

Fall 2024
University of Rochester
Tuesday and Thursday 2:00pm – 3:15pm

: psc211s2024@gmail.com

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

Tony Molino
Thursday 3:30-5:00pm or by appointment
Harkness 305

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.

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).

20%
30%
20%
:
15%
:
15%

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 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

Carl T. Bergstrom & Jevin D. West. 2020.
. Random House

We will be drawing on several articles found at:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/shadowland/>

The course outline appears below. You should complete the reading listed for the class meeting 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.

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	COVID-19: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/889eva/world-leaders-are-hyping-bogus-covid-cures? https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/what-can-coronavirus-tell-us-about-conspiracy-theories/610894/ BLM: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z3exj3/mass-protests-turn-the-powerful-into-conspiracy-theorists https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/technology/george-floyd-misinformation-online.html
Thursday, January 25	Defining conspiracy theories	Merlan. Chapters 1-2. Russell Muirhead & Nancy Rosenblum. 2018. “The New Conspiracists” . 65(1)
Tuesday, January 30	Defining conspiracy theories: What features do they have in common	Merlan. Chapters 3-4. https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2020/05/conspiracy-museum/610984/
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

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, , 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-fo-ur-congresswomen/594019/ https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/baseless-smear-targeting-ilhan-omar-mad-e-its-way-trump-thanks-fox-and-these-far-right https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/conspiracy-theories-civil-war/612283/

Tuesday

Tuesday, April 23	Presentations	None
Thursday, April 25	Presentations	None
Tuesday, April 30	Presentations	None