

PSC 211: Conspiracy Theories in American Politics

Fall 2019

University of Rochester

Tuesday and Thursday 2:00pm – 3:15pm

Course Email: psc211f2019@gmail.com

Professor Kroeger

Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:30-2:00pm or by appointment

Office: 307 Harkness Hall

Professor Tyson

Office Hours: Thursdays 12:00-2:00pm

Office: 310 Harkness Hall

Course Description

Conspiracy theories are becoming an organizing principle in American politics. This course will explore the history and trends of conspiracy theories, the psychological and strategic underpinnings of persuasion in these theories and misinformation, and the political implications of current conspiracy theories. In order to understand the use (or misuse) of evidence and logic in conspiracy theories, several weeks will be dedicated to extended examples. These conspiracy theories are polarized and polarizing, a unit of the course will discuss political science research on polarization and place conspiracy theories within this trend.

Course Requirements

Students are expected to attend class every Tuesday and Thursday and keep up with the readings. Active, respectful, and thoughtful participation in class meetings is expected and necessary for the course. The course relies on engaged interest and participation. This course follows the College credit hour policy for four-credit courses. This course meets twice weekly for 2.5 hours per week. In this course, students will complete the enriched activities using readings and other class materials. These activities include a combination of scholarly readings, current news, listening assignments (e.g., podcasts and documentaries), and team-based work on a presentation. As part of this component of the course, students should keep up with current events (we will suggest ways to do so).

Grading

First paper:	20%
Second paper:	20%
Third paper:	20%
Reading responses:	20%
Final presentation:	5%
Participation:	15%

Grading Scale and Late Assignments

100 ≥ A ≥ 93 > A- ≥ 90 > B+ ≥ 87 > B ≥ 83 > B- ≥ 80 > C+ ≥ 77 > C ≥ 73 > C- ≥ 70 > D+ ≥ 67 > D ≥ 63 > D- ≥ 60 > E

If you do not have an extension, and you turn in a paper late, you will be docked one third of one letter grade for every 24 hours that the paper is late, with late penalties accruing from the time the paper is due. For example, if your paper earned a B+, but you turned it in a few hours past the time it was due, you will receive a B; if you turned it in 30 hours past the time it was due, you will receive a B-.

Grade Disputes

Grade disputes will not be accepted for 24 hours after receiving the assignment back. Grade disputes should be accompanied by a memo detailing the reasons that the student believes a higher grade is warranted. The professor who did not grade the assignment will be the grade dispute arbiter and the grade that he/she determines binds (if you get a lower grade on the regrade, this grade stands and vice versa).

Email

Since there are two professors for this class, please direct your emails to the course email address (psc211f2019@gmail.com).

Participation

The participation grade is comprised of attendance and active (and *respectful*) participation in seminar. We will be doing activities and discussing readings, and it is essential that all students contribute. Participation points will automatically be deducted for absences.

Academic Honesty

All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. More information is available at: <http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/index.html>

Disabilities and Accommodations

This classroom respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities, and we encourage you to talk with us about any concern or situation that affects your ability to complete your academic work successfully. Students requiring accommodations should contact the Office of Disability Resources:

1-154 Dewey Hall disability@rochester.edu (585) 275-9049

Required Books

You will need to purchase the books listed below. We will read substantial portions, so we cannot post these selections on Blackboard. The rest of the readings will be available on Blackboard. Throughout the semester, we will send newspaper articles and other short pieces that deal with topical issues. These are considered required reading and we will discuss them in class.

Anna Merlan. 2019. *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power*. Metropolitan Books.

Nancy Rosenblum. 2019. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Course Outline

The course outline appears below. You should complete the reading listed for the class meeting *before* the class meets. We will discuss the readings in class, so it's important to complete the readings in order to secure your participation points.

Date	Topic	Reading
Thursday, August 28	Class canceled—Professors out of town for conference	None
Tuesday, September 3	Welcome and introduction	
Thursday, September 5	<p>Welcome and introduction</p> <p>Watch “Adam Ruins Everything”</p> <p>Short assignment (on BB): <i>What are three things that these examples have in common? Due 9/12.</i></p>	<p>Sunstein and Vermeule. <i>Conspiracy Theories</i>.</p> <p>FBI Intelligence Bulletin on Conspiracy Theories (in Dropbox as FBI_bulletin)</p>
Tuesday, September 10	Defining conspiracy theories	Merlan. Chapters 1-2.
Thursday, September 12	Defining conspiracy theories: What features do they have in common?	Merlan. Chapters 3-4.
Tuesday, September 17	Conspiracies as explanation	Fenster. <i>Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture</i> . Chapters 3-4.
Thursday, September 19	Psychology of uncertainty	Merlan. Chapter 5.
Tuesday, September 24	Problems of evidence	<p>Merlan Chapter 6.</p> <p>Oreskes and Conway. <i>Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming</i>. Chapter 1.</p>
Thursday, September 26	What is the political backdrop?	McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal. <i>Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches</i> . Chapters 1-2.
Tuesday, October 1	What is the political impact of polarization?	Barber and McCarty. 2015. “Causes and Consequences of Polarization.” In Mansbridge and Martin, eds., <i>Political Negotiation: A Handbook</i> , pp. 37-89.

Thursday, October 3	Urban-rural and political divides	Kramer. 2016. <i>The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker</i> . Chapters 1 and 3.
Tuesday, October 8	State politics: How are state politics ripe for conspiracy theories?	TBD
Thursday, October 10	The paranoid style Short assignment: Discuss the relationship between the structure of American politics and the paranoid style. Due 10/17.	Hofstadter. <i>The Paranoid Style in American Politics</i> . Essay.
Tuesday, October 15	FALL BREAK	None
Thursday, October 17	White nationalism	Merlan. Chapter 8. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/trumps-white-nationalist-attack-four-congresswomen/594019/ https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/baseless-smear-targeting-ilhan-omar-made-its-way-trump-thanks-fox-and-these-far-right
Tuesday, October 22	The role of the media Short assignment: How does the internet interact with the things we have already studied? The problems of evidence and the internet. Due 10/29.	DellaVigna and Kaplan. "The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting." <i>The Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> . Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei. "The political legacy of entertainment TV." <i>American Economic Review</i> .
Thursday, October 24	The internet and social media	The Muller Report. <i>Selection. Part II and III of Volume 1</i> .

		https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/technology/section-230-hate-speech.html
Tuesday, October 29	How is this phenomenon evolving?	Rosenblum. Section 1.
Thursday, October 31	Evolution continued	
Tuesday, November 5	Affecting democracy? <i>Short assignment: Why could this be a problem for democracies versus other regimes? Due 11/12.</i>	Rosenblum. Section 2. https://newrepublic.com/article/154133/democratic-rot-origins-american-conspiracism
Thursday, November 7	Presentations	None
Tuesday, November 12	Presentations	None
Thursday, November 14	Presentations	None
Tuesday, November 19	Presentations	None
Thursday, November 21	Presentations	None
Tuesday, November 26	No class: Thanksgiving	Video
Thursday, November 28	Thanksgiving	
Tuesday, December 3	QAnon	https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/qanon-trump-conspiracy-theory.html https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/xwnjx4/people-tell-us-how-qanon-destroyed-their-relationships
Thursday, December 5	What is to be done?	Rosenblum. Section 3.
Tuesday, December 10	Last day of class. Wrap up, loose ends, conclusions. FINAL PAPER DUE AT THE START OF CLASS (2PM)	None