

PSC 211: Conspiracy Theories in American Politics
Fall 2024
University of Rochester
Tuesday and Thursday 2:00pm – 3:15pm

Course Email: psc211s2024@gmail.com

Professor: Scott A. Tyson
Office Hours: Tuesday 3:30-5:00pm or by appointment
Office: Harkness 109C

Teaching Assistant: Tony Molino
Office Hours: Thursday 3:30-5:00pm or by appointment
Office: Harkness 305

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 and misinformation in these theories, 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, so 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 a total of 2.5 hours per week. In this course, students will complete 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 presentations. 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:	30%
Reading responses:	20%
Final presentation:	15%
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 grader who did not grade the assignment will be the grade dispute arbiter and the grade that he determines binds (if you get a lower grade on the regrade, this grade stands and vice versa).

Email

Please direct your emails to the course email address (psc211s2024@gmail.com) which will be accessed by both the instructor and TA. If, however, you would like to discuss something privately either with the instructor or TA, individual emails are:

Scott Tyson: styson2@ur.rochester.edu

Tony Molino: tmolino2@ur.rochester.edu

Participation

The participation grade is comprised of attendance and active (and *respectful*) participation in class. 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.

Carl T. Bergstrom & Jevin D. West. 2020. *Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World*. Random House

We will be drawing on several articles found at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/shadowland/>

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, January 18	Welcome Watch “Adam Ruins Everything”	https://www.scribd.com/document/420379775/FBI-Conspiracy-Theory-Redacted#download&from_embed
Tuesday, January 23	The modern relevance of conspiracies and conspiratorial thinking	<p>COVID-19: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/889eva/world-leaders-are-hyping-bogus-covid-cures?</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/what-can-coronavirus-tell-us-about-conspiracy-theories/610894/</p> <p>BLM: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z3exj3/mass-protests-turn-the-powerful-into-conspiracy-theorists</p> <p>https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/technology/george-floyd-misinformation-online.html</p>
Thursday, January 25	Defining conspiracy theories	<p>Merlan. Chapters 1-2.</p> <p>Russell Muirhead & Nancy Rosenblum. 2018. “The New Conspiracists” <i>Dissent</i>. 65(1)</p>
Tuesday, January 30	Defining conspiracy theories: What features do they have in common	<p>Merlan. Chapters 3-4.</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2020/05/conspiracy-museum/610984/</p>
Thursday, February 1	Psychology of uncertainty	Merlan. Chapter 5-6.

Tuesday, February 6	Conspiracies as explanation. Classic conspiracy theories try to explain why the world works/why certain people control world. People want to rationalize things.	Merlan. Chapter 7,9. Uscinski. Section IV
Thursday, February 8	The psychology of conspiratorial thinking	Uscinski, Section III
Tuesday, February 13	The politics of evidence	Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, <i>Merchants of Doubt</i> , Ch. 1-3, 5 Merlan Chapter 10.
Thursday, February 15	Disinformation	Richard Stengel, <i>Information Wars</i> , Part IV
Tuesday, February 20	Disinformation II	Peter Pomerantsev, <i>This is Not Propaganda</i> , Parts I-III https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/06/conspiracy-mainstream-media-trump-farage-journalism/612628/
Thursday, February 22	Political Extremism	Katherine Cramer, <i>The Politics of Resentment</i> , Chapters 1 and 3 Christopher Hare and Keith Poole, 2014. "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics." <i>Polity</i> 46(3)
Tuesday, February 27	The state of affairs, what is to be done and causality	https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/v7gz53/the-conspiracy-singularity-has-arrived Bergstrom & West, Ch. 1-3

Thursday, February 29	Role of statistics	Bergstrom & West, Ch. 4-5
Tuesday, March 5	Role of statistics	Bergstrom & West, Ch. 6-7
Tuesday, March 19	Role of statistics	Bergstrom & West, Ch. 8-9
Thursday, March 21	Being a consumer of information in the age of big data	Bergstrom & West, Ch. 10-11
Tuesday, March 26	Political Extremism II	Jon Ronson, <i>Them</i> , Ch. 1,2,12,13 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/ https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/03/joseph-mccarthy-and-the-force-of-political-falsehoods?mbid=social_twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_brand=tny&utm_social-type=owned&utm_source=twitter
Thursday, March 28	White nationalism	Merlan. Chapter 8. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/trumps-white-nationalist-attack-for-congresswomen/594019/ https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/baseless-smear-targeting-ilhan-omar-made-its-way-trump-thanks-fox-and-these-far-right https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/conspiracy-theories-civil-war/612283/

Tuesday, April 2	The role of the media	<p>Brian Stelter, <i>Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News, and the Dangerous Distortion of Truth</i>, 1, 5-7</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/trumps-favorite-tv-network-post-parody/611353/</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/05/survivor-20-years-later-keeps-teaching-us-trust-no-one/610981/</p>
Thursday, April 11	The role of the media II	<p>Della Vigna, Stefano, and Ethan Kaplan. "The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting." <i>The Quarterly Journal of Economics</i> 122.3 (2007): 1187-1234.</p> <p>Durante, Ruben, Paolo Pinotti, and Andrea Tesei. "The political legacy of entertainment TV." <i>American Economic Review</i> 109.7 (2019): 2497-2530.</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/07/fake-pregnancy-celebrity-theories-benedict-cumberbatch-babygate/614089/</p> <p>https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/08/how-instagram-aesthetics-repackage-qanon/615364/</p>
Tuesday, April 16	Social media	<p>The Mueller Report. <i>Selection. Part II and III of Volume 1 (What the Russian campaign was)</i>.</p> <p>Peter Pomerantsev, <i>This is Not Propaganda</i>, Part IV</p> <p>https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/technology/section-230-hate-speech.html</p>
Thursday, April 18	Social Media II	<p>Melissa Zimdars & Kembrew McLeod, <i>Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age</i>, Ch. 1-2, 15, 16</p> <p>https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/v7gq4x/how-shadowbanning-went-from-a-conspiracy-theory-to-a-selling-point-v27n3?</p>

Tuesday, April 23	Presentations	None
Thursday, April 25	Presentations	None
Tuesday, April 30	Presentations FINAL PAPER DUE AT THE START OF CLASS (2PM).	None