POT 4320 - CONSPIRACY AND DEMOCRACY

Section: A060

College of Sciences

School of Politics, Security, and Intl Affairs

Course Information

Term: Summer 2026
Class Meeting Days: ASC
Class Meeting Location: Online
Modality: WW
Credit Hours: 3.00

Instructor Information

Steven Smallpage
Title: Associate Professor
Office Location: Online via Teams

Office Hours:
M 12:00pm - 1:30pm, by appointment
Email: steven.smallpage@ucf.edu

Office Hours

To schedule a meeting during the course, please use the following link:
https://calendly.com/st102997-ucf/30min

Course Description

POT 4320 COS-POL SCI 3(3,0)Conspiracy Theories and Democracy: Examination of conspiracy theories and their impact on democracy. Occasionally

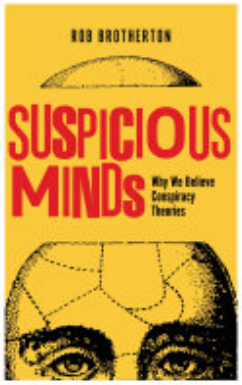
This course examines conspiracy theories as one of the recurring habits of modern democratic politics. Rather than treating them merely as curiosities or irrational excrescences, the course approaches them as politically and intellectually significant forms of explanation that arise under conditions of uncertainty, distrust, and conflict. Students will study what conspiracy theories are, why they appeal to individuals and groups, how they circulate in American political life, and what effects they have on citizenship, public trust, and democratic institutions. Drawing on political science and psychology, the course considers both the inner logic of conspiratorial thinking and its broader historical and political consequences.

Student Learning Outcomes

After successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Define conspiracy theories and distinguish them from related forms of political suspicion, scandal, and misinformation
2. Explain major psychological and cognitive mechanisms associated with conspiracy theory belief
3. Analyze how conspiracy theories emerge, spread, and persist within social and political life
4. Describe the historical development of conspiracy theories in American politics
5. Evaluate the relationship between conspiracy theories and democratic citizenship, institutions, public trust, etc.
6. Synthesize course concepts into argument

Required Course Materials and Resources



Suspicious Minds
ISBN: 9781472915641
Authors: Rob Brotherton
Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing
Publication Date: 2015-11-19

American Conspiracy Theories
ISBN: 9780199351824
Authors: Joseph E. Uscinski, Joseph M. Parent
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Publication Date: 2014-08-05

Course Assessment and Grading Procedure

This course is divided into six modules, one per week. Each module is designed to cover various fundamental aspects of understanding the causes, correlates, and consequences of conspiracy thinking in the United States. At the end of each module, there will be an exam based on the readings. To support your learning of the material throughout the module, you will engage with other students through Yellowdig. At the end of the end of the module, there will be a final paper assignment.

In a traditional semester (e.g., fall or spring) this course would span at least 15 weeks. Given that this course is only six weeks long, the learning will be condensed. You should be prepared to take on a heavier reading load

week-to-week when compared to normal 15 week semester courses.

Syllabus Quiz

After reading through this syllabus, you need to take a Syllabus Quiz to check your understanding of some important details of the course to ensure that you are being marked as an active participant of the class for financial aid purposes. The Syllabus Quiz is worth 1% of your course grade, and it is due by 11:59pm EST on Sunday, May 17th.

Yellowdig Discussions

You will be engaging in online discussions throughout the semester, which are an integral part of your course grade (30% in total). In this class, we will use Yellowdig for our discussions, since we will be async online. I encourage you to write better discussion questions that people actually want to talk about, and I hope it will produce better discussions week to week.

How is Yellowdig different than Discussions?

The Yellowdig platform is quite different from the Discussions tool in Canvas (Webcourses@UCF). You may be used to responding to a discussion prompt that your professor puts forward, and then writing responses and responding to another classmate or two's posts. Yellowdig works a bit differently. In Yellowdig, students (you!) decide what to contribute and how often, and you earn points automatically as you go. It's a bit more like social media and less like the old discussions platform. You "create posts" - i.e. ask questions, write out your critiques/comments on the material - and interact with each others' posts, earning points based on how much you post and how many people comment on your posts. Students who have used Yellowdig in other courses have remarked they like the freedom this allows, but it is still a departure from a familiar way of doing things. You are probably thinking, "how do I earn credit through Yellowdig?" Well, there will be 6 "earning periods" in Yellowdig, where

each earning period represents 5% of your total course grade (for a total of 30%). Each of the six periods is 1-week long, meaning that you are able to earn participation credit by posting and commenting during each period. We will get to the specifics in just a moment, but essentially, you earn a certain number of points for creating a post, for commenting on others' posts, and for having other people comment on your posts. As the moderator, I may also award extra points to students who demonstrate particularly high-quality participation in Yellowdig. If you ask really good questions that generate lots of discussion from others, or if you write quality comments on other people's posts, you can earn lots of points easily and get a really good discussion grade for the course with ease week-to-week.

How Do I Access the Yellowdig Community?

To get started, you need to join the course Yellowdig by clicking the "Yellowdig" tab from the course Canvas page. There are several ways to access our Yellowdig community:

1. Click on Yellowdig on the course menu.

2. Click on the Yellowdig assignment in Assignments in the course menu.

3. Bookmark the Yellowdig URL to go directly to our Yellowdig community page apart from this course.

4. Download the Yellowdig mobile app.

Is Participation in Yellowdig Required?

Yellowdig is a required part of the course - this is how participation will be graded in this course.

How Do I Use Yellowdig?

Watch Learn Yellowdig in Under 3 Minutes for a brief overview of how to use Yellowdig.

Does my Yellowdig Participation Contribute Toward my Grade?

Yes. As you create posts and make comments in Yellowdig, and as others react to or comment on your posts, you will automatically receive points in Yellowdig. The points you earn in Yellowdig are passed to the course gradebook in a single column. The points you acquire will account for 30% of your course grade.

Your goal is to earn 6,000 points by the end of the 6-week term to receive 100% for this component of your course grade. With five "earning periods" throughout the course, you should plan to earn 1,000 points in Yellowdig during each earning period to get full credit in this component of your grade. However, you are able to earn up to 1,350 points in a single week-long earning period to give you a cushion. Students are encouraged to continue participating in Yellowdig even after they have earned 6,000 points; however, extra credit will not be given for exceeding the 6,000 point goal.

You receive points during an earning period for interacting and engaging with your peers in any of the following ways:

Writing a post with fewer than 55 words
Writing a post with greater than 55 words
Writing a Comment to another student's post with fewer than 20 words
Writing a Comment to another student's post with greater than 20 words
Adding a video to a Post of Comment
Receiving a Comment from another student on your Post
Receiving a Reaction [emoji] on your Post or Comment
Receiving an Accolate from the Professor

How Much Should I Participate?

There are 5 "earning periods" for Yellowdig that span the entire course. The first period is a week and a half long - to allow you time to get oriented to the platform - but the final 4 periods are one week long (opening Wednesday morning and closing at 11:59 PM EST on Tuesdays). The goal

is to earn a total of 2,500 points in Yellowdig by the end of the 5 earning periods (so an average of 500 points per period). You can earn a maximum of 700 points per earning period. This means that your level of participation can vary throughout the course. However, remember that you cannot "make up" all the points as the course nears the end.

***Pro-Tip: Pick at least one day a week to mark on your calendar to "Check Yellowdig"!**

Students have remarked it can be easy to forget sometimes.

To learn more about how points work, see [Getting Points and Passing Your Yellowdig]Grade.

Here are tips to help maximize the points:

• Some of the points you earn are by receiving reactions and replies from others -- so your posts will get more points if they get a conversation started. There are many interactive features you can capitalize on, such as hashtags, mentions, emojis, videos, polls, and much more.

• Before you post, you have to select a Topic. Make sure that your contribution is relevant to that topic.

• Review others' posts before creating your own to avoid duplication of ideas.

• Continuing conversations is encouraged; feel free to return to an earlier conversation to add to it.

• Think about your audience when you participate. What do you think is engaging and important to them?

• Recognize your peers' good posts by reacting to them and commenting. They may very well return in kind.

How Often Should I Participate?

Simply put, you cannot earn points from people if you do not have posts up in the community for others to see. You are encouraged to post earlier than later, so there is ample time for others to view and comment.

Yellowdig resembles social media in the sense that you can pop into the community for short periods of time. I recommend you check our community at least twice per week.

You will receive notifications when others comment on your posts or you are mentioned.

How Can I Keep Up with the Conversations in Yellowdig?

By default, the most active posts and comments will be appear at the top of the page. If you prefer a chronological view, click Sort and then By Recent Posts. You can also select Filter to filter posts by member (student or teacher), topic, date, hashtag, and your own content, among others. Note that you do not have to read every single post and comment!

Can I Report a Post?

Our community will thrive when we treat each other with respect. We will be adopting Yellowdig's code of conduct. You may choose to flag a post if you believe it violates the code.

How Do I Keep Up with my Yellowdig Grade?

Yellowdig passes back your grade to the course gradebook as a percentage that represents your current pace toward earning the maximum points in Yellowdig.

Note that your Yellowdig grade can fluctuate up or down in the gradebook. This is because your Yellowdig grade is recalculated at the start of each weekly earning period and you will appear to "lose" points on the Yellowdig assignment. Don't worry! You did not lose Yellowdig points, the grade is simply calculated out of how many points you need for the current

earning period to be on pace. Earn your points for the period and your grade will go back up. It's recommended to check your Yellowdig grade on the last day or two of the earning period [Monday-Tuesday].

To track your grade and understand the updates along the way, check inside the "Show Details" section of Yellowdig rather than your course gradebook. The grade calculations at the top, the Point Log details within, and My Participation will show point earning events and your grade changes a number of different and helpful ways.

Module Examinations

Each week by Tuesday at 11:59 PM EST, you will complete a Module Examination. These exams contain multiple choice, true-or-false, or matching questions that will test your knowledge of that module (week)'s material. You will complete 6 exams throughout the term (at the end of each module).

Each "Module Exam" is worth 10% of your overall grade. Thus, the Module Exams, altogether, comprise 60% of your overall grade in the course.

You must have each Module Exam completed by Tuesday at 11:59pm following that week's material (for example, the Module 1 Exam will be due by Tuesday, May 19th at 11:59pm). You will have only 1 attempt to complete the exam, and you will have 1 hour to complete the exam once you begin. You may use your book and notes on the exams, but you may not use internet searches or any AI-powered tools on these exams.

Final Paper

During the final week of the course, you will turn in the final paper (6-8 pages) for the course: the Conspiracy Theory Paper. Drawing on course readings, this final paper assignment asks you to analyze whether the concept of conspiracy thinking in American politics. Here, you are being

asked to show that you can use the course readings to make a detailed, evidence-based argument about the nature of conspiracy thinking in the United States. Your papers should be 11 or 12-pt. font, double-spaced, normal 1" margins, Times New Roman font, and your title page and bibliography do not count toward the 6-8 pages. Details and specific instructions will be included in the "Assignment Prompts" tab of the Webcourses page. The Paper is worth 25% of the course grade and is due by 11:59 PM EST on Tuesday, June 23rd, 2026.

Assignment Submissions

All of your assignments will be submitted via Webcourses. Your papers should be written in 11 or 12pt. standard font (Times New Roman, Arial, Garamond), double-spaced, with page numbers, and including a bibliography/works cited page. When you add page numbers, please also add your name (e.g., Smallpage, 1). A cover page is suggested, but not required so long as you include your name, the title of the work, the course name, and the date at the top of your paper. The cover page and bibliography/works cited page do not count towards the page requirement. You may use whichever standard citation style you prefer (APA, MLA, APSA, Chicago), but make sure you use it consistently in your project (i.e., do not change up your citation style in the paper).

Grading Scale

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Letter Grade	Percentage
A	94-100%
A-	90-93%
B+	87-89%
B	84-86%
B-	80-83%
C+	77-79%
C	74-76%
C-	70-73%

Letter Grade	Percentage
D+	67-69%
D	64-66%
D-	61-63%
F	0-60%

Communication Expectations

As an online async course, I value that students are often working on the course materials at all hours of any given day. So, I will never fault a student for writing an email or sending me a Teams message whenever the question or concern crosses their mind. However, I would like to remind my students that I will typically respond to messages only during normal business hours (9am - 5pm EST). Given the number of potential messages I get on any given day, please expect a response within 24 hours. (If you have not received a response within 24 hours, please resend the message--I promise I will not be annoyed!)

The best way to get a message to me is through a Teams message. If you cannot access Teams, please send me an email. I would not suggest using Canvas to send me a message, as it is a very clunky system to navigate.

Policies for Course Grade

Missed/Late Assignments

Students are expected to submit their assignments and post on Yellowdig by the posted deadlines. Sometimes, however, life gets in our way. I try to be as reasonable as I can--sometimes life throws wrenches at us that prevent us from meeting the deadlines that were originally set. If you encounter a situation where you find yourself unable to turn an assignment in by the deadline, please email me as soon as possible so that we discuss an appropriate course of action. For those who communicate ahead of deadlines with legitimate extenuating circumstances, I may consider small extensions.

However, if you do not communicate ahead of time or do not have a

legitimate excuse as to why a deadline will be missed, your assignment is considered late and can only receive half credit. I will only accept late assignments for one week past the original deadline (i.e. if you miss the deadline on Tuesday at 11:59 one week, you must have the assignment submitted by Tuesday at 11:59 the next week). All assignments - including late assignments - must be turned in by the last day of class (June 23rd, 2026). The Module Exams and the Paper cannot be turned in late. <u>If you do not take a module exam or submit the final paper by its deadline, you will receive a 0 for that particular assignment.</u>

Attendance

This is an async online class, so attendance is largely through completing tasks and discussions.

Make-up Assignments for Authorized University Event or Co-curricular Activities

Students who represent the university an an authorized event or activity (for example, student athletes) and who are unable to meet a course deadline due to a conflict with that event must provide the instructor with documentation in advance to arrange a make-up. No penalty will be applied if the student gives advance notice and communicates with the instructor following UCF policy. In the case of an authorized university activity, it is your responsibility to show the instructor a signed copy of the Program Verification Form for which you will be absent, prior to the class in which the absence occurs or due date you need extended. For more information, see UCF Policy 4-401.

Make-up Assignments for Religious Observances

A student who desires to observe a religious holy day of his or her religious faith must notify their instructor as soon as practicable prior to the observance. Students who are absent because of religious observances will be permitted a reasonable amount of time to complete

any missed work. For more information, see UCF Regulation 5-020.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is prohibited. Use of GenAI tools via website, app, or any other access, is not permitted in this class. All components of assignments in this course must be independently and originally completed by the student. Representing work created by GenAI as your own work will be treated as plagiarism.

Disability Access & Accommodations

The University of Central Florida is committed to providing equal access to all students with disabilities (ADHD, learning disabilities, Autism, chronic medical conditions, physical disabilities, etc.). To receive consideration for reasonable disability-related course accommodations, disabled students must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and complete the steps required for SAS to review accommodation requests. More information can be found on the UCF Student Accessibility Services website under the Start Here tab or by contacting SAS directly (Ferrell Commons 185; sas@ucf.edu; Phone - 407-823-2371).

Approved accommodations are shared with course instructors via the SAS Course Accessibility Letter. Implementing certain accommodations may require discussion and specific considerations of the course design, course learning objectives, and the individual academic and course challenges experienced by the student. While students with disabilities or chronic health needs are also encouraged to discuss any course concerns with professors in addition to contacting SAS, professors are not required to facilitate disability-related adjustments to the course unless the professor has received a Course Accessibility Letter from SAS that outlines approved accommodations.

Academic Integrity

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

a. **Academic misconduct is defined as any submitted work or behavior that obstructs the instructor of record's ability to accurately assess the student's understanding or completion of the course materials or degree requirements (e.g., assignment, quiz, and/or exam). Examples of academic misconduct include but are not limited to: plagiarism, unauthorized assistance to complete an academic exercise; unauthorized communication with others during an examination, course assignment, or project; falsifying or misrepresenting academic work; providing misleading information to create a personal advantage to complete course/degree requirements; or multiple submission(s) of academic work without permission of the instructor of record.**

b. **Any student who knowingly helps another violate academic behavior standards is also in violation of the standards.**

c. **Commercial Use of Academic Material. Selling of course material to another person and/or uploading course material to a third-party vendor without authorization or without the express written permission of the University and the instructor of record. Course materials include but are not limited to class notes, the instructor of record's slide deck, tests, quizzes, labs, instruction sheets, homework, study guides, and handouts.**

d. **Soliciting assistance with academic coursework and/or degree requirements. The solicitation of assistance with an assignment, lab, quiz, test, paper, etc., without authorization of the instructor of record or designee is prohibited. This includes but is not limited to asking for answers to a quiz, trading answers, or offering to pay another to complete an assignment. It is considered Academic**

Misconduct to solicit assistance with academic coursework and/or degree requirements, even if the solicitation did not yield actual assistance (for example, if there was no response to the solicitation).

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 respond to academic misconduct when necessary. Penalties for violating rules, policies, and instructions within this course can range from a zero on the exercise to an "F" letter grade in the course. In addition, an Academic Misconduct report could be filed with the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity, which could lead to disciplinary warning, disciplinary probation, or deferred suspension or separation from the University through suspension, dismissal, or expulsion with the addition of a "Z" designation on one's transcript.

Being found in violation of academic conduct standards could result in a student having to disclose such behavior on a graduate school application, being removed from a leadership position within a student organization, the recipient of scholarships, participation in University activities such as study abroad, internships, etc.

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 Let's Be Clear and UCF Cares.

For more information on access and community engagement, Title IX,

accessibility, or UCF's complaint processes contact:

- **Title IX – ONAC – Office of Nondiscrimination & Accommodations Compliance & askanadvocate@ucf.edu**
- **Disability Accommodation – Student Accessibility Services – Student Accessibility Services & sas@ucf.edu**
- **Access and Community Engagement (including the Ginsberg Center for Inclusion and Community Engagement, Military and Veteran Student Success, and HSI Initiatives)**
- **UCF Compliance and Ethics Office – Compliance, Ethics, and Risk Office & complianceandethics@ucf.edu**
- **The Ombuds Office is a safe place to discuss concerns.**

Reporting an Incident or Issue

If you believe you have experienced abusive or discriminatory behavior by any faculty or staff member, contact the Office of Institutional Equity online or at 407-823-1336. You can also choose to report using the UCF Integrity Line and can report anonymously or as yourself at 1-855-877-6049 or using the online form. UCF cares about you and takes every report seriously. For more information see the Reporting an Incident or Issue Webpage.

Deployed Active-Duty Military Students

Students who are deployed active duty military and/or National Guard personnel and require accommodation should contact their instructors as soon as possible after the semester begins and/or after they receive notification of deployment to make related arrangements.

Campus Safety

At UCF Public Safety and Police, safety is the top priority. Emergencies on campus are rare, but if one should arise, it's important to be familiar with some basic safety and security concepts.

- **In an emergency, always dial 911.**

- Every UCF classroom has an **Emergency Procedure Guide** posted on a wall near the door, which will show you how to respond to a variety of situations. This guide can also be found online here.
- In the event of an active threat, remember **AVOID, DENY, DEFEND.** Choose the best course of action and act immediately. Watch the video here to learn more.
    - **AVOID.** Pay attention to your surroundings and have an exit plan. Get as much distance and as many barriers between you and the threat as quickly as possible.
    - **DENY.** When avoiding is difficult or impossible, deny the threat access to you and your space. Lockdown by creating barriers, turning the lights off and remaining quiet and out of sight. Make sure your cell phone is silenced, but do not turn it off.
    - **DEFEND.** When you are unable to put distance between yourself and the threat, be prepared to protect yourself. Commit to your actions, be aggressive and do not fight fairly. Do whatever it takes to survive.
- For emergencies on campus, UCF will utilize the UCF Alert system. All UCF students, faculty and staff are automatically enrolled to receive these email and text alerts, however, it's a good idea to frequently ensure your contact information is up to date.

Financial Aid Accountability

All instructors/faculty are required to document students' academic activity at the beginning of each course. In order to document that you began this course, please complete this activity by the end of the first week of classes or as soon as possible after adding the course. Failure to do so may result in a delay in the disbursement of your financial aid.

Class Schedule

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Assigned Reading(s)
1	What is a conspiracy theory?	Brotherton: Introduction, Chapters 1-3
2	Who believes conspiracy theories, and why?	Brotherton: Chapters 4-7
3	How does conspiracist thinking work?	Brotherton: Chapters 8-Epilogue
4	Conspiracy Theories as an American political phenomenon	Uscinski and Parent: Chapters 1 & 2

Week	Topic	Assigned Reading(s)
5	Evidence, facts, and who are the Conspiracy Theorists?	Uscinski and Parent: Chapters 3 & 4
6	Conspiracy theories, political conflict, and democracy	Uscinski and Parent: Chapters 5-7