



Course Syllabus: POLS-4933-101 Political Conspiracies

Prothro-Yeager College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Fall 2024, Tuesday and Thursday (11:00-12:20 AM)

Contact Information

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Course Description

In the Western public perception, the Middle East and other regions are widely perceived as a place where politics is nothing but conspiratorial. However, more recently, scholars and journalists have acknowledged that conspiracy theories have taken centerstage in Western politics. In an increasingly polarized world where conspiracy theories are taking centerstage, even in advanced democracies, the challenges of political conversations among ordinary citizens and the political elite has become increasingly challenging. While conspiratorial understanding of politics is nothing new, moving from the margin to the center of political debates is viewed as a new phenomenon. But is this truly a new phenomenon, or have conspiracy theories always been interwoven with modern politics?

In this course, we are going to develop a framework to make sense of the trend of conspiracism in the political debates. The course is interregional including North America, Europe, and the Middle East due to the transnational nature of many conspiracy theories. In this course, we will keep an open mind as we learn about a type of political interaction labeled as conspiratorial.

What kind of explanation is labeled as a conspiracy theory (**definitions**)? Is a conspiracy theory by definition wrong (**labeling**)? What is wrong with conspiracy theories, if anything at all (**epistemology** of conspiracy theories)? Are all groups and individuals equally susceptible to conspiracy theories or some particular groups or individuals are more susceptible (**psychology** of conspiracism)? What is the **history** of the conspiratorial understanding of politics? What role does conspiracy theory play in **democratic** and **non-democratic** systems? Do they **matter**? What **causes** them? Is there any **cure** for conspiracism?

In addition, we are going to ask: What are some of the main conspiracies in the Middle East, North America, and Europe? Who are the main agents/actors in these conspiracies? What do ordinary people do in engaging conspiracy theories and are they only consumers of elite-generated conspiracy theories? Moreover, the course examines the effects of conspiracies on political institutions, political participation,

and relations among states. By going beyond the pejorative use of the term ‘conspiracy theory,’ the course explores the power relations in knowledge production and labeling as a political tool.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Comprehend the complex political phenomenon of conspiracy theory.
2. Recognize the longer historical trajectory of contemporary political issues.
3. Ask critical questions and articulate political arguments.
4. Utilize self-reflection and critical thought as tools for interpretation.
5. Engage with the perspectives of others to add depth to your own understanding.

Textbook & Instructional Materials

There is no assigned text you need to purchase for this course. All written material and video or audio material will be available to you through D2L on online on the Internet. If you have difficulty accessing the material, it is your responsibility to notify me in advance of the class to which it is assigned.

Study Hours and Tutoring Assistance

N/A

Student Handbook

Refer to: [Student Handbook](#)

Academic Misconduct Policy & Procedures

Academic Dishonesty: Cheating, collusion, and plagiarism (the act of using source material of other persons, either published or unpublished, without following the accepted techniques of crediting, or the submission for credit of work, not the individual to whom credit is given). Additional guidelines on procedures in these matters may be found in the Office of Student Conduct.

A Note on Chat GPT

***AI use is strictly prohibited.**

This course assumes that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves, working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any substantive portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and using artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT. The online portal for uploading assignments detects and flags sections of writing that has been generated by AI.

Academic dishonesty on exams, quizzes and assignments will result in a **Zero** on the quiz, assignment, or exam and the student or students in question may receive an F in the course and/or be turned over to the university for sanction. ***More than one incident of academic dishonesty during the course will automatically result in a course grade of F.**

The MSU Honor Creed applies in this course, and students are expected to abide by it. Student work in this course expected to be original and produced only for this course. Students may not use the textbook, chapter summaries, notes, PowerPoints, lectures, or any online material during quizzes and exams.

Students may not collaborate with each other during quizzes or exams or to create substantially similar responses to writing assignments.

[Office of Student Conduct](#)

Moffett Library

Moffett Library provides resources and services to support student’s studies and assignments, including books, peer-reviewed journals, databases, and multimedia materials accessible both on campus and remotely. The library offers media equipment checkout, reservable study rooms, and research assistance from librarians to help students effectively find, evaluate, and use information. Get started on this [Moffett Library webpage](#) to explore these resources and learn how to best utilize the library.

Grading

Completing ALL the readings and regular attendance (will be required of all students. Active participation in discussions is critical for students to succeed in this course.

Table 1: Points allocated to each assignment

Assignments	Points
Weekly in-class quizzes (10 * 3)	30
Survey Questionnaire 1 : Engage with MSU Students	5
Survey Questionnaire 2: Engage with Wichita Falls residents	5
A Research Paper in three drafts - First Draft: 5 points - Second Draft: 10 points - Final Draft: 25 points	40
- Class Participation (physical attendance, participation in conversations) (15 points) - Presentations (5 points)	20
Total Points	100

Table 2: Total points for final grade.

Grade	Points
A	90
B	80 to 89
C	70 to 79
D	60 to 69
F	Less than 60

Quizzes

Weekly Quizzes (30 points): Weekly in-class quizzes (short answer to examine your understanding of the weekly readings). I will give you around 13 in-class quizzes and at the end of the semester counts the 10 of your highest grades.

Projects Required

- MSU Students Survey (5 points):** conducting a question survey of MSU students (five students). I provide you with the survey questions and the prints.
 - I discuss the details of how conduct the survey in class.

2. **Wichita Falls Survey (5 points):** conducting a question survey of MSU students (five residents). I provide you with the survey questions and the prints.
 - I discuss the details of how conduct the survey in class.
3. **Final Project (40 points)**
 - **First Draft:** In 700 words or more answering provided questions regarding your final project. (5 points)
 - **Second Draft:** 1200 words or more you show development of your project and the arguments you are going to make. It is required in this draft to show how you are using the class readings in your projects. (10 points)
 - **Final Draft:** (2000 words or more) A polished version of your project. (25 points)

Attendance, Participation, Presentation (20 points)

Students must attend the lectures. In addition, engagement during class is as important as attendance. Students are expected to participate in group discussions and class debates and demonstrate that they are fully present. Students observed using mobile phones, reading non-class materials, or otherwise not fully engaged in class, will not receive engagement credit for that class period. This syllabus serves as the notice of the above policies. Over the course of the semester, 2 absences will be allowed for all students. More than 2 absences will significantly lower your participation grade. If a student misses 8 class sessions without an excuse, they will fail the class; therefore, it is recommended that they withdraw.

Exams

There is no exam for this course.

Mid-Term Exam

There is no mid-term exam

Final Exam

There is no final exam.

Extra Credit

There is no extra credit for this course

Late Work

Late work is accepted! You always have the opportunity to finish your assignments. Late works are graded from 90 rather than 100.

Make-up Work/Tests

There is no make-up work tests or exam.

Important Dates

Last day for term: December 6th 2024 [Academic Calendar](#).

Deadline to file for graduation: September 23 2024. [Academic Calendar](#).

Last Day to drop with a grade of "W:" November 25 2024. Check the date on the [Academic Calendar](#).

Refer to: [Drops, Withdrawals & Void](#)

Desire-to-Learn (D2L)

Extensive use of the MSU D2L program is a part of this course. Each student is expected to be familiar with this program as it provides a primary source of communication regarding assignments, examination materials, and general course information. You can log into [D2L](#) through the MSU Homepage. If you experience difficulties, please contact the technicians listed for the program or contact your instructor.

Instructor Class Policies

Students are expected to be on time. They must avoid wearing earphones during class, talking to one another during the lecture, and using mobile phones for texting or purposes other than occasional course-related use. None of these behaviors will be tolerated.

Change of Schedule

A student dropping a course (but not withdrawing from the University) within the first 12 class days of a regular semester or the first four class days of a summer semester is eligible for a 100% refund of applicable tuition and fees. Dates are published in the Schedule of Classes each semester.

Refund and Repayment Policy

A student who withdraws or is administratively withdrawn from Midwestern State University (MSU) may be eligible to receive a refund for all or a portion of the tuition, fees, and room/board charges that were paid to MSU for the semester. However, if the student received financial aid (federal/state/institutional grants, loans, and/or scholarships), all or a portion of the refund may be returned to the financial aid programs. As described below, two formulas (federal and state) exist in determining the amount of the refund. (Examples of each refund calculation will be made available upon request).

Services for Students with Disabilities

In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Midwestern State University endeavors to make reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunity for qualified persons with disabilities to participate in all educational, social, and recreational programs and activities. After notification of acceptance, students requiring accommodations should make an application for such assistance through Disability Support Services, located in the Clark Student Center, Room 168, (940) 397-4140. Current documentation of a disability will be required in order to provide appropriate services, and each request will be individually reviewed. For more details, please go to [Disability Support Services](#).

College Policies

Campus Carry Rules/Policies

Refer to: [Campus Carry Rules and Policies](#)

Smoking/Tobacco Policy

College policy strictly prohibits the use of tobacco products in any building owned or operated by WATC. Adult students may smoke only in the outside designated smoking areas at each location.

Alcohol and Drug Policy

To comply with the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1989 and subsequent amendments, students and employees of Midwestern State are informed that strictly enforced policies are in place which prohibit the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of any illicit drugs, including alcohol, on university property or as part of any university-sponsored activity. Students and employees are also subject to all applicable legal sanctions under local, state, and federal law for any offenses involving illicit drugs on University property or at University-sponsored activities.

Campus Carry

Effective August 1, 2016, the Campus Carry law (Senate Bill 11) allows those licensed individuals to carry a concealed handgun in buildings on public university campuses, except in locations the University establishes as prohibited. The new Constitutional Carry law does not change this process. Concealed carry still requires a License-to-carry permit, and openly carrying handguns is not allowed on college campuses. For more information, visit [Campus Carry](#).

Active Shooter

The safety and security of our campus is the responsibility of everyone in our community. Each of us has an obligation to be prepared to appropriately respond to threats to our campus, such as an active aggressor. Please review the information provided by the MSU Police Department regarding the options and strategies we can all use to stay safe during difficult situations. For more information, visit [MSUReady – Active Shooter](#). Students are encouraged to watch the video entitled “*Run. Hide. Fight.*” which may be electronically accessed via the University police department’s webpage: [“Run. Hide. Fight.”](#)

Grade Appeal Process

Update as needed. Students who wish to appeal a grade should consult the Midwestern State University [MSU Catalog](#)

***Notice:** Changes in the course syllabus, procedure, assignments, and schedule may be made at the discretion of the instructor.

Course Schedule:

Module 1: Syllabus and Introduction

08/26 to 8/30

This week we will look at Richard Hofstadter’s seminal article exploring the history of the “paranoid style” in American politics. What are the defining characteristics of conspiracism, and is it always the same throughout time and across different societies? Does Hofstadter’s characterization of conspiracy thinking still apply today? It is important to remember that he is the first to theorize and systematically discuss the phenomenon of conspiracy theory; it is therefore he who has set the terms of debate since the 1960s.

Tuesday: Syllabus and Introduction

Thursday: What is Paranoid Style? Are conspiracy theorists paranoid?

- Hofstadter – “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964) (13 pages)
- Walker – “The United States of Paranoia” (from *United States of Paranoia*) (16 pages)

Module 2: Some Contemporary Conspiracy Theories

09/02 to 09/06

Note: This week, I am attending a conference, so I will post the lecture on D2L. We will not have in-person class for the week. Students are required to watch the lecture. I will check to see who has watched it as a way to take attendance for this week.

Before diving into the definitions, epistemology, and psychology of conspiracy theories, this week we will read some contemporary accounts labeled as conspiratorial and discuss whether these recent accounts

differ in any way from more classical conspiracy theories. Muirhead and Rosenblum refer to these as the 'New Conspiracism.'

Guiding Questions: *What lenses do we need to analyze the contemporary conspiracy theories? How should we analyze these new conspiracies? How are they distinct from classic versions? Should we do anything about them?*

Tuesday

- Muirhead & Rosenblum, "Conspiracy without the Theory" (23 pages)
- Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal" (13 pages)

Thursday (Read *at least* one of the readings below - but feel free to read both)

- Fenster - ("Failure of Imagination" - 9/11) (from *Conspiracy Theories* -2008) (46 pages)
- Kay – "Birthers" (from *Among the Truthers* - 2011) (23 pages)
- <https://911truth.org/>

Module 3: Definitions (how do we know what we know?)

09/07 to 09/13

We will begin by wrestling with the problem of defining terms like conspiracy, conspiracy theory and conspiracy politics, before going on to look at the question of whether conspiracy theories are inherently wrong.

Guiding questions: *What is conspiracy theory? What are the definitions of conspiracy theory? Where do conspiracy theories come from? Why does it matter? How do we know what we know (epistemology)? Is there a political reality? What is true, and how facts are established?*

Tuesday

- Denith – Chapters 3 (from *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*) (16 pages)
- Knight - Conspiracy Culture (Definitions) (3 pages)
- Denith - Some problems with General Definition (from *The philosophy of conspiracy theories* (14 pages) (**optional**))

Thursday

- Coady, "Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy" (from *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*) (12 pages)
- Popper – "Conspiracy Theory of Society" (3 pages)
- Robertson & Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theories and Religion" (**optional**)

Module 4: Politics of Conspiracy Theory

09/16 to 09/20

Guiding questions: *What political ends do conspiracy theories achieve? Who benefits? What is 'conspiracy politics?'*

Tuesday

- Radnitz - A summary of Revealing Schemes: the Politics of Conspiracy Theory in Russia) (2021) (2 pages)
- Uscinski – Chapter 6 “Conspiracy Theories are for Losers” from the book *American Conspiracy Theories*

Thursday

- Orr & Husting, “Media Marginalization of Racial Minorities”
- Atkinson and Dewith - The Politics of Disruption (from *Uscinski - Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*) (10 pages)
- BBC Future, “What we can learn from conspiracy theories”

Module 5: Psychology of Conspiracy Theory (Who Believes in CTs)

09/23 to 09/27

One intuitive explanation for the popularity of conspiracy theories is that they fulfil a psychological function for their believers. Most researchers have started from the assumption that conspiracy theories are illogical and riddled with contradictions, and so we need to explain why some people are prepared to believe such weird things. Recently psychologists have begun to investigate the particular psychological traits that they think are central to conspiracy belief. One of the trickiest questions is whether conspiracy theorists are wired in a different way, or whether there is no real difference between conspiracy theorists and the general population.

Guiding questions: *What cognitive tendencies predispose all of us or some of us to conspiracy theories? Are there some aspects of social life that predispose us?*

Tuesday

- Brotherton, “Why We Believe in Conspiracy Theories” from *Suspicious Minds* 2015, ch. 4) (18 pages)
- YouTube: *Imerse*, “[A Neuroscientist Explains What Conspiracy Theories do to Your Brain](#)”

Thursday

- Wood & Douglas, “Conspiracy Theory Psychology” (4 pages)
- Prooijen – “When do People Believe Conspiracy Theories ” from the book *The Psychology Of Conspiracy Theories* (16 pages)

Module 6: (causes and Cures)

09/30 to 10/04

What causes the development and expansion of conspiracy theories? Under what social and political conditions is it more probable to see the rise of conspiracy theories? Are economic conditions relevant? Are there ways to control the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories? What should governments (or institutions) do in the face of the extensive spread of conspiracy theories?

Tuesday

- Fenster - Against the Cure (from *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East* (12 pages)
- Radnitz - Traumas and Tyranny? The Long-Term and Proximate Roots of Conspiracism (from the book *Revealing Schemes*) (16 pages)

Thursday

- Sunstein – “Conspiracy theories” (22 pages)

Module 7: (do they matter? consequential?)

10/7 to 10/11

Tuesday

- Douglas - Understanding Conspiracy Theories (5 pages)
- Jolley and Douglas - “The social consequences of conspiracism Exposure to conspiracy theories” (10 pages)

Thursday

- Radnitz – “The Consequences of Conspiracism” (*Revealing Schemes* – 2021) (22 pages)

Module 8: Conspiracies in Europe

10/14 to 10/18

Tuesday

- (Nordic) “Migration and the Dangerous Outsiders” (from *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries*) (24 pages)
- Bilewicz – “CONSPIRACY STEREOTYPES” (from *The Psychology of Conspiracy*) (3 pages)
- Kofta et al – “What Breeds Conspiracy Antisemitism?” (4 pages)

Thursday

- Peter Kreko – “Conspiracy theory as Collective Motivated Cognition” (from *The Psychology of Conspiracy*) (10 pages)
- Jenne - Central European University (from *Enemies Within* 2022 (28 pages)

Module 9: Russian Conspiracies

10/21 to 10/25

Tuesday

- Yablokov - Chapter 4 of *Fortress Russia* (20 pages)

Thursday

- Yablokov - Chapter 5 from *Fortress Russia* Chapter 5 (22 pages)

Module 10: Middle East Conspiracies

10/28 to 11/01

Tuesday

- Gray – State as Conspiracist (from Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World) (20 pages)
- Kurzman - The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran (7 pages)

Thursday

- Pipe - Intro (Hidden Hands) (10 pages)
- Gürpınar - Deep State (from Conspiracy Theories in Turkey (2019) (11 pages)
- Crews - Sellers of the Homeland (from Enemies Within 2022) (18 pages) - **optional**

Module 11: Media and CTs

11/04 to 11/08

Tuesday

- [Readings to be decided](#)

Thursday

- [Readings to be decided](#)

Module 12: (Conspiracy Theories and Foreign Policy)

11/11 to 11/15

Tuesday

- Tim Aistrophe, “Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy,” *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy*, 2016

Thursday

- Tim Aistrophe, “Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy,” *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy*, 2016

Module 13: The New World Order (Conspiracy Cases)

11/18 to 11/22

Among the most prominent conspiracy theories of recent times is the umbrella theory about a secret cabal controlling the whole of modern history. This story is often told in terms the rise of the Antichrist and an apocalyptic plot to establish a “New World Order.” This conspiracy narrative has its origins in the religious right and the particular creed of premillennial dispensationalism, but it has since become fused into other forms of popular conspiracism, not least antisemitism. One central question we need to

consider, then, is the relationship between conspiracy theory and religion. Are these theories in fact just the continuation of the long tradition of antisemitic conspiracism?

Tuesday

- Barkun – “New World Order (1)” (from *A Culture of Conspiracy* (26 pages)

Thursday

- Fenster – “Conspiracy theories secrecy and power in American culture” (35 pages)
- Olmsted – “Real Enemies” (from the book *Real Enemies*) (32 pages) (**optional**)

Writing Week (Thanksgiving)

11/25 to 11/27

- Meeting only on **Tuesday**.

Module 14: Democracy and Conspiracy Theories

12/02 to 12/06

Guiding Questions: *How do conspiracy theories highlight the challenges of democracy?*

Tuesday

- Scott Radnitz, “Why Democracy Fuels Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (2022): 147–61
- [Paper Presentations](#)

Thursday

- [Paper Presentations](#)

Table 3: Course Schedule

Module	Activities/Assignments/Exams	Due Date
Module 1 08/26 to 8/30	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 2 09/02 to 09/06	Class Readings on D2L	Quiz taken on d2l due 09/05
Module 3 09/07 to 09/13	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 4 09/16 to 09/20	Class Readings on D2L	1- In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday 2- First draft of your final project due by Sep 22nd at 11:00 P.M.
Module 5 09/23 to 09/27	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 6 09/30 to 10/04	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 7 10/7 to 10/11	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 8 10/14 to 10/18	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 9 10/21 to 10/25	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 10 10/28 to 11/01	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 11 11/04 to 11/08	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 12 11/11 to 11/15	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 13 11/18 to 11/22	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
Module 14 11/25 to 11/29	Focus on writing your final paper The class meets only on Tuesday	No quiz
Module 15 12/02 to 12/06	Class Readings on D2L	In-class quiz on Tuesday or Thursday
End of the Semester 12/09 to 12/11	N/A	Final Project Due by December 11 at 12:00 p.m.