American citizens often need to rely on science in order to make informed decisions. But what are we to do when the media tell us that scientists disagree? Will this vaccine in fact increase the probability that my baby will be autistic? Should I really support public policy based on predictions of global warming? This course on Scientific Controversies begins with two classic controversies from the history of science, the so-called Galileo Affair and early debates about Darwinian Evolution. We will see how genuine differences of scientific opinion in the early stages of research continued to be exploited for political, religious and ideological purposes long after a scientific consensus had been achieved. The second half of the course will deal with current controversies where the balance of evidence is less clear cut -- or at least less easy to understand. We will treat all viewpoints critically, but with respect.

Students will have the opportunity to make oral presentations, as well as write short essays and take exams over assigned readings.