

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



*Political Science 334*

*Professor Mark Alan Smith*

**My background**

**Assistance for my former student**

**Covid-19 adjustments**

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**section AA is now in SAV 132**

**section AC is now in SMI 115**

**Lectures: recorded through Pantopo, accessible through Canvas. Releasing any part of the recording outside of our class is a violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).**

**Sections: not recorded.**

## **Explaining the title of the course**

**truth (Oxford English Dictionary): “something that conforms with fact or reality”**

**the truth: “The fact or facts; the actual state of the case; the matter, situation, or circumstance as it really is”**

**We’ll be considering many kinds of truth (scientific, historical, political, religious, moral, etc.).**

**Some questions about what you think is true**

**An implication: some of your beliefs (and mine) are wrong.**

**A second implication: when you disagree with someone, you could be right, but it's also possible that they're right.**

**Epistemology: “the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope.**

**Epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.”**

**Disciplinary orientation of the course**

## **Elaborating further on the course's title:**

- **“Seeking truth” implies that the quest is difficult. If it was easy, we wouldn't need this class.**
- **misinformation: false information offered either intentionally or unintentionally**

**Misinformation overlaps with fake news, alternative facts, conspiracy theories, and science denial.**

## Some examples:

HOME

ELECTION

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement

TOPICS: Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misinformation\\_related\\_to\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misinformation_related_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic)

**“Dihydrogen monoxide is a colorless and odorless chemical compound that contributes to thousands of deaths every year. Inhaling it, even in small quantities, can be life-threatening. Dihydrogen monoxide is a major component of acid rain, and it leads to the corrosion and oxidation of many metals.**

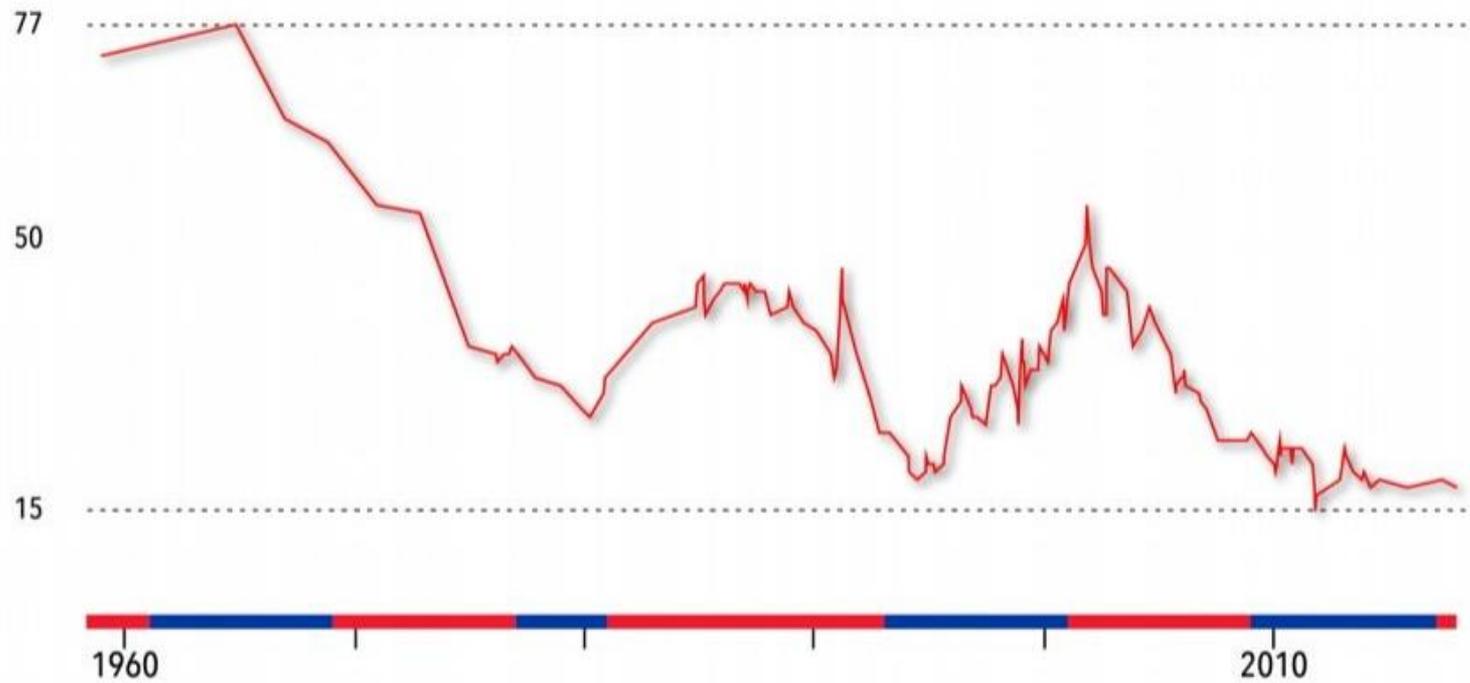
**A proposed voter initiative would require counties in Washington to measure and report the levels of dihydrogen monoxide flowing through the pipes of every home. The initiative would empower the Washington State Department of Ecology to issue regulations to protect people from the dangers of dihydrogen monoxide.”**

- **cynicism**

**“How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington, DC to do what is right?”**

**just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never**

## Trust in Government %



Share of Americans who said they trust the government in Washington to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time."

Source: Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017*, May 3, 2017, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/>.

**“Now I’m going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?” (Gallup, August 2020)**

**The next slide combines those saying “a great deal” and “quite a lot”**

<b>small business</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>the military</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>the medical system</b>	<b>51%</b>
<b>the police</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>the church or organized religion</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>the public schools</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>the Supreme Court</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>the Presidency</b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>banks</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>large technology companies</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>organized labor</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>newspapers</b>	<b>24%</b>
<b>big business</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>television news</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>news on the internet</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Congress</b>	<b>13%</b>

**How can someone figure out what's true if they don't trust political institutions, organized religion, technology companies, or the media?**

**Increasingly, people rely on their social and political groups. Whether they *should* do so is a different matter.**

- **political polarization: “the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats” (Pew Research Center)**

**Pew Research Center data on political polarization on policy issues, 1994-2017**

<https://www.people-press.org/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>

**But polarization is often visceral rather than simply a matter of differences over public policy. For example, how many people would not object if their son or daughter married someone from the other party?**

**72% in 1958**

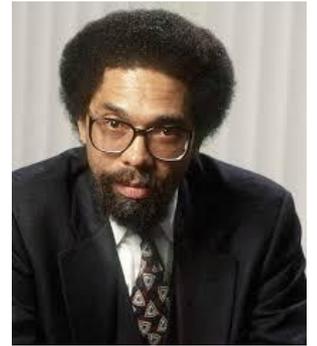
**45% in 2016**

**affective polarization: how people feel about the other side**

**negative polarization: people often dislike the other side more than they like their own side**

**Whether as cause (an instigator) or effect (a venue for polarization arising elsewhere), universities are on the front lines of political polarization.**

**Robert George/Cornel West statement**



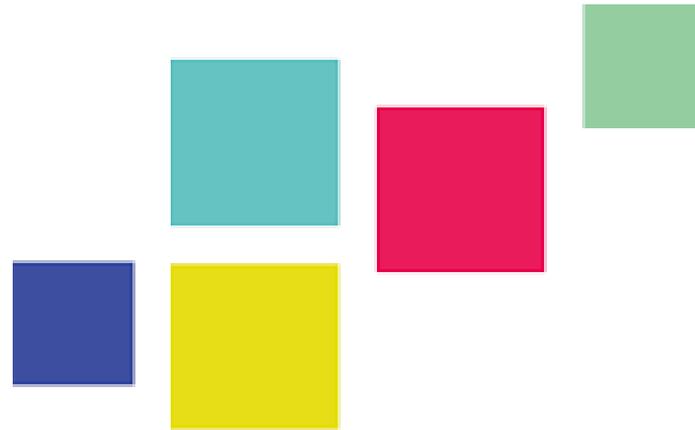
<https://jmp.princeton.edu/statement>

**This class follows the principle that the search for truth requires all kinds of diversity, including viewpoint diversity.**

**Proclaiming the need for many points of view is, in fact, a point of view.**

**The syllabus includes many views but not everything, which would be neither possible nor desirable.**

**The course relies on viewpoint diversity as an instrumental value rather than an absolute value.**



# HETERODOX ACADEMY

<https://heterodoxacademy.org/>

**Heterodox Academy's mission:**

**“promoting open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in institutions of higher learning”**

**The HxA Way: <https://heterodoxacademy.org/library/the-hxa-way/>**

**A caveat: Good principles can be abused by bad actors.**

**This class will encourage student participation in lectures and especially in sections, on what are sometimes difficult subjects.**

**representation, self-expression,  
and learning to defend your  
beliefs**

**vs.**

**the search for truth**

**Critical thinking? Think for yourself? Yes, but be careful. We will examine the ways in which thinking goes awry.**

**The plan of the quarter—syllabus and assignments.**

**Workload: readings, videos, and podcasts**

**Grading:**

**Weekly response memos: 18%**

**Midterm exam: 22%**

**Paper: 30%**

**Final exam: 30%**

**Most of the time, I will bring you other people's ideas, concepts, and research findings. Anything original or distinctive to me will be labeled as such.**

**Readings for next class**

## **Class policies:**

- **coming late, leaving early**
- **laptop use**
- **norms around respect, dignity, discussion, engagement, diversity, open-mindedness**

**The course aims to cultivate certain habits of mind:**

**Intellectual humility**

- **Willingness to recognize your limitations**
- **Willingness to say “I don’t know”**
- **Willingness to say, “I was wrong”**

## **Intellectual honesty**

- **Fairly assess ideas, arguments, and data, especially when they undercut your existing beliefs on that matter**
- **Follow the evidence wherever it leads**