

Citizen Polling on CCP Influence in the LAC Region

Executive summary

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leverages its economic and political influence in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) to further its geopolitical agenda across the region. CCP involvement comes with corruption and unmet promises that can degrade local democratic institutions. While many actors are working to combat CCP influence in LAC, there are large knowledge gaps influencing public perception. The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted nationally representative surveys and in-depth interviews with experts in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama to research public opinion and perception of CCP influence throughout the region. The research demonstrates that citizens in the four surveyed countries are largely unaware of CCP investment and influence. The study also highlights how the CCP is using the media to influence popular perceptions. The general populations in the four surveyed countries are unaware of the CCP's geopolitical agenda. IRI delineates recommendations for domestic and international stakeholders to use this survey to close the knowledge gaps and minimize the negative impacts of CCP influence on democratic institutions.

Background

The CCP has [instrumentalized](#) economic engagement with countries across LAC to exert influence in the economic, political, and informational domains.¹ Leveraging expanded trade and investment ties, the CPP has [deployed a range of tactics](#) to advance its own interests in LAC, often at the expense of democracy. On the economic front, opacity surrounding CCP and CCP-affiliated entities' business and negotiating practices frequently produce negative consequences for recipient countries' finances and democracy.² The poor quality, labor practices, and importing of materials in CPP infrastructure projects have detrimental effects on the economy and environment of many of these countries. Alongside these economic practices, the CCP works to cultivate – or co-opt – political elites or to pressure the unwilling. China's growing economic clout is a two-sided coin for many political elites. Beijing's efforts to promote its economic model has won converts among some, while in other cases the appeal lies simply in the economic benefits (corruption among them) that cooperation with China makes possible.³

These efforts are supported by a comprehensive, well-resourced effort to shape local public opinion on its rise.⁴ Deploying tools from censorship to purchasing stakes in local media outlets, and content-sharing to cultivation of local proxies in the media, the PRC (People's Republic of China) seeks to promote its narrative and advanced positive perceptions of China and its presence in target countries. This deteriorates the state of independent media in the countries affected.

The overall results of PRC influence efforts can be a weakening of democratic institutions, a reduced inclination to support democratic norms globally, and/or increased support for the PRC's deeply

¹ See, for example: Ellis, Evan. "China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean: Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 31 March 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/congressional_testimony/ts220331_Ellis_Testimony.pdf?Yjf9iiv14ntLWuOfUn8LcxsYE0ldI32y.

² "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response." *International Republican Institute*, February 2021, <https://www.iri.org/resources/china-expands-global-authoritarian-influence-efforts-some-fragile-democracies-show-resilience-against-ccp-aggression/>.

³ "Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence." *International Republican Institute*, September 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/coercion-capture-and-censorship-case-studies-on-the-ccps-quest-for-global-influence/>.

⁴ Ibid.

authoritarian model of governance and global ambitions. As regional governments increase their economic dependency on China, the CCP becomes increasingly well-positioned to leverage these relationships to further their geopolitical aims across LAC. While there are a growing number of regional stakeholders working to bolster resilience to CCP influence in LAC, they often lack an understanding of public perceptions of these foreign interventions, as there are few surveys assessing how citizens understand and assess the CCP's targeted interventions in their countries and the overall region.

To equip domestic and international stakeholders with the resources needed to bolster regional resistance against foreign influences in LAC, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted nationally representative public opinion surveys and supplemental qualitative research to gauge and understand the knowledge of CCP influence in four indicative countries in the region.

Methodology

a. *Quantitative*

IRI designed and commissioned nationally representative opinion surveys in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama with a sample size of approximately n=1,200 adults per country. IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) developed sampling and fieldwork protocols for the four countries, and IRI selected CID Gallup to conduct data collection for this multi-country poll. The data collection mode varied by country, based on factors such as phone penetration, geographic size, and COVID-19 restrictions at the time of fieldwork. Survey fieldwork took place through phone interviews (CATI) in Argentina (September 23-October 15, 2021), and through face-to-face interviews at the respondents' homes (CAPI) in El Salvador (September 13-25, 2021), Panama (September 9-October 5, 2021) and the Dominican Republic (September 11-27, 2021.)

IRI developed a questionnaire to elicit insights into public judgement and understanding of the scope and effects of the CCP's influence in their respective countries and the LAC region. The questionnaire was tested through cognitive interviews in Panama to maximize both understanding and resonance of the survey questions among regular citizens, due to the challenges of discussing a subject matter removed from citizens' everyday concerns.

Upon receipt of the raw data, CISR thoroughly vetted each country's dataset to ensure representative samples, to investigate suspicious patterns that may arise from deviation from fieldwork protocols, and to ensure internal cohesion – i.e. the relative absence of contradictory responses within the same interview. Once data was vetted by IRI, it was disaggregated through relevant lenses for each country and data visualizations were developed. This information was then used for the qualitative research process.

b. *Qualitative*

IRI commissioned Q-Q Research Consultants (Q-Q) to conduct five in-depth interviews (IDIs) per country to supplement polling. Q-Q conducted 20 in depth interviews in total, five per each study country. The interviews were held via video-calls in January 2022. The IDIs were conducted with experts in CCP influence from a variety of backgrounds including academia, consumer protection groups, government, civil society organizations, and journalism. The experts reviewed the poll findings, contextualized the quantitative data and provided additional insights based on their background. Q-Q followed strict security protocols to ensure expert privacy. These interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to form country analysis reports.

IRI also cross referenced the research with findings from the NED-funded BRIDGE program conducted by IRI's Center for Global Impact (CGI). The program interviewed key thought leaders and experts from

across the region on China's influence tactics, particularly shaping information environments conducive to the CCP's interests.

Overarching Findings

a. Populations in the four surveyed countries generally had minimal understanding of Chinese investment.

When asked if they were aware of major Chinese investment in their countries, 62% of survey respondents in Panama, 59% of survey respondents in El Salvador, 57% of survey respondents in Argentina and 55% of respondents in the Dominican Republic answered in the negative. The interviewed experts asserted that the Argentine public has almost "zero" knowledge of PRC investments, apart from seeing Chinese stores widely established in Buenos Aires. Experts added that, in contrast, elite Argentine society - business sector and academia - tend to be more informed of China's investment and influence in the country. Experts in the Dominican Republic agreed with poll findings that PRC investments were not well known by the public. In El Salvador, the general population does not have a relative understanding of China's investment as most are unaware of it due to little media coverage on the topic. Experts noted that Panama's general population is not knowledgeable about PRC investment. However, China is attempting to obtain major contracts in Panama, which might increase investment and awareness.

b. Populations in the four surveyed countries were generally unaware of Chinese influence within the country.

Experts stated that the general population in Argentina did not have a very good idea of China's strategic influence. When asked about how PRC involvement affects Argentine norms, laws, and rules, 52% of respondents answered they were not affected, whereas 21% believe that norms and laws become less similar to China's, and 11% believe rules, laws, and norms become more similar to China's as a result (Appendix A, Slide 47). Moreover, when Argentines were asked about PRC motivation to invest in their country, 77% of survey respondents believed its motives are economic and resource-driven rather than political. In the Dominican Republic, awareness of China's influence may have grown after the assistance that China afforded Dominicans during the pandemic but still remains low (Appendix A, Slide 75). Similarly, experts believe that China's influence in the country, as well as the general public's knowledge of this influence, is low in El Salvador. Salvadorans are often not exposed to PRC presence in their day-to-day lives, giving them very little cultural influence. Experts emphasized that most Salvadorans have family members in the U.S. and are, therefore, more influenced by U.S. culture. In contrast, the general Salvadoran population does not watch television from the PRC, is not in tune with news from the PRC, and usually has no interest in traveling to China. China has always had a strong influence on Panamanians, as 5% of Panamanians have Chinese ancestors,⁵ and there are large financial investments in Panama made by the CCP. However, experts emphasize that Panamanians are not aware of the consequences of this influence. Showcasing this indifference to CCP influence in Panama, only 12% of survey respondents in Panama expressed high interest in news about China.

⁵ Tone, Sixth. "For Chinese in Panama, Ethnicity Eclipses Cross-Straits Politics." #SixthTone, 4 Sept. 2017, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000802/for-chinese-in-panama%2C-ethnicity-eclipses-cross-straits-politics#:~:text=Around%205%20%%20of%20Panama's,its%20Cantonese%20name%2C%20Fa%20Yen.>

c. The COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in shaping a positive view of China in the four surveyed countries.

When asked how likely it was for China to emerge as a global leader in the world following the COVID-19 pandemic, 56% of survey respondents in Panama and 76% in Argentina answered it was ‘very likely’ or ‘somewhat likely’ (Appendix A, Slide 53). More specifically, 23% of Panamanians evaluated China’s performance with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic as ‘very positive,’ while 34% rated it ‘somewhat positive (Appendix A, Slide 135).’ In Argentina, 24% of survey respondents labeled China’s performance as ‘very positive,’ and 40% labeled it ‘somewhat positive’ (Appendix A, Slide 54). Additionally, 65% of survey respondents evaluated PRC support to Argentina in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat positive’ (Appendix A, Slide 55). Similarly, experts highlighted that China’s presence was perceived more positively after they were able to provide vaccines in the Dominican Republic. Experts noted that media outlets in the Dominican Republic portrayed PRC support throughout the pandemic positively. In El Salvador, when PRC vaccines arrived, President Nayib Bukele and the PRC ambassador received donations as part of a large media event. Experts argue that China was positioned by the government as the country saving the lives of Salvadorans. In Panama, experts noted that citizens were aware of significant PRC donations of hospital/medical equipment and of food aid packages to areas most affected by COVID-19. Experts argue that these donations swayed public opinion of the CCP to a more positive light.

d. The economy ranked highest as the greatest challenge for the surveyed countries

In the Dominican Republic, 22% of survey respondents stated unemployment is the greatest problem facing their country (Appendix A, Slide 68). The economy was closely followed by crime, violence, and insecurity at 21%. In Panama, 39% of respondents stated that unemployment was the most important problem facing their country (Appendix A, Slide 117). In El Salvador, 32% stated that unemployment was the most important problem facing the country, followed by crime, violence, and insecurity at 22% – which is notable due to the high violence rate (Appendix A, Slide 86). In Argentina, 29% of respondents stated that the economy/unemployment was the most important problem facing the country and 18% stated cost of living/high prices was the greatest challenge (Appendix A, Slide 24). These statistics show that the populations in the surveyed countries are concerned with their economic well-being, which may serve as an avenue China can exploit through seemingly lucrative investments that may truly be short-lived, harmful to the local environment and exploitative.

e. The majority of respondents across the surveyed countries primarily used television to gain political information, while China used TV media channels to promote its influence

This finding was strongest in Panama where 76% of respondents stated they most frequently used television to gain political information (Appendix A, Slide 137). The findings were similar in other countries with 73% in El Salvador, 71% in Argentina, and 69% in the Dominican Republic using television

as their primary source of political information. The expert in-depth interviews revealed that the PRC often uses television networks to promote their strategic agenda. In Panama, experts affirmed that media coverage of China is usually positive. There is a perception among participants that the PRC engages in strategies to ensure positive news coverage. These strategies include embedding individuals in various media forms, offering incentives, and supporting journalists and media workers travel to China, all in hopes of ensuring positive media coverage. In the Dominican Republic, experts affirmed that although there is not much media coverage of the PRC, existing media coverage has given positive publicity to PRC vaccine aid and pandemic relief.

e. Populations across the four countries generally believed that democracy was the best possible form of government, yet this did not seem to affect their view of China.

This sentiment was strongest in Argentina, where 80% of respondents stated that democracy was the best form of government (Appendix A, Slide 28). Interestingly, Argentines are also enthusiastic about strengthening ties with China. In fact, 65% of survey respondents in Argentina believe that PRC engagement in Argentina has had no effect on democracy in their country (Appendix A, Slide 49). Only 41% of Panamanian survey respondents believed that democracy is the best possible form of government (Appendix A, Slide 121). Thirty-five percent said that there are other forms of government that are better than democracy. Panamanians were almost evenly split between characterizing China as a democracy or dictatorship (Appendix A, Slide 125). Fifty-seven percent of respondents in El Salvador believe that democracy is the best possible form of government (Appendix A, Slide 90). However, experts are surprised that so many respondents in El Salvador are in favor of democracy, as it contradicts prior surveys about democratic sentiment they have seen. It is worth noting that the response rate on “don’t know/refuse to answer” is particularly high on this topic. Experts across all countries highlighted that China is not a democracy as they do not hold elections, have an authoritarian government, and do not respect human and labor rights. One Dominican expert opined that despite pervasive corruption in Latin America, the culture would not support a CCP-style government as democratic norms are too embedded to be easily changed by a country with a very different cultural background such as China (Appendix B, Interview D4).

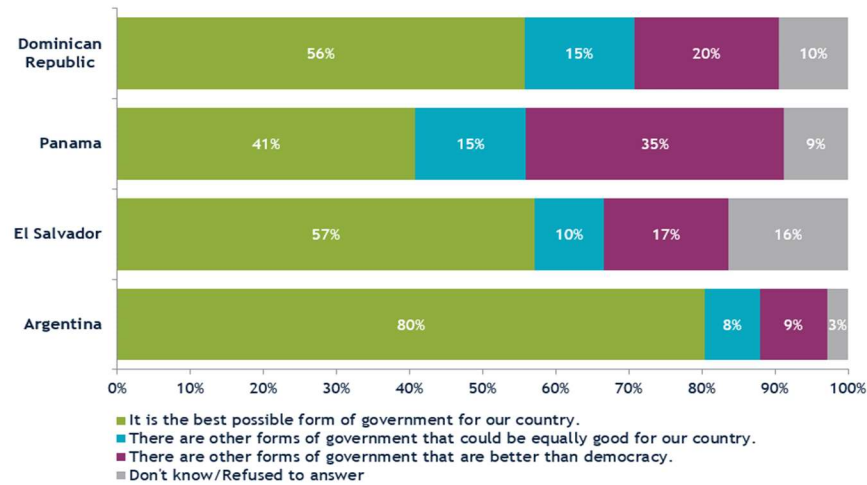
Which media platform do you use most frequently to gain political information?

(Up to three responses permitted; Cumulative response displayed)

Issue	Dominican Republic	Panama	El Salvador	Argentina
Television	69%	76%	73%	71%
Social media	60%	55%	60%	64%
Internet (other than social media)	56%	46%	50%	70%
Communications platforms like WhatsApp	41%	48%	28%	21%
Radio	26%	32%	26%	30%
Print media	5%	14%	9%	12%
Other	8%	5%	3%	1%
*None	2%	2%	5%	2%
*Don't know/Refused to answer	1%	<1%	1%	<1%



Do you believe that democracy is the best possible form of government for our country or not?



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Argentina

IRI conducted 1,202 computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) in Argentina between September 23 and October 15, 2021. To design a nationally representative sample, a multi-stage sampling method was used in which mobile phone numbers were generated using operator codes taken from the national telephone numbering plan.

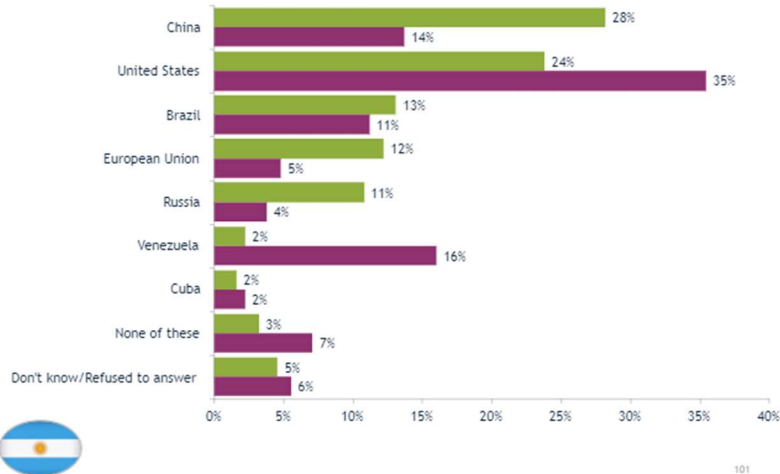
Experts affirmed that China is seen as a country that provides gifts to Argentina and sponsors officials to travel to China. Additionally, experts noted there are corrupt practices in competing for projects, but they noted that these practices are not exclusive to China. When Argentines were asked about corruption in the survey— defined as them having to do a favor, giving a gift card or paying a bribe because someone misuses their position for personal gains – 37% stated corruption has **had a lot** of negative impact on them and 22% said it has **not had** any negative impact on them (Appendix A, Slide 29). Experts note that many Argentines feel that paying bribes or giving in to the system of corruption is a necessary cost of business – many Argentines have no time to feel guilty about paying bribes. Experts emphasized that corruption in Argentina and in Latin America is so commonplace that PRC corruption is not a big concern.

In Argentina, 35% of survey respondents said that the U.S. is the most important economic threat to the country, compared to 14% listing China as the most important economic threat. In comparison, 28% of respondents stated that China is the most important economic partner compared to 24% who stated it is the U.S. (Appendix A, Slide 32). Experts attributed this to two main factors: (1) China is often viewed as an economic stimulator by Argentines, (2) the anti-American sentiment may cause Argentines to support or prefer other countries (3) China appeals to Argentines as an alternative country for financial support when Argentina faces issues financing its debt with the IMF (Appendix B, Interview A13). Positive U.S. perception has been on a decreasing trend, while positive perception of China is on the rise. Many believe that China can alleviate Argentina from its debts and economic hardships. For example, the interviewed experts noted that China is one of the main recipients of Argentinian food exports, supporting Argentina’s economy (Appendix B, Interview A13). One of the experts explained that Argentina produces ten times the amount of food needed to sustain their own population. China now functions as a major strategic partner for this market, allowing exports into their country without many commercial obstacles – improving China’s perception within Argentina.



Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important economic partner for Argentina?

Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important economic threat for Argentina?



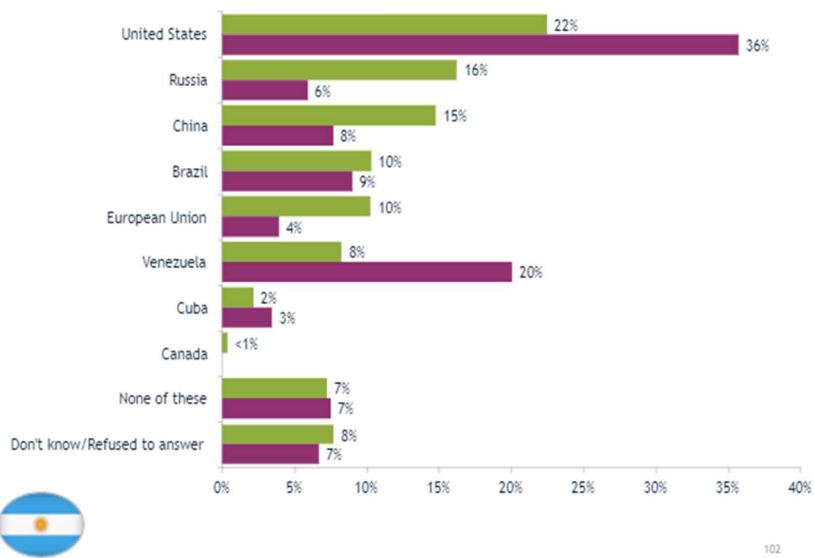
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In Argentina, 36% of survey respondents said the U.S. was the most important political threat for the country compared, to only 8% stating that China was the most important political threat. In comparison, 22% of respondents stated that U.S. was the most important political partner compared to 15% who stated that China was the most important political partner (Appendix A, Slide 33). Experts noted that the Argentine government can be split into two groups: a pro-U.S. group and a pro-China group. Additionally, some well-known media outlets, like *Clarín* and *La Nación*, are more pro-U.S.. Similarly, *Infobae*, the most read online media platform, publishes investigative pieces painting China in a negative light. On the contrary, state-sponsored media outlets, like *Página 12* and *la República*, are often considered more pro-China. Thus, Argentines are strongly influenced by the type of media consumed and have split views on China and the U.S.

Survey respondents were also asked if they were aware of any major Chinese investment in Argentina. Fifty-seven percent of respondents stated they were not, while 34% said they were aware of investments (Appendix A, Slide 35). Out of those who claimed to be aware of investments, 26% were aware of infrastructure projects and 14% of the Pig Agreement (Acuerdo Porcino), a trade agreement allowing for PRC investments in Argentinian pork production (Appendix A, Slide 36). Experts affirmed that the general public has almost no knowledge about the details of strategic PRC investments in Argentina. Experts concluded that the general population's perception of China is largely indifferent. However, experts noted that the political class and intellectual elite view PRC influence in Argentina as a financial opportunity and have a positive perception of the country.

Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important political partner for Argentina?

Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important political threat for Argentina?



Dominican Republic

IRI conducted 1,220 face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) in the Dominican Republic between September 11 and 27, 2021. A multi-stage sampling method was used to design a nationally representative sample according to data from the Dominican Republic’s 2010 census.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the Dominican Republic’s most important economic partner and biggest economic threat as well as the most important political partner and most important political threat. In the Dominican Republic there was a more favorable view of the U.S. than in other countries surveyed. 64% of respondents listed the U.S. as the most important economic partner and 66% named them as the most important political partner (Appendix A, Slides 73 and 74). In turn, 18% stated China was the biggest economic threat, and 12% stated that China was the biggest political threat.

Experts alluded to an increase in positive public perception by Dominicans of China. The media utilized a communication strategy to encourage the narrative that China was providing donations and emergency assistance. For example, an expert noted that one media network held a large concert for New Year’s Eve on the city’s boardwalk, in which they invited China’s ambassador as an honorary guest and portrayed him as a celebrity (Appendix B, Interview D1). The experts emphasized the ambassador’s savvy use of social media to portray the PRC positively (Appendix B, Interview D4). The experts also noted that these strategies prove effective as a substantial portion of the population obtain their news from social media over political or economic news programs.

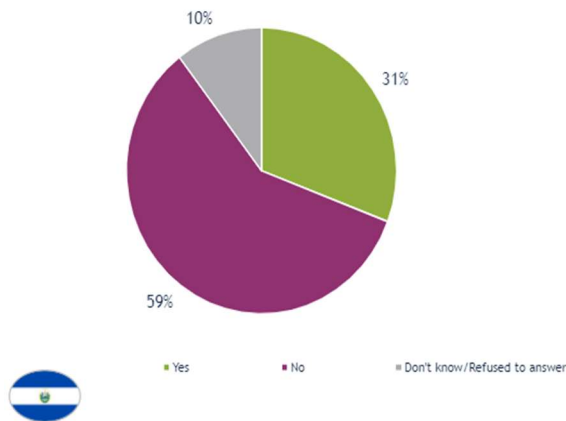
Experts confirmed that the U.S. is still viewed very positively. There are strong ties between the two countries – with more than a million Dominicans in the U.S., most Dominicans have a relative living in the U.S. However, experts say that the PRC gave significant assistance to the Dominican Republic during the COVID 19 pandemic, including support for health providers and firefighters (Appendix B, Interview D4). In response to the pandemic, the PRC was the first country to provide vaccines to the Dominicans. PRC corporations have also invested in academic exchanges, as well as programs that fund trips to China for youth and individuals in politics, media, and academia.

El Salvador

IRI conducted 1,205 face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) in El Salvador between September 13 and September 25, 2021. A multi-stage sampling method was used to design a nationally representative sample according to data from El Salvador's 2007 census and the 2016 National Household Survey (ENAHO).

When Salvadorans were asked about corruption – defined as them having to do a favor, giving a gift card or paying a bribe because someone misuses their position for personal gains – 30% stated that corruption has had substantial negative impact on them while 38% said it has not had any negative impact on them (Appendix A, Slide 91). To that end, experts shared that the business sector and the most educated segments of the population associate PRC projects with clientelism, corruption and lack of transparency. Meanwhile, the average citizens do not hold the same negative associations related to China. Furthermore, experts noted that citizens believe that China and the current Salvadorian government do not prioritize the rule of law or democracy and do not associate these governments with public administration principles, such as transparency and accountability. Experts also emphasized that positive media coverage of China can make it easier for the CCP to act corruptly, as there is less transparency and scrutiny of their actions.


▶ Are you aware of any major Chinese investment in our country?

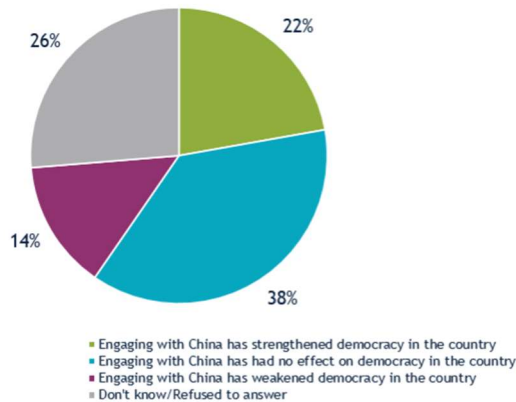


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When asked who they believed to be the biggest foreign donor to El Salvador, 54% of survey respondents listed the U.S. while 21% answered China (Appendix A, Slide 92). Experts elaborated that the general population had a basic understanding of PRC investment as some of their projects were highlighted by both the media and President Nayib Bukele. However, they are not aware of specific details, partially due to the fact that El Salvador only began its partnership with China in 2019, a year after it cut ties with Taiwan. Historically, China has had little economic, political and cultural influence in the country.

When asked if they were aware of Chinese investments, 31% said yes. Out of those participants, 27% mentioned the covid-19 vaccine, 22% factories, and 17% infrastructure, with the rest giving varied answers such as donations, job creation, telecommunications, etc. (see appendix A, Slide 96). Experts commented

 To your best knowledge, which of the following statements best reflects how democracy in the country has been impacted by the country's engagement with China?



weakened democracy, and 26% didn't know or refused to answer (Appendix A, Slide 105). Experts affirmed that Salvadorean perception of China is still mainly indifferent. Many Salvadoreans see China positively as the country has promised to engage economically in El Salvador. However, some segments of the population are skeptical as none of the promised projects have been completed. Experts highlighted that the government's communication strategy is to portray China as positively as possible. President Bukele's government has several newspapers, radio stations, and a large group of influencers that are active on social media, which allows them to control information in the country.

that the PRC was the first country to donate vaccines to El Salvador. When the vaccines arrived, President Bukele and the Chinese ambassador received the donations as part of a large media event. However, there was no media coverage when the U.S. donated vaccines months later. Through this strategic media campaign, the PRC has been positioned by the government as the country saving the lives of Salvadorans with vaccine donations.

Salvadorans were also asked how democracy in the country has been impacted by the country's engagement with China. 38% of respondents stated that engaging with China had no effect on democracy, 22% stated it strengthened democracy, 14% stated that it has

Panama

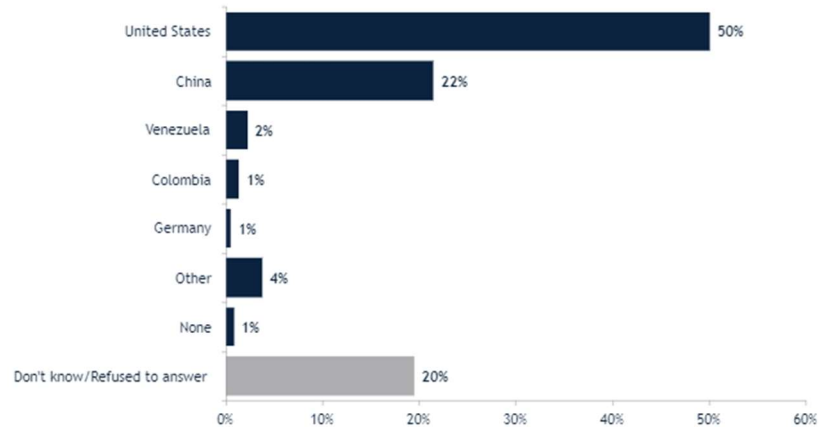
IRI conducted 1,216 face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) in Panama between September 9 and October 5, 2021. A multi-stage sampling method was used to design a nationally representative sample according to data from the Panama's 2010 census.

When Panamanians were asked about corruption – defined as them having to do a favor, giving a gift card or paying a bribe because someone misuses their position for personal gains – 33% stated corruption has had a negative impact on them and 32% said it has not had any negative impact on them (Appendix A, Slide 122).

Experts shared that the PRC not only engages in corrupt practices but also in "totalitarian" practices. They explained that there is a cultural element of corruption at play as many of the practices that would be considered corrupt by the U.S. are not viewed as corrupt in China due to the totalitarian nature of their government. Overall, experts stated that Chinese firms carrying out projects and importing Chinese labor are perceived to engage in corrupt practices by Panamanians. Experts believe that there are mixed perceptions of U.S. corruption. Panamanians who believe that the U.S. is corrupt may be influenced by a feeling that the U.S. has taken advantage of Panama in the past for its own interests, such as in the 1989 invasion (Appendix B, Interview P5).



Which would you say is the biggest foreign donor to Panama?

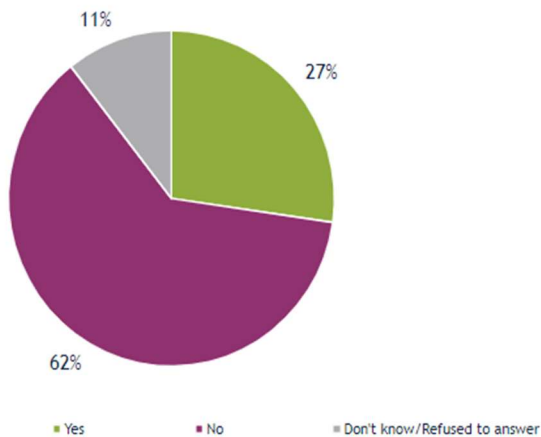


*Responses receiving <1% are collapsed into Other.

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Are you aware of any major Chinese investment in our country?



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When asked who they believed to be the biggest foreign donor to Panama, 50% answered the U.S. while 22% stated China (Appendix A, Slide 123). Experts noted that the general population's knowledge of China is extremely limited, and that general international relations issues are not well known. Panama is one of the countries in Latin America with the longest tradition of PRC presence. This is because around 15% of Panamanians have Chinese ancestors. Still, until about five years ago, Panamanians had a negative perception of China as Panama had a decade-long relationship with Taiwan. In 2017, the Panamanian government cut ties

with Taiwan in favor of friendlier relations with the PRC. The Panamanian public reacted negatively to this

as it was done so secretly that many key officials were not even aware that it was happening. (Appendix B, Interview P5). Although the breakup with Taiwan was not well received by the public, the PRC have tried to change that perception. According to experts, the CCP has been successful in turning public opinion in its favor through strategies such as offering scholarships to both graduate and postgraduate students to go to China. Furthermore, CCP is still attempting to expand its reach in Panama by gaining new contracts, such as the concession for electric generation on the Atlantic. Though Panamanians care about corruption, the general population is not as aware of PRC investments or corrupt practices.

When asked about perception of governments, 75% of survey respondents characterized the U.S. as a democracy and 68% characterized Panama as a democracy, while 46% characterized China as a dictatorship (Appendix A, Slide 125). Experts affirmed that most Panamanians have a better perception of the U.S. than of China. 59% of respondents see the U.S. as Panama's most important economic partner and 62% see the U.S. as its most important political partner (Appendix A, Slides 126 and 127). Although the U.S. is certainly perceived more positively than China, perception of China is changing. Experts highlighted that these perceptions may be affected by socio-economic status and education level. Panamanians often see the U.S. and China as two superpowers in competition. Over half of survey respondents believe that it is likely or somewhat likely that China will emerge as a global leader following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

1. *Target briefings to business community, academia, civil society and media.*

As the general population in each of the four surveyed countries has very limited awareness of PRC investment and influence, IRI recommends targeted briefings to community leaders to promote the information collected. Specifically, members of the business community and academia should understand the political history, as well as the recent pitfalls of PRC involvement, including the corruption and lack of follow-through that comes with PRC projects. Civil society members work to strengthen their country's democratic institutions and would benefit from this information to inform citizens of how China can deteriorate the democratic fabric in these countries. Independent journalists and media outlets would benefit from a better understanding of the depth of PRC influence in the region's media networks, as well as the corrosive consequences of this influence on the state of democracy. Furthermore, journalists who are aware of the pitfalls of PRC investment will be able to better increase public awareness which can be beneficial in this context.

2. *Meet with country-specific stakeholders to develop tailored programming.*

With the in-depth interviews and country-specific polling, this report was able to contextualize the information found on public perception of PRC influence. However, IRI recommends brainstorming sessions with local stakeholders to develop avenues to promote the messaging of information on PRC influence. For example, collaborating with stakeholders already working in the anti-corruption or independent media space to counter PRC strategies in ways that are relevant to each country's context. Tailored programming to counter PRC strategies could help equip local media outlets with the know-how to communicate the risks of PRC influence more effectively and make it relatable by displaying how PRC involvement negatively affects the everyday lives of people from the countries surveyed.

3. *Use target messaging to tie PRC involvement in LAC to anti-corruption efforts.*

IRI recommends focusing on issue areas related to the economic investment of the PRC, such as anti-corruption, as an avenue to inform the general population and raise public awareness of the

negative impact of PRC investment. Respondents from each of the four surveyed countries expressed concern about the direction that their country is headed in. Specifically, the respondents said that economic issues are the most important problem facing their country. Because citizens are deeply concerned with the economic standing of their country, directly linking PRC investment with corruption will inform citizens of the potential negative consequences of PRC influence. Messaging could demonstrate how corruption results in inefficient allocation of resources, the presence of a shadow economy, and low-quality public services – which pose a risk to economic growth. Increasing awareness of the negative effects of PRC investment is key to increasing awareness and interest in PRC influence among the general population.

Appendices

Appendix A – Polling Results from Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama

Appendix B – In-depth Expert Interviews from Argentina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama