

# Political Science 334: Seeking Truth in an Age of Misinformation, Cynicism, and Political Polarization

University of Washington  
Autumn 2020

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## **Overview of Class:**

Many commentators have proclaimed that we are living in an era of “post-truth,” defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The forces leading to this phenomenon have been building in the U.S. and around the world over the last few decades. An academic movement often called “postmodernism” has asserted that there are no overarching truths, just local truths relative to each person or community. Meanwhile, the public has lost confidence in the institutions that used to serve as arbiters of truth, including the media, business, government, and organized religion. The information environment now includes both fake news and false allegations of fake news. The result is a profound challenge: How can anyone know what’s true? The answer for many people today is whatever feels true from within the filter bubble of their social media and personal networks.

This course will focus on the difficulties of separating fact from fiction in the contemporary world. Recognizing the need to examine competing perspectives on important topics, the syllabus includes authors writing from a range of political and ideological orientations (left, right, centrist, libertarian, etc.). We will learn the tools of critical and scientific thinking and then apply them to politics and other areas of controversy. We will gain insights into the political and cognitive biases that guide how people interpret information, form beliefs, and resist changing their minds. In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. By understanding the errors in intuition, perception, and memory that can lead people astray and create a tribal mentality, students will strengthen their ability to recognize their own biases and evaluate claims through reason and evidence. Along the way, we will investigate why so many Americans embrace conspiracy theories, reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus, and

accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also examine the production and consumption of false information and how a person can navigate the Wild West of claims and counterclaims easily accessible online.

**Learning Objectives:**

- To develop the trait of intellectual humility
- To gain a historical understanding of major approaches to knowing what's true
- To see how political identities pose challenges to the search for truth
- To learn how to assess information in the news media and social media

**Adjustments for online learning**

The lectures will run synchronously and will be recorded and posted (along with the slides) at the course's Canvas site, for the benefit of students who cannot attend at the designated time or who want to return to the lectures at a later date. Releasing any part of the recording outside of our class is a violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The sections will run synchronously but will not be recorded.

**Workload:**

Students should expect a higher-than-average workload in keeping up with the weekly readings, videos, and podcasts, plus the required papers. There will be slightly less than two hours of preparation outside of class (and more when papers are due) for every hour in class.

**Course requirements and grading breakdown:**

The grading is based on three papers of varying lengths, plus section participation. The papers will require students to engage with materials from the course.

First paper: 25%

Second paper: 15%

Final paper: 45%

Section participation: 15%

You will submit your papers through Turnitin, a program that organizes online submissions and assists in detecting plagiarism.

**Religious Accommodations:**

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy, <https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form, available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

**Disability Accommodations:**

Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary or permanent disability that requires accommodations (this includes but is not limited to mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924, or [uwdrs@uw.edu](mailto:uwdrs@uw.edu). See the DRS website at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>

### **Academic Honesty:**

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. A suspected instance will be reported and disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington's academic honesty policy, please refer the Student Conduct Code at <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/student-code-of-conduct/>

### **Plagiarism and VeriCite:**

The UW has a license agreement with Turnitin, an educational tool that helps prevent or identify plagiarism from Internet resources. Your instructor will use the service by requiring that assignments are submitted electronically through Canvas and checked by Turnitin. The Turnitin report indicates the amount of original text in your work and whether all material that you quoted, paraphrased, summarized, or used from another source is appropriately referenced.

### **Schedule of Topics and Readings**

Note: Particular authors appear on the syllabus not because the instructor necessarily endorses them but because they are relevant to the course. Some of the readings, videos, and podcasts may change as the quarter moves forward, but you will always receive notice of any changes at least one class session in advance.

#### **Thursday, October 1** Introduction to the class

Read/listen/watch:

Stephen Colbert, The Word—Truthiness (just the first segment lasting 2:40, not the whole episode)

Kendra Cherry, The Benefits of Being Open-Minded

Kathryn Schulz, On Being Wrong

Heterodox Academy, The HxA Way

Van Jones, Safe Spaces on College Campuses

Robert George and Cornel West, Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression

Danny Westneat, America's Culture War Arrives on Tiny, Mostly White Lopez Island

#### **Tuesday, October 6** Premodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Augustine of Hippo, letter 93 to Vincentius, chapter 2, paragraphs 6 and 8; and chapter 6, paragraph 20

Thomas Aquinas, The Sin of Blasphemy

Martin Luther, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants

Pope Pius IX, Syllabus of Errors. Focus on #s 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 21, 55, 77, 78, and 80, and remember that these are propositions the Pope is *condemning*

Answers in Genesis, Can We Prove the Bible is True?  
Catholic Answers, Papal Infallibility  
Wikipedia entry on film version of Fiddler on the Roof  
Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, lyrics and music to Tradition

**Thursday, October 8** Modern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch:

Skeptic Presents, What Is a Skeptic?  
Scott Lilienfeld, Intellectual Humility: A Guiding Principle for the Skeptical Movement?  
Steven Pinker, Reason Is Not Negotiable  
Logan Chipkin, Dogma Is Not Confined to the Cathedral  
Irshad Manji, Rethinking Life on the Left  
Erik Gilbert, Liberal Orthodoxy and the New Heresy  
George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

**Tuesday, October 13** Postmodern approaches to truth, part I

Read/listen/watch:

Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author  
Reza Aslan, interview on The Daily Show  
Jesse Singal, Reza Aslan on What the New Atheists Get Wrong about Islam  
Suzanna Danuta Walters, Why Can't We Hate Men?  
Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Aspects & Assumptions of Whiteness & White Culture in the United States  
Michel Foucault, The Subject and Power

**Thursday, October 15** Postmodern approaches to truth, part II

Read/listen/watch:

Helen Pluckrose, The Evolution of Postmodern Thought  
Albert Mohler, Postmodernism and Society  
Lee McIntyre, Post-Truth, interviewed by Agah Bahari on Neohuman

**Tuesday, October 20** How the premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to truth can each go awry

Read/listen/watch:

Ben Shapiro, Religious Belief and the Enlightenment, interviewed by Jordan Peterson  
Michael Shermer, What Is Truth, Anyway?  
Then & Now, Understanding Derrida, Deconstruction, and Of Grammatology

**Thursday, October 22** Fallacies and biases that undermine reasoning

Read/listen/watch:

15 Logical Fallacies You Should Know before Getting into a Debate  
Carl Sagan, The Fine Art of Baloney Detection  
David Robson, The Intelligence Trap, interviewed on The Middle Way Society  
Musa al-Gharbi, There's No Reason to be Smug about the Partisan Diploma Divide  
Carol Tavris, Why We Believe—Long After We Shouldn't

**Tuesday, October 27** Flaws in intuition

Read/listen/watch:

Laurie Santos, How Monkeys Mirror Human Irrationality

Sheena Iyengar, The Art of Choosing

Lisa Belkin, The Odds of That

Andrew Shtulman, Scienceblind, interviewed by Michael Shermer on Science Salon

**Wednesday, October 28** First paper due

**Thursday, October 29** Flaws in perception and memory

Read/listen/watch:

Daniel Simons, Seeing the World As It Isn't

Steven Novella, Body Snatchers, Phantom Limbs, and Alien Hands

Elizabeth Loftus, How Reliable Is Your Memory

Lindsay Beyerstein, On Bullshit: Harry Frankfurt, Donald Trump, and Indifference to Truth

Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise, talk at Politics and Prose bookstore

**Tuesday, November 3** Origins and effects of political polarization

Read/listen/watch:

Lilliana Mason, Uncivil Agreement, interviewed by Russ Roberts on EconTalk

Douglas Ahler, Something Democrats and Republicans Have in Common

Hidden Brain, Not at the Dinner Table, interview with Yanna Krupnikov

Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy with Tom Hanks

Jerry Taylor, The Alternative to Ideology

**Thursday, November 5** Tribalism and truth

Read/listen/watch:

Tom Jacobs, Why We Engage in Tribalism, Nationalism, and Scapegoating

Andrew Sullivan, America Wasn't Built for Humans

Ezra Klein, How Politics Makes Us Stupid

Mark Horowitz, Inherent Bias in Academia and Politics

Hyrum Lewis, Our Big Fight Over Nothing: The Political Spectrum Does Not Exist

**Tuesday, November 10** Truth, Cynicism, Misinformation, and Tribalism in the 2020 Election

Read/listen/watch: nothing for today

**Thursday, November 12** The limits of individual rationality

Read/listen/watch:

Rebecca Saxe, How We Read Each Other's Minds

Jonathan Haidt, The Rationalist Delusion in Moral Responsibility (only the first 17:55)

Robert Kurzban, Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite, talk at The Amazing Meeting 2014

Edge, The Argumentative Theory, A Conversation with Hugo Mercier

**Tuesday, November 17** Universities and truth

Read/listen/watch:

Jacalyn Kelly, Tara Sadeghieh, and Khosrow Adeli, Peer Review in Scientific Publications

University of Chicago, Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression  
American Association of University Professors, Statement on Professional Ethics  
Musa al-Gharbi, On Heterodox Academy and Effective Advocacy  
Heterodox Academy, Understanding the Campus Expression Climate  
Bonnie Kristian, I Worked at a Website that Rated Professors for Political Bias  
Lara Schwartz, False Equivalence, interviewed by Chris Martin on Half Hour of Heterodoxy

**Wednesday, November 18** Second paper due

**Thursday, November 19** Science and truth

Read/listen/watch:

Lee McIntyre, The Case for Science

Steven Novella, Scientific Consensus

Ed Yong, A Waste of 1000 Research Papers

Stuart Ritchie, Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth

Brian Gallagher, Wikipedia and the Wisdom of Polarized Crowds

**Tuesday, November 24** Science denial on the left and right

Read/listen/watch:

Arthur Lupia, What's the Value of Social Science?

Luana Maroja, Self-Censorship on Campus is Bad for Science

Oren Cass, No, Not that Evidence

Jerry Taylor, A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides, interviewed by Indre Viskontas on Inquiring Minds

Naomi Oreskes, Why Trust Science?

**Thursday, November 26** (no class—Thanksgiving break)

**Tuesday, December 1** Does (or can) the news media uncover truth?

Read/listen/watch:

American Press Institute, The Lost Meaning of 'Objectivity'

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (1926 version)

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (2014 version)

Brent Cunningham, Re-thinking Objectivity

Wesley Lowery, A Reckoning over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists

Louise Perry, An Untrue Claim in the New Yorker Speaks Volumes

Margaret Sullivan, The Disinformation System that Trump Unleashed Will Outlast Him

Charles Cooke, Biden's Media Campaign

**Thursday, December 3** Objectivity and subjectivity in the news media

Read/listen/watch:

Danah Boyd, Did Media Literacy Backfire?

The Onion, CNN Holds Morning Meeting to Decide What Viewers Should Panic about for Rest of Day

Carolyn Hax, Everything Is on Fire

Ezra Klein, The Media Divide Beyond Left-Right

**Tuesday, December 8** Misinformation and disinformation

Read/listen/watch:

Kate Starbird, Disinformation Campaigns Are Murky Blends of Truth, Lies and Sincere Beliefs:  
Lessons from the Pandemic

Ruth Reader, Is the Explosion of COVID-19 Conspiracies Changing People's Real World  
Behavior?

Nina Schick, Deepfakes and the Infocalypse, interviewed on Intelligence Squared

Jonathan Rauch, The Constitution of Knowledge

**Thursday, December 10** Are there moral truths?

Read/listen/watch:

William Lane Craig vs. Shelly Kagan, Is God Necessary for Morality?

William Barr, speech at the University of Notre Dame Law School on October 21, 2019

**Tuesday, December 15** Final paper due