

# Misperceptions in Politics

Instructor: D.J. Flynn

Office: Silsby 209

Office Hours: Wed. 10:00 AM–12:00 PM

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Classroom: Silsby XXX

Class Meetings: M/W/F 2:10–3:15 PM

x-period: Thurs. 1:20–2:10 PM

Course Website: [LINK TO APPEAR]

## Course Description

Many citizens hold misperceptions about political facts. To what extent do misperceptions distort people's preferences and bias public opinion? This seminar examines the causes and consequences of misperceptions, strategies for correcting misperceptions, and the tools scholars use to study misperceptions scientifically. These tools include surveys, experiments, and a widely used statistical computing program (R). Over the course of the quarter, students will collaborate with the instructor to design, execute, and report an original experimental study of misperceptions.

## Methods Prerequisite

This course assumes familiarity with basic principles in research design and statistics, including hypothesis testing, difference-in-means tests, and linear regression. The prerequisite is GOVT 10 or an equivalent (see the instructor with questions on acceptable prerequisites). The course assumes no prior experience with R.

## Instructional Approach

This class will be run as a seminar. As such, it entails substantial reading and depends critically on [active preparation](#) by all students. Class discussions will focus on critically analyzing the readings (particular attention will be paid to the validity of research designs and analyses). Some class meetings will focus on R. These meetings will be run as a workshop in which students complete data management and analysis tasks together with the instructor.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- explain the role factual perceptions play in the opinion formation process;
- identify the conditions under which misperceptions are likely to affect people's opinions;

- evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to correcting misperceptions;
- design valid surveys and experiments to study misperceptions;
- critique theoretical and empirical approaches to studying misperceptions.

### **Course Expectations**

Students are expected to engage in *active preparation* before each class meeting. *Active preparation* means that students have (i) completed all readings; (ii) understood the main takeaway from all readings (1-2 sentences); (iii) considered how the readings relate to one another; and (iv) identified strengths and weaknesses of each author's argument.

Each student will be expected to make an especially important contribution to one or more class meetings by acting as an expert discussant (students will choose topics at the first class meeting). As discussants, students will formulate one or more questions per reading (e.g., 3 readings = 3 or more questions, with at least 1 from each reading) and introduce them at the start of class. Questions should be emailed to the instructor 24 hours prior to the class meeting. The instructor may provide feedback or minor edits.

Finally, students should be respectful of fellow students and the instructor at all times.

### **Course Website and Communication**

The syllabus, slides, and any other materials distributed in class will be posted on the course website ([LINK TO APPEAR]). Most class meetings will not include slides.

All announcements will be made via email. While I am happy to answer questions via email, students are encouraged to come to office hours. I can typically provide greater detail and answer follow-ups more quickly in office hours than I can via email.

### **Laptop/electronic Device Policy**

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without the instructor's permission (e.g., during classes focused on R). You should therefore make sure to print all readings before class. This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops [hinders learning](#)

not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately [distracting and cognitively taxing](#). In addition, research suggests that students take notes [more effectively](#) in longhand than on laptops.

### **Academic Integrity**

Students are responsible for understanding and abiding by the [Academic Honor Principle](#) at all times. Ignorance of the Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Please see me in the first two weeks of the term with any questions.

This course has a strict academic integrity policy: *any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade in the class; there are no exceptions to this policy*. This is in addition to any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation.

### **Students with Disabilities**

Students who may need disability-related classroom accommodations should see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

### **Religious Observances**

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

### **Office Hours**

My office hours for the winter term are Wednesday from 10:00AM–12:00 PM in Silsby 209. Feel free to email me to reserve a 15-minute block of time (though this is not required). I will prioritize appointments over walk-ins, though I am happy to meet with any student if time permits. If you cannot attend office hours, please email me to schedule an alternate meeting time (but note I am generally unable to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays this term).

## Grades

### Essay Exam (40%)

There will be one closed-book essay exam testing your understanding of lecture and reading material (the exam will not cover R). The exam will pose several questions, and students will be able to choose which questions to answer (e.g., choose 2 from 3). The goal of the exam is to measure your understanding of key concepts and arguments—*not* your mastery of minor details or jargon.

Here are some sample essay questions (none of these will appear):

- Under what conditions are facts likely to affect people's political opinions? Discuss three.
- Why do corrections often fail to reduce misperceptions? Identify and discuss three factors from the readings that undermine corrections.
- What is the difference between ignorance and misperception? What are two approaches to distinguishing them in surveys? Discuss advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches.

### Discussion participation; section drafts for class project (40%)

*Discussion participation:* Students are expected to attend class and contribute to discussion. I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes on the readings, which would factor into this portion of the grade (weighted equally with other components).

*Class project details:* Over the course of the quarter, students will collaborate with each other and the instructor to design, execute, and report an original empirical study of misperceptions. Our ultimate goal will be to publish the results in a peer-reviewed political science journal, a goal that will require substantial commitment from each student. Any work on this project that extends beyond the quarter (e.g., revising and resubmitting to a journal) is completely optional.

Students should think about potential research questions as they complete the readings. We will discuss potential questions throughout the first half of the course and then ultimately vote/agree on one to pursue. The basic format of our article will be as follows: (i) background/motivation; (ii) relevant past literature; (iii) theory/expectations; (iv) experimental design; (v) results; (vi) implications/discussion. We will complete each step together as a class (e.g., formulating hypotheses, analyzing the data, discussing implications). Students are required to become certified to conduct human subjects research by the [Dartmouth CPHS](#) (details will be provided in class).

Students will be responsible for drafting and revising one of the sections above (<2500 words). Students will submit a first draft, which will be reviewed and graded by the instructor. Using the instructor's comments, students will revise this first draft into a more polished final draft, which will also be graded. The instructor will then make any necessary edits and combine all section drafts into a draft article.

Due dates for the first and final drafts will be discussed at the first class meeting. Students will be able to choose which sections they draft with an eye towards scheduling, as most sections can only be written at a certain point in the quarter (e.g., results after experimental design, etc.).

Students will be graded on the quality of both the first draft *and* the final draft. These components will be weighted equally with students' class participation grade—that is,  $\text{grade} = \frac{1}{3}(\text{discussion participation} + \text{first draft} + \text{final draft})$ .

### **Homework (20%)**

Some weeks will include homework. Homework questions will focus on the readings and/or key skills in R. Homework assignments will consist of 5 or fewer questions and will be distributed not less than 5 days before they are due. Homework should be submitted in class, during office hours, or slid under my office door. (In the event of technical difficulties that prevent you from printing, I will accept homework via email.) Late homework will not be accepted.

### **Course Readings**

There are no required books. Most of the readings are accessible by clicking on the hyperlinks below. (Note: you will need to be on the campus network or logged into the Dartmouth [VPN](#) to access materials that are behind academic journal paywalls.) Other readings will be posted on the course website. If you are having difficulty accessing a reading, contact the instructor.

This course entails substantial reading, much of which is challenging. Students are not expected to understand every argument or statistical analysis presented in the readings; rather, they should engage in [active preparation](#). I encourage students to read ahead and come to office hours with questions. I will do my best to highlight upcoming readings that are particularly challenging and to offer advice.

## Course Schedule

The tentative course schedule is presented below. Please note that we will likely use one or more x-periods for exam preparation and/or to further develop skills in R. I have noted some possible x-period meetings below, but we will schedule these throughout the quarter based on student needs.

Students should complete the readings in the order in which they are listed below. Please read each entry *carefully*, as some readings are entire articles/books, while others are excerpts.

This schedule is subject to change (with notice). Please consult the syllabus online for the most up-to-date information.

### Overview of opinion formation; the role of (mis)information

Wed., 1/4:

- Course syllabus
- [Course survey](#)
- Druckman, James N. and Arthur Lupia. 2000. "[Preference Formation.](#)" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3: 1-24. Skip from the middle of p. 5 ("Having traced the ancestry of preference...") to the middle of p. 7 ("The objects over which preferences..."); read the rest.

Fri., 1/6:

- Boudreau, Cheryl and Arthur Lupia. 2011. "[Political Knowledge.](#)" In *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press. All.
- Druckman, James N. 2005. "[Does Political Information Matter?](#)" *Political Communication* 22(4): 515–519. All. (The author refers to other articles contained in that issue of the journal; you are not responsible for those articles.)
- Kuklinski, James H. 2007. "[The Limits of Facts in Citizen Decision-Making.](#)" *Extensions* (Fall): 1-6. All.

### Defining and measuring misperceptions

Mon., 1/9:

- Luskin, Robert C., Gaurav Sood, and Joshua Blank. N.d. “[The Waters of Casablanca: Political Misinformation \(and Knowledge and Ignorance\)](#).” Unpublished paper. All.
- Pasek, Josh, Gaurav Sood, and Jon A. Krosnick. 2015. “[Misinformed About the Affordable Care Act? Leveraging Certainty to Assess the Prevalence of Misperceptions](#).” *Journal of Communication* 65(4): 660–673. All.
- Flynn, D.J., Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2016. “[The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs about Politics](#).” Unpublished paper. Read p. 1-10.

### **Intro to R**

Wed., 1/11:

- Take the [CITI online course](#) (be sure to take the following course/exam: Group 2 Social/Behavioral Basic Course); bring printed certificate to class
- Read “[What is R?](#)”
- [Download R](#)
- In class: R

### **Intro to survey/experimental methods**

Fri., 1/13:

- Erikson, Robert S. and Kent L. Tedin. 2001. *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed. New York: Longman. [Chapter 2](#). Start on p. 25 (at “2.1 Sampling”); read the rest.
- Druckman, James N., Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. 2011. “[Experiments: An Introduction to Core Concepts](#).” In *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Read p. 15-24, including the appendix on the Neyman-Rubin Causal Model (stop at “Noncompliance”).
- Mutz, Diana C. 2011. *Population-Based Survey Experiments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. [Chapter 1](#). Skip from the middle of page 5 (“My personal interest...”) to the top of page 8 (“Drawing on the Advantages...”); read the rest.

Mon., 1/16:

- No class (MLK Day)

## **Misperceptions across domains**

Wed., 1/18:

- Ramsay, Clay, Steven Kull, Evan Lewis, and Stefan Subias. 2010. “[Misinformation and the 2010 Election: A Study of the US Electorate.](#)” Report by WorldPublicOpinion.org and Knowledge Networks. All.
- Flynn, D.J. 2016. “[The Scope and Correlates of Political Misperceptions in the Mass Public.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.
- Ahler, Douglas J. and Sood, Gaurav. 2016. “[The Parties in our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and their Consequences.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.

x-period: Thurs., 1/19 [if needed]

## **Survey methods in practice**

Fri., 1/20:

- Read Qualtrics “[Survey Platform Overview](#)”; watch introductory video
- Make sure you can log-in to Dartmouth [Qualtrics](#) site; explore
- Huff, Connor and Dustin Tingley. 2015. “[Who Are These People? Evaluating the Demographic Characteristics and Political Preferences of MTurk Survey Respondents.](#)” *Research & Politics*: 1-12. All.
- In class: Qualtrics and R

## **Causes of misperceptions: motivated reasoning**

Mon., 1/23:

- Taber, Milton and Charles Lodge. 2006. “[Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs.](#)” *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3): 755-769. All.
- Druckman, James N. 2012. “[The Politics of Motivation.](#)” *Critical Review* 24(2): 199-216. All.
- Meirick, Patrick C. 2013. “[Motivated Misperceptions? Party, Education, Partisan News, and Belief in ‘Death Panels’.](#)” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 90(1): 39-57. All.

Wed., 1/25:

- Kahan, Dan M. “[The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm.](#)” Forthcoming, *Emerging Trends in Social & Behavioral Sciences*. All.
- Kahan, Dan M., Erica Cantrell Dawson, Ellen Peters, and Paul Slovic. N.d. “[Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.

x-period: Thurs., 1/26 [if needed]

Fri., 1/27:

- Lauderdale, Benjamin E. 2016. “[Partisan Disagreements Arising from Rationalization of Common Information.](#)” *Political Science Research and Methods* 4(3): 477-492. All.
- Flynn, D.J. and Yanna Krupnikov. 2016. “[Misinformation and the Justification of Socially Undesirable Preferences.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.

### **Causes of misperceptions: elites and media**

Mon., 1/30:

- Kull, Steven, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis. 2003. “[Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War.](#)” *Political Science Quarterly* 118(4): 569-598. All.
- Jerit, Jennifer and Jason Barabas. 2006. “[Bankrupt Rhetoric: How Misleading Information Affects Knowledge about Social Security.](#)” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70(3): 278-303. All.
- Nyhan, Brendan. 2013. “[When ‘He Said, She Said’ is Dangerous](#)” *Columbia Journalism Review* [online, 16 July 2013]. All.

### **Causes of misperceptions: social networks**

Wed., 2/1:

- Garrett, R. Kelly. 2011. “[Troubling Consequences of Online Political Rumoring.](#)” *Human Communication Research* 37(2): 255-274. All.
- Nyhan, Brendan, Jason Reifler, and Sean Richey. 2012. “[The Role of Social Networks in Influenza Vaccine Attitudes and Intentions Among College Students in the Southeastern United States.](#)” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 51(3): 302-304. All.

- Jin, Fang, Wei Wang, Liang Zhao, Edward Dougherty, Yang Cao, Chang-Tien Lu, and Naren Ramakrishnan. 2014. “[Misinformation Propagation in the Age of Twitter.](#)” Report for Discover Analytics, Virginia Tech. All.

x-period: Thurs., 2/2 [if needed]

Fri., 2/3:

- Come to class with a list of possible research topics/questions (hard copy to turn in)
- In class: discuss timeline for group project

Mon., 2/6:

- In class: group project

### **Consequences of misperceptions**

Wed., 2/8:

- Kuklinski, James H., Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert F. Rich. 2000. “[Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship.](#)” *Journal of Politics* 62(3): 790–816. All.
- Gaines, Brian J., James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Buddy Peyton, and Jay Verkuilen. 2007. “[Same Facts, Different Interpretations: Partisan Motivation and Opinion on Iraq.](#)” *Journal of Politics* 69(4): 957-974. All.
- Sides, John and Jack Citrin. 2007. “[How Large the Huddled Masses? The Causes and Consequences of Public Misperceptions about Immigrant Populations.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.

x-period: Thurs., 2/9 [if needed]

Fri., 2/10:

- Gilens, Martin. 2001. “[Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences.](#)” *American Political Science Review* 95(2): 379-396. All.
- Howell, William G. and Martin R. West. 2009. “[Educating the Public.](#)” *Education Next* 9(3): 41-47. All.
- Sides, John. “[Stories or Science? Facts, Frames, and Policy Attitudes.](#)” Forthcoming, *American Politics Research*. All.

## Corrections

Mon., 2/13:

- Cobb, Michael D., Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2013. “Beliefs Don’t Always Persevere: How Political Figures Are Punished When False Positive Information about Them Is Discredited.” *Political Psychology* 34(3): 307-326. All.
- Berinsky, Adam J. 2015. “Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation.” *British Journal of Political Science* (July): 1-22. All.
- Thorson, Emily. 2015. “Identifying and Correcting Policy Misperceptions.” Unpublished paper. All.

Wed., 2/15:

- Ross, Lee, Mark R. Lepper, and Michael Hubbard. 1975. “Perseverance in Self-perception and Social Perception: Biased Attributional Processes in the Debriefing Paradigm” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32(5): 880-892. All.
- Bullock, John G. 2007. *Experiments on Partisanship and Public Opinion: Party Cues, False Beliefs, and Bayesian Updating*. Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University. Chapter 2. All.
- Thorson, Emily. 2016. “Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation.” *Political Communication* 33: 460-480. All.

x-period: Thurs., 2/16 [if needed]

Fri., 2/17:

- Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2010. “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions.” *Political Behavior* 32(2): 303-330. All.
- Nyhan, Brendan, Jason Reifler, and Peter A. Ubel. 2013. “The Hazards of Correcting Myths about Health Care Reform.” *Medical Care* 51(2): 127-132. All.
- Wood, Thomas and Ethan Porter. 2016. “The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes’ Steadfast Factual Adherence.” Unpublished paper. All.

Mon., 2/20:

- R homework due (bring hard copy to class)
- In class: group project/R

Wed., 2/22:

- Bode, Leticia and Emily K. Vraga. 2015. “[In Related News, That Was Wrong: The Correction of Misinformation Through Related Stories Functionality in Social Media.](#)” *Journal of Communication* 65(4): 619-638. All.
- Weeks, Brian E. 2015. “[Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions: How Anger and Anxiety Moderate the Effect of Partisan Bias on Susceptibility to Political Misinformation.](#)” *Journal of Communication* 65(4): 699-719. All.
- Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2016. “[The Roles of Information Deficits and Identity Threats in the Prevalence of Misperceptions.](#)” Unpublished paper. All.

x-period: Thurs., 2/23 [if needed]

Fri., 2/24:

- R homework due (bring hard copy to class)
- In class: group project/R

### **Journalistic fact-checking**

Mon., 2/27:

- Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2015. “[The Effect of Fact-Checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on U.S. State Legislators.](#)” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 628-640. All.
- Graves, Lucas, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2016. “[Understanding Innovations in Journalistic Practice: A Field Experiment Examining Motivations for Fact-Checking.](#)” *Journal of Communication* 66(1): 102-138. All.

### **Normative issues**

Wed., 3/1:

- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Ryden W. Butler. 2013. “[The Epistemology of Fact Checking.](#)” *Critical Review* 25(2): 162-180. All.

- Amazeen, Michelle A. 2015. “Revisiting the Epistemology of Fact-Checking.” *Critical Review* 27(1): 1-22. All.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. 2015. “The Epistemology of Fact Checking (Is Still Naive): Rejoinder to Amazeen.” *Critical Review* 27(2): 1-10. All.

x-period: Thurs., 3/2 [if needed]

Fri., 3/3:

- Shapiro, Robert Y. and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon. 2008. “Do the Facts Speak for Themselves? Partisan Disagreement as a Challenge to Democratic Competence.” *Critical Review* 20(1-2): 115-139. All.
- Marietta, Morgan, David C. Barker, and Todd Bowser. 2015. “Fact-Checking Polarized Politics: Does The Fact-Check Industry Provide Consistent Guidance on Disputed Realities?” *The Forum* 13(4): 577-596. All.

Mon., 3/6:

- In class: finish class project

Wed., 3/8:

- In class: exam Q&A

Sun., 3/12, 11:30 AM:

- Essay exam

Syllabus last updated: October 3, 2016