

China in Latin America: Economic Partner, Cultural Force, and Democratic Powerhouse?

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Abstract

Since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has solidified its status as a key player in infrastructure development, trade, and foreign aid. Regions that were previously outside China's sphere of influence, such as Latin America, have experienced a significant increase in economic ties with the country. This expansion reflects a diversification of Chinese influence in the region, both politically and culturally. Historically, Latin America has had a complex relationship with democracy, with significant variation across the region. The influence of major external powers, such as the United States and Russia, has had lasting effects on democratic stability, governance, policymaking, and cultural dynamics. This study focuses on the South-South relationship between China and Latin America. Combining geocoded project data from the Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD) with two decades of Latinobarometro survey waves, we examine the impact of increased aid from a non-democratic regime on attitudes toward democracy in the region. Our findings indicate that countries receiving Chinese foreign aid experience an immediate and sustained improvement in pro-democratic attitudes. Notably, we observe no change in opinions about China itself, suggesting that the effects are not driven by shifts in perceptions of the country. Furthermore, the most significant effects are in countries with the least democratic governance. These results suggest that democratic values in Latin America may be more resilient to non-democratic influences than previously thought, indicating a potential backlash against authoritarianism.

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