GROUPTHINK AND BLAME AVOIDANCE: THE RISKS OF HASTY MEASURES TO REDUCE MOBILITY IN THE FACE OF COVID-19[1]

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ABSTRACT: The ability to travel in and out of the state of Hidalgo, Mexico, posed a dilemma for its inhabitants in the face of the health crisis caused by COVID-19. The pandemic led the state government to take drastic actions on vehicular mobility, trying to inhibit people's movements and, thus, avoid an increase in contagions. However, since the implementation of the measure known as *Hoy no circula* (No-Driving Day) in the state, an upturn in the mobility of people happened. A descriptive statistical analysis, using Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports database, we compared the reduction in mobility in Hidalgo with other states. The relative failure of *Hoy no circula* is explained from a groupthink approach that seeks to understand the decisions of the state executive, the reciprocal acceptance of its cabinet and support of its bureaucratic base. Our approach, supported by blame avoidance theory, makes it possible to study the adverse consequences of the government's decision as the result of groupthink which, in order to avoid the confrontation of ideas and discussion or contradiction in organizations, leads to suboptimal outcomes.

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1 The results of this research were published in a summarized version entitled "No-driving day (again): Governmental decisions on mobility from a groupthink approach, in the context of COVID-19", in the Special Issue on Latin America (June, 2022), of the Occasional Papers Series, of the Section on International and Comparative Administration (SICA) of the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA).

Keywords: *mobility, groupthink, blame avoidance, COVID-19, hoy no circula*

INTRODUCTION

Once the federal government in Mexico announced *Jornada de Sana Distancia* (Healthy Distance Campaign) as a prevention campaign in response to COVID-19, a set of actions were put in place that included basic prevention measures, rescheduling of mass events, suspension of non-essential activities and care for the elderly (Ramírez, 2020). These actions were announced to last from March 23 to April 19, however they were not canceled well after April. Such measures were aimed to reduce the population's mobility throughout the country. The announcement was made by the federal government, and all states replicated the decision.

The state of Hidalgo was no exception regarding preventive measures due to the fact that Pachuca, as its metropolitan area is close to Mexico City, which is the main source of contagion in the country. In an unprecedented event in Hidalgo, as of May 4, 2020, an agreement published in Hidalgo's Official Bulletin, a temporary measure was imposed to reduce vehicular mobility in order to mitigate the propagation of SARS-CoV2 virus among the population of Hidalgo. This measure corresponds to Phase 3 of the health emergency (n.a., 21 April 2020).[2] The strategy adopted by Hidalgo's state government, known as *Hoy no circula* (a replica to the famous program in the country's capital, in operation since 1989), restricted the circulation of vehicles up to four days per week, in the following order:

TABLE 1 MOBILITY RESTRICTION DISTRIBUTION OF DAYS

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

Source: POEH, May 2, 2020.

2 "This stage occurs when the virus affects thousands of people in several localities. Because of its urgency, more drastic health protocols such as generalized quarantine are put in place" (IMSS, n.d.). Phase 3 is considered the most dangerous "Epidemiological Stage", after Phase 1 "Importation of cases" and Phase 2 "Community transmission". Phase 3 can also be considered the stage when infections are in the thousands and there is community spread.

The restriction on vehicle mobility would mean that some cars with odd-numbered license plates would not be able to circulate for up to two consecutive days (e.g. Saturday and the fourth Sunday of the month). The measure was taken with confusion among inhabitants of the main cities of the state, since it was not known how the authority would proceed to enforce such a mandate, nor how it would achieve coordination with the municipal governments for such purposes. That is, it was not known concretely how municipal governments would monitor and sanction the provisions of the Agreement published in Hidalgo's Official Bulletin on May 2, 2020 (effective May 4).[3]

The drastic provision resonated with the population, trigged widespread complaints (n.a., September 1, 2020), while the state government announced that *Hoy no circula* had reduced mobility in Hidalgo. However, the executive's decisions and evidence did not ensure that outcome. There was no guarantee that by the sole announcement of the Healthy Distance campaign promoted by the federal government and citizen conviction, mobility was reduced to levels that could be attributed to the implementation of *Hoy no circula.* Additionally, surveillance was not strict, only checkpoints on the city limits of Pachuca (the central municipality of the Metropolitan Zone). These checkpoints controlled access to the municipality, but not mobility within it. In other words, the emergency measure operated to restrict mobility between municipalities, while within the citizens' decision could not be attributed to obedience to the government's actions.

Using open data from Google Community Mobility Reports, a brief descriptive statistical analysis of the trends regarding the reduction of mobility in Hidalgo was made. The state of San Luis Potosí and Mexico City were used as reference cases. The results show how the levels of mobility reduction observed were not compatible with the expected results of the state government's decisions. This analysis is based on literature that focus on the dynamics of groupthink and blame avoidance.

DELIMITATION

This research is relevant due of the dilemmas caused by drastic decisions and the difficulty to limit freedom to transit. Although the conditions of social coexistence, after the appearance of COVID-19, modified habits in the world, based on transit in public spaces. It is possible to find generalized resistance and adaptation processes from the emerging measures imposed by governments. In this sense, the imposed restrictive measure on cars in Hidalgo brought

3 Hidalgo's Official Bulletin (POEH) is where official governmental matters are published, e.g. approved laws, regulations, reforms, among others. As was the decree establishing *Hoy no circula,* as a mandatory official measure.

collective discontent and implications for mobility between the municipalities in the metropolitan area of this federal entity. Vehicle containment meant closing "borders" between municipalities, with an impact on the necessity to move between the metropolitan municipalities in the city of Pachuca.[4]

Hoy no circula in Hidalgo represents the possibility –as an atypical case– to analyze the implications of emerging programs in contingencies such as COVID-19 pandemic. The main point here is that not even drastic actions are capable of producing convincing results, especially when government decisions seek to suppress criticism among the group that makes them –and among the population–, prevent dissent points of view and having a directive leader (Zimbardo, 2007). In this case, the state governor. Similarly, the decision-makers around *Hoy no circula* anticipated quick outcomes, even when they were neither proven nor probable. This led leaders to be in a position of needed justification-seeking, evade responsibility, in other words, blame avoidance.

In addition to the risk of misjudgment incurred by the governor in assuring that his provision did have an impact on the population, it was observed that after the restriction on mobility was in place, there was an increase in people's mobility within the state. In other words, the official argument of the effects of *Hoy no circula* not only lacks logic (due to false attribution) but is deceitful. Before presenting evidence it is necessary to frame the state government's decisions using the groupthink theory to explain the phenomenon under analysis.

The groupthink approach is not specific to government dynamics; in this paper we use it to critique the government cabinet's performance in Hidalgo. The set of assumptions about the cabinet, as a policy-making group, is that it acts under an illusory logic of invulnerability, with a conventional view of rival opinions, under pressure and self-censorship (Janis, in Mintz & Sofrin, 2017; Carolan, 2017; Barr & Mintz, 2018), and with the support of "self-appointed mental guards [...] who protect the group from adverse information that might destroy their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions" (Janis, 1973, pp. 21-22).

In a close attempt to make automatic and quick decisions, as if it were a system 1 in Kahneman's terms (2012),[5] the state government opted for alternatives (such as mobility's drastic restriction) that were not the product

4 The Metropolitan Zone of Pachuca is made up of seven municipalities: Pachuca, Mineral de la Reforma, Mineral del Monte, San Agustín Tlaxiaca, Zempoala, Zapotlán de Juárez and Epazoyucan.

5 Daniel Kahneman (2012) adopted terms originally proposed by Keith Stanovich and Richard West, referring to two systems of mind: System 1, which operates quickly and automatically, with little or no effort; and System 2, focuses attention on effortful mental activities, including complex computations. "System 2 operations are often associated with the subjective experience of acting, choosing and concentrating" (Kahneman, 2012, p. 23).

of complex processes of choice.[6] The consequences of the government's decision in Hidalgo were not only citizen dissatisfaction (n.a., September 1, 2020) but also the impossibility of declaring positive results of the decision if after the imposition of this emergency measure the population had actually experienced a considerable reduction in mobility (but this did not happen). The significance of the relative failure of the decision necessarily leads us to think that government practices are not optimal when they start from an unconditional loyalty dynamic to the organization's leadership. If a decision were to achieve favorable results under such a dynamic, these could be due to stochastic events, but not to the product of efficient public policy processes. The groupthink approach, as the basis for the conditions that vitiated the decisions around *Hoy no circula*, is complemented by other conditioning factors that explain anticipatory and blame avoidance behaviors.

GROUPTHINK AND BLAME AVOIDANCE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Almost four decades ago, Irving Janis (1973) explained groupthink as "a quick and easy way to refer to the thinking mode that group members engage when they are dominated by the concurrence-seeking tendency, when their strivings for unanimity override their motivation to evaluate the consequences of their actions" (Janis, 1973, pp. 20-21). A groupthink phenomenon is found when members regard group loyalty as the highest form of morality, avoid raising controversial issues, question weak arguments or try to prevent softened thoughts (Janis, 1973). For Gomes *et al.* (2019), groupthink can be seen as a "phenomenon of social psychology that occurs when everyone in a group starts thinking alike" (p. 1).

Hidalgo is a state with political group backgrounds –government practices have historically given unconditional support for the governor's decisions– thus support for the executive's decisions during the pandemic were guaranteed. In addition, the party tradition within the state intervenes as an element of cohesion among the governor's 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, as Zimbardo (2007) points out, challenging the groupthink mentality and willing to document all allegations of wrongdoing (p. 456). However, the cost

6 While Kahneman's (2012) system 1 may refer rather to quasi-instinctive actions, the reference here attempts to argue that human decisions (individual and group), can be located on a spectrum ranging from the unreasoned to the more complex and intellectually elaborated.

of challenging the groupthink mentality is too high for its members. Instead everyone was supposed to show its support for the governor.

In the case of Hidalgo's *Hoy no circula* a different outcome instead of a decline in vehicle circulation was observed. Even though the result of the cabinet's decision (decision group) was a failure, it cannot be assumed to be entirely a product of groupthink or that the decision was weak (Janis, 1987). In such a case, the very argument that constructs the link between the state government's decision and the observed reality would constitute a fallacy. The fundamental point in Hidalgo's vehicle restriction is that the scenario after the constraint's entry was no better than before (between the announcement of *Sana Distancia* campaign and the beginning of *Hoy no circula*).

The discussion of this measure were, far from the public's knowledge, an intimate cabinet affair. There is no evidence to suggest that it was backed by expert or empowered bodies in the field, but rather that it went from an individual 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 the risky actions were present. No one, as part of the governor's cabinet –not even the secretaries with the most influence on the issue, such as the state Secretariat of Public Policy or the Secretariat of Mobility and Transport– would rationally be willing to compromise their position by contravening the government's decision. In other words, cabinet members showed unanimity in order to avoid disparities and provoke a 'black sheep' effect (Dubé & Thiers, 2017). Cabinet dynamics are thus a group game where policy-makers, in the sense of Dubé and Thiers, are exposed to different types of pressures and tend to develop informal norms to maintain friendly intra-group relations.

Importantly, groupthink is not pervasive in every decision-making process in a state government. It occurs when the group's structure and a given situation conform to specific prior conditions, according to Janis and Mann (1977, in Lee, 2019): a) group cohesion, b) structural faults in the organization, and c) a provocative situational context (p. 3). In addition to these conditions, groupthink is related "to the deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgment resulting from peer pressure, [occurring] in highly cohesive groups where the need for unanimity exceeds the motivation to analyze new courses of action realistically" (Dubé & Thiers, 2017, p. 32). Regarding the decisions of vehicle restriction in Hidalgo, group cohesion is understood by the alignment and homogeneity of thinking among the government's cabinet; structural faults are explained by the set of organizational pressures to censor or disapprove disagreement, and the COVID-19 crisis is clearly a provocative situational context, which calls for the government's intervention.

With the three previous aspects, the pandemic context can be analyzed as a trigger for crisis management by governments, since the need to address the problems by the pandemic required different interventions. In this sense, it should be understood that crisis management is "the process of strategic planning that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from a negative event" (Fear-Banks, in Yim & Park, 2021) and that the organization's vulnerabilities to a crisis "become encoded into an organization's culture, processes, and infrastructure over a long time" (Yim & Park, 2021, p. 2). However, the absence of proper management, fosters a bias within the organizational culture that can lead to groupthink (Cha *et al.,* 2020).

In a logic of collective rationalization, any sign of discrepancy with group assumptions tends to be overlooked (Cleary *et al.,* 2019), so groupthink overrides critical thinking (Coles *et al.,* 2020). Thus, the governor's decision, assumed to be the final one of an entire governing body, pushes the organization towards complacency, as group members conceive explanations to make their decisions appear rational and correct (Gandossy & Sonnenfeld, in Yim & Park, 2021, p. 3). However, it is likely that the occurrence of groupthink is a consequence of practices and behaviors framed by a corporate elitism culture, understood as a dysfunctional orientation of large (including governmental) corporations when there is a collectively magnified concern for organizational superiority and additional privileges at the expense of others (Reimann & Wiener, in Yim & Park, 2021). The decision to implement a measure as *Hoy no circula* is the result of an imposed governmental decision, rather than a collective decisional exercise incorporating expert or specialist opinions.

Although it is not possible to speak of a major damage by the implementation of a failed measure to restrict mobility, neither can a positive effect be attributed to it. However, the fact of not starting from a solid base in the decision-making process represents a greater risk of failure. As the decision-making process can or should be based on a rigorous rational actor model (Allison, 1971), which underestimates organizational dynamics by relying on pretentious assumptions, especially when the experience during the pandemic did not allow for a sophisticated decision-making process. However, the result of Hidalgo's decision-making was the extreme opposite since it was founded on improvisation, an entrenched political culture and corporate elitism.

In addition to groupthink, the analysis of the present case incorporates blame avoidance, understood as the evasion of liability for failed outcomes. In this case, it means that the government is liable for the adverse outcomes of a restrictive measure proved to be worthless. This blame avoidance, according to Christopher Hood (2011), shapes the behavior of officials, the architecture of organizations and their operational routines and policies. The outcome of

a decision such as *Hoy no circula* represents a political risk (blame risk)[7] for the state government. Therefore, blame avoidance behaviors, in this case, could have involved anticipating possible outcomes. In this sense, two components that Hood (2011) uses to explain blame avoidance behaviors should be considered: 1. Perceived and Avoidable Harm (PAH), and 2. Perceived Responsibility (PR).

PAH refers to "something [that] is seen as being worse than it could have been if matters had been handled differently" (Hood, 2011, p. 6). Considered for the case under analysis, that COVID-19 infections would have increased and that the state government would not have tried to reverse the situation by preventing excessive people's transit. RP refers to "the harm was avoidable because it was caused by acts of omission or commission by some identifiable individual or organization or possibly some abstract institution" (Hood, 2011, p. 6). For example, an exogenous situation such as the generation of COVID-19 virus.

The perception of a possible scenario with a worse situation than the one when the government intervened to restrict people's mobility, may not necessarily be due to a pressure to avoid blame or evade responsibility, but rather to gain credit for the situation. In this respect, the combination of the costs and benefits of a political decision must be considered. Kent Weaver (1986) establishes three dimensions in which the motivations behind the attitudes of policy-makers can be identified: 1) one in which the maximization of social benefits is sought; 2) one in which policymakers will focus (from a credit claiming stance) on the political impacts by the balance of gains and losses on groups of relevance to them and, 3) one in which, as blame avoiders, policymakers seek to discount potential gains relative to losses over which they must minimize blame. In an ideal scenario, policy analysts might argue that policymakers should always approach the first dimension, where the primary motivation for decision-makers is a social benefit. However, various political interests always come into play, and it is these interests that move decisions towards the other two dimensions. The point at which motivations that pursue collective welfare and the satisfaction of those in positions of power within a government converge is what marks the overlap between politics and public policy (but that is a matter for other studies).

Whether decisions are made in one direction or the other, either as credit claimers or blame avoiders, depends on the situations that generate blame avoidance behavior. Weaver (1986) argues that the perceived net benefits and costs of a given situation can lead to four specific scenarios, depending on

7 For Hood (2011), it is more appropriate to use the term blame risk, as political risk can refer more to the risks to which businesses or investors are exposed by government decisions that are contrary to them.

whether those are high or low (Table 2). It is important to note that while Weaver (1986) refers to policymakers as politicians involved in legislative processes, the present analysis refers specifically to governors and members of the executive branch (in the Mexican context) who make decisions on matters of relevance, for example the management of COVID-19 at the local level.

TABLE 2. COST-BENEFIT DISTRIBUTIONS AND POLICYMAKERS' MOTIVATIONS

		Perceived net benefits to constituency	
		High	**Low**
Perceived net costs to constituency	High	(1) Blame Avoiding	(2) Credit-Claiming
	Low	(3) Credit-Claiming	(4) Good Policy

Source: Weaver, 1986, p. 379
Note: Weaver (1986) argues that the constituency (in an electoral context) is much less likely to notice widely diffused costs or benefits than those that are relatively concentrated in a smaller group of the electorate.

Table 2 depicts the combinations of perceived costs and benefits of a given situation that can lead to blame avoidance behavior. It is important to note that the higher the perceived cost and benefit, the more clearly the behavior of policymakers may be biased towards blame avoidance, because the higher the likelihood of an adverse outcome, the lower the possibility of securing a benefit and, therefore, the rational choice for the government would be to minimize the blame (cell 1). In contrast, when costs and benefits are low, the decision-maker can act unconstrained and not necessarily politically motivated (cell 4). When costs are high and benefits perceived to be low (cell 2), the politician can do little more than adopt and display a stance of opposition to the adverse outcome, for which he or she receives credit. Finally, when benefits are perceived to be high and concentrated among the public/direct constituency, and costs relatively low, the policymaker claims credit for making the decision (cell 3).

Taking the above representation to the case of *Hoy no circula* in Hidalgo, and the theoretical approaches from groupthink, it is possible to establish that, for the state government to decide to restrict mobility, some conditions have to be in place. First, based on the specific background conditions described by Janis and Mann (1977, in Lee, 2019), the government decided on the mobility restriction measure as a product of groupthink dynamics in a government with group cohesion (due to the historical political tradition in the state and party

affiliation), structural failures and under a challenging situational context due to COVID-19. However, the dynamics of groupthink explain, the decisional environment in which the state authorities acted. The anticipation of positive outcomes following the implementation of *Hoy no circula* is rather a product of credit-claiming behavior. The problem represented by the anticipation of unlikely results of a decision was the confrontation of arguments in which, on the one hand, the governor claimed that the measure achieved a decrease in vehicle traffic (Montoya, 2020), while, on the other, the data showed, in fact, a contrary result: an increase in vehicle traffic. The dynamics of groupthink establish the toxic atmosphere under which a flawed and biased decision is made (moment A) motivated by the search for public recognition, but which, at the moment of failure, translates into attitudes of evasion of responsibility (moment B).

CASE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The debate about the government's decisions failure on people's mobility as components of an emerging public policy is based on open-access data evidence. The incompatibility between public discourse and observable reality calls for a confrontation of arguments to which, this paper seeks to contribute. In order to demonstrate the counterproductive result, the case of Hidalgo was analyzed in contrast to what happened in the state of San Luis Potosí and Mexico City. The reason for choosing the latter as reference cases is the fact that, in San Luis Potosí, a state in the center of the country (as is Hidalgo), no traffic restriction measures were implemented. Mexico City was chosen because *Hoy no circula* has been in place for more than three decades, regardless of the pandemic. Both cases serve as control over the observable effects in Hidalgo. It should be noted, however, that our exercise is not a quasi-experimental study, although there are elements with which comparisons can be made between the three entities; as the information consulted comes from Google Community Mobility Reports as a common source. Nor is it a solely inferential analysis, despite the use of ordinary least squares.

Since the analysis was based on real data and not on controlled samples, it is not possible to make a comparison between Hidalgo and its counterfactual. That is, it is not possible to compare simultaneous scenarios where, on the one hand, the behavior of mobility with *Hoy no circula* program in Hidalgo, on the other, see what would have happened without this program. For this reason, San Luis Potosí and Mexico City were chosen as a reference. It should be clarified that the urban conditions of the three cities are not necessarily

comparable (especially Mexico City with the other two), but the data on the decrease in mobility are in percentages, which avoids the bias that population size or any other raw data may entail.

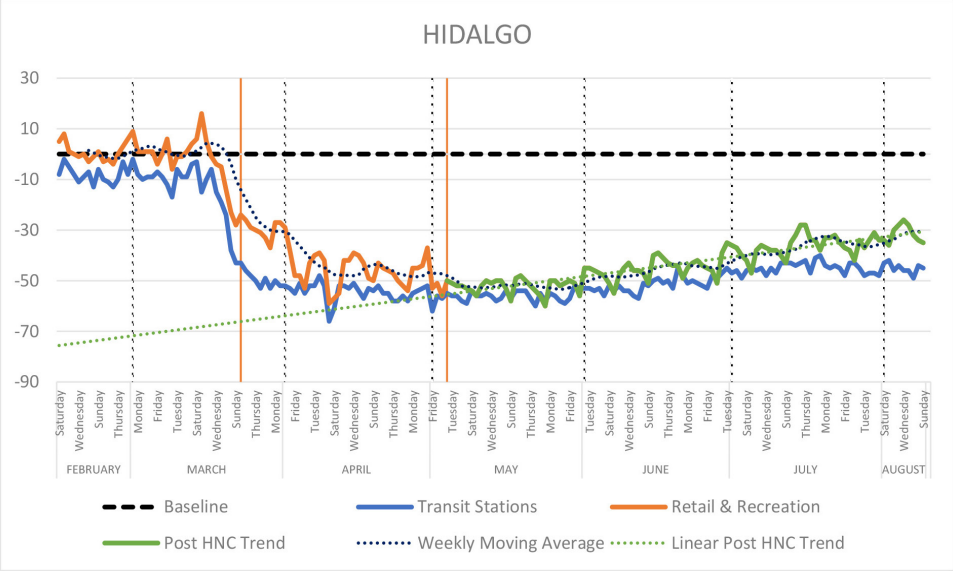
Urban mobility conditions in the three cities analyzed may even show some phenomena associated with socio-economic factors or the supply of alternative communication routes. Although these differences were very marked between areas, for example, the west and east of Mexico City (Pineda, 2022), this analysis does not attempt to capture such relationships but rather associates a generalized behavior concerning the decrease in mobility in the cities, related to measures implemented by local governments.

To be precise about the handling of the information, the data collected from Google Community Mobility Reports covers February 15 to July 31, 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-week period in January" (between January 3 and February 6), as there is no baseline. 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.[8] The reason for selecting these categories is that attendance at places such as restaurants, shopping centers, theme parks, etc. included in "Retail & Recreation" category reflects the recurrence of non-essential activities and thus resistance to government measures. The presence of people at public transport stations (metro, train, bus) captures the need for people to transit, but in particular for people who had to travel for work or other essential reasons.

Descriptive analysis of Google Community Mobility Reports data indicates that following the announcement of *Hoy no circula* emergency program in Hidalgo, levels of reduced mobility decreased (i.e. an increase in mobility is assumed). Figure 1, shows that since the announcement of the measure on May 4, people's mobility trend for leisure purposes (visiting places within the category "Retail & Recreation") increased. As noted, the failure of the action cannot be attributed solely to the unsubstantiated decision of the state government, but to behaviors observed as a consequence of the collective mood of aversion with the restrictions. 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 citizens. Perhaps it had no influence, either in a positive or negative way. What can simply be observed is that, contrary to expectations, the mobility of inhabitants was greater than before the measure came into force.

8 The total set of categories consists of "Grocery & pharmacy", "Parks", "Transit stations", "Retail & recreation", "Residential" and "Workplaces".

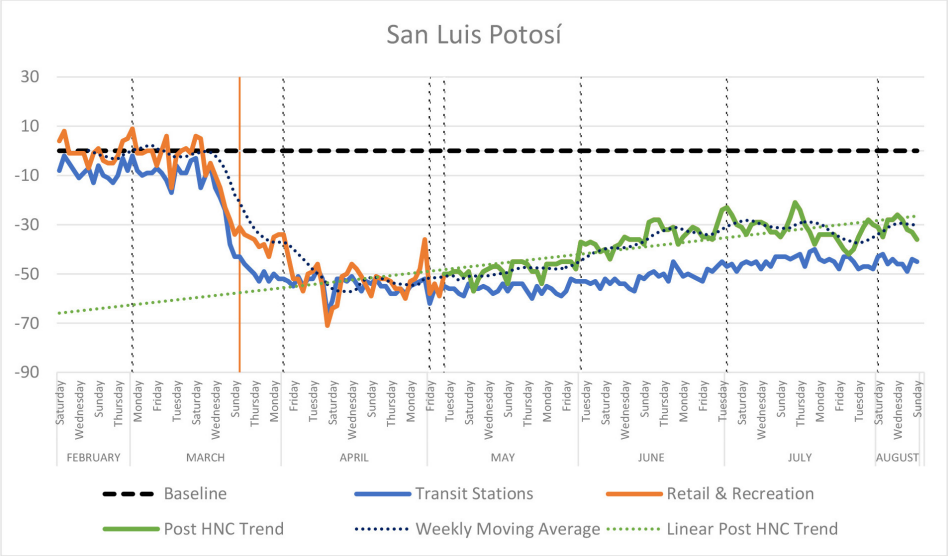
FIGURE 1. TREND IN REDUCED MOBILITY LEVELS FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES IN HIDALGO FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF *HOY NO CIRCULA*, 2020



Source: Authors with Google's Community Mobility Reports.
Note: Mobility reduction levels are in percentages. The trend line does not necessarily reflect the magnitude of the linear model estimate, but it does reflect the direction. The dotted line (7-period moving average) indicates the smoothing of the leisure mobility decline series by weekly moving averages. The horizontal dashed line represents the base period that Google considered for the measurement of mobility levels. A series of mobility level at transport stations is included as a reference. The series "Post HNC Trend" starts on May 4, the day when the announcement of the mobility restriction in Hidalgo was made. These notes apply to the following two figures.

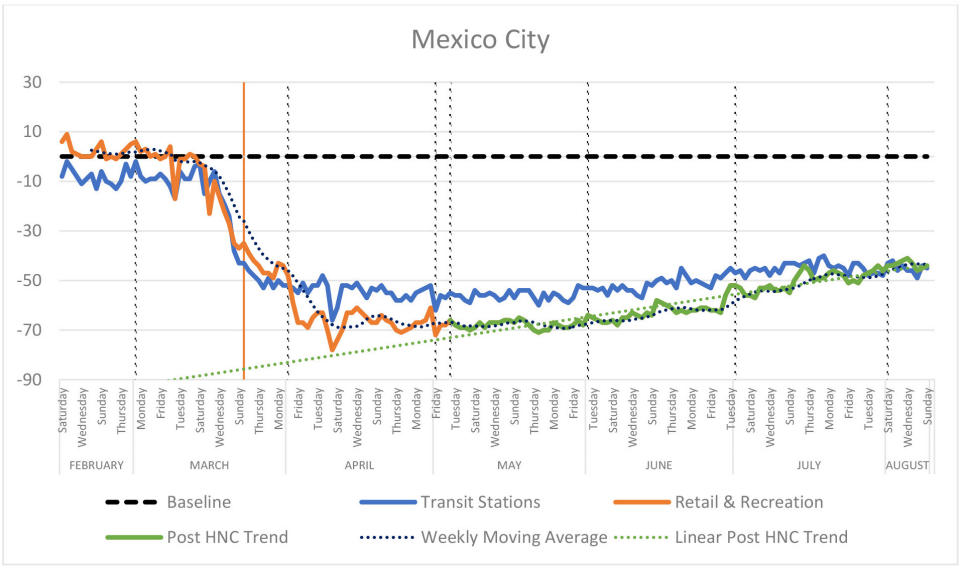
The same situation is observed in both San Luis Potosí and Mexico City (Figures 2 and 3). This generalized trend shows a similar behavior, regardless of the measures taken in the states. In other words, *Hoy no circula* in Hidalgo does not seem to have had any significant effect in reducing mobility.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

FIGURE 2. TREND IN RECREATIONAL MOBILITY REDUCTION LEVELS IN SAN LUIS POTOSÍ FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF *HOY NO CIRCULA* IN HIDALGO, 2020



Source: Authors with Google's Community Mobility Reports.
Note: A dotted line is added at the beginning of May, corresponding to the entry of *Hoy no circula* in Hidalgo, for reference only.

FIGURE 3. TREND IN REDUCED MOBILITY LEVELS FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES IN MEXICO CITY FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF *HOY NO CIRCULA* IN HIDALGO, 2020



Source: Authors with Google's Community Mobility Reports.
Note: A dotted line is added at the beginning of May, corresponding to the entry of *Hoy no circula* in Hidalgo, for reference only.

Trend slope calculations for the three entities indicate that Hidalgo falls between the levels shown by Mexico City and San Luis Potosí. Using ordinary least squares as a technique to estimate the linear trend in the three cases, running a consecutive daily time series with the levels of mobility reduction (Google Community Mobility Reports), the slope of the series showing the daily levels of mobility reduction for Hidalgo was estimated to be 0.2538, while for Mexico City and San Luis Potosi 0.29122 and 0.25005, respectively.

The interpretations from the graphs presented are that, on the one hand, Hidalgo is not the state with the greatest decrease in mobility, Mexico City reached levels of more than 70% reduction (a threshold that Hidalgo never exceeded). On the other, it is interpreted that the trend after the announcement of the mobility restriction program did not have a greater consequence than in other states such as San Luis Potosí, which showed a smaller increase in mobility, starting in May (when the measure was announced in Hidalgo) and making a parallel comparison between states. Therefore, it cannot be assured that *Hoy no circula* in Hidalgo had different effects to other places where there was no contingent action restricting vehicle movment. However, the analysis would require complementary studies to prove this assertion more conclusively.

The sequence of events, from the start of *Sana Distancia* campaign, through the announcement of measures restricting mobility, to periods in which attendance at all sites would be normalized, meant that the Hidalgo's government went through periods in which its decisions framed by credit claiming were transformed into excuses for blame avoidance. We must also consider the fact 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. The moment when *Hoy no circula* came into effect marked the intention to position the governor as an actor who would act rationally and intelligently towards the pandemic, giving him credit for his decisions and with the support of his cabinet. 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 the costs of implementing *Hoy no circula,* while not really low, were at least as high as any other type of intervention that any other government could take to counter the spread of the disease. That is, there would be no way of not incurring a cost for any emerging decision, while the credit or gain would be expected to overcompensate the costs.

However, it was not long before the governor himself (and his cabinet) had to justify with misleading information that the measure had worked, even though it had not. The trap in which the state government was caught transcended in

what was communicated from the federal government on November 10, 2020, when it was said that among 12 other states (out of 32 in Mexico), Hidalgo had "a notable increase in mobility" (n. a., November 10, 2020). Contagion did not stop and deaths increased, while people did not restrain to move freely.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of the implementation of an atypical measure restricting vehicle circulation in Hidalgo, affected the freedom of transit, mainly in the Metropolitan Zone of Pachuca. The state government's arguments, –beyond the shown optimism–, do not hold up after the comparison of data showing that Hidalgo did not have a marked difference in mobility reduction after the announcement of *Hoy no circula.* On the contrary, as an adverse result, a generalized increase in mobility was observed (as was the case in other entities).

Based on a groupthink approach, the inefficient decision adopted by the state government, far from being based on evidence were framed as a good action, is assumed to be the result of a dynamic of loyalty and group cohesion amongst the cabinet, ultimately provoking the dissatisfaction of the inhabitants of Pachuca. In other words, decisions based on loyalty to the leader of an organization, in this case, the executive branch, can result in consensus with adverse consequences and inefficient results. In other words, failures. All of this occurred within the framework of conditions that provoke the presence of vicious group behaviors, with COVID-19 pandemic being part of the triggering context.

Likewise, as a complement to the groupthink approach, the decisions made by the state government of Hidalgo were framed in terms of blame avoidance behavior, based on the fact that the government decided to implement *Hoy no circula* as an unusual but transcendental measure that would draw the recognition of public opinion. However, the search for recognition (credit claiming) would be transformed into strategies of blame avoidance in the face of the effects that turned out to be counterproductive. Not only was there no significant decrease in mobility compared to other states that did not adopt a similar measure Instead it increased. A comparison between Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí and Mexico City, and the trend in the number of people attending recreational venues and transport stations shows that *Hoy no circula* is not an effective measure and that was based on suboptimal decisions derived from organizational flaws.

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