

POLS469
Advanced Topics in American Politics:
Political Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories
Fall 2014

Instructor: April Johnson
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Phone:
Class Time: Tues/Thurs 2:00pm-3:15pm
Class Location: Behavioral Sciences Building, Room 115
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 11am-12pm and by appointment
Office Location: Behavioral Sciences Building, Room 1126A

***This is an unfinished syllabus. Changes will be made prior to 8/25/14.**

Course Description and Objectives

Credit Hours: 3 undergraduate hours, 4 graduate hours

Prerequisite(s): Grade of B or better in POLS 101 and Grade of B or better in POLS 329; or graduate standing; or consent of the instructor.

How do conspiracy theories and political misinformation gain traction among the American public? This course explores historical and contemporary examples of conspiracy theories and their broader impact on society. We investigate whether some individuals are more susceptible to misinformation and the extent to which the current political climate facilitates skepticism and distrust. We will pay close attention to the psychological mechanisms which encourage the adoption and persistence of erroneous beliefs, particularly in the face of contradictory evidence. The role that political elites, mass media, and emerging technologies play in disseminating and perpetuating such ideas is also considered. At the end of this course students should be able to identify the social and psychological roots of misinformation acceptance and provide a critical analysis of its influence on American democracy. The format of this class will primarily reflect that of a graduate seminar. Critical thinking and a vibrant class discussion are essential to the structure of this course.

Required Texts

There is no textbook for this course. Required readings will be made available electronically on Blackboard (<http://blackboard.uic.edu>).

Evaluation of Course Objectives

Reaction Papers: Each student will be required to write three 5-6 page reaction papers which analyze and evaluate various concepts discussed in this class. A grading rubric for these papers will be handed out during the first week of the semester. Papers should be handed in at the beginning of class on the day they are due.

Paper 1 covers readings from 8/28 through 9/23

Paper 2 covers readings from 9/25 through 10/21

Paper 3 covers readings from 10/23 through 11/18

These papers may take a variety of approaches:

1. A discussion and attempted resolution of what you see as conflicting ideas and/or findings in the given literature.
2. A critical reaction (positive or negative) to some theoretical proposition or program of research.
3. A synthesis of perspectives that have been presented as competing or unrelated.
4. A brief research proposal designed to test or extend a theoretical claim from the readings or lecture.
5. A paper relating some ideas from this course to ideas you have run across in other coursework.

Research Proposal and Presentation: Each student is expected to submit a research proposal as the final paper in this course. Research proposals should essentially be a scholarly journal article, minus data collection and analysis. Proposals therefore will consist of the following sections: abstract, introduction, literature review, anticipated subject pool/survey data, and experimental design/methodology. Students will present an overview of their research proposal during the last two class periods. A grading rubric for the research proposal and specific instructions for the presentation will be handed out during the second week of class.

Participation: Every student is expected to be present and actively engaged each class period. Participation includes asking questions about the readings (write down questions as you read!), answering questions posed by the instructor, and responding to the arguments made by your classmates. I encourage all students to think critically and to share their insights and inquiries with the class.

Distribution of Grades

- 25% Participation
- 45% Reaction papers 1-3 (15% each)
- 30% Research proposal and presentation

Grading Scale

A	90-100	C	70-79	F	59 or below
B	80-89	D	60-69		

Midterm and Final Exams

While I recommend checking your grades in Blackboard throughout the semester, I will inform students of their official midterm grades during approximately the eighth week of class. If you are concerned about your overall grade and/or a particular assignment at any point please feel free to meet with me during my office hours.

Final examinations are administered during the sixteenth week of the semester. Any student having more than two final examinations scheduled in one day is entitled to rescheduling. For a schedule of exams and exam policies see:

http://www.uic.edu/depts/oar/current_students/calendars/final_exam_schedule.html

Policy for Missed or Late Work

Missing or late work will be accepted only under extenuating circumstances and with proper (medical) documentation. Students will generally not be allowed to make up missing coursework due to transportation, weather, family and/or personal issues, though certain exceptions may be made on a case by case basis.

Religious Holidays

Students who wish to observe their religious holidays shall notify the faculty member by the tenth day of the semester of the date when they will be absent unless the religious holiday is observed on or before the tenth day of the semester. In such cases, the student shall notify the faculty member at least five days in advance of the date when he/she will be absent. The faculty member shall make every reasonable effort to honor the request, not penalize the student for missing the class, and if an examination or project is due during the absence, give the student an exam or assignment equivalent to the one completed by those students in attendance. If the student feels aggrieved, he/she may request remedy through the campus grievance procedure.

Disability Policy

The University of Illinois at Chicago is committed to maintaining a barrier-free environment so that students with disabilities can fully access programs, courses, services, and activities at UIC. Students with disabilities who require accommodations for access to and/or participation in this course are welcome, but must be registered with the Disability Resource Center (DRC). You may contact DRC at 312-413-2183 (v) or 312-413-0123 (TTY) and consult the following: <http://www.uic.edu/depts/oaa/disabilityresources/faq/accommodations.html>.

Electronic Communication

Communication for this course will be sent to your official university email address via Blackboard. ***It is your responsibility to read the email in your official university email account and to do so in a timely manner (at least twice per week).*** If you choose to forward your official university email to another off-campus account, faculty are *not responsible* for any undeliverable messages to your alternative personal accounts.

Writing Assistance

The writing center, located in Grant Hall 105, offers one-on-one consultation with student writers who need help developing ideas, or need advice, guidance or additional instruction on any aspects of writing in any class. Tutors are prepared to spend fifty minutes per appointment, and there is no limit to the number of tutoring sessions you can have each semester. Make an appointment and be on time! Bring the paper on which you're working, as well as any related drafts or notes, and information about the assignment. For an appointment, call the Writing Center at (312) 413-2206, or stop by room 105 of Grant Hall. Visit the Writing Center website at www.uic.edu/depts/engl/writing for more information.

Academic Integrity

As an academic community, UIC is committed to providing an environment in which research, learning, and scholarship can flourish and in which all endeavors are guided by academic and professional integrity. All members of the campus community—students, staff, faculty, and administrators—share the responsibility of insuring that these standards are upheld so that such an environment exists. Instances of academic misconduct by students will be handled pursuant to

the Student Disciplinary Policy:

<http://www.uic.edu/depts/cas/dosnew/conductforstudents.shtml>

Plagiarism

Academic honesty is expected at all times. Any student found to have engaged in academic misconduct such as plagiarism, collusion, or submitting non-original work is subject to disciplinary sanctions from the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. The term “plagiarism” includes, but is not limited to, the use, by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment. The term “collusion” includes, but is not limited to, the unauthorized collaboration with any other person in preparing work offered for academic credit. Students are advised that faculty routinely use SafeAssign both to prevent plagiarism and to assist in verifying when/if it has occurred.

In this course you will be required a three reaction papers and a final research proposal. While I encourage you to use many resources in gathering information, you must provide a citation for the sources used in your paper. This includes supplementing your knowledge from the required readings with information from magazine/newspaper articles, websites, books, etc. In addition to rewording information from your sources, my advice is to always cite any and all sources used in your written assignments. ***If I suspect that a student has committed plagiarism, even if it is his or her first time, the student will receive a zero on the assignment and an incident report will be filed with the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.*** For more information about plagiarism and prevention, go to www.plagiarism.org/.

Grievance Procedures

UIC is committed to the most fundamental principles of academic freedom, equality of opportunity, and human dignity involving students and employees. Freedom from discrimination is a foundation for all decision making at UIC. Students are encouraged to study the University's “Nondiscrimination Statement”. Students are also urged to read the document “Public Formal Grievance Procedures”. Information on these policies and procedures is available on the University web pages of the Office of Access and Equity: www.uic.edu/depts/oea.

Disclaimer

The instructor reserves the right to amend or correct this course syllabus as necessary. If the instructor amends or corrects this syllabus students will be properly notified of any changes.

Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Required Readings
Tues 8/26	Introduction	---
Thurs 8/28	Experimental Research	*TBD
Tues 9/2	Defining Misinformation, Rumors and Conspiracies	*TBD
Thurs 9/4	History of Conspiratorial Thinking	Hofstadter (1964) Knight Chapter 1
Tues 9/9	How Widespread are Conspiratorial Beliefs?	*TBD
Thurs 9/11	Attitude Formation	*TBD
Tues 9/16	Evolutionary Approaches	Dijksterhuis and Aarts (2003)
Thurs 9/18	Susceptibility: General Cognitive Errors	Brotherton and French (2014)
Tues 9/23	Susceptibility: Specific Personality Factors	Oliver and Wood (2014) Goertzel (1994)
Thurs 9/25	Social-Psychological Explanations <i>Paper 1 due</i>	DiFonzo and Bordia Chapter 5 Bordia and DiFonzo (2004)
Tues 9/30	Us vs. Them	Uscinski, Parent and Torres (2011) Simmons and Parsons (2005)
Thurs 10/2	Emotions	Lodge and Taber (2005)
Tues 10/7	Motivated Reasoning	Kunda (1990) Taber and Lodge (2006)
Thurs 10/9	<i>No Class</i>	---
Tues 10/14	Belief Perseverance	*TBD
Thurs 10/16	Partisan Differences	Public Policy Polling Data, April 2013 Public Policy Polling Data, October 2013

Date	Topic	Required Readings
Tues 10/21	Modes of Misinformation Spread	Sunstein and Vermeule (2009)
Thurs 10/23	Motivations of Rumor Spread <i>Paper 2 Due</i>	DiFonzo and Bordia Chapter 3
Tues 10/28	Groupthink and Extremism	't Hart (1991) Sunstein (1999)
Thurs 10/30	The Role of Political Elites	*TBD
Tues 11/4	Election Day- Go Vote! <i>No Class</i>	---
Thurs 11/6	Journalists as Agenda Setters	*TBD
Tues 11/11	Conspiracies in Film	---
Thurs 11/13	Social Networking	*TBD
Tues 11/18	Do Corrections Work?	Lewandowsky et al. (2012) Nyhan and Reifler (2010)
Thurs 11/20	Implications for Democracy <i>Paper 3 Due</i>	*TBD
Tues 11/25	<i>Make Up Day- Potentially No Class</i>	---
Thurs 11/27	<i>Thanksgiving- No Class</i>	---
Tues 12/2	Presentations	---
Thurs 12/4	Presentations	---
Research Proposal Due Upload to SafeAssign by 5:00pm Friday December 12, 2014		

To view academic deadlines, including add/drop dates, please visit
<http://www.uic.edu/ucatalog/CA.shtml>