Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

The Outlook for U.S.-Mexico Relations under the Biden Administration

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From Trump to Biden:
Mexican Public Opinion and AMLO's Rhetoric

The 2020 U.S. presidential election generated a great deal of interest in Mexico.

Key Takeaways

- President López Obrador seems to have adjusted the tone of his discourse with Donald Trump, and now his tone is subject to changes with Joe Biden.

- The Mexican public has shown a pro-Democratic bias in all consecutive elections since 2004.

- Despite Trump's negative image in Mexico, the majority of Mexicans perceived a positive relationship between the Trump and AMLO administrations. This could reflect AMLO's rhetoric of cooperation with the Trump government.

- From 2019 to 2020, Mexican public opinion about the U.S.-Mexico relationship changed significantly, in a positive direction, and the polls also showed positive changes in Mexicans' opinions about the U.S. during that time.

- Any adjustments in AMLO's rhetoric could be important for how Mexicans perceive the new relationship with Biden. Changes in policy and discourse on the Biden side are likely to be important as well.

- Future polls should consider the Biden factor, as well as AMLO's rhetoric.

Introduction

In this brief article, I document Mexican public opinion about the United States and the bilateral relationship. How interested have Mexicans been in the U.S. elections? How popular or unpopular have U.S. presidents been in Mexico? How do Mexicans rate the U.S.-Mexico relationship? What expectations do they have about the Biden-López Obrador relationship? Opinion polls conducted during the last two decades, from 2000 to 2021, help us respond to these questions in a straightforward way. However, looking at the shifts of opinion also raises a more speculative question: What role does presidential rhetoric play in shaping these public views? The question is relevant in the sense that President López Obrador seems to have adjusted the tone of his discourse with Donald Trump, and now his tone is subject to changes with Joe Biden.

A Most Engaging Election

The 2020 U.S. presidential election generated a great deal of interest in Mexico. A national poll showed that 53 percent of respondents were "very" or "somewhat" interested in the election just a few days before it took place.[1] That may be a record high. Previous polls

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showed the levels of interest at 49 percent in 2000,[2] 44 percent in 2008 (I have no data for 2004), 37 percent in 2012,[3] and 39 percent in 2016.[4] The level of engagement in Mexico in 2020 seems consistent with the surprisingly high turnout, which suggests that American voters were also particularly engaged.

A Democratic Bias

In 2020, Mexicans expressed a clear preference for Joe Biden over Donald Trump. A national poll showed that 51 percent of respondents preferred Biden to win the election, as opposed to 20 percent who preferred Donald Trump.[5] The preference for Biden is not surprising, and not only because Trump had very negative ratings among Mexicans, as we will see below, but also because the Mexican public has shown a pro-Democratic bias in all consecutive elections since 2004. In that year, 55 percent of Mexican respondents preferred the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, whereas 20 percent supported George W. Bush. In 2008, 46 percent favored Barack Obama, and only 13 percent was for John McCain. The Obama gap widened significantly in 2012, with 76 percent of Mexicans preferring him, as opposed to 10 percent who were for Mitt Romney.[6] The pro-Democratic gap grew from about 33-35 points in 2004 and 2008, to 66 points in 2012, and to 72 points in 2016, when 74 percent of Mexicans preferred Hillary Clinton and only 2 percent Donald Trump.[7]

Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric in 2016 may have helped him gain support among some segments of the U.S. electorate, but it was also quite effective in mobilizing a great majority of Mexicans against him. The fact that support for Trump in the country grew from 2 percent in 2016 to 20 percent in 2020 is quite puzzling, as he remained quite unpopular. The exception to the pro-Democratic bias in Mexico was the 2000 election, when the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, was preferred by 28 percent of respondents, as opposed to 19 percent for Al Gore.[8]

Trump's Ratings

President Trump had predominantly negative ratings in Mexico. Favorable opinions about him represented only a single digit, on average, during his years in government. In contrast, eight in ten Mexicans, on average, expressed a negative opinion about him (See Figure 1). Popularity ratings for Bush and Obama were clearly positive at the beginning of their administrations and then went down, in the context of the Gulf War for Bush, in 2003, and towards the end of Obama's second term, in 2015; but neither of them had a negative balance of opinion during their terms. Unfavorable views about the U.S. President skyrocketed during Trump's first year, in 2017, making him the least liked U.S. President in Mexico, considering opinion data since 2001, although the honor is likely to remain if we could go further back.

Figure 1. Mexican Public Opinion about the U.S. Presidents: 2001-2020 (Percent)
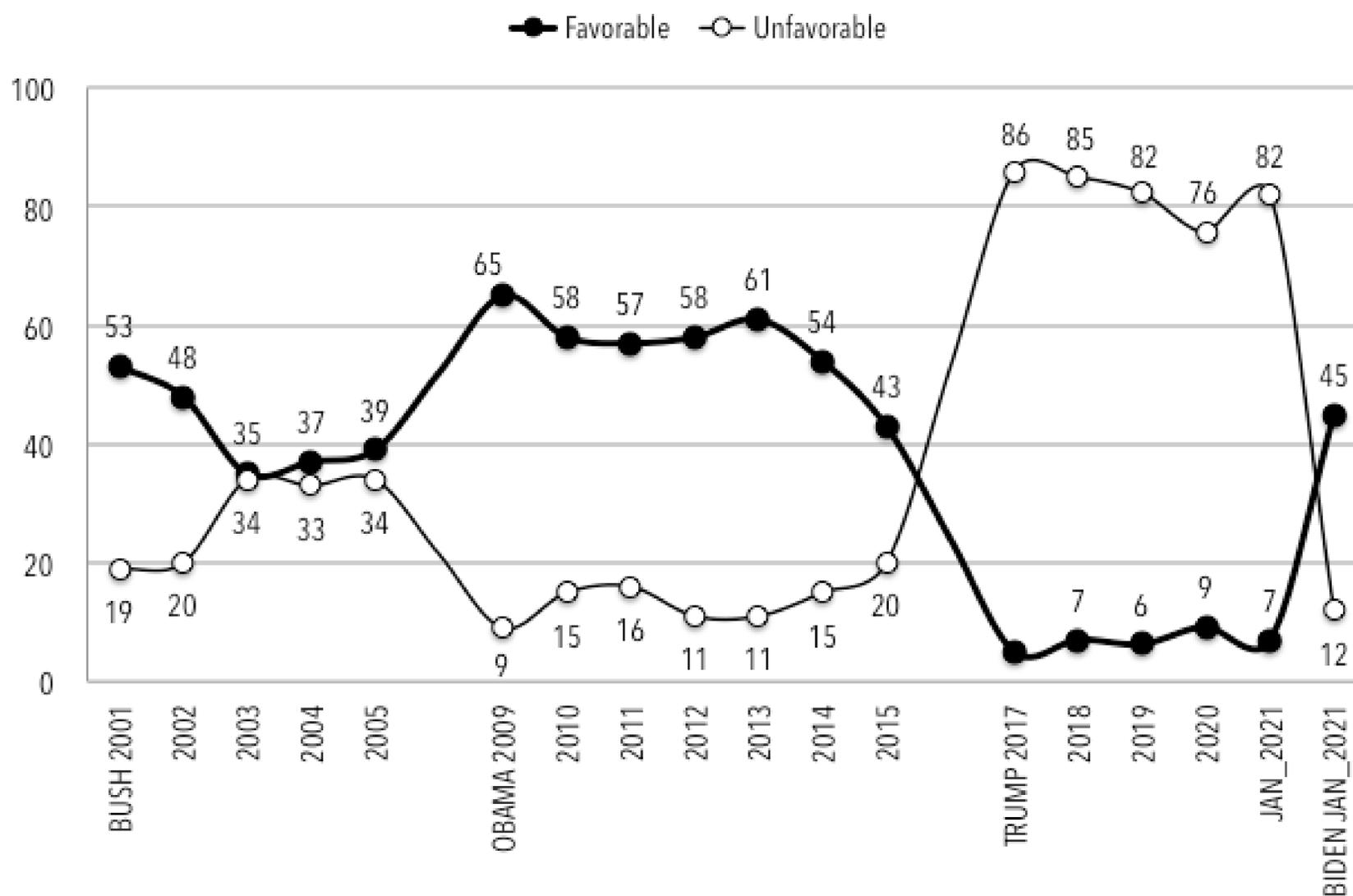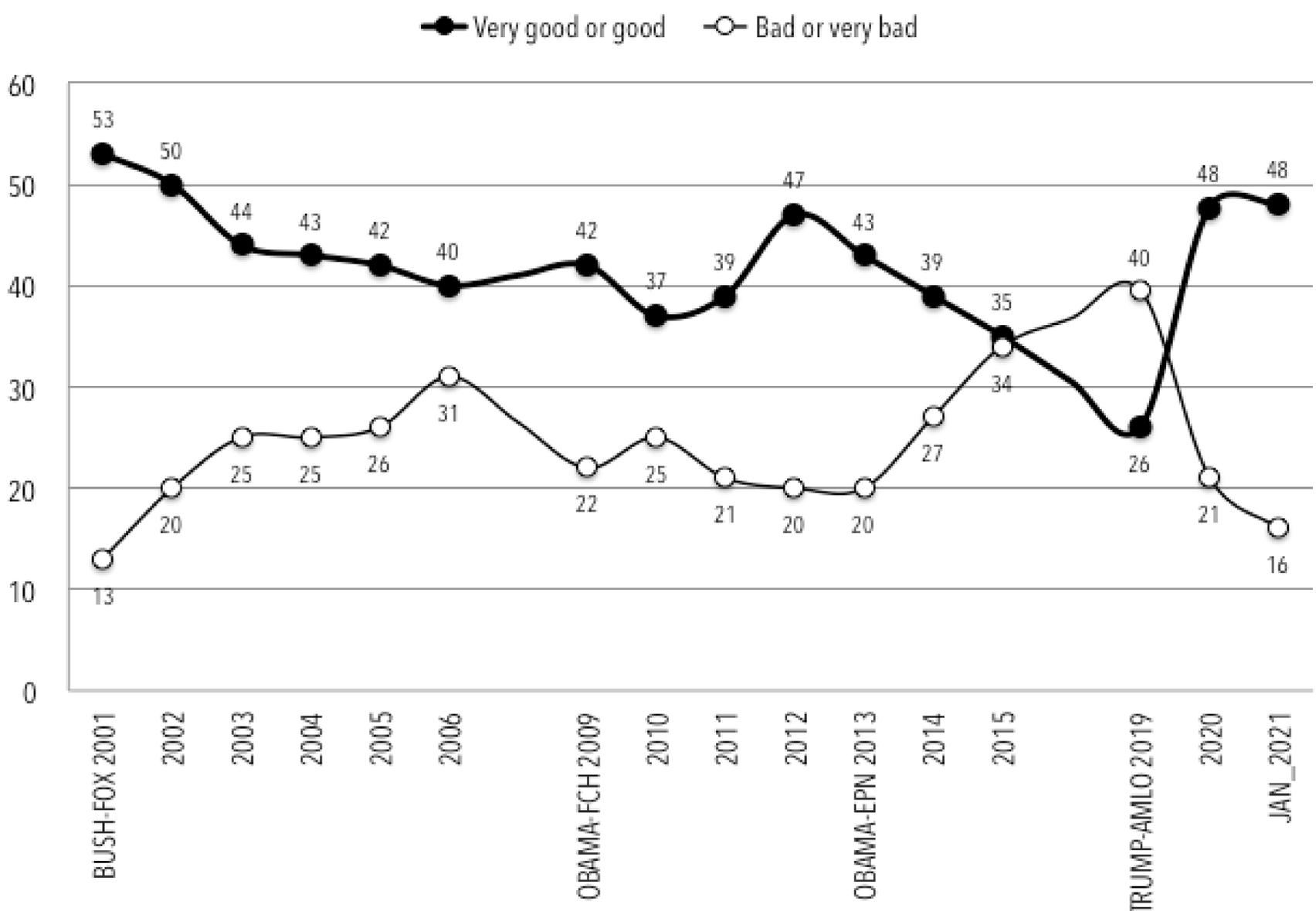

Sources: *El Financiero* monthly national telephone polls, 2019-2020 (monthly n=820), and January 15-16, 2021 (n=500, Biden still President-Elect); *El Financiero* national face-to-face polls, 2017-2018 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,500); *Reforma* quarterly national face-to-face polls, 2001-2015 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,515). The graph shows percent in yearly averages, except in January 2021. Neutral opinions (neither favorable nor unfavorable) and don't knows not shown. No available data for 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2016.

The Trump Puzzle

President Trump's favorable ratings in Mexico only averaged 9 percent in 2020, and yet 20 percent of respondents preferred him over Biden to win the election. How so? The answer to this puzzle may lay in the fact that, despite Trump's negative image, the majority of Mexicans perceived a positive relationship between the Trump and López Obrador administrations. It is tempting to think that this had something to do with AMLO's high approval ratings cascading into public perceptions about the U.S.-Mexico relationship. However, that does not seem to be the case. During AMLO's first year in government, in 2019, his approval ratings were the highest, but the bilateral relationship between the United States and Mexico was mostly perceived as a bad one (See Figure 2). Perceptions changed dramatically during AMLO's second year in government, when his approval ratings had slightly dropped in comparison to his first year. The average percent of Mexicans who considered the U.S-Mexico relationship as good or very good increased from 26 percent in 2019 to 48 percent in 2020. What explains this significant shift in public opinion? I believe this reflects AMLO's rhetoric of cooperation with the Trump government.

Figure 2. Mexican Public Opinion about the U.S.-Mexico Relationship: 2001-2020 (Percent)

Sources: *El Financiero* monthly national telephone polls, 2019-2020 (monthly n=820), and January 15-16, 2021 (n=500); *El Financiero* national face-to-face polls, 2017-2018 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,500); *Reforma* quarterly national face-to-face polls, 2001-2015 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,515). The graph shows yearly averages. Neutral opinions (neither good nor bad) and don't know not shown. No available data for 2007, 2008, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

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The AMLO Factor

President López Obrador emphasized a good relationship and friendly relationship with Trump, challenging the negative popular feelings about the U.S. President. The confrontational tone that AMLO expressed as a candidate clearly contrasted with his tone as President. Perhaps it was risky to take a friendly tone with Trump, but it seems that it paid off in terms of public perceptions about the bilateral relationship. In addition, some of AMLO's decisions that experts criticized actually enjoyed a broad public support. About 63 percent of Mexicans supported AMLO's decision to send Mexico's newly created National Guard to the border with Guatemala to stop the flow of Central American migrants; 35 percent opposed it.[9] About 59 percent of Mexicans agreed with AMLO's decision to visit Trump in July 2020, in the middle of the election campaign and the pandemics; 35 percent disagreed.[10] After the visit, 47 percent described the visit to Washington, D.C. as a "success," and 25 percent as a "failure." This was not majority view, but still a predominantly favorable assessment. The positive public mood was also captured in a poll where respondents were asked to evaluate AMLO for thanking Trump for "being gentle and respectful towards Mexicans," which you could think of as a cognitive dissonance. Surprisingly, 51 percent gave favorable ratings, compared to 22 percent who expressed negative ones. It seems that the Mexican public was reacting favorably to AMLO's friendly depiction of Trump, despite Trump. AMLO's rhetoric conveyed a sense that things were going well, and the public went along. A majority of Mexicans were satisfied with the U.S.-Mexico relationship despite being highly dissatisfied with Trump. Perhaps for that reason, one in five Mexicans thought that Trump might not be such a bad option for a second term—given the mutual "understanding" between both presidents. Was this an effect of AMLO's tone?

A Rhetoric of Cooperation

From 2019 to 2020, Mexican public opinion about the U.S.-Mexico relationship changed significantly, in a positive direction, and the polls also showed positive changes in Mexicans' opinions about the United States during that time. Polls conducted since 2016 suggest three different stages of aggregate opinion about the United States (See Figure 3). From 2016 to 2018, Mexicans' views about the United States, still under the Obama administration, were predominantly negative. During most of 2019, with Trump and AMLO's first year, opinions

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were divided. Towards the end of 2019 and throughout 2020, Mexicans' views had turned much more favorable. This shift may reflect President López Obrador's rhetoric of cooperation. If that is the case, it has some implications for how Mexicans will view the new Biden administration. At first, AMLO's rhetoric with Biden did not seem to follow the same positive tone it had shown with Trump, and the tone will surely go through an adjustment process, still uncertain at the time of this writing.

Figure 3. Mexican Public Opinion about the United States: 2001-2020 (Percent)
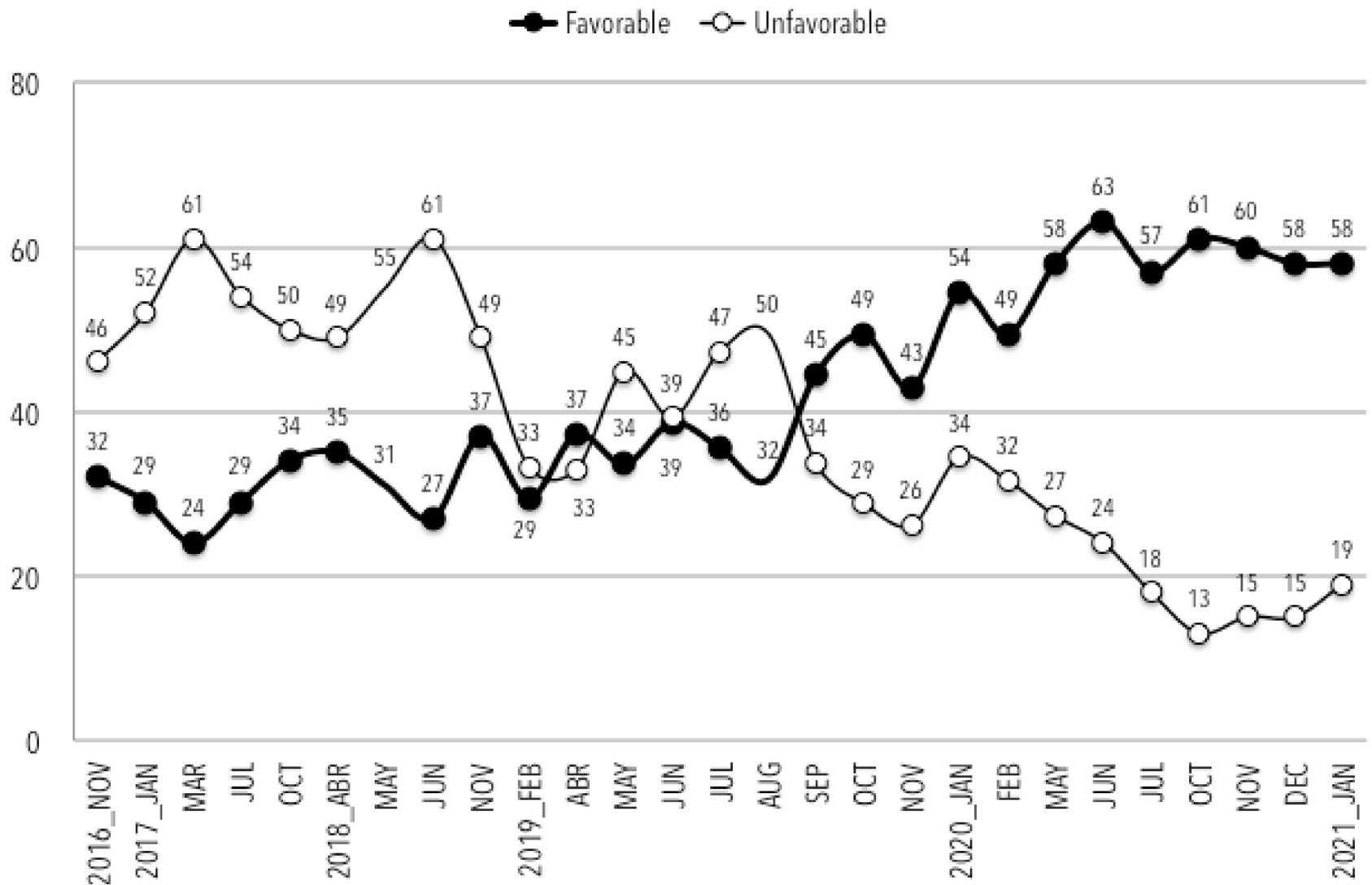
Sources: *El Financiero* monthly national telephone polls, 2019-2020 (the monthly number of interviews is about 820); *El Financiero* national face-to-face polls, 2016-2018 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,500). Neutral opinions and don't know not shown; *El Financiero* monthly national telephone polls, 2019-2020 (monthly n=820), and January 15-16, 2021 (n=500); *El Financiero* national face-to-face polls, 2017-2018 (the number of interviews ranges from 1,000 to 1,500). Neutral opinions (neither favorable nor unfavorable) and don't know not shown. No available data for 2007, 2008, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

The Biden Factor

A majority of Mexicans may have preferred Joe Biden over Donald Trump to win the U.S. election, but Biden generated much more uncertainty at first. In November 2020, after the election, 28 percent of Mexicans did not know what to expect from a Biden-AMLO relationship, and 36 percent said they thought it would be good.[11] By January 2021, the level of uncertainty had dropped significantly, to only 4 percent; but expectations did not improve: 36 percent said they expected a good relationship. Whether this perception improves depends to a great extent on how AMLO's rhetoric adjusts to the new times. After the election, AMLO was far from reassuring Mexicans about Biden. The Mexican President held any congratulatory remarks until after the Electoral College's confirmation of the Biden victory in December. The delay received harsh criticism from pundits and experts, but polls showed the public, once again, quite supportive of the President. In a November poll, 57 percent approved of AMLO's decision to hold his congratulatory remarks; 25 percent disapproved. In addition, 52 percent thought that AMLO's decision would not affect a future relationship with Biden.[12]

Polls also show that Mexicans' opinions about Biden have been improving. His positive ratings went up from 22 to 38 percent from March to October 2020, to 41 percent in November, and to 45 percent in January 2021, right before his inauguration.[13] We can expect this positive trend to continue during the first 100 days, but, again, it will also depend on how AMLO's rhetoric adjusts to the new circumstances. The Cienfuegos-DEA affair right before the inauguration had not been captured fully by opinion polls at the time of this writing, but it looked like a hazardous moment.

If I am correct in thinking that the rhetoric of cooperation shaped public views in the past year, and that AMLO was able to influence a positive public mood in Mexico despite Trump, there is reason to believe that any adjustments in rhetoric will be important for how

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Mexicans perceive the new relationship with Biden. In addition to that, changes in policy and discourse on the Biden side are likely to be important as well. Almost half of the Mexican population thought positively of him right before taking office. For that reason, his cues and signaling may have much more weight than Trump's in Mexican public opinion. It will be important for future polls to consider the Biden factor, as well as AMLO's rhetoric.

About the Author

Alejandro Moreno is a Professor of Political Science at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). He is also the Director of Public Opinion Polls for *El Financiero*. Alejandro is currently a Global Fellow with the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and has previously been a Public Policy Scholar with the Wilson Center. He has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and a Bachelor of Social Sciences from ITAM. His areas of expertise are public opinion, political behavior, elections, comparative politics, and survey research methodologies.

Endnotes

[1] *El Financiero* national poll, published on October 29, 2020.

[2] *Reforma* national poll, published on September 29, 2000.

[3] *Reforma* national poll, published on November 5, 2012.

[4] *El Financiero* national poll, published on June 29, 2016. This latter poll was conducted five months before Election Day, so it is likely that the level of interest may have increased in later months.

[5] *El Financiero* national poll, published on October 29, 2020.

[6] *Reforma* national poll, published on November 5, 2012.

[7] *El Financiero* national poll, published on June 29, 2016.

[8] *Reforma* national poll, published on September 29, 2000.

[9] *El Financiero* national poll, published on June 20, 2019.

[10] *El Financiero* national poll, published on July 2, 2020.

[11] *El Financiero* national poll, published on November 17, 2020.

[12] *El Financiero* national poll, published on November 17, 2020.

[13] *El Financiero* national poll, published on January 20, 2021.

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