Fall 2025

COURSE OUTLINE

POY 4320

Conspiracy Theory and Democracy

School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs
College of Sciences, University of Central Florida
3 credit hours

Instructor: Dr. Daniel Marien, Daniel.Marien@ucf.edu
Graduate Teaching Assistant: Chadine Allen
Contact us via course email.

CLASS TIME/LOCATION: MWF, 10:30 to 11:45 PM, CB1 Room 309.

OFFICE HOURS. Howard Philips Hall, room 311H

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from noon to 2:00 pm and from 3:30 pm to 5 pm. Or by special appointments setup via email. I am flexible. Do not skip class or miss work to make an appointment for consultation. Appointments on weekends are possible as well. If you cannot show up at an appointment, please email me ahead of time to reschedule.

1. Course Description

Public discourse today seems saturated with conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation. Mass shootings are tragic events. Or they are staged incidents orchestrated for political advantage. Masks mitigate the spread of viruses. Or they don't. Vaccines reduce the risks of serious illness. Or they make you sick with autism. Elections are lost and won legitimately. Or they are stolen by malign actors. Already divided by competing economic interests and divergent social values, the public now lacks a shared sense of reality.

Who believes in conspiracy theory and why? Are there more conspiracy theories and more disinformation circulating today than in the past? Are there conditions in the modern world making us more susceptible to believe them? Are conspiracy theories linked to specific ideologies such as populism or not?

What impact can conspiracy theories and disinformation have on the shared sense of reality that many political theorists see as a precondition for democracy?

And, since real conspiracies do happen, how can we distinguish plausible from far-fetched conspiracy theories and how can we separate falsehoods from truth in the mass of information circulating on the internet?

In brief, this course studies conspiracy theories and disinformation, their impact on our politics and helps participants in developing resources and skills to disarm them.

2. Course Materials

You will need to have ready access to the following two sources:
Bethany Kilcrease
Falsehood and Fallacy:
How to Think, Read and Write in the Twenty-First Century.
University of Toronto Press
2021.
ISBN: 978-1487588618.

Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich
Truth Decay:
An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life.
Rand Corporation,
2018,
ISBN 9780833099945.

Video documentaries and other readings materials will also be occasionally assigned. They will be available online for free at the UCF Library Reserve. Video assignments cannot be projected long in advance since availability for online steaming varies without warning the instructor. Video assignments (when relevant) will be announced in the weekly Part A Discussion Boards.

IN ADDITION TO THE TEXTBOOK, we will also use an electronic platform called ***Yellowdig*** to facilitate discussion on issues of evaluation among participants (for Part B posts). This platform presents advantages over Webcourses for that purpose. (We will also use Webcourses for quizzes and Part A questions).

2. Basic Course Expectations

Students are expected to: (1) always have a working connection to the internet; (2) to promptly procure the textbook and access; (3) to take quizzes and submit Part A and Part B posts s in due time in normal circumstances; (4) to respect the rules of academic honesty, never to present text not their own as their own wording. (5) In most cases to paraphrase contents from the textbook rather than use direct quotes. Quotes can be used, but sparingly. Quoting is sometimes the most effective thing to do, particularly when dealing with concept definitions. But quotes should normally not amount to more than 10 to 15% of your text. (6) The use of ChatGPT or other AI programs for the composition of your posts is forbidden.

I. Student Learning Outcomes

LO-1: Students will be able to describe with a high degree of accuracy the classical concept of conspiracy theory as articulated by Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent. Of particular interest are the following issues: What is and is not a conspiracy theory? Who tends to believe in conspiracy theories and for what reasons? How and by whom are conspiracy theories used in politics and under what conditions?

LO-2: Students will be able to describe with a high degree of accuracy the concept of truth decay as articulated by Kavanagh and Rich, what factors drive truth decay and what are its consequences for democratic self-government.

LO-3: Students will be able to apply in concrete situations Uscinski and Parent's tests for evaluating the plausibility of conspiracy theories as well as Kilcrease's methods to identify falsehoods ("fake news", conspiracy theory, misinformation, disinformation) and fallacies (error in informal logic).

II. Assessment Overview

NOTE ON THE SCHEDULE AND DUE DATES

Quiz and Part A answers in Webcourses are normally due on **Mondays** (except when that Monday is a UCF holiday as on 9/1. In that case, the assignments are due on the following Tuesday.)

Part B posts in Yellowdig are always due on **Wednesdays**.

Before Course Perception of environmental conditions and politics is normally due on Friday 8/22 but accepted until 8/29 (this frees financial aid).

After Course Perception of protest movements is due on Wednesday 12/3

Why Using Two Electronic Platforms?

Webcourses for the weekly Quiz and for answering Part A reading comprehension questions. Webcourse is basically where you demonstrate you understood the week's readings. The quizzes and Part A questions are always focused on the assigned materials. This is not the place to give your opinion or discuss outside sources.

Yellowdig for Part B is where you evaluate the readings and make sense of it in conversation with other class participants. Here, you are invited to use outside sources when relevant. In Part B you:

(1) answer the instructor's evaluation question for that module.

(2) formulate your own original critical thinking question concerning the week's readings.

It is recommended that you do this before the last minute. This maximizes your chance of receiving answers and comments from your classmates. In Yellowdig, you can receive points for attracting comments from other class participants.

Yellowdig is basically where you reflect on the reading's meaning in dialogue with class participants after you have demonstrated understanding of the material in the preceding quiz and Part A. More detail about how to post and earn points in Yellowdig is available in Files under B) Guide for Posting in Part A and Part B.

You access our Yellowdig community from Webcourses. Click on the Yellowdig button found on the left column of the Webcourses home page. Before submitting a post, you must click on the Create button and select the relevant topic from a list of topics defined by the instructor.

Why a Delayed Deadline for Part B?

The Part B (Yellowdig) window for submission opens on Thursday and closes on Wednesday at 11:58 PM. This is the Wednesday following the Monday on which that week's quiz and Part A assignment are due.

For a given module, the Wednesday extension for Part B over the Monday deadline for quiz and Part A is meant to give you time to reflect critically in the issues. My experience as an instructor at UCF suggests that many students will take the quiz and answers Part A questions at the last minute on Monday evening. That leaves little time for critical thinking on the readings. The Wednesday deadline for Part B is meant to give time for critical thinking. **Note that extensions for Part B posts are not possible**. See course policies on **Make-up Exams and Assignments** for details.

IV. Assessment Overview

Assessment Overview

WHAT Description	WHEN Deadlines	WORTH Full Course Points	WHY Purpose
Before Course Perception of Conspiracy and Disinformation Issues	**Friday 8/22, 11:30pm** Late submission accepted until Fr. 1/29	**1**	**QUICK MONEY** To free up your financial aid and to prepare your After-Course Statement due at the end of the semester.
Quizzes In Webcourses	**Monday Evenings At the end of module** (Bi-weekly or weekly)	**48**	**UNDERSTANDING** To verify mastery of assigned materials with multiple choice questions.
Part A Questions In Webcourses	**Monday Evenings At the end of module**	**20**	**UNDERSTANDING** To identify sources of confusion and

	(Bi-weekly or weekly)		articulate points of interest.
Part B Questions in Yellowdig	**Wednesday Evenings (Bi-weekly or weekly)**	**20**	Evaluating materials and connecting with analytical concepts.
Final Exam	**Monday 12/1 at 10:30 AM until 12:50 PM**.	**10**	Comprehensive final examination on all materials covered during the semester.
After Course Perception of Conspiracy and Disinformation Issues	**Wednesday 12/3 at 11:30 PM** Upload a file in Webcourses	**1**	**SYNTHESIS** To foster reflection on what was learned and to communicate this to the instructor.
TOTAL		**100**	See the Grading Scale below

Grading Scale (%)	
94-100	A
90-93	A-
87-89	B+
84-86	B
80-83	B-
77-79	C+
70-76	C
60-69	D
0-59	F

V. Course Prerequisites

Course prerequisites include an open mind and a readiness to reflect on the subject matter. There are no prerequisites in the sense of having completed specific previous courses beyond English Composition.

VI. Course Credits

3 credits

VII. Course Schedule

NOTE: Updates may be introduced to the schedule below. Updates would be stated in the description of the new module (Part A in Webcourses).

Weeks 2-5:

Deadlines:
Quiz and Part A Post: Monday 9/22 at 11:30 pm in Webcourses.

Part B Posts: Wednesday 9/24 at 11:30 pm in Yellowdig.

WEEK 2-5 MATERIALS:

Read:

Excerpts from Ball et al. chapter 2 on democracy, pp. 35-50 only.
Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*, 2020. (Lib Reserve). Introduction,
Lecture notes on *Four Threats*, chapters 7-8-9)

Instructor's Lecture Notes on Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*

Uscinski and Parent, ch. 2, pp. 36-52. (in Files)

Senator Danforth et al., *Lost, Not Stolen*, Executive Summary and chapter on Georgia.

Weeks 6-7:

Deadlines:
Quiz and Part A Post: Monday 10/6 at 11:30 pm in Webcourses.

Part B Posts: Wednesday 10/8 at 11:30 pm in Yellowdig.

Read:

Stenner and Haidt, Authoritarianism Is not a Momentary Madness but an Eternal Dynamic within Liberal Democracies."Read only pp. 175-188 and pp. 209-217.

Kavanagh and Rich, *Truth Decay*, summary and chapters 1-2.

Week 8-9:

Quiz and Part A Post: Monday 10/20 at 11:30 pm in Webcourses.

Part B Posts: Wednesday 10/22 at 11:30 pm in Yellowdig.

Read:

Kavanagh and Rich, *Truth Decay*, chapter 4.
Testing conspiracy theories for plausibility or lack thereof.

Week 10-11:

Quiz and Part A Post: Monday 11/3 at 11:30 pm in Webcourses.

Part B Posts: Wednesday 11/5 at 11:30 pm in Yellowdig.

Read:

Kavanagh and Rich, *Truth Decay*, chapter 5.
Kilcrease, *Falsehood and Fallacy,* Introduction and chapters 1-3.

Week 12-13:

Quiz and Part A Post: Monday 11/17 at 11:30 pm in Webcourses.

Part B Posts: Wednesday 11/19 at 11:30 pm in Yellowdig.

Read:

Kilcrease, *Falsehood and Fallacy,* chapters 4-8.
Testing social media statements for fallacies or lack thereof.

Week 14-15 (Monday 11/24):

Assignment in identifying fallacies.

Deadlines: TBA

Week 15 (Wednesday 11/26), Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 16, Final Exam:

In person in regular classroom, on Monday 12/1, from 10:30 AM to 12:50 PM.

After Course Deadline: on Wednesday 12/3.

VIII.Policy Statements

Notifications in Case of Changes to Course Modality
Depending on the course of the pandemic during the semester, the university may make changes to the way classes are offered. If that happens, please look for announcements or messages in Webcourses@UCF or Knights email about changes specific to this course.

COVID-19 and Illness Notification
Students who believe they may have a COVID-19 diagnosis should contact UCF Student Health Services (407-823-2509) so proper contact tracing procedures can take place.

Students should not come to campus if they are ill, are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19, have tested positive for COVID, or if anyone living in their residence has tested positive or is sick with COVID-19 symptoms. CDC guidance for COVID-19 symptoms is located here: (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html)

Students should contact their instructor(s) as soon as possible if they miss class for any illness reason to discuss reasonable adjustments that might need to be made. When possible, students should contact their instructor(s) before missing class.

In Case of Faculty Illness
If the instructor falls ill during the semester, there may be changes to this course, including having a backup instructor take over the course. Please look for announcements or email in Webcourses@UCF or Knights email for any alterations to this course.

Course Accessibility and Disability COVID-19 Supplemental Statement
Accommodation may need to be added or adjusted should this course shift from an on-campus to a remote format. Students with disabilities should speak with their instructor and should contact sas@ucf.edu to discuss specific accommodation for this or other courses.

Make-up Exams and Assignments

Per university policy, you are allowed to submit make-up work (or an equivalent, alternate assignment) for university-sponsored events, religious observances, or legal obligations (such as jury duty). If this participation conflicts with your course assignments, I will offer a reasonable opportunity for you to complete missed assignments and/or exams. The make-up assignment and grading scale will be equivalent to the missed assignment and its grading scale. Please contact me ahead of time to notify me of upcoming needs.

Cannot make the deadline for other reasons than those listed above? Contact the instructor with an explanation **and** a request for a specific deadline extension. I cannot accept open-ended extension requests. Note also that my flexibility on deadlines diminishes with the approach of the end of the semester.

NOTE: I cannot give extensions in Part B. Yellowdig is a platform for exchange between participants. There is no point in joining a conversation that happened last week, after other participants have already moved on to another topic. If you have a major impediment hindering you from completing your tasks in Yellowdig (such as surgery, illness, accident, bereavement, etc.), you need to email me with an explanation and documentation. The best I can do for you then is to not count that Yellowdig week missing in the computation of your final course grade. Such exemptions will be limited in number to one.

Academic Integrity
Students should familiarize themselves with UCF's Rules of Conduct. According to Section 1, "Academic Misconduct," students are prohibited from engaging in:

- *Unauthorized assistance*: Using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information or study aids in any academic exercise unless specifically authorized by the instructor of record. The unauthorized possession of examination or course-related material also constitutes cheating.
- *Communication to another through written, visual, electronic, or oral means*: The presentation of material which has not been studied or learned, but rather was obtained through someone else's efforts and used as part of an examination, course assignment, or project.
- *Commercial Use of Academic Material*: Selling of course material to another person, student, and/or uploading course material to a third-party vendor without authorization or without the express written permission of the university and the instructor. Course materials include but are not limited to class notes, Instructor's PowerPoints, course syllabi, tests, quizzes, labs, instruction sheets, homework, study guides, handouts, etc.
- *Falsifying or misrepresenting* the student's own academic work.
- *Plagiarism*: Using or appropriating another's work without any indication of the source, thereby attempting to convey the impression that such work is the student's own.
- *Multiple Submissions*: Submitting the same academic work for credit more than once without the express written permission of the instructor.
- *Helping another violates* academic behavior standards.
- ***Marien's addition to UCF policy:*** the listing of works cited but not materially used in a post or essay also constitutes a breach of academic honesty. It misrepresents the depth of research done.

For more information about Academic Integrity, students may consult The Center for Academic Integrity.
For more information about plagiarism and misuse of sources, see "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices".
Responses to Academic Dishonesty, Plagiarism, or Cheating
Students should also familiarize themselves with the procedures for academic misconduct in UCF's student handbook, The Golden Rule. UCF faculty members have a responsibility for students' education and the value of a UCF degree and so seek to prevent unethical behavior and when necessary, respond to academic misconduct. Penalties can include a failing grade in an assignment or in the course, suspension, or expulsion from the university, and/or a "Z Designation" on a student's official transcript indicating academic dishonesty, where the final grade for this course will be preceded by the letter Z. For more information about the Z Designation, see http://goldenrule.sdes.ucf.edu/zgrade.

Turinitin.com:
In this course the instructor may utilize turnitin.com, an automated system which instructors can use to quickly and easily compare each student's assignment with billions of web sites, as well as an enormous database of student papers that grows with each submission. The instructor submits your texts to Turnitin at his discretion. Students found guilty of plagiarism will receive a failing grade for the entire course and may incur additional penalties.

Weekly postings must be original. To ensure originality, students cannot view classmates' posts before they have themselves posted in the Discussion Board. Students are also not able to edit their postings after having posted them in the Discussion Board. **It is strongly recommended that you compose your post in a word processing file, review it there for content and style and only then paste the final product in the Discussion Board.**

Quizzes are individual exercises with open access to materials but limited time to answer the questions.

Course Accessibility Statement
The University of Central Florida is committed to providing access and inclusion for all persons with disabilities. Students with disabilities who need disability-related access in this course should contact the professor as soon as possible. Students should also connect with Student Accessibility Services (Ferrell Commons 185, sas@ucf.edu, phone (407) 823-2371). Through Student Accessibility Services, a Course Accessibility Letter may be created and sent to professors, which informs faculty of potential access and accommodations that might be reasonable. Determining reasonable access and accommodation requires consideration of the course design, course learning objectives and the individual academic and course barriers experienced by the student.

Campus Safety Statement
Emergencies on campus are rare, but if one should arise in our class, everyone needs to work together. Students should be aware of the surroundings and familiar with some basic safety and security concepts.

- In case of an emergency, dial 911 for assistance.
- Every UCF classroom contains an emergency procedure guide posted on a wall near the door. Please make a note of the guide's physical location and consider reviewing the online version at http://emergency.ucf.edu/emergency_guide.html.
- Students should know the evacuation routes from each of their classrooms and have a plan for finding safety in case of an emergency.
- If there is a medical emergency during class, we may need to access a first aid kit or AED (Automated External Defibrillator). To learn where those items are located in this building, see http://www.ehs.ucf.edu/workplacesafety.html (click on link from menu on left).
- To stay informed about emergency situations, sign up to receive UCF text alerts by going to my.ucf.edu and logging in. Click on "Student Self Service" located on the left side of the screen in the tool bar, scroll down to the blue "Personal

Information" heading on your Student Center screen, click on "UCF Alert," fill out the information, including your e-mail address, cell phone number, and cell phone provider, click "Apply" to save the changes, and then click "OK."

- Students with special needs related to emergency situations should speak with their instructors outside of class.
- To learn about how to manage an active-shooter situation on campus or elsewhere, consider viewing this video. You CAN Survive an Active Shooter

Deployed Active-Duty Military Students
If you are a deployed active-duty military student and feel that you may need special accommodation due to that unique status, please contact your instructor to discuss your circumstances.

Copyright
This course may contain copyright protected materials such as audio or video clips, images, text materials, etc. These items are being used with regard to the Fair Use doctrine to enhance the learning environment. Please do not copy, duplicate, download or distribute these items. The use of these materials is strictly reserved for this online classroom environment and your use only. All copyright materials are credited to the copyright holder.

Third-Party Software and FERPA
During this course you might have the opportunity to use public online services and/or software applications sometimes called third-party software such as a blog or wiki. While some of these could be required assignments, you need not make any personally identifying information on a public site. Do not post or provide any private information about yourself or your classmates. Where appropriate you may use a pseudonym or nickname. Some written assignments posted publicly may require personal reflection/comments, but the assignments will not require you to disclose any personal identity-sensitive information. If you have any concerns about this, please contact your instructor.

Title IX

Title IX prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual misconduct, sexual violence, sexual harassment, and retaliation. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find resources available to support the victim, including confidential resources and information concerning reporting options at https://letsbeclear.ucf.edu and http://cares.sdes.ucf.edu/.

For more information on diversity and inclusion, Title IX, accessibility, or UCF's complaint processes contact:

- Title IX – OIE – http://oie.ucf.edu/ & askanadvocate@ucf.edu
- Disability Accommodation – Student Accessibility Services

- Diversity and Inclusion Training and Events
- UCF Compliance and Ethics Office & complianceandethics@ucf.edu
- Ombuds Office