

- Gary C. Jacobson (2010). "Perception, Memory, and Partisan Polarization on the Iraq War." *Political Science Quarterly* 125(1): 31–56.
- Dan M. Kahan, Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic (2017). "Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government." *Behavioral Public Policy* 1(1): 54–86.
- Optional: Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2010). "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32(2): 303–330.
- Optional: Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter (2018). "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence." *Political Behavior.*

Context and examples:

- Catherine Rampell (2017). "Huge distrust in government statistics, especially among Republicans." *Washington Post*, March 24, 2017
- Brian Resnick (2017). "What Roy Moore's campaign can teach us." Vox, December 12, 2017.
- Adam Berinsky (2012). "The Birthers Are Back." YouGov, February 3, 2012.

Differing factual interpretations (2/6)

Core readings:

- 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.

- James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (N.d.) "The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning In Climate Change Preference Formation."
- Optional: Martin Bisgaard (2015). "Bias Will Find a Way: Economic Perceptions, Attributions of Blame, and Partisan-Motivated Reasoning during Crisis." *Journal of Politics* 77(3): 849–860.

Context and examples:

- Daniel Dale (2017). "Donald Trump voters: We like the president's lies." *Toronto Star*, March 26, 2017.

Social category differences and misperceptions of outgroups (2/11)

Core readings:

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

Context and examples:

- This American Life (2016). "Will I Know Anyone at This Party?" October 28, 2016. (13:10–59:50 or transcript)
- Caitlin Dickerson (2017). "How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down." *New York Times Magazine*, September 26, 2017.
- Adam Serwer (2015), "Why We're Finally Taking Down Confederate Flags," Buzzfeed, June 24, 2015.
- Optional: David W. Blight (2002), Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory, Chapter 8.

Information environments and elite cues (2/13)

Core readings:

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

- Optional: James A. Stimson and Emily M. Wager (N.d.). "The Facts of the Matter: How the Public Recognizes and Responds to Reality."

Context and examples:

- Brendan Nyhan (2014). "Voter Fraud Is Rare, but Myth Is Widespread." *New York Times*, June 10, 2014.
- Ezra Klein (2014). "Why Neil deGrasse Tyson's dismissal of anti-GMO concerns matters." Vox, August 1, 2014.

Conspiracy theories: Causes and consequences

Conspiracy theories: Definitions and beliefs (2/18)

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).
- Optional: J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (2014). "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 952–966.

Context and examples:

- Karlyn Bowman, Norman Ornstein, and Michael Barone. (2013). "Conspiracy Theories." *AEI Political Report* 9(10) 1–4.
- Fairleigh Dickinson University (2016). "Fairleigh Dickinson Poll Shows 90 Percent of Trump and Clinton Supporters Believe in Conspiracies That Smear the Candidate They Oppose." October 11, 2016.
- Brendan Nyhan (2017). "Why More Democrats Are Now Embracing Conspiracy Theories." *New York Times*, February 15, 2017.
- Paul Musgrave (2018). "Conspiracy theories are for losers. QAnon is no exception." *Washington Post*, August 2, 2018.

The psychology of conspiracy theory belief (2/20)

Core readings:

- Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart (2016). "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 824–844.

- Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson (2016). "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions." *Political Research Quarterly* 69(1): 57–71.
- Optional: Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky (2008). "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception." *Science* 322(5898): 115–117.
- Optional: 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.

Context and examples:

- Spencer Ackerman (2018). "There's Been a George Soros for Every Era of Anti-Semitic Panic." *The Daily Beast*, October 12, 2018.
- Kevin Roose (2018). " 'False Flag' Theory on Pipe Bombs Zooms From Right-Wing Fringe to Mainstream." *New York Times*, October 25, 2018.
- Aaron Blake (2018). "How the Trumps and conservative media helped mainstream a conspiracy theory now tied to tragedy." *Washington Post*, October 29, 2018.

Effective writing and peer review (2/25)

- Midterm course survey (`https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bf49U6aLUQVBKYt`) must be submitted before class
- Due 8 PM on 2/23: Memo draft
- Due before class (Canvas): One-page peer review
    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 assignment
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Rumors, social media, and online misinformation

Rumors and word-of-mouth (2/27)

Core readings:

- Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007). "Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends." *Diogenes* 213: 19–35.
- Taylor N. Carlson (2017). "Modeling Political Information Transmission as a Game of Telephone." *Journal of Politics* 80(1): 348–352.
- Optional: Taylor N. Carlson (N.d.). "Through the Grapevine: Informational Consequences of Interpersonal Political Communication."

Context and examples:

- Joshua Zeitz (2017). "Lessons From the Fake News Pandemic of 1942." *Politico Magazine*, March 12, 2017.
- Alan Blinder (2018). "Where'd You Hear That? A Rumor Mill Churns Amid Hurricane Michael's Rubble." *New York Times*, October 18, 2018.
- Rachel Leung and Zayna Syed (2018). "Students question University emergency alert system after West Quad robbery." *Michigan Daily*, January 30, 2018.

Online rumors and misinformation (3/11)

Core readings:

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

Context and examples:

- Craig Timberg and Drew Harwell (2018). "We studied thousands of anonymous posts about the Parkland attack and found a conspiracy in the making." *Washington Post*, February 27, 2018.
- Amanda Taub and Max Fisher (2018). "Where Countries Are Tinderboxes and Facebook Is a Match." *New York Times*, April 21, 2018.
- Mike Isaac and Kevin Roose (2018). "Disinformation Spreads on WhatsApp Ahead of Brazilian Election." *New York Times*, October 19, 2018.

- Timothy McLaughlin (2018). "How Whatsapp Fuels Fake News and Violence in India." *Wired*, December 12, 2018.

"Fake news" and online misinformation in 2016 and after (3/13)

Core readings:

- Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). "Fake news consumption and behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election" (Canvas).
- Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer (2019). "Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election." *Science* 363(6425): 374–378.
- Optional: Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow (2017). "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2): 211–236.
- Optional: Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker (2019). "Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook." *Science Advances* 5(1): aau4586.

Context and examples:

- Craig Silverman (2016). "This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook." Buzzfeed, November 16, 2016.
- Brendan Nyhan (2018). "Fake News and Bots May Be Worrisome, but Their Political Power Is Overblown." *New York Times*, February 13, 2018.
- Paul Resnick (2018). "Unlike in 2016, there was no spike in misinformation this election cycle." The Conversation, November 5, 2018.

Academic writing + bots, YouTube, and fake images and video (3/18)

Academic writing:

- 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)
- Tim Büthe (N.d.). "Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science."

Core readings:

- Chengcheng Shao, Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Onur Varol, Alessandro Flammini, and Filippo Menczer (2018). "The spread of low-credibility content by social bots." *Nature Communications*.

- Optional: Cuihua Shen, Mona Kasra, Wenjing Pan, Grace A Bassett, and Yining Malloch (2018). "Fake images: The effects of source, intermediary, and digital media literacy on contextual assessment of image credibility online." *New Media & Society*.

Context and examples:

- Jack Nicas (2018). "YouTube Drives Viewers to the Internet's Darkest Corners — Video site's algorithm often recommends divisive or misleading fare" *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2018. (Canvas)
- Geoffrey A. Fowler (2018). "I fell for Facebook fake news. Here's why millions of you did, too." *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.
- Joshua Rothman (2018). "In the Age of A.I., Is Seeing Still Believing?" *New Yorker*, November 12, 2018.
- Optional: Max Fisher and Katrin Bennhold (2018). "As Germans Seek News, YouTube Delivers Far-Right Tirades." *New York Times*, September 7, 2018.

Media coverage and fact-checking

Misinformation in mainstream media coverage (3/20)

Core readings:

- Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff (2004). "Balance as bias: global warming and the US prestige press." *Global environmental change* 14(2): 125–136.
- Derek J. Koehler (2016). "Can journalistic 'false balance' distort public perception of consensus in expert opinion?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 22(1): 24–38 (Canvas).
- Optional: Ullrich K.H. Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, Ee Pin Chang, and Rekha Pillai (2014). "The effects of subtle misinformation in news headlines." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 20(4): 323–335 (Canvas).

Context and examples:

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

Fact-checking as a response to misinformation (3/25)

Core readings:

- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (N.d.). "Do People Actually Learn From Fact-Checking? Evidence from a longitudinal study during the 2014 campaign."
- Emily Thorson (2016). "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation." *Political Communication* 33(3): 460–480.
- Optional: Joseph E. Uscinski and Ryden W. Butler (2013). "The Epistemology of Fact Checking." *Critical Review* 25(2): 162–180.
- Optional: Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2015). "The Effect of Fact-checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on U.S. State Legislators." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 628–640.

Context and examples:

- Cary Spivak (2011). "The Fact-Checking Explosion." *American Journalism Review*, December 2, 2010.
- Brendan Nyhan (2012). "Ignored factchecks and the media's crisis of confidence." *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 30, 2012.

Online fact-checking (3/27)

Core readings:

- Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand (N.d.). "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake News Stories Increases Perceived Accuracy of Stories Without Warnings."
- Katie Clayton et al. (forthcoming). "Real Solutions for Fake News? Measuring the Effectiveness of General Warnings and Fact-Check Banners in Reducing Belief in False Stories on Social Media." *Political Behavior*.
- Optional: Leticia Bode and Emily K. Vraga (2015). "In Related News, That was Wrong: The Correction of Misinformation Through Related Stories Functionality in Social Media." *Journal of Communication* 65(4): 619–638.

Context and examples:

- Hunt, Elle (2017). "'Disputed by multiple fact-checkers': Facebook rolls out new alert to combat fake news." *The Guardian*, March 21, 2017.
- Larson, Selena (2017). "Facebook modifies the way it alerts users to fake news." CNN, December 21, 2017.

- Georgia Wells and Lukas I. Alpert (2018). 'People Hold Backup Role In Facts War — Facebook relies more on computers to fight misinformation, says humans can't keep up." *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2018. (Canvas)
- Zahra Hirji (2018). "YouTube Is Fighting Back Against Climate Misinformation." BuzzFeed, August 7, 2018.

Public policy applications

Crime (4/1)

Core readings:

- Jane Esberg and Jonathan Mummolo (N.d.). "Explaining Misperceptions of Crime."
- Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Oliver Wright (1996). "Crime in Black and White: The Violent, Scary World of Local News." *Harvard International Journal of press/politics* 1.3: 6–23.
- Optional: Nicola Mastrorocco and LuigiMinale (2018). "News media and crime perceptions: Evidence from a natural experiment." *Journal of Public Economics* 165: 230–255.

Context and examples:

- John Gramlich (2018). "5 facts about crime in the U.S." Pew Research Center, January 30, 2018.
- Justin Fox (2018). "Pssst: Crime May Be Near an All-Time Low." *Bloomberg*, February 12, 2018.

Peer review (4/3) — student session

- Review: 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)
- Review: Tim Büthe (N.d.). "Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science."
- Due 8 PM on 4/1: Paper draft
- Due before class (Canvas): 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

Inequality and redistribution (4/8)

Core readings:

- Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Edoardo Teso (2018). "Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution." *American Economic Review* 108(2): 521–554.
- Cheryl Boudreau and Scott A. MacKenzie (2018). "Wanting What Is Fair: How Party Cues and Information about Income Inequality Affect Public Support for Taxes." *Journal of Politics* 80(2): 367–381.
- Optional: Alberto Alesina, Armando Miano, and Stefanie Stantcheva (N.d.). "Immigration and Redistribution."
- Optional: Michael Kraus, Ivuoma Onyeador, Natalie Daumeyer, Julian Rucker, and Jennifer Richeson (N.d.). "The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality."

Context and examples:

- Annie Lowrey (2018). "Left Economy, Right Economy." *The Atlantic*, June 4, 2018.
- Daniel Treisman (2018). "Why the poor don't vote to soak the rich." *Washington Post*, February 27, 2018.

Climate change (4/10)

Core readings:

- John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ullrich K. H. Ecker (2017). "Neutralizing misinformation through inoculation: Exposing misleading argumentation techniques reduces their influence." *PLOS One*.
- Hunter Gehlbach, Carly D. Robinson, Christine C. Vriesema (N.d.). "Climate conversations: Seeking a common starting point."
- Optional: Salil D. Benegal and Lyle A. Scruggs (2018). "Correcting misinformation about climate change: The impact of partisanship in an experimental setting." *Climatic Change* 148(1–2): 61–80.
- Optional: Yanni Ma, Graham Dixon, and Jay D. Hmielowski (2019). "Psychological Reactance From Reading Basic Facts on Climate Change: The Role of Prior Views and Political Identification." *Environmental Communication* 13(1): 71–86.

- Review: James Druckman and Mary C. McGrath (N.d.) "The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning In Climate Change Preference Formation."

Context and examples:

- Ed Lavandera and Jason Morris (2017). "As the seas around them rise, fishermen deny climate change." CNN, May 31, 2017.
- Tracy Jan (2018). "In North Carolina, hurricanes did what scientists could not: Convince Republicans that climate change is real." *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.
- James Rainey (2018). "Bob Inglis, a Republican believer in climate change, is out to convert his party." NBC News, September 30, 2018.

Health, medicine, and health care reform (4/15)

Core readings:

- Brendan Nyhan (2010). "Why the Death Panel Myth Wouldn't Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate." *The Forum* 8:1.
- Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, Sean Richey, and Gary Freed (2014). "Effective Messages in Vaccine Promotion: A Randomized Trial." *Pediatrics*. (Note: The study materials are provided in a separate online appendix.)
- Optional: Benjamin Lyons, Vittorio Merola, and Jason Reifler (N.d.). "Not Just Asking Questions: Effects of Implicit and Explicit Conspiracy Information About Vaccines and Genetic Modification." *Health Communication*.

Context and examples:

- Alan Feuer (2014). "The Ebola Conspiracy Theories." *New York Times*, October 18, 2014.
- Andrew Jacobs (2016). "Conspiracy Theories About Zika Spread Through Brazil With the Virus." *New York Times*, February 16, 2016.
- Sarah Boseley (2018). "Measles cases at highest for 20 years in Europe, as anti-vaccine movement grows." *The Guardian*, December 21, 2018.

Misinformation by and in authoritarian regimes (4/17)

Core readings:

- Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts (2017). "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument." *American Political Science Review* 111(3): 484–501.

- Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas (2018). "Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Optional: Haifeng Huang (2018). "The Pathology of Hard Propaganda." *Journal of Politics*.

Context and examples:

- Adrian Chen (2015). "The Agency." *New York Times*, June 2, 2015.
- Alexis C. Madrigal (2018). "Russia's Troll Operation Was Not That Sophisticated." *The Atlantic*, February 19, 2018.
- Keith Collins and Sheera Frankel (2018). "Can You Spot the Deceptive Facebook Post? *New York Times*, September 4, 2018.

Misinformation: Implications for democracy (4/22)

Core readings:

- Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2018). "The New Conspiracists." *Dissent*, Winter 2018.
- Henry Farrell and Bruce Schneier (N.d.). "Common-Knowledge Attacks on Democracy."
- Optional: Brendan Nyhan (2018). "How Misinformation and Polarization Affect American Democracy." In "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," Joshua Tucker, ed., Hewlett Foundation, pages 49–53.

Context and examples:

- David Roberts (2017). "America is facing an epistemic crisis." Vox, November 2, 2017.
- Max Fisher (2018). "Inside Facebook's Secret Rulebook for Global Political Speech." *New York Times*, December 27, 2018.
- Tyler Cowen (2019). "Why Internet Censorship Doesn't Work and Never Will." *Bloomberg*, January 3, 2019.
- Anthony L. Fisher (2017). "Fake news is bad. Attempts to ban it are worse." Vox, July 5, 2017.

Misinformation paper due (4/29, 8 PM)

Strategy memo rubric

Criteria	A	B	C/D/F
Diagnosis	Clear, strong explanations that go beyond description, address important objections	Discernible explanations but not strong/clear enough or too much description	Unclear or weak explanations provided; mainly description or assertion; incomplete
Recommendations	Creative recommendations or approaches that combine or apply theories in new ways	Some analytical originality in approach; opportunities for greater creativity	Little originality; relies mainly on points raised in class/readings
Use of course concepts	Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to 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 that support diagnosis and recommendations	Details and facts provided, but more needed or some lacking relevance	Some details and facts provided, but not enough and/or lack relevancy
Organization	Clear, logical organization that develops recommendations 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

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