Policy Brief

No-driving Day (Again): Governmental Decisions on Mobility from a Groupthink Approach, In the Context of COVID-19

Everardo Chiapa Aguillón, Ph.D.[29]

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic led the state government of Hidalgo, Mexico, to take drastic measures on vehicular mobility, trying to inhibit people's movements and, thus, avoid increased contagion. However, since implementing the measure known as *Hoy no circula* (No-Driving Day) in the state, there has been an upturn in mobility. The relative failure of the measure is explained from theoretical approaches to groupthink and blame avoidance, framing the government's decisions that led to suboptimal outcomes. A descriptive statistical analysis, using Google's Community Mobility Reports database, shows a comparison of the reduction in mobility in Hidalgo with other states.

Context of an Emergent Policy

Once the federal government in Mexico announced the *Jornada de Sana Distancia* (Healthy Distance Campaign) in response to

[29] Guest Researcher, Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology, everardo.chiapa@gmail.com

COVID-19, a set of prevention measures were put in place. This included basic prevention measures, rescheduling of mass events, suspension of non-essential activities and care for the elderly (Ramirez, 2020).

In an unprecedented event in the State of Hidalgo, using an agreement published in the Official Gazette of the State of Hidalgo on 2 May 2020 (and effective as of 4 May), a temporary measure was imposed to reduce vehicular mobility to mitigate the spread and propagation of the SARS-CoV2 virus among the population. The strategy adopted by the Hidalgo state government, commonly known as *Hoy No Circula* (in allusion to the famous program in the country's capital, which has been in operation since 1989), restricted the circulation of vehicles up to four days per week in the following order:

Table 1: Distribution of Days in the Mobility Restriction

Last digit of the license plate	No driving days	No driving Sundays
Even-numbered	Monday	First Sunday of the month
Odd-numbered	Tuesday	Second Sunday of the month
Even-numbered	Wednesday	Third Sunday of the month
Odd-numbered	Thursday	Fourth Sunday of the month
Even-numbered	Friday	Fifth Sunday of the month
Odd-numbered	Saturday	

Source: POEH, 2 May 2020.

The drastic provision resonated with the population, triggering widespread complaints

(El Independiente, 1 September 2020). While the state government subsequently announced that *Hoy No Circula* had reduced mobility in Hidalgo, even when the executive's decisions were not based on sufficient reasons or evidence to ensure it. In addition, surveillance was not strict, but by checkpoints set up on the borders of Pachuca (as the central municipality of the Pachuca Metropolitan Zone). These checkpoints could control access to the municipality, but not mobility within it; in other words, the emergency measure worked to restrict mobility between municipalities. Within them, the citizens' decision could not be attributed to obedience to the agreement.

Theoretical Framework

As an atypical case, *Hoy No Circula* in Hidalgo represents the possibility of analyzing the implications of emerging programs in the face of contingencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The main point here is that not even the most drastic measures are capable of producing convincing results, especially when government decisions have been taken based on suppressing criticism among the group that makes them –and among the population–. This suppression operates, therefore, to prevent dissenting points of view and having a directive leader (Zimbardo 2007), whose figure, in this case, is the governor of the state. Similarly, the decision-makers around *Hoy No Circula* tended to anticipate expected outcomes hastily, even when such outcomes were neither proven nor probable, leaving them in a position of necessarily seeking justification and evading responsibility. Closer to an attempt to make automatic and quick decisions, the state government opted for alternatives that were not the product of complex processes of choice.[30]

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[30] In allusion of two systems of mind referred by Daniel Kahneman (2012).

In addition to the risk of fallacy incurred by the government in assuring that its provision had affected the population, after the restriction on vehicle circulation came into force, there was an upturn in mobility. The official argument regarding the effects of *Hoy No Circula* not only lacks logic (due to false attribution) but is false in itself. This situation leads to framing the state government's decisions in the groupthink theory that explains the phenomenon under analysis. In this sense, there is a set of interrelated assumptions about the government cabinet, as a policy-making group, that has to be taken into account: a) its members act under an illusory logic of invulnerability (Janis, 1973; Barr & Mintz, 2018); b) have a stereotypical view of rival or dissenting opinions by discouraging or ignoring them (Janis, 1973; Coles et al., 2020), and c) are subjected to pressure and self-censorship as "members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions" (Janis, 1973, p. 21-22).

Almost four decades ago, Irving Janis (1973) explained groupthink as a phenomenon found when group members regard group loyalty as the highest form of morality, avoiding raising controversial issues, questioning weak arguments, or trying to prevent softened thoughts. In this sense, as Hidalgo is a state with political group roots –where government practices have historically been based on unconditional support for the governor's decisions– support for the governor's decisions in the face of the pandemic would be guaranteed. In addition, the party tradition within the state intervenes as an element of cohesion among the governor's support group. Any show of resistance by cabinet members (as a consolidated support group for the governor), especially when the situation before COVID-19 called for prompt action, would mean, in

the sense that Zimbardo (2007) points out, "challenging the groupthink mentality and being able to document all allegations of wrongdoing" (p. 456).

The discussion of *Hoy No Circula* was far from the public's knowledge. There is no evidence to suggest that it was backed by an expert or empowered bodies in the field, but rather that it went from an unproven idea to the execution of a poorly reasoned mandate. In this sense, and consistent with Janis (1987), the illusion of invulnerability to the dangers arising from risky action was present. Not even the heads of the Executive Secretariat of Public Policy or the Secretariat of Mobility and Transport would rationally be willing to compromise their position as part of the group by contradicting the government's decision. Cabinet members would show unanimity to avoid disparities and provoke a 'black sheep' effect (Dubé and Thiers, 2017).

Importantly, groupthink may not be pervasive in every decision-making process in a state government. Still, it occurs when the group structure and a given situation conform to specific antecedent conditions: a) group cohesion, b) structural faults in the organization, and c) a provocative situational context (Janis and Mann, 1977, in Lee, 2019; Carolan, 2017). In case of decisions around the vehicle restriction measures in Hidalgo, group cohesion is explained by the alignment and homogeneity of thinking among the government cabinet; structural faults are defined by the set of organizational pressures to censor or disapprove disagreement, and the COVID-19 crisis is the provocative situational context, which calls for government interventions.

In addition to groupthink, this analysis incorporates a blame avoidance approach, understood as the evasion of liability for failed outcomes. In this case, the government of Hidalgo would be liable for the adverse consequences of a restrictive measure that has been proven to be invalid. According to Christopher Hood (2011), this blame avoidance shapes the behavior of officials, the architecture of organizations, and their operational routines and policies. The outcome of taking a decision such as *Hoy No Circula* could represent a political (or blame) risk for the state government; therefore, blame avoidance behaviors, in this case, could have involved anticipating possible outcomes.

The perception of a possible scenario with a worse situation than the one when the government decides to intervene, restricting people's mobility, may not necessarily lead to a pressure to avoid blame or evade responsibility, but rather to gain credit for the situation. When costs are high and benefits are perceived to be low, the politician can do little more than merely adopt and display a stance of opposition to the adverse outcome, for which they receive credit for the decision. Whether decisions are made in one direction or the other, either as credit claimers or blame avoiders, depends on the situations that may generate blame avoidance behavior and the perception of how high or low are the perceived net benefits and costs (Weaver, 1986).

Taking the above to the case of *Hoy No Circula*, the dynamics of groupthink explain, if anything, the decisional environment in which the state government acted on the mobility restriction (in a moment A), but the anticipation of positive outcomes following the implementation of *Hoy No Circula* is rather a product of credit claiming behaviour (in a moment B).

Methodology

Trends in reducing mobility in Hidalgo were described in a statistical analysis based on data from Google Community Mobility Reports. For this purpose, the state of San Luis Potosí and Mexico City were used as reference cases. The reasons for choosing the latter for comparison are, in one hand, that there were no traffic restriction measures implemented in San Luis Potosí, a state in the centre of the country (as is Hidalgo). In the other hand, Mexico City was chosen because *Hoy No Circula* program has been in place for more than three decades, regardless of the presence of the pandemic.

The data collected covers 11 fortnights, from 15 February to 31 July 2020, for mobility levels in Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí, and Mexico City. According to Google's page for mobility data, "the reference value for each day is the average value for the five weeks in January" (between 3 January and 6 February), as there is no baseline as such. From the different datasets showing the variation in the number of visits to certain locations, the categories of "Retail & Recreation" and "Transit Stations" were chosen. The reason for selecting these categories is that attendance at places included in the "Retail & Recreation" category reflects the recurrence of non-essential activities and thus resistance to government measures. The presence of people at public transport stations captures the need for transit for people in general, particularly for people who had to travel for work or other essential reasons.

Results

The analysis indicates that following the announcement of *Hoy No Circula*, levels of reduced mobility decreased (i.e., an increase in mobility is assumed). This can be seen in

Figure 1, which shows the increase in people's mobility for leisure purposes since 4 May. This was reinforced by the federal government on 10 November 2020, when it was said that among 12 other states (out of 32 in total in Mexico), Hidalgo had had "a notable increase in mobility" (Milenio, 20 November 2020). Contagions did not stop and deaths increased, while people did not restrain the need to move freely.

The measure's failure cannot be attributed solely to the unsubstantiated decision of the state government but to behaviors that would naturally be observed as a consequence of the collective mood of disgust with the health measures. Nor can one allege civil disobedience to the governor's orders, since the measure does not seem to have generated sufficient echo in the actions of the citizens. Perhaps it had no influence, either in a positive or negative sense. What can simply be observed is that, contrary to expectations, the mobility of inhabitants was greater than before the measure came into force.
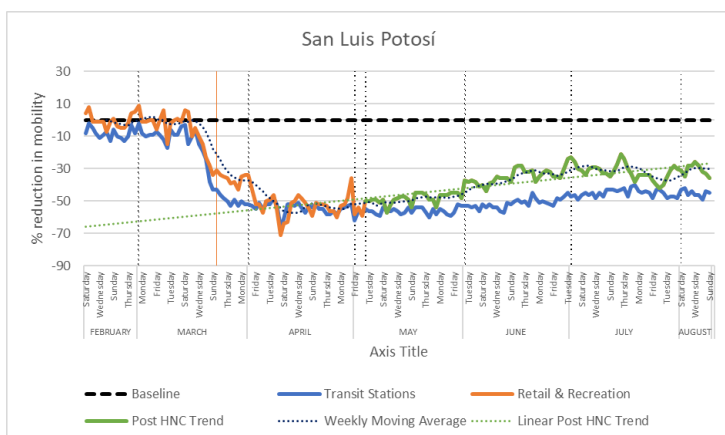
Figure 1: Trend in Levels of Reduced Mobility for Recreational Purposes in Hidalgo Following the Announcement of *Hoy No Circula*, 2020.

Source: Own elaboration, based on Google Community Mobility Reports.

Note: The "Linear Post HNC" line indicates the smoothing of the leisure mobility decline series by weekly moving averages. The horizontal dashed line represents Google's reference value. The series "Post HNC Trend" starts on 4 May, the day when the announcement of the mobility restriction in Hidalgo was made. A thick orange line indicates the start of the Healthy Distance Campaign (23 of March). These notes apply to the following two figures.

The same situation is observed in both San Luis Potosí and Mexico City (Figures 2 and 3). This generalised generalized trend shows a similar behaviour, regardless of the measures taken in the states. *Hoy No Circula* in Hidalgo does not seem to have had any significant effect in reducing mobility. Mexico City, despite the historical experience in implementing such restrictions (but not having to modify the traffic flow provisions), had a more significant decrease in mobility, even though the trend was also increasing from May onwards.

Figure 2: Trend in Levels of Recreational Mobility Reduction in San Luis Potosí Following the Announcement of *Hoy No Circula* in Hidalgo, 2020.

Source: Own elaboration, based on Google Community Mobility Reports.

Figure 3: Trend in Levels of Reduced Mobility for Recreational Purposes in Mexico City Following the Announcement of *Hoy No Circula* in Hidalgo, 2020
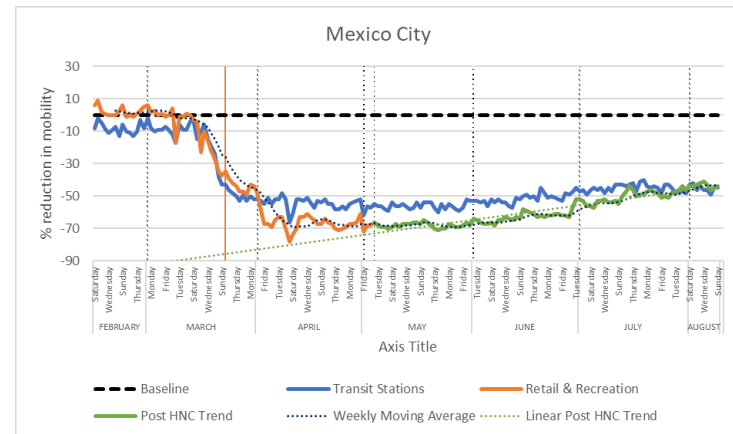
Source: Own elaboration, based on Google Community Mobility Reports.

The calculation for the trend slope of Hidalgo falls between the levels shown by Mexico City and San Luis Potosí. Ordinary least squares were used for estimating the linear trend in the three cases, running a consecutive daily time series with the levels of mobility reduction. The daily mobility reduction series in Hidalgo showed a slope of 0.2538, while for Mexico City and San Luis Potosi it was 0.29122 and 0.25005, respectively. Therefore, it cannot be assured that *Hoy No Circula* in Hidalgo has had different effects than in other places where there was no contingent measure restricting vehicle traffic.

It is worth noting that it all stems from the fulfilment of conditions that triggered groupthink practices to make decisions that attempted to deal with the health crisis, but without achieving the expected (but not foreseen) results. In other words, the decision to restrict mobility would have been perceived as having a high benefit and a relatively low cost. In this sense, it could be assumed that there would be no way of not incurring the costs of implementing *Hoy No Circula* if the

credit or gain were expected to overcompensate them.

Conclusions

This paper analyzes the case of the implementation of *Hoy No Circula* as an atypical measure in the context of COVID-19 restricting vehicle circulation in the state of Hidalgo. The state government's arguments, beyond the optimism shown, do not hold up after the comparison of data showing that Hidalgo did not have a marked difference in the reduction of its mobility after the announcement of *Hoy No Circula*. On the contrary, a generalised increase in mobility was observed as an adverse result.
Based on a groupthink approach, the inefficient decision adopted by the state government was framed, which, far from being based on evidence that it would be a good measure, is assumed to be the result of a dynamic of loyalty and group cohesion among the cabinet. In other words, decisions based on loyalty to the leader of an organization, in this case, the state executive branch, can result in consensus with adverse consequences and inefficient results. The COVID-19 pandemic ultimately triggered the making of these decisions, framed by contextual conditions that caused the presence of vicious group behaviors.
Likewise, the decisions made by the state government of Hidalgo were framed in terms of blame avoidance behaviour. This approach is based on the fact that the government decided to implement *Hoy No Circula* as an unusual but transcendental measure assuming it would attract the recognition of public opinion. However, the search for recognition would be transformed into strategies of blame avoidance in the face of the effects of a decision that turned out to be counterproductive. The program failed since

not only was there no greater decrease in mobility than in other states that did not adopt a measure similar to *Hoy No Circula*, but it increased since its entry into force.

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