

# **POL 210 – Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories**

Fall 2021

Kirby Hall 109 – W/F 2:00 – 3:15 p.m.

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Office Hours: T 9:00 – 11:00 a.m., 12:00 –  
3:00 p.m.; By Appointment

## Course Description:

“It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character.” – Mark Twain, probably<sup>1</sup>

Politics has been described as many things but rarely has it been described as a haven for honest brokering. More commonly, it is described as a stage for lies and deception. And yet, that leaves us with a riddle: If everyone knows to expect only a fraction of the truth in politics, why then do deceptions so often seem to work? We will address this riddle over the course of the semester, divided into four sections: 1) establishing the definitions of different types of lies or non-truths, 2) describing the typical means of deception dissemination, 3) understanding what about our brains makes us susceptible to bad information, and 4) assessing what we can do about it.

Course Goals: By the end of the semester, students should...

- Understand the conceptual definitions, including the similarities and differences, of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.
- Understand how misinformation and conspiracy theories are disseminated to broader audiences, including the role played by pertinent political entities.
- Have developed a nuanced understanding of the myriad ways our cognitive abilities, personalities, psychological needs, and social identities affect our susceptibility to misinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Cultivated a familiarity with the potential means of mitigating the harms of misinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Developed a familiarity with the empirical study of political misinformation.
- Have improved as critical writers.
- Have improved as advocates for their logic-based, critical, respectful arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> It's from *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller.

These goals are ambitious but eminently achievable. Accomplishing these goals will require the professor and each student to buy in to a collective learning enterprise. You should expect me to come to class prepared to explain core concepts and ready to moderate a discussion of the most intellectually contentious and intriguing aspects of those concepts. Here is what I expect and need from you: I expect you to do the assigned readings before the associated class period. I expect you to keep up to date with current events and consider the connection between what we're discussing in class and the broader political world. I expect you to come to class ready to engage in a critical but respectful discussion. I expect you to take the assigned papers and projects seriously, give them your best effort, and turn in work you can be proud of.

I do *not* expect you to have mastered all of the materials and skills on Day 1. If it were that easy, there wouldn't be much of a point to having the class. If you find yourself struggling with a reading or assignment, please know that this is part of the educational journey. And it's a journey you do not undertake alone. Please seek out help from the resources available to you including your fellow students and the professor.

Reading Materials: There is one required textbook for this course: *American Conspiracy Theories* by Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent. All other readings will be posted on the course website.

Course Policies:

*Civility Policy:* This is a course about politics, and one that will, by its very nature, frequently touch on divisive topics. To avoid those topics would be to limit the study of political misinformation and conspiracy theories to only the most frivolous of cases, which would avoid awkward discussion at the cost of substance. There is no expectation that we will all agree or that we will somehow avoid awkward confrontations entirely, but there is an expectation that everyone will be respectful in how they handle disagreements. This means no insults, ad hominin attacks, or bad-faith arguments.

*BS Policy:* It is likely that there will be disagreement about the applicability to terms like "misinformation" and "conspiracy theories" to specific cases. Everyone, students and instructor alike, are vested with a "BS power." If you would like to contest that a case is really an example of misinformation, simply raise your hand and call BS. We will then take a few minutes to discuss what is known and not known about the case and collectively make a veracity assessment.

*Laptop Policy:* The policy of the department of political science is that laptop computers only be used classrooms for note taking and other academic purposes as designated by the instructor. I will permit laptops on a contingency basis. I reserve the right to ban computer use in their courses should this policy be repeatedly violated.

Academic Integrity: Academic dishonesty constitutes attempting to pass off the work of others as your own without proper attribution. It is unacceptable in this course, just as it is unacceptable in life. If I find that you plagiarized, cheated, or were otherwise dishonest about your work on an assignment, you will automatically receive a 0. There will be no exceptions or excuses. Such situations not only go against my classroom policies but are also violations of the [Wake Forest Honor Code](#). As such, they will be referred to the Honors and Ethics Council. If you are unsure if you are providing proper attribution or have any other questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Accommodations: Wake Forest University provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. If you are in need of an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact me privately as early in the term as possible. Retroactive accommodations will not be provided. Students requiring accommodations must also consult the Learning Assistance Center & Disability Services (118 Reynolda Hall, 336-758-5929, lac.wfu.edu).

Assignments: Grades will be calculated as follows:

- Participation (10%)
- Response papers (40%)
- Research projects (50%)
  - Research question (5%)
  - Methodology proposal (10%)
  - Preliminary results memo (10%)
  - Final paper (25%)

*Participation* – Students are expected to be active participants in their learning. Participation will be holistically and subjectively assessed based on the frequency and quality of contributions to class discussion. Attendance is part of participation as if you are not there, you necessarily cannot participate.

*Response Papers* – Students will turn in four response papers throughout the semester, each worth 10 percentage points of the final grade. Each paper will respond to a provided prompt. There are eight total prompts from which to choose, each due on the listed date. Students can choose whichever four of the eight prompts they would like. Papers should generally be 3-4 pages, double spaced. A primer with specific guidelines and a breakdown of grading procedures will be posted online.

- **Prompt 1 (Sept. 3)** – Provide a real-world example of an elite-driven misinformation campaign. Was there a single elite disseminating the misinformation or were other elites involved as amplifiers? If the former, do you think elite amplifiers would have made the spread of misinformation more effective? Less effective? Why do other elites amplify misinformation disseminated by others and what can be done to discourage them from doing so?

- **Prompt 2 (Sept. 15)** – Provide a real-world example of misinformation that circulated on social media that was not started by a political elite. Is there anything distinctive about the content or form of this misinformation when compared to elite-driven misinformation? What kinds of misinformation flourish on social media platforms? Does misinformation spread more easily on some social media platforms than others?
- **Prompt 3 (Sept. 24)** – Is a tendency toward conspiratorial thinking more of a latent characteristic (i.e., personality trait) or a situational characteristic (i.e., dependent on one’s environment)? Put another way, does a political leader who invokes conspiracy theories make his/her/their supporters more conspiratorial or does he/she/they build a coalition of people who were already conspiratorial? Explain your reasoning, incorporating pertinent examples.
- **Prompt 4 (Oct. 15)** – In contemporary American politics, is the average Republican more misinformed than the average Democrat? Is the average Republican more likely to base their political attitudes and behavior on misinformation than the average Democrat? If you answer yes, is the root cause psychological or structural? If you answer no, why do many, including social scientists, believe the answer is yes?
- **Prompt 5 (Oct. 22)** – Is misinformation an important ingredient in causing political violence? If not, what is more important? If yes, explain why.
- **Prompt 6 (Nov. 5)** – Who is the media’s audience for fact-checks? What are the media’s incentives to engage in fact-checking? Are there other entities that could engage in fact-checking, either in addition or alternatively to, the media?
- **Prompt 7 (Nov. 17)** – Social media platforms are private companies that produce a product. If people dislike the product, they can stop using it or switch to an alternative. Given that, can we reasonably expect social media platforms to self-regulate when it comes to misinformation? If yes, what are the successes and failures of existing self-regulation? If no, what can we do about it?
- **Prompt 8 (Nov. 19)** – Given what you know about the psychological mechanisms that make us susceptible to misinformation, what skills, techniques, or reminders do you think would be most effective at creating a more accurately informed polity? Who or what should bear the onus of passing along those skills, techniques, or reminders?

*Research projects* – As a class, we will spend this semester collectively researching the connection between political misinformation and the January 6 attack on the Capitol. Together, we will come up with a list of topics related to this subject. Examples of potential topics may include the historical legacy of attacks on election integrity, a discourse analysis of elite rhetoric in the lead-up to the attack, the role of partisan media as an amplifier of rumors, a comparison between left and right conspiracies in the

aftermath, etc. Students, either by themselves or in a group of no larger than four, will choose one of these topics and devise a research question. They will identify a methodological approach to answering this question. They will then apply this methodological approach to study their topic and answer this question. Students will then write a research paper (~10 pages) based on these results. A more detailed primer on this project will be posted on the course site and I will discuss this at greater length in class. All students in a group will get equal grades on each element of the project unless an inequality in workload and contributions has been registered and verified.

*Extra Credit* – For extra credit, students can give a presentation on their research projects. Presentations can be worth up to 5 percentage points added to the final paper grade (which would work out to a maximum of 1.25 percentage points added to the final grade).

Grades: Letter grades will be assigned as follows:

<i>Letter grade</i>	<i>Percent grade</i>
A	93.5 or greater
A-	89.5 – 93.49
B+	86.5 – 89.49
B	83.5 – 86.49
B-	79.5 – 83.49
C+	76.5 – 79.49
C	73.5 – 76.49
C-	69.5 – 73.49
D+	66.5 – 69.49
D	59.5 – 66.49
F	59.49 or below

Course Schedule: I reserve the right to modify the course schedule and/or readings as needed. Modifications will be announced in class and via email.

Module	Topic	Key Questions	Required Readings	Recommended Readings	Assignments
Misinformation and Disinformation and Conspiracies, Oh My	Aug. 25: Syllabus Day	* What does it mean for something to be true? * Are politics post-truth?	1) The syllabus 2) Edelman – <i>The Politics of Misinformation</i> , chapter 4 3) Higgins – “Post-truth: A Guide for the Perplexed” 4) Mair – “Post-truth Anthropology”		
	Aug. 27: Defining Misinformation, Disinformation, and Misperceptions	*How should we define the terms misinformation, disinformation, and misperceptions?	1) Stahl – “On the Difference or Equality of Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation” 2) Kuklinski et al. – “Misinformation and the Currency of Democracy” 3) Vraga & Bode – “Defining Misinformation and Understanding its Bounded Nature”		
	Sept. 1: Defining Conspiracy Theories and Stereotypes	*How should we define the term conspiracy theory? *How should we define the term stereotype? *What are the similarities and differences between misperceptions, conspiracy theories, and stereotypes?	1) Uscinski & Parent – <i>American Conspiracy Theories</i> , chapter 2 2) Uscinski – “What is a Conspiracy Theory” 3) Bordalo et al. – “Stereotypes”	1) Sunstein & Vermeule – “Conspiracy Theories” 2) Ahler & Sood – “The Parties in Our Heads”	Come to class having brainstormed potential research project topics

How Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories are Disseminated	Sept. 3: Political Elites and Misinformation Entrepreneurs	*Are political elites able to disseminate misinformation? *If so, what makes them effective at doing so?	1) Zaller – <i>The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion</i> , chapters 3 & 6 2) Goertzel – “The Conspiracy Theory Pyramid Scheme”	1) Tesler – “Elite Domination of Public Doubts about Climate Change (Not Evolution)” 2) Nyhan – “Why the Death Panel Myth Won’t Die”	Prompt 1 response papers due
	Sept. 8: Constructing a Doubt Infrastructure	*Are party-adjacent institutions able to disseminate misinformation? *If so, what makes them effective at doing so?	1) Oreskes & Conway – <i>Merchants of Doubt</i> , Introduction and chapter 1 2) Feldman et al. – “Climate on Cable”	1) Feldman – “The Mutual Reinforcement of Media Selectivity and Effects”	Research questions due
	Sept. 10: Media	*Does the media disseminate misinformation? *If so, what leads the media to act as a disseminator?	1) Dixon & Linz – “Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as Lawbreakers on Television News” 2) Merkle – “Are Experts (News)Worthy?”	1) Dixon – “Crime News and Racialized Beliefs” 2) Gilens – <i>Why Americans Hate Welfare</i> , chapters 5 & 6 3) Weeks & Southwell – “The Symbiosis of News Coverage and Aggregate Online Search Behavior” 4) Mooney – <i>The Republican Brain</i> , chapter 8	
	Sept. 15: Political Rumors in a Social Media Age	*Is misinformation disseminated via a bottom-up process? *Has social media amplified bottom-up misinformation dissemination?	1) Shin et al. – “Political Rumoring on Twitter during the 2012 US Presidential Election” 2) Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral – “The Spread of True and False News Online”	1) Hughes & Waismel-Manor – “The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election” 2) Edy & Risley-Baird – “Rumor Communities”	Prompt 2 response papers due

			<p>3) Guess, Nyhan, &amp; Reifler – “Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 U.S. Election”</p> <p>4) Coastan – <a href="#">“What is QAnon?”</a></p>	<p>3) Uscinski &amp; Parent – <i>American Conspiracy Theories</i>, chapter 5</p> <p>4) Bode et al. – <i>Words That Matter</i>, chapter 8</p> <p>5) Hemsley – “The Role of Middle-Level Gatekeepers in the Propagation and Longevity of Misinformation”</p>	
Why Are We So Gullible?	Sept. 17: Heuristic Failures and Memory	*How do our cognitive limitations (and the heuristic workarounds we employ to deal with them) affect our proclivity to accept misinformation?	<p>1) Marsh &amp; Yang – “Believing Things that Are Not True,” pgs. 15-24 [in <i>Misinformation and Mass Audiences</i>]</p> <p>2) Gilbert, Tafarodi, &amp; Malone – “You Can’t Not Believe Everything You Read”</p> <p>3) Xie &amp; Quintero Johnson – “Examining the Third-Person Effect in Baseline Omission in Numerical Comparison”</p> <p>4) Loftus – “The Malleability of Human Memory”</p>	<p>1) Gilbert, Krull, &amp; Malone – “Unbelieving the Unbelievable”</p> <p>2) Mares – “The Role of Source Confusions in Television’s Cultivation of Social Reality Judgments”</p> <p>3) Ecker et al. – “Correcting False Information in Memory”</p>	
	Sept. 22: Emotional Responses	<p>*Does the sentiment or emotional content of misinformation contribute to our susceptibility?</p> <p>*Does our emotional state affect how we process misinformation?</p>	<p>1) Wegener, Petty, &amp; Smith – “Positive Mood Can Increase or Decrease Message Scrutiny”</p> <p>2) Soroka – <i>Negativity in Democratic Politics</i>, chapter 6</p> <p>3) Albertson &amp; Gadarian – <i>Anxious Politics</i>, chapter 3</p>	<p>1) Soroka – <i>Negativity in Democratic Politics</i>, chapter 1</p> <p>2) Heath, Bell, &amp; Stemberg – “Emotional Selection in Memes”</p> <p>3) Ecker, Lewandowsky, &amp; Apai – “Terrorists Brought Down the Plane!”</p>	
	Sept. 24: The Conspiratorial Predisposition	*Are some people more inclined to believe conspiracies and misinformation than others?	<p>1) Uscinski &amp; Parent – <i>American Conspiracy Theories</i>, chapter 4</p> <p>2) Oliver &amp; Wood – “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion”</p>	<p>1) Uscinski &amp; Parent – <i>American Conspiracy Theories</i>, chapter 6</p>	Prompt 3 response papers due



			3) Wood & Douglas – “Conspiracy Theory Psychology”	2) Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson – “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs?” 3) Uscinski et al. – “Why do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?” 4) Muirhead & Rosenblum – “The New Conspiracists”	
Sept. 29 and Oct. 1	No Class Sessions				Meet with group members to work on methodology proposals
Oct. 6: Need for Cognition, Affect, and Chaos	*Do our personalities make us more or less susceptible to misinformation?	1) Arceneaux & Vander Wielen – <i>Taming Intuition</i> , pgs. 46-54 & chapter 5 2) Peterson, Osmundsen, & Arceneaux – “The ‘Need for Chaos’ and Motivations to Share Hostile Political Rumors”	1) Arceneaux et al. – “Some People Just Want to Watch the World Burn”	Methodology proposals due	
Oct. 8	No Class Session. Fall Break				
Oct. 13: Motivated Reasoning	*When we are processing information, what are we really trying to do? *Does our motivation affect our susceptibility to misinformation?	1) Taber & Lodge – “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs” 2) Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler – “The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions”	1) Kunda – “The Case for Motivated Reasoning” 2) Taber, Cann, & Kucsova – “The Motivated Processing of Political Arguments” 3) Gaines et al. – “Same Facts, Different Interpretations”		
Oct. 15: Partisan Asymmetries	*Are conservatives more susceptible to misinformation than liberals?	1) Hofstadter – “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” 2) Mooney – <i>The Republican Brain</i> , chapter 3 3) Hazlett & Mildenerger – “Wildfire Exposure Increases Pro-Environment Voting within Democratic but not Republican Areas”	1) Young – <i>Irony and Outrage</i> , chapter 6 2) Mooney – <i>The Republican Brain</i> , chapters 11 & 12 3) Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett – “The Partisan Brain”	Prompt 4 response papers due	

				4) Connors – “The Social Dimension of Political Values”	
	Oct. 20: Identity	*How do our social identities affect how we process information? *Do our social identities make us more or less susceptible to misinformation?	1) Jefferson, Neuner, & Pasek – “Seeing Blue in Black and White” 2) Goldberg et al. – “A Social Identity Approach to Engaging Christians in the Issue of Climate Change”	1) Bastardi et al. – “Wishful Thinking”	
The Consequences of Misinformation and How to Deal with It	Oct. 22: The Case that Misinformation Matters	*Does misinformation affect our political attitudes and behavior?	1) Hochschild & Levine Einstein – “It Isn’t What We Know that Gives Us Trouble, It’s What We Know that Ain’t So” 2) Weeks & Garrett – “Electoral Consequences of Political Rumors” 3) Uscinski – “Down the Rabbit Hole We Go!” pgs. 12-14	1) Levine Einstein & Glick – “Do I Think BLS Data are BS?” 2) Moore – “On the Democratic Problem of Conspiracy Politics”	Prompt 5 response papers due
	Oct. 27: The Case for Muted Misinformation Effects	*Or does our political attitudes and behavior affect whether we become misinformed?	1) Swire et al. – “Processing Political Information” 2) Guess et al. – “‘Fake News’ May Have Limited Effects Beyond Increasing Beliefs in False Claims”	1) <a href="#">Science of Politics Podcast on Conspiracy Theories</a>	
	Oct. 29: A History of Fact-checking	*If we just told people the truth, would that fix the problem?	1) Poulsen & Young – “A History of Fact-Checking in U.S. Politics and Election Contexts” 2) Uscinski & Butler – “The Epistemology of Fact Checking”	1) Scriber – “Who Decides What’s True in Politics?”	Preliminary results memo due
	Nov. 3: Fact-checking Best Practices	*What are the best ways to present corrections to misinformation?	1) Nyhan – “Fact-checking can Change Views?” 2) Nyhan & Reifler – “Misinformation and Fact-checking”	1) Lewandowsky et al. – “Misinformation and Its Correction” 2) Lewandowsky & van der Linden – “Countering Misinformation and Fake	

			3) Young et al. – “Fact-Checking Effectiveness as a Function of Format and Tone”	News Through Inoculation and Prebunking” 3) Nyhan & Reifler – “Displacing Misinformation about Events”	
Nov. 5: When Fact-checking Fails	*Does fact-checking really make a difference? *Who responds to fact-checking?	1) Huertas – “Despite Fact-checking, Zombie Myths about Climate Change Persist 2) Nyhan & Reifler – “When Corrections Fail” 3) Thorson – “Belief Echoes”	1) Nyhan et al. – “The Hazards of Correcting Myths about Health Care Reform” 2) Li & Wagner – “The Value of Not Knowing” 3) Skurnik et al. – “How Warnings about False Claims Become Recommendations”		
Nov. 10: Media Incentives to Fact-check	*Can we count on the media to tell us the truth?	1) Columbia Journalism Review – “Enabling the Jobs Report Conspiracy Theory” 2) Pingree, Brossard, & McLeod – “Effects of Journalistic Adjudication on Factual Beliefs...” 3) Perloff – “A Three-Decade Retrospective on the Hostile Media Effect”	1) Patterson – <i>Informing the News</i> , chapter 4		Prompt 6 response papers due
Nov. 12: Creating Better Elite Incentives	*Could we incentive political elites to refrain from spreading or amplifying misinformation?	1) Nyhan & Reifler – “The Effect of Fact-Checking on Elites” 2) Swire-Thompson et al. – “They Might Be a Liar But They’re My Liar”			
Nov. 17: Making Better Social Media	*Could social media platforms step in to prevent the dissemination of misinformation?	1) Bode & Vraga – “In Related News, That Was Wrong” 2) Clayton et al. – “Real Solutions for Fake News?”	1) Pennycook et al. – “Shifting Attention to Accuracy Can Reduce Misinformation Online”		Prompt 7 response papers due

Nov. 19: Media Literacy	*Can we teach people to be more discerning consumers of information?	1) Vraga et al. – “Theorizing News Literacy Behaviors” 2) Tully, Vraga, & Bode – “Designing and Testing News Literacy Messages for Social Media” 3) Guess et al. – “A Digital Literacy Intervention...”	1) Badrinathan – “Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation” 2) Vraga, Bode, & Tully – “Creating News Literacy Messages to Enhance Expert Corrections of Misinformation on Twitter”	Prompt 8 response papers due
Nov. 24 and Nov. 26	No Class Sessions, Thanksgiving Break			
Dec. 1: American Misinformation in a Comparative Context	*Is America the exception or the rule when it comes to misinformation?	1) Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst – “Resilience to Online Disinformation” 2) Tenove – “Protecting Democracy from Disinformation”	1) Koc-Michalska et al. – “Public Beliefs about Falsehoods in News”	
Dec. 3: Course Wrap-up	*Where do we go from here?	No readings, come to class prepared to discuss your research projects		Final papers due