



Fake Polls as Fake News:

The Challenge for Mexico's Elections

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Voter manipulation through misinformation is a long and established practice in many polities regardless of whether they are democracies or authoritarian regimes. Parties and candidates alike will frame and even distort issues to their advantage. Misinformed voters can be a potential threat to democracy if they get to know the issues through fake news: poor decision-making will follow. For many analysts, this is exactly what led to Brexit and to Trump's victory in the United States.

It can be argued that the spread of fake news during a campaign is as old as elections themselves, but the speed at which they are produced and disseminated nowadays is certainly new. Through social media, fake news can reach a global audience in a matter of minutes.

As a pollster in Mexico, I have long observed all kinds of fake news being disseminated during electoral campaigns. A peculiarity of fake news in Mexico, however, is that polls themselves have become the fake news. For years, many media outlets and political columns have reported results of public opinion polls that are of dubious quality. Likewise, established polling firms have often had to denounce that their reports have been doctored or that they did not conduct the poll being reported as theirs in the media. In recent elections, on election day, fake exit poll results have circulated through social media. While the dissemination of fake news through social media is easy, it is striking how receptive the Mexican mainstream media is to fake news. In fact, many fake news and fake polls are first reported in established media outlets and then widely circulated on social media.

What is particularly troublesome is not only that fake polls have been attributed to established firms but also that many fake polls are attributed to non-existent firms. Polls are fake but so are the firms behind them. Moreover, the stories about these fake polls have run in major media outlets, so it is not a marginal issue. Further, the practice of publishing fake polls predates the appearance of Facebook or Twitter in our lives.

When Did It all Start?

It is difficult to identify a single moment when fake polls began to appear in the Mexican media. It is easier to say that polls began to matter in Mexico once the political system opened up and contested elections became a norm rather than the exception. This happened in the decade of the 1990s, especially after the severe economic crisis of 1994-1995. The economic crisis led to the defeat of the incumbent party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI by its acronym in Spanish), in a number of gubernatorial elections. In the 1997 mid-term legislative elections, the PRI lost control of the Chamber of Deputies for the first time. The sea change in the relevance of public opinion data in this period is best reflected in the amount of [published polls](#) during the presidential campaigns of 1994 and 2000. Throughout the entire 1994 presidential campaign, only 17 national polls were circulated. In contrast, 48 national polls were published from January to June 2000.

In 2000, when the presidential election that led to the end of 71 years of uninterrupted PRI rule in Mexico took place, the publication in established media outlets of fake polls was a widespread practice. During the 2000 presidential campaign, several newspapers (*El Sol de México*, *Excélsior*, *Unomásuno*) reproduced the results of [shadowy firms](#) such as Ceprocepp, Technomanagement, and Fishers with widely favorable numbers to Francisco Labastida, the PRI candidate. These firms that no one knew existed (and that no one has even heard of since) circulated 10 polls throughout the campaign, which represent 21 percent of the total number of public polls. Citizens being exposed to questionable data and disinformation was a strategy to influence and sway public opinion. The strategy, of course, did not work as the PRI lost the election by six percentage points.

In the 2000 presidential election, political parties also began to broadcast ads with dubious but favorable public opinion data for their causes. I remember watching the second presidential debate on the night of May 26, 2000. Less than an hour after the debate ended, a paid spot about Vicente Fox being the winner of the debate appeared on the main national TV network. Given the technological restrictions of those years and the short period of time between the end of the debate and the diffusion of the spot, it was impossible to conduct,

in less than an hour, a serious poll about who the winner of the debate was. Naturally, the purpose of the spot was not to convey accurate information but to shift public opinion in favor of Vicente Fox. From then on, polls have been widely used in Mexico as an instrument to circulate misleading claims about popular support for governments and candidates. Push polls (polls aimed at swaying voters using loaded or manipulative questions) frequently receive wide diffusion in established media outlets.

Why Do Politicians Promote Fake Polls?

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence regarding the impact of published polls on public opinion or voting behavior, Mexican politicians keep pushing for the publication of favorable results to their causes. In some cases, politicians may believe that there is a bandwagon effect that will benefit them. In some other cases, politicians want to appeal to strategic voters, that is, voters who do not want to waste their vote supporting a candidate or party with slim chances of winning. By revealing that a party has a low probability of winning, polls—whether fake or not—may influence the decision of strategic voters.

The rationality behind a bandwagon effect or strategic voting rests however in informing the voters about the actual state of electoral preferences. Given the low levels of information voters have, it is not clear that they will find out what the polls are actually saying and even less clear how much weight will be given to that information. Furthermore, poll results sometimes conflict, so polls' effect on voters may cancel out. Indeed, one can argue that the main purpose of any fake poll is to misinform the public about the actual state of electoral preferences.

Fake News and Fake Polls in the 2018 Election

The use of fake polls has become the rule rather than the exception for electoral processes in Mexico. Just days before the 2017 Estado de México gubernatorial election, a [fake survey, falsely claiming to be from Consulta Mitofsky, a Mexican polling firm](#), spread throughout social media, and different political actors used these numbers to support the MORENA

candidate, despite Mitofsky denying its authenticity. Furthermore, the day of the election, [fake exit polls](#) circulated on social media.

However, the diffusion of fake polls is not restricted to social media as sometimes the whole process starts in the mainstream media. For instance, a series of questionable polls regarding the 2018 presidential election were published for a long time in [different media](#). The polls were attributed to the [Office of the President](#) or to CISEN, Mexico's equivalent of the National Security Agency. The reports of these polls had blatant errors, such as a huge margin of error for a national poll of 5,000 interviews, but no one in the media questioned their authenticity. These fake polls circulated widely for many months, and it was not until recently that the Press Secretary to the Mexican President issued a statement rejecting the claims that these were governmental polls. The purpose of these polls was to present some parties and politicians as appearing more popular than they actually were.

As long as there are more unpopular politicians than popular ones, the demand for fake polls will continue. If the mainstream media keeps echoing these fake polls, social media will just pick it up and will disseminate them broadly. Unlike other countries, in Mexico fake news and fake polls are a problem because the mainstream media does not stop false information from reaching the public. Hence, it is likely that more fake news and polls will start to appear in the current presidential campaign.

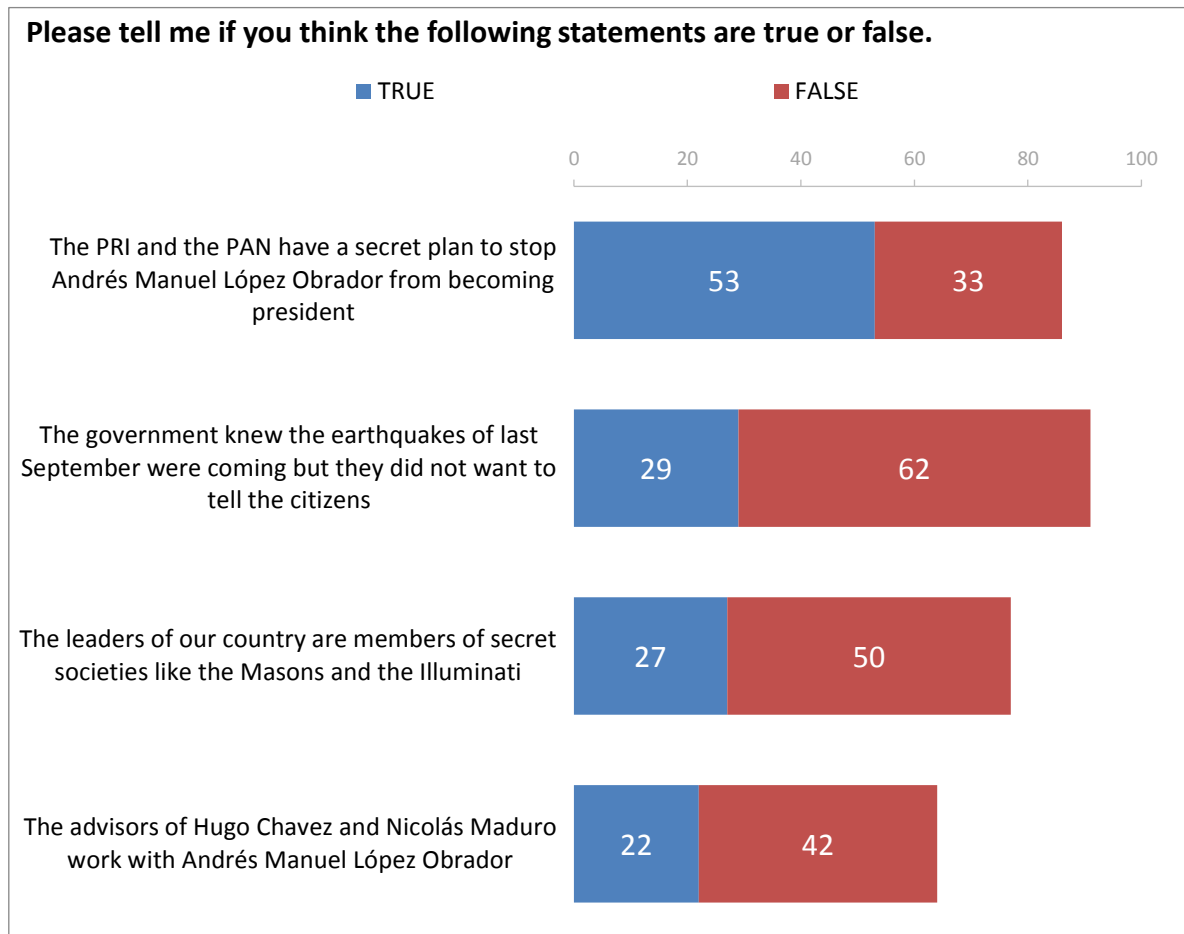
How Receptive are Mexicans to Fake News?

If the supply side of fake news is alive and kicking, what about the demand side? We know citizens filter out information that clash with their ideology, partisanship, interests, prejudices, or preconceptions. While social media allows a degree of voter segmentation unforeseen a decade ago, voters are not just passive recipients of information. Further, access to the internet or social media is not universal in Mexico. Only around half of the eligible voting population has internet access in Mexico. To succeed, fake news requires a dual strategy, a strategy that works in *both* the mainstream media and in social media.

Given this context, a relevant question to ask is whether Mexicans are prone to believe in fake news and if social media consumers are more likely to believe in these types of stories. To answer this question, I included a set of questions in a national face-to-face survey of 1,003 Mexican adults aged 18 and over (November 2017). The battery of questions aimed to measure if respondents were inclined to believe in a series of fake statements and conspiracy theories.

In the survey, respondents were asked if several false statements were true or false. Roughly half of the Mexican adults (53%) think that the PRI and the PAN have a secret plan to stop Andrés Manuel López Obrador from becoming president. A polarizing figure, Lopez Obrador is currently the favorite candidate to win the 2018 presidential election. Polling data and past electoral campaigns suggest Mexicans are likely to believe questionable stories surrounding his candidacy. For instance, the results of the survey show that one in five (22%) respondents think that advisors to Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro work with López Obrador. Even though the left-wing candidate [has stated](#) that he does not have any relationship with the Venezuelan government, an important number of citizens think the opposite. Hence, fake stories about López Obrador's links with the Venezuelan government will fall on fertile ground in the upcoming presidential campaign.

Figure 1. Share of people that believe in a series of fake statements



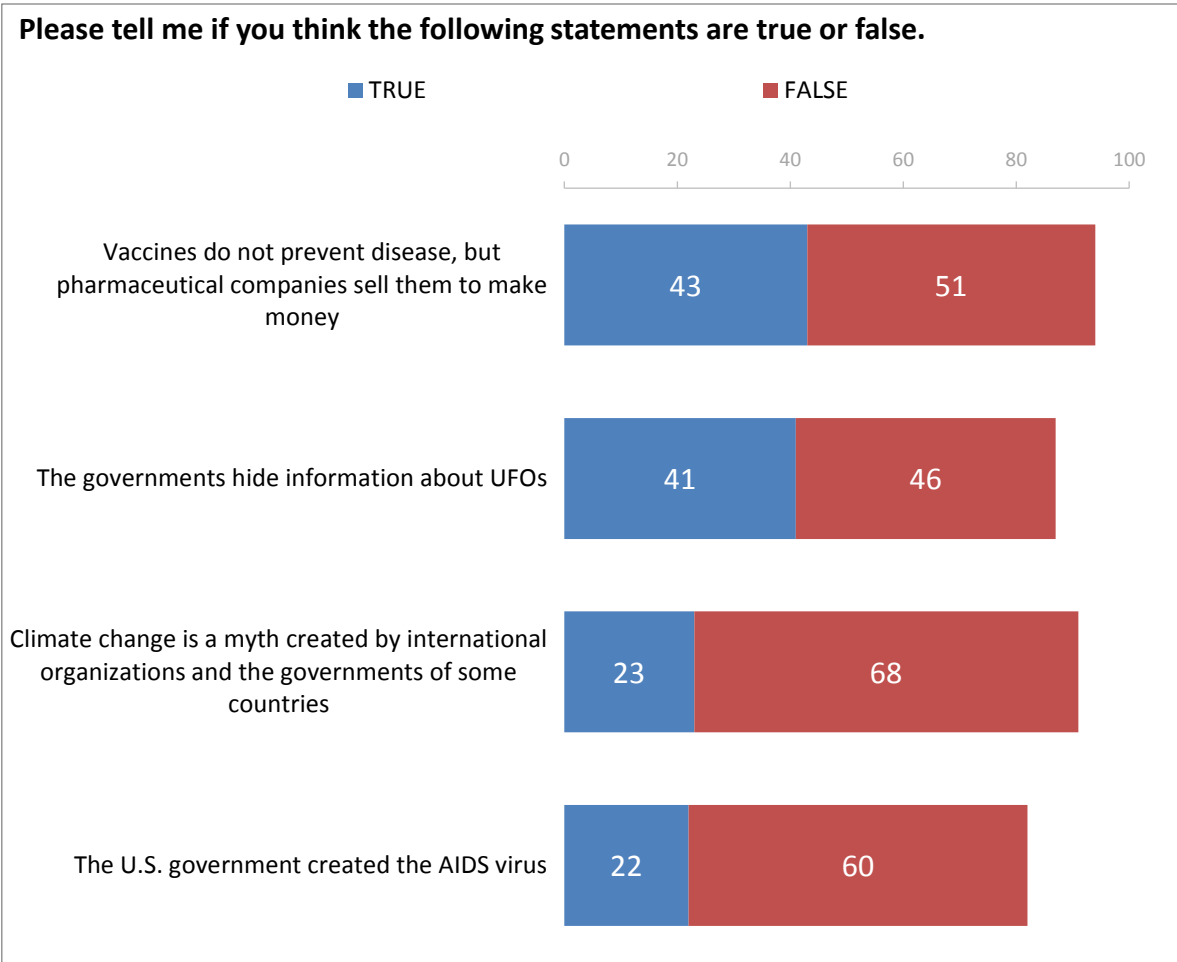
In September 2017, Mexico was shaken by two major earthquakes. Coincidentally, the second quake occurred on the 32nd anniversary of one of the most devastating tremors of the country. Even though scientists [cannot predict earthquakes](#), the survey shows that 29 percent of Mexican adults think that the national government knew in advance that an earthquake was going to hit the country, but they decided not to tell people. Finally, even though there is no evidence to support this idea, roughly one in four (27%) Mexicans concur with the idea that Mexico’s leaders are members of secret societies such as the Masons and the Illuminati.

Poll respondents were also asked if they believe in a series of conspiracy theories that have circulated not only in Mexico but also in other countries. The purpose of these questions

was to quantify if respondents were prone to believe narratives that are hard to prove. A significant number of people think these stories are true. Nearly half of the respondents (43%) expressed that vaccines do not prevent disease but that pharmaceutical companies sell them just to make money. A similar share of people (41%) believe that governments hide information on extraterrestrial life. Additionally, 23 percent of the respondents consider that climate change is a myth created by international organizations and some countries. Furthermore, one in five (22%) think that the United States created the AIDS virus. Overall, 70 percent of Mexican adults believe in at least one of these narratives. Needless to say, the proclivity to believe in conspiracy theories is not exclusive to Mexicans. For instance, [research suggests](#) that over 55 percent of Americans believe in some conspiracy theory. People, in general, seem to be inclined to accept these kinds of stories.

The data thus reveal that citizens are receptive to fake stories and hard-to-prove theories. In a world where it has become relatively easy to report and spread false news, someone who wants to shift public opinion could succeed given that people tend to believe in questionable information. Given that social media has become the favorite place to disseminate fake news, it is important to know if social media consumers are more likely to believe in false narratives. In Mexico, no evidence was found to support this idea. Social media users are as likely to believe in fake news and/or conspiracy theories as non-social media users. The most likely reason is that access to the internet or social media in Mexico is skewed towards the younger, more educated, and more affluent social groups, and they tend to be more critical of the information they receive.

Figure 2. Share of people that believe in a series of conspiracy theories



What the data show is that there is receptivity to fake or controversial stories. However, there is a high degree of variance depending on the topic, although it is safe to say that stories related to the political realm will be more credible given the discredit of political institutions. This is particularly relevant because fake news can be used not only to promote positive/negative information about a candidate but also to discourage turnout, especially among younger voters who have more access to social media.

The current presidential election in Mexico takes place in a context where parties and candidates have incentives to spread fake news, and voters show a proclivity to believe in them. While the main battleground will be in the digital realm, the role of the mainstream media cannot be understated: if they do not filter out the fake news and fake polls, all Mexicans will be exposed to false stories increasing the chances for poor decision-making.

About the Author

Jorge Buendía is the Director of Buendía & Laredo and a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute. Mr. Buendía conducts research on electoral marketing, electoral studies, electoral behavior, and public opinion. His research findings on these topics have been published in various academic journals in the United States, Latin America, and Mexico. Mr. Buendía received his PhD and master's degree in Political Science from the University of Chicago. In addition, he has a master's degree in Comparative Government from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is a member of the National System of Researchers and a professor-researcher of the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM) and the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE).