



Misinformation and the Latino Immigrant Experience

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's digital age, social media plays a powerful role. People, especially among immigrant Spanish-speaking communities, consume and rely on news presented on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. Access to US news (that are mostly in English as a predominantly English-speaking country) in your own, personal language can be challenging. This leads to sensationalized, false content spreading quickly within Latino immigrant networks online, leading to increased fear, confusion, and poor mental health. This brief will explore how misinformation disproportionately impacts Latino immigrants and asks: How can policies and social media accountability better protect those vulnerable populations from the psychological and systemic consequences of disinformation?

II. OVERVIEW

Latino immigrants in the United States face vulnerabilities in the digital age, such as how they receive and process information. Nearly 70% of Central American migrants relied on Facebook and 25% on WhatsApp for migration news. That is a staggering amount. This statistic shows the over-reliance on non-news sources as viable centers of information. Many Latino immigrants consume content primarily in Spanish through informal social networks where misinformation

spreads easily and rapidly, especially around immigration policies, public benefits, and elections. In recent years, divisive political rhetoric has intensified this vulnerability. For example, President Donald Trump made false claims such as, "Illegal aliens coming into our country under Biden are treated better than our vets," and falsely suggested Latino immigrants were harming Black and union workers. Such statements fuel division and stigmatization, leading many Latinos to feel alienated from the government and mainstream media. Psychologists describe this as "racial trauma": continuous misinformation, such as dehumanizing lies like the ones quoted above. This breaks trust and induces anxiety, depression, or learned helplessness among migrants. They seek guidance in mostly community-based groups on WhatsApp or Facebook posts. This creates a cycle where false information replaces official guidance, and fear overrides social and civic participation.

A. Relevance

Misinformation on social media cannot be minimized to just a digital issue. It is now a political concern for politicians. Social media can aid or severely damage a politician's career, like how a few videos posted on YouTube about moderate Democrats, like U.S Rep. Xochitl Torres Small, falsely accused her of supporting the Green New Deal. She lost her re-election against Republican Yvette Herrell in one of the nation's

most Hispanic districts. They are frequently reminded and shown issues most important to them, such as deepfakes and algorithm echo-chambers relating to immigration laws, voting rights, healthcare, and public benefits. This is dangerous, especially in the lead-up to elections, where disinformation can hinder voter turnout or mislead people about their legal rights. Demonstrating that the consequences are not only civic but also psychological. This issue is urgent, as more and more Latino immigrants turn to social media for political updates. Policymakers should consider how language access and content moderation can intersect with their plans. And if they're targeting Latinos, how can they make sure to amplify their message correctly? Without action, this will deepen existing inequalities and hinder all immigrants' ability to participate fully in American society. In a red Republican state with a high Cuban and Venezuelan population, Florida, half of Spanish-speaking voters encountered misinformation during the 2020 elections. These campaigns can be against anyone and any party.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Latino immigrants in the United States have long been subject to government-sanctioned fear and exclusion. One early example is Operation Wetback (1954), a mass deportation program targeting Mexican immigrants—many of them legal residents or even U.S. citizens—under the image of national security and labor protection. This era framed Latino immigrants as threats, using public messaging to sow fear and justify removal. The pattern established by these tactics laid the groundwork for disinformation strategies now. The legacy of this operation continues

today in subtler, more digital forms. The fear that once spread through radio announcements and newspaper headlines now spreads through viral WhatsApp chains and misleading Facebook posts. During the Trump administration in 2016 and 2024, anti-immigrant rhetoric escalated dramatically, with statements like “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” framing immigrants, especially Latinos, as criminal threats. These kinds of narratives were echoed in media outlets and eventually filtered through social media algorithms. Immigrants who sought clarity on immigration policy, DACA status, or asylum protections were often met not with official resources but with viral misinformation in their native languages. Spanish-speaking users, in particular, are at a stark disadvantage. The Tech Transparency Project found that while 49.1% of English misinformation triggers search interventions, only 21.1% of Spanish misinformation does. False information is tailored to immigrants’ backgrounds (algorithm). This is especially true in Spanish-speaking communities fleeing from political instability. Algorithms stretch and content grows quickly when they appeal to close emotions. For example, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, nearly half of Spanish-speaking voters interacted with aggressive content that falsely claimed that then-candidate Joe Biden was aligned with Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro. This wasn’t random. It was designed to exploit the deep fear Venezuelan immigrants carry from fleeing authoritarian rule, suggesting the idea that voting for Biden meant inviting socialism and the collapse of the U.S. Despite Latino advocacy groups fighting for better protections, social media companies have been slow to act.

Meanwhile, government agencies lack structure and reform, and leave social media to decide on how to combat misinformation by themselves.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The problem of misinformation doesn't only extend to Latino communities, but also to other immigrant communities who primarily speak Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic, and other non-English languages, as they also face a clear risk from online disinformation. These groups often lack consistent, non-sensationalized access to media in their native languages. In light of this absence, diaspora media (first stakeholders) play an important role. Ethnic and diaspora media outlets—including radio stations, local newspapers, and online publishers in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, and other languages help serve as important information lifelines. For example, Phoenix's La Campesina radio network educates Latino voters in Spanish, helping bridge information divides. But although this may be seen as a solution, most of these communities still readily rely on platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, WeChat, TikTok, and Facebook for their news consumption, (second stakeholders) making them especially vulnerable to disinformation that spreads rapidly and without oversight, in non-English digital spaces due to ineffective measures. Consequently, social media and messaging platforms are central to how these communities receive news, with moderation policies determining which content is visible and which narratives are magnified or ignored. Government agencies, such as the FTC, FCC, Department of Justice's Civil Rights divisions, and local elections or public service offices (third stakeholders) can and should have

the responsibility for ensuring fair platform oversight and enforcing election laws across all language groups. Nonprofits and community-based organizations (fourth stakeholders), including Chinese for Affirmative Action's PiYaoBa fact-check site, APIA Vote, and a variety of Latino advocacy groups, serve as trusted intermediaries due to them mostly speaking the same language as the community they're serving. These groups not only deliver in-language news and voter resources, but also work to identify and counter false information within immigrant-language communities.

B. Risks of Indifference

Ignoring misinformation in multiple languages, as overwhelmingly diverse America can be, can produce serious harms and consequences. Politically, non-English disinformation can shape and twist election facts. Experts warn that AI and deepfakes of politicians may be used to create convincing content in immigrant languages, especially in Spanish, as it is a main target due to lingering immigrant policies. Already, a deepfake robocall mimicking President Biden was used in New Hampshire. It doesn't help that most campaigns have created false narratives targeting Hispanic voters. Today, massive amounts of Spanish-language election lies circulate unchecked on YouTube and social media apps because moderators rarely check or, frankly, put any importance on non-English posts. This has real effects: polls found a large share of Latino respondents believe baseless fraud claims (e.g., 40% of Latinos polled thought "Democrats engage in election fraud"). Such targeted disinformation creates voter suppression for communities of color. Health and social

misinformation is also important to consider. During the pandemic, Spanish-speaking communities encountered viral false claims about the COVID-19 vaccine. (Vaccines contain microchips or cause cancer, supernatural cures, etc.) that ultimately reduced confidence in the vaccine. Chinese- and Vietnamese-language communities also saw conspiracies about vaccines, 5G, or immigration, especially when blamed and attacked during 2020 after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to language barriers, health agencies whose base language is English fail to have their messaging reach these communities, allowing these dangerous rumors to spread. Mental health and safety are also jeopardized by online lies. For example, false WhatsApp rumors of imminent ICE raids have provoked panic in immigrant communities. A 2025 report found that many immigrants avoided everyday activities (going to work, school, or medical appointments) due to fear of fake enforcement actions. These anxieties have escalated stress and sleep problems among families. Disinformation targeting immigrants can undermine trust in institutions and reduce participation, regardless of whether it's political or in their community. As one analysis puts it, misinformation exploiting immigrant fears spreads distrust in democratic processes, drawing a similar comparison to old voter suppression tactics used on Black people, like poll taxes and literacy tests. Protecting these language minorities is nonpartisan and essential, as digital consumer safety and equal access to truthful information are core American values. In practice, securing and protecting immigrant-language information channels strengthens democracy and consumer protection for all communities, as AI, deepfakes, and misinformation are not only an issue for

immigrant communities.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

At its core, protecting non-English-speaking communities from misinformation shouldn't be seen as a partisan issue, as the rapid spread of lies now demands nonpartisan intervention. The consequences of inaction are not only political, but also socially and economically important. Some potential benefits of addressing this issue by looking beyond party lines include:

- 1) **Protection of Democratic Integrity:** A democracy relies on an informed population and electorate. When language barriers block access to reliable information, it threatens the fairness of elections and civic participation, which is central to democracy in this country. Ensuring that ANY immigrant-language speakers (Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic) receive accurate in-language information without ominous music in the background helps strengthen public trust in democratic processes, a goal all policymakers should share, regardless of what party you belong to.
- 2) **Community Resilience:** Misinformation undermines not only public health messaging and legal understanding but also access to public services and economic opportunities. Consequently, the entire community loses productivity and mental well-being. Ensuring equal access to truthful information, regardless of language, supports stronger families and healthier neighborhoods to become something more and to have

non-polarizing systems to support that.

- 3) **Prevention of Social Division and Polarization:** Most disinformation that is spread, which focuses on immigrant groups, is designed to sow division or exploit trauma. Addressing this not only protects immigrants from manipulation but also reduces societal scapegoating and polarization. This benefits national cohesion and community stability.

V. TRIED POLICY

Currently, most legal efforts focus on AI content or have focused on regulating English content only. At the state level, dozens of laws ban “deepfake” or AI-manipulated election ads, but few have created meaningful change. Texas’s 2019 law (SB 751) and similar legislation have seen no progression. Very recently, California enacted AB 2655 and AB 2839 (September 2024) to force platforms to label or remove AI-generated campaign ads and allow officials to get reprimanded. While these are monumental steps, these issues only receive attention around election times and political issues, never taking in- account the social or economic effects AI may have. They do not focus on language-specific action or address misinformation. Federally, proposed bills like the DEEPFAKES Accountability Act have stalled. Again, no federal statutes yet mandate the labeling of AI images or require platforms to counter misinformation in immigrant languages. Platform-based moderation has also lagged. Tech companies have tried, pointing to their automated tools and multilingual fact-checking partnerships. For example, Meta’s AI lab claims to handle 100+ languages, and WhatsApp claims to limit message

forwarding. This doesn’t help. Real-world research reveals major gaps in these “solutions”. In 2020, an Avaaz study found Facebook applied warning labels on only 30% of viral Spanish misinformation (vs. 71% of English). Meta and Google testing suggest that algorithms struggle with recognizing regional dialects and under-researched languages, like Nahuatl. Government enforcement has similarly been slow: the FTC recently only began exploring making rules against platform “unfair and deceptive” practices after pressure from a Spanish-language coalition, but currently, no concrete regulations on disinformation targeting Latinos or other immigrants have been implemented. Alas, voluntary fact-checks, general fraud laws, and state deepfake bans have not filled the gap of misinformation, deepfakes, or AI. They still leave immigrants’ news feeds vulnerable to hoaxes and false narratives.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Mandate AI-Content Labeling in non-English/ Immigrant Languages
Require platforms to automatically detect generative AI or manipulated media in Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic, etc, and label such content as fabricated or fake. (For example, California’s AB 2655 forces platforms to label or remove AI-altered political ads; this idea could extend to any content in immigrant languages.) Platforms would also be instructed to reduce algorithm movements or flag suspicious foreign-language posts. Consistent labels (“AI-generated content”) would help users apply skepticism and enable regulators to target viral lies. This policy builds on emerging AI guidelines and puts legal weight behind them. By organizing multilingual content warnings, we

make the AI-driven disinformation safer to encounter or more likely to be noticed as fake.

Community-Based Mental Health Outreach in Immigrant Languages and Communities

Due to the effects and propagation of social media posts that falsely inform immigrant communities of ICE raids, policy updates, economic well-being, and “steps to take if...”. It is important to partner with local health departments, community clinics, and trusted cultural organizations to provide trauma-informed mental health services in Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic, and other spoken immigrant languages. Mental health detriments are caused by these social media posts. These programs could offer group counseling, hotline services, and workshops designed to help individuals manage anxiety, fear, and misinformation-related stress. Models like NYC’s “NYC Well” could be localized and replicated with bilingual counselors.

Fund Diaspora Media and Create Tech Tools

Provide grants to news organizations and radio stations serving immigrant populations to build and create verification systems. For instance, Congress could issue funds (through CPB, NEH, or a new Digital Equity program) for projects like community fact-checking apps, AI-powered myth-busting bots in apps like SMS, WhatsApp channels, or local radios. Chinese AA’s PiYaoBa, a Chinese-language fact-checker, exemplifies this approach. Grants could help hire bilingual reporters or technologists who use AI tools to debunk false media quickly. By empowering grassroots outlets and immigrant-led newsrooms/news stations, this option helps already existing trusted networks. Well-funded diaspora media can create tip hotlines with professionals where

they ask their audience for questions, and professionals in their field may answer. They then, can send out community-wide alerts in real time. In effect, it turns immigrant media into active responders against lies.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Emerging technologies are rewriting the rules regarding the spread of misinformation, and policies must catch up to include all languages. Failing to realize accountability now would leave millions of immigrants, most importantly Latinos, (given immigration debates) as easy prey for AI-driven information. The three options above—mandate AI- content labeling in non-English languages, community-based mental health outreach, funding diaspora media, and creating new technology tools— if brought together, would ensure all languages outside of the English-focused media receive the same protections English speakers get.

This investment has payoffs: it strengthens democracy by making sure everyone, regardless of language, can access truthful information regarding their government, in turn safeguarding public health (and their own health) by shutting down harmful rumors, and upholding civil rights by treating language minorities fairly. Protecting specifically Latino, Spanish-speaking communities in this dire era of Conservatism and MAGA protects the integrity and safety of our entire society. The mental health repercussions and trauma may be eternal and passed down through generations. Latinos are shaping the soul of America. Yet, they still face a digital landscape that distorts their truth and currently live and converse under a government that undermines

their voice, safety, and civic participation.

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