January 2022

Survey of opinion leaders: Assessments of China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean

This survey and report were undertaken as part of an American University project supported by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and the U.S. Department of State.

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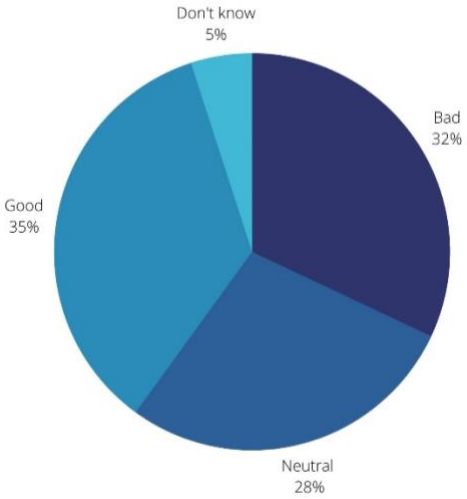
KEY FIGURES

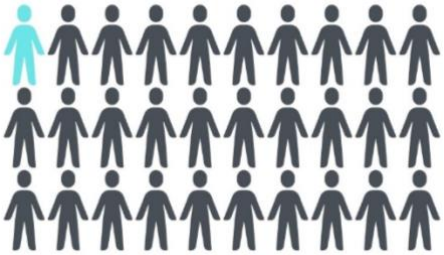
336
Opinion leaders from 23 countries responded to the survey

35%
Have a good or very good opinion of China

78%
Consider China's influence in Latin America to be high

86%
Consider China's influence on the region's economy to be high





1 of 30
Respondents consider China's media influence in Latin America to be high

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This survey and report were undertaken as part of an American University project supported by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and the U.S. Department of State.

I. Introduction

As part of a multi-faceted research program on China's engagements in Latin America and the Caribbean, undertaken in partnership with American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, the Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales (CRIES) conducted an online survey of opinion leaders to gauge sentiment in the region toward China and to place this in comparative perspective. The survey, fielded between May and July 2021, elicited responses from 336 people distributed across 23 countries in the Americas. Among the main findings is that China is seen as a major power with a high degree of influence in Latin America and the Caribbean in comparison to other countries engaged with the region. However, this influence is characterized in relatively negative terms, and Chinese media do not seem to have significant influence on public opinion.

II. What is the view of China among opinion leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean?

Our survey found that fewer than 15% of respondents have a very favorable opinion of the Asian giant, while slightly less than a quarter of respondents have a positive opinion. However, about 30% of those surveyed have an "intermediate" opinion of Beijing, while a third has a negative or very negative opinion. What does this distribution of opinion mean? If we compare it with judgements regarding other outside powers, we find that attitudes toward China are among the lowest, and comparable to Russia's and India's.

Figure 1. Latin American and Caribbean Opinion Leader Attitudes toward China

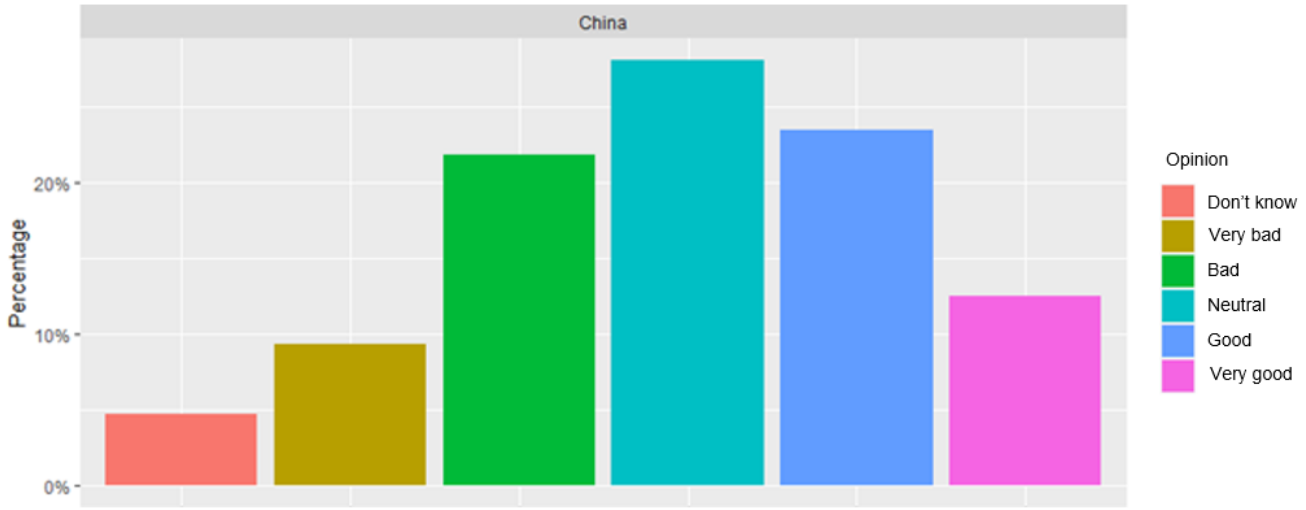
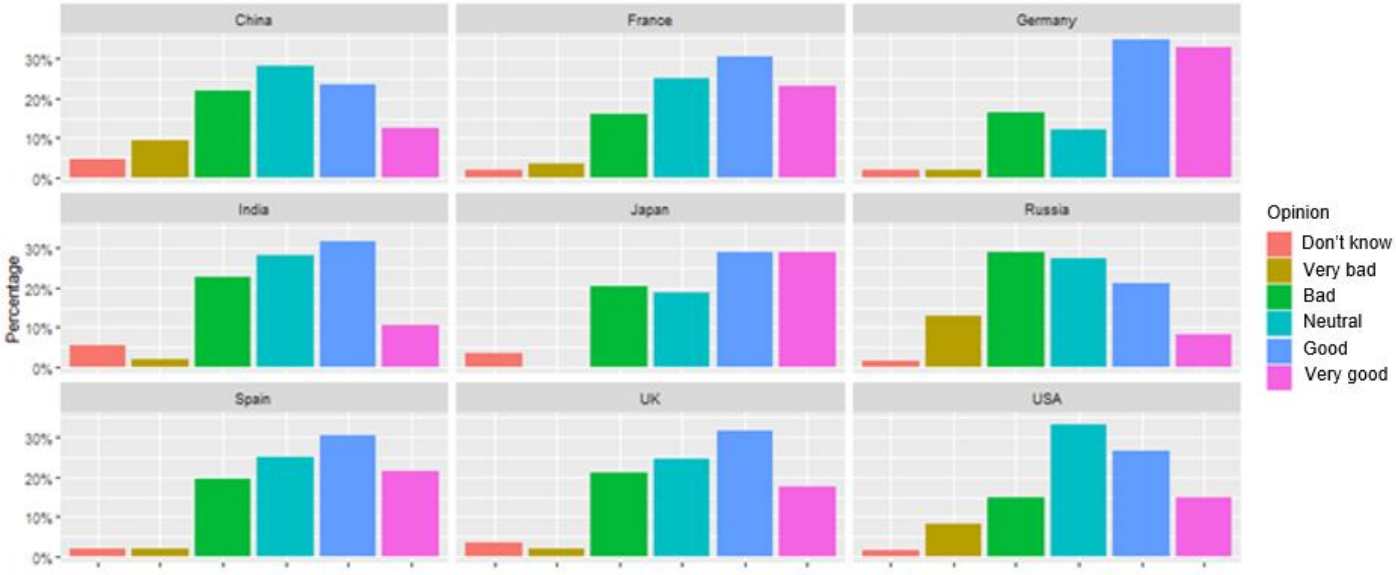


Figure 2. Opinion of China and other outside powers



However, opinion towards China varies along socio-demographic lines. In terms of age, those over 66 years old express a more positive opinion about Beijing than their younger counterparts, while those between 36 and 45 years old have the lowest proportion of good or very good opinions about China. Interestingly, the youngest respondents (age between18 and 25) represent the group with both the highest proportion of positive and negative opinions about China. If we look instead at the occupation of the respondents, professionals working in consulting and the private sector represent the highest percentage of "very bad" opinions about China, while more than 37% of scholars have a good or very good opinion about Beijing, the highest alongside professionals from international organizations.

Figure 3. Opinion toward China disaggregated by age

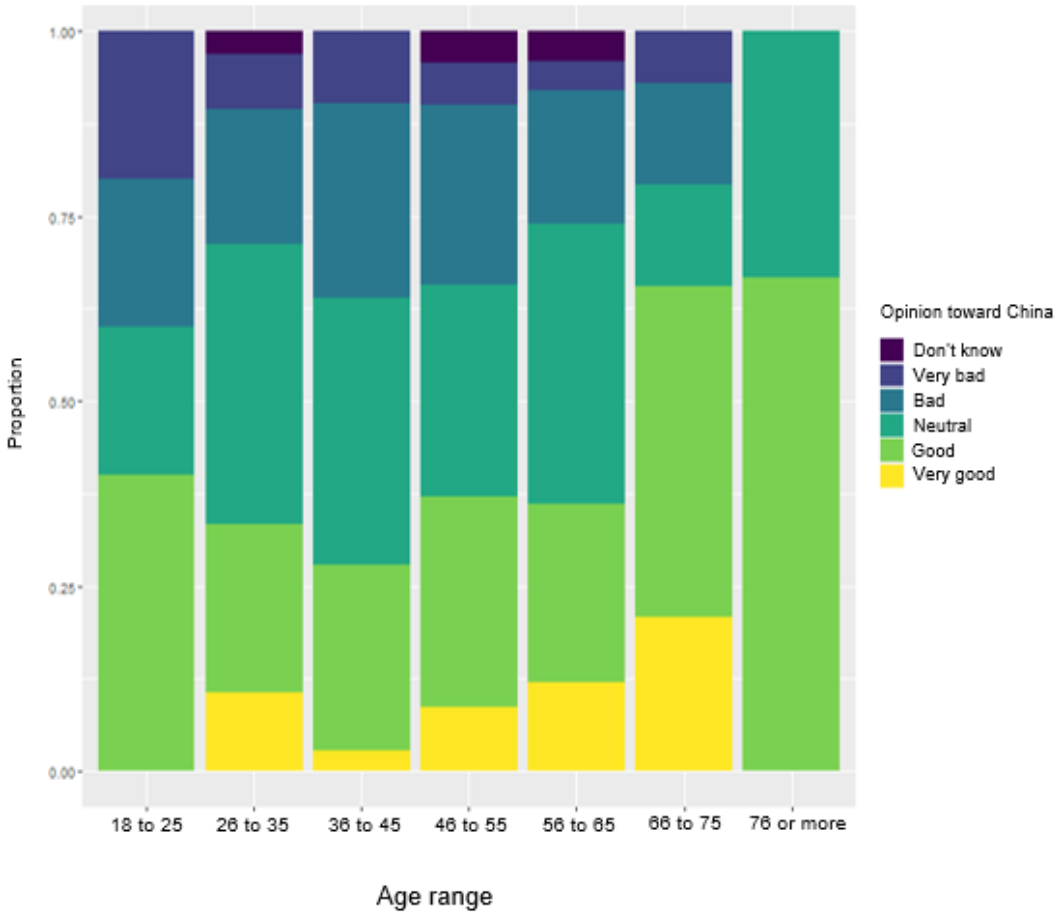
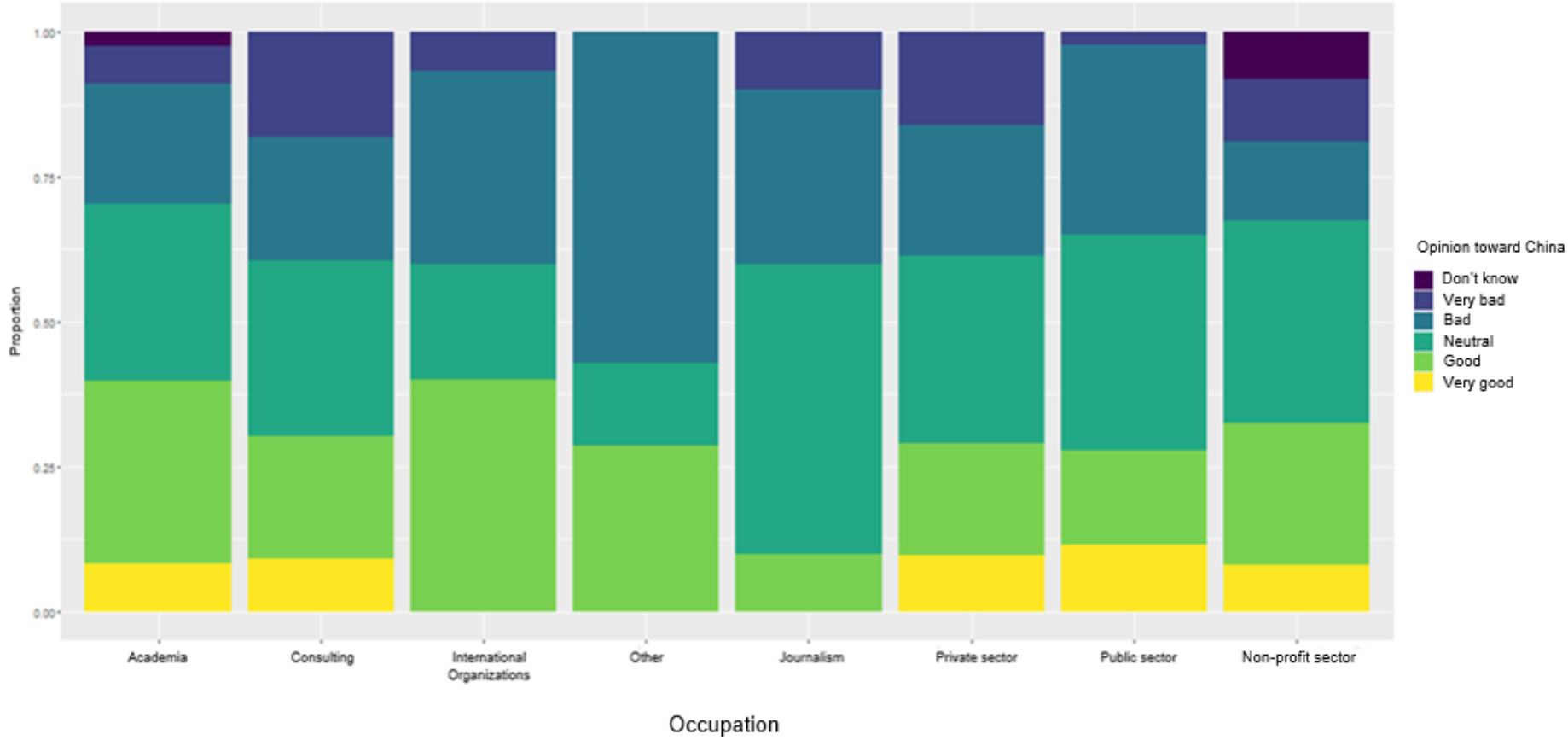


Figure 4. Opinion toward China disaggregated by occupation



Additional variability emerges from the respondents' differences in opinion of their own country's government. To cross-check the data with the information obtained on government opinion, respondents were divided into two groups according to their country of residence. Group 1 comprises those residing in Latin American countries whose foreign policy is arguably oriented towards the "Global South." Group 2 consists of countries whose foreign policy is relatively oriented to the "Global North" (See Annex 1).[1] Here we find that individuals with a good or very good opinion of their own government in Group 1 have a mostly favorable opinion of China. Particularly, more than half of respondents who are between values 6 and 9 on the scale of opinion about their governments (on a scale of 0 to 10) express positive opinions about China. In contrast, individuals who have a mostly negative opinion about Group 1 governments present relatively low opinions about China. In contrast to what was observed in Group 1, in Group 2 there is no clear correlation between opinions about the respondent's own government and evaluations of the role of China. This suggest that in countries where governments pursue foreign policies articulated in terms of the "Global South," attitudes toward China among its supporters may be comparatively favorable.

[1] The classification of countries into these two groups serves mainly the purposes of showing interesting patterns. It is not an official nor a validated classification and should not be used beyond this report.

Figure 5. Opinion toward China disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 1 countries

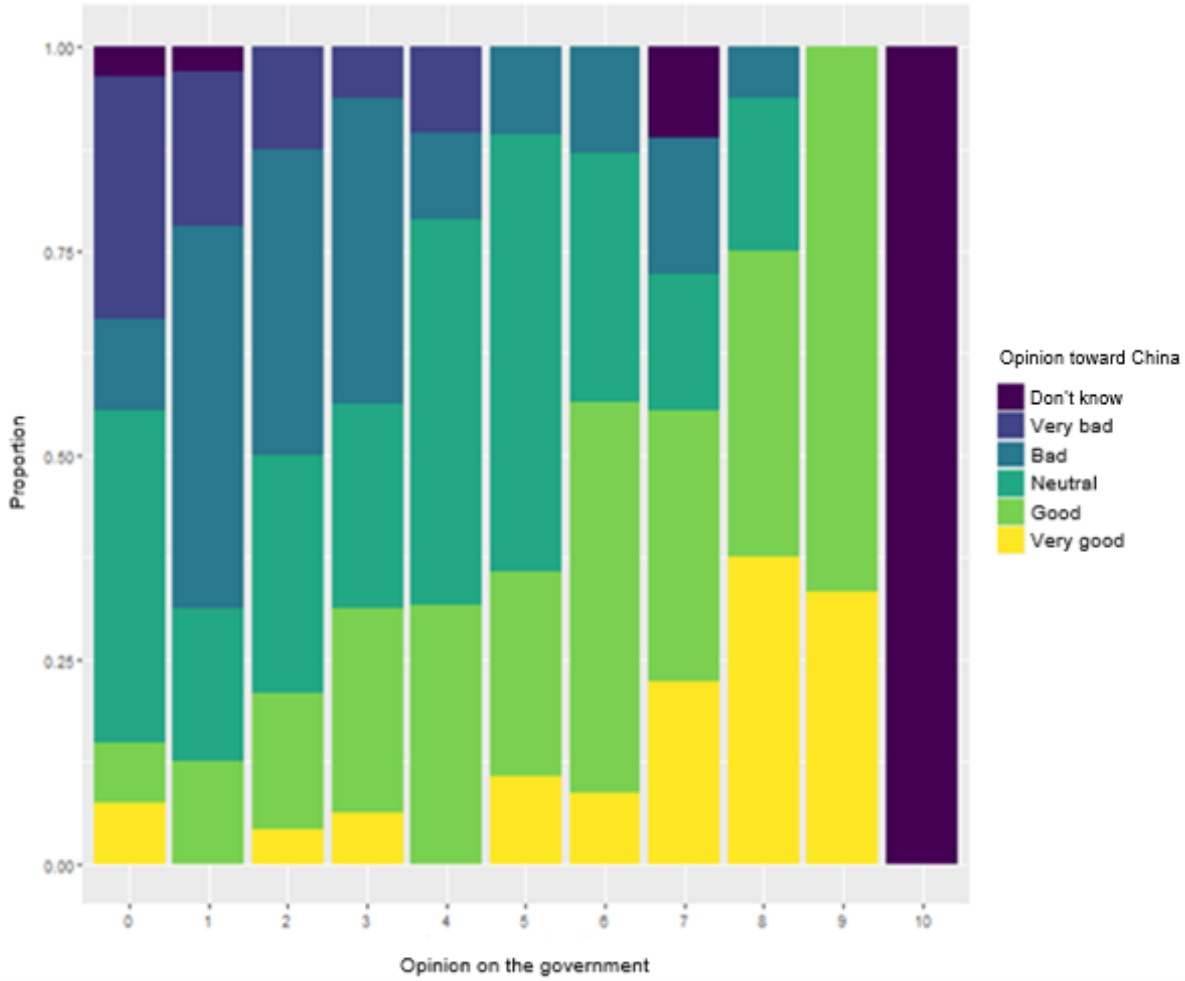
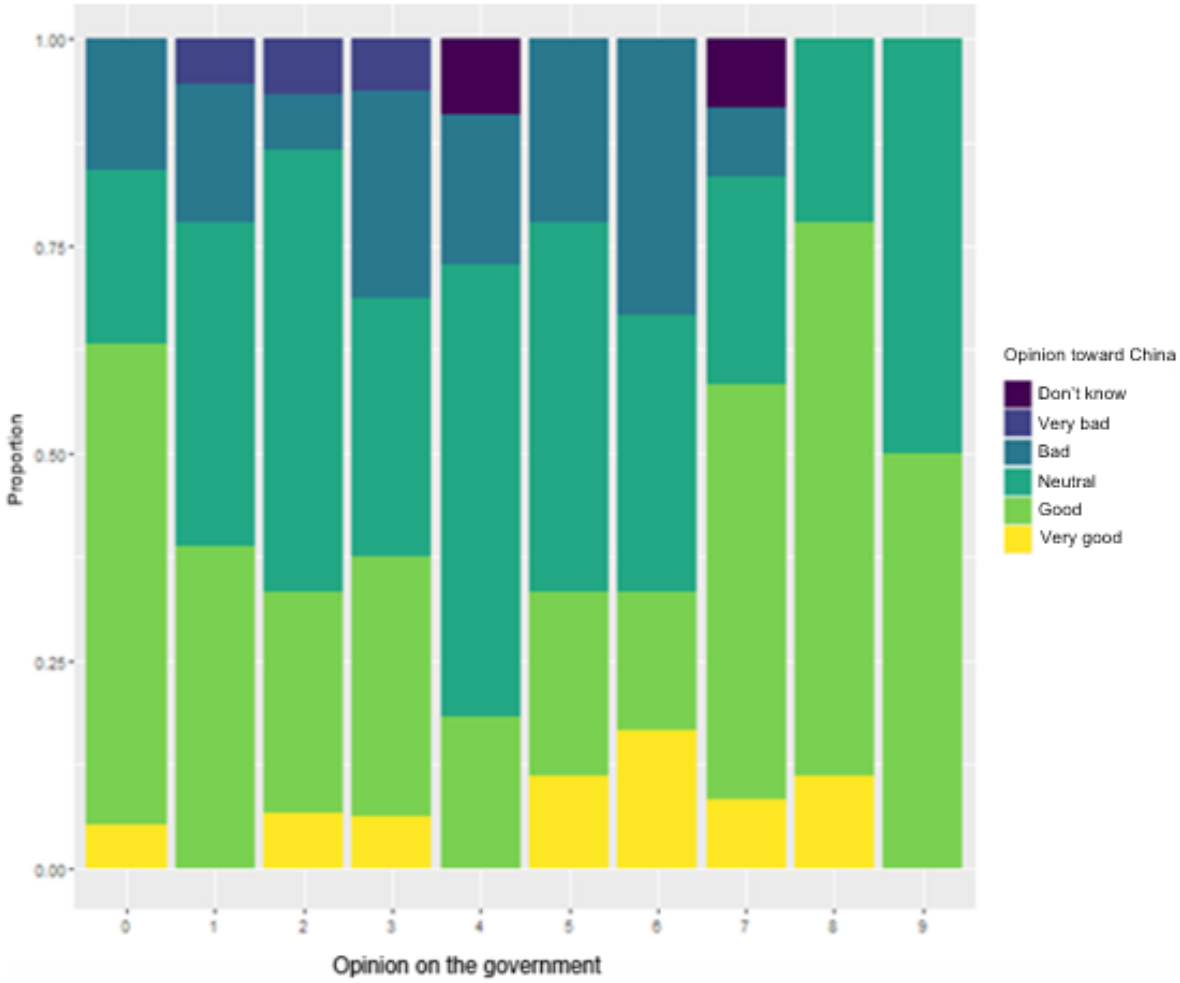


Figure 6. Opinion toward China disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 2



III. What type of engagement should Latin American and Caribbean countries have with China?

According to opinion leaders we surveyed, on average, the top priority Latin American and Caribbean countries should have with China is trade, followed by foreign direct investment and financial ties. Last in order of priority would be cooperation in international security, and there is also minimal support for engagement around multilateral cooperation and human rights. Notably, this order of priorities coincides with that expressed regarding relations with the United States. This would indicate that opinion leaders consider that the region's priorities in its bilateral relations with great powers do not change drastically whether we are focusing on relations with Washington or Beijing. The only statistically significant difference concerns international security: in the case of the United States, international security is on average higher than that assigned to relations with China (although it is still the last priority).

Figure 7. Prioritization of bilateral ties with China

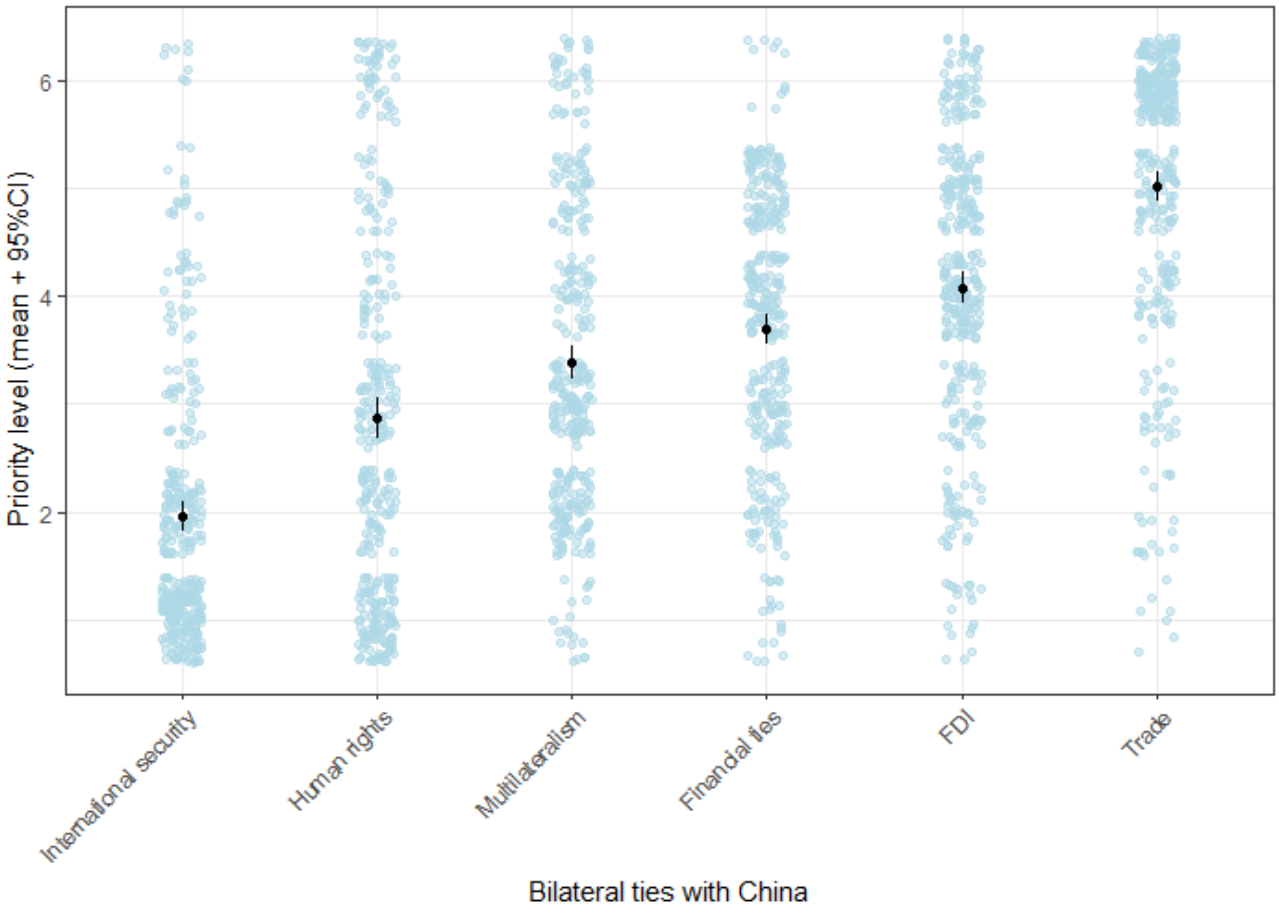
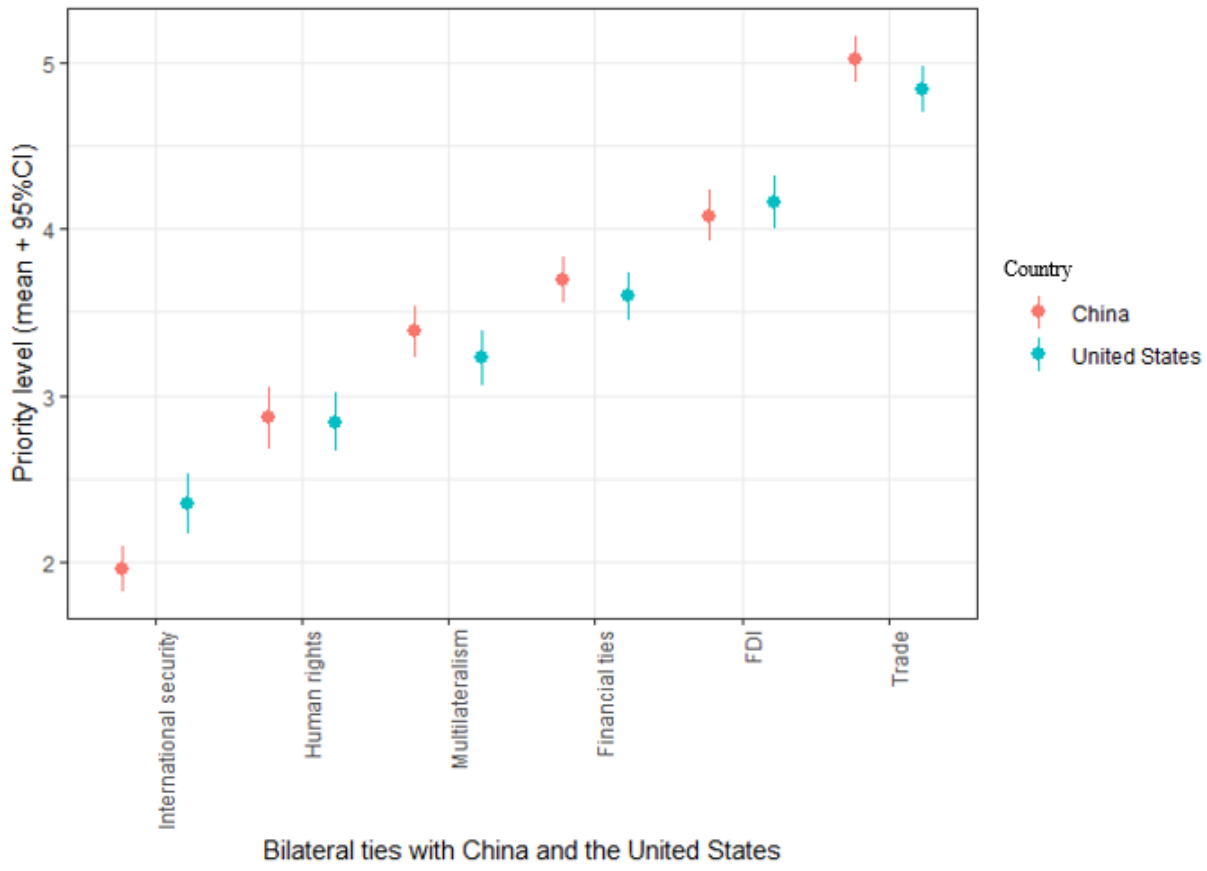


Figure 8. Prioritization of bilateral ties with China and the United States



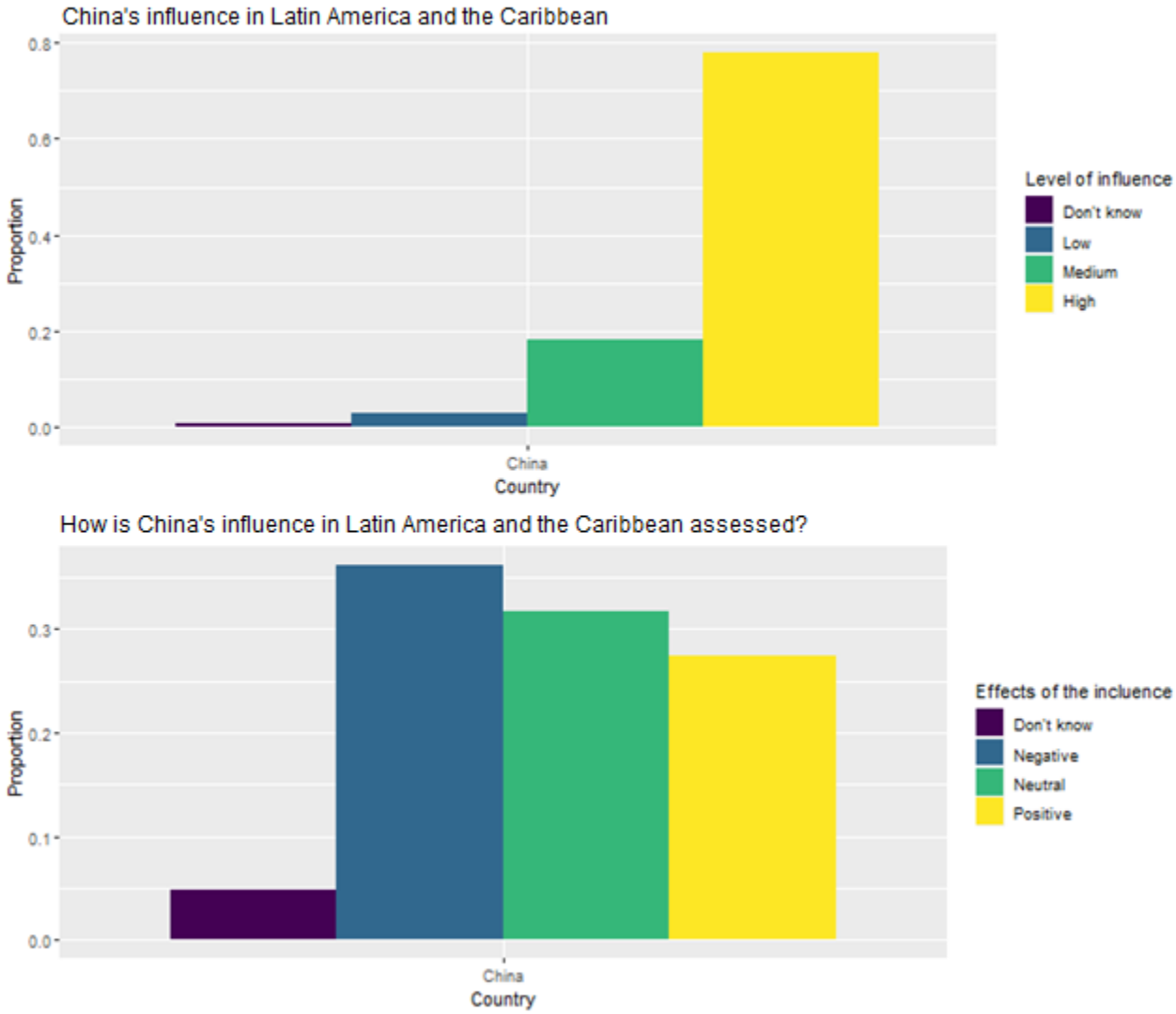
IV. China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

Although opinion leaders would privilege certain areas over others when engaging with China, this is conceptually different than perceived real influence. In other words, a person would like to engage with a given country, but the perceived influence of that country could be low as well as high. Similarly, a person could also have a bad opinion about a country but still believe that that country's influence on the region is too important to ignore.

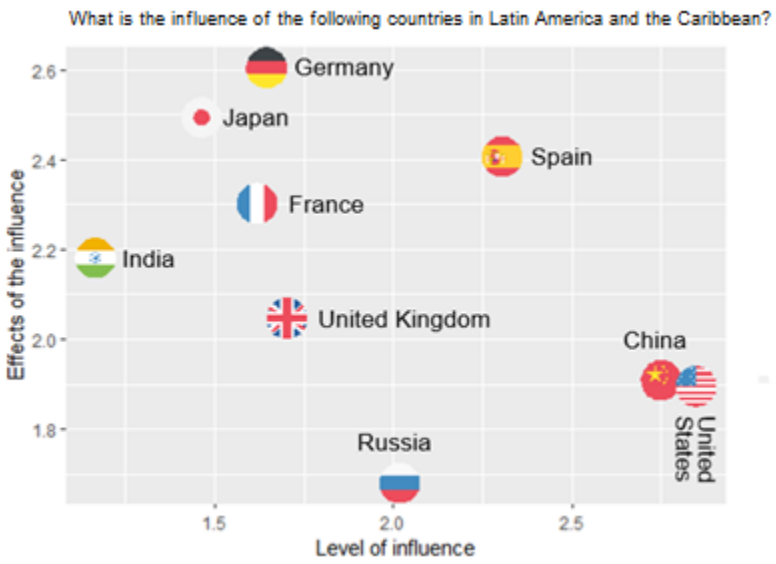
Regarding the perceived influence of China in Latin America and the Caribbean, almost 80% of survey respondents consider this influence to be high, while less than 5% consider it to be low. Only the United States is seen has having higher influence than the Asian giant. Washington is said to have the most influence in the region, followed by Beijing, Madrid and Moscow. But opinion leaders vary in their assessment of whether the influence exerted in the region by Beijing is positive. A little more than a third of them considers China's influence to be negative, while 32% consider it to be neutral and a little more than 25% label it to positive.[2] Compared to other powers, opinion leaders consider China's influence to be, on average, the second most negative, only after Russian influence in the region. German, Japanese and Spanish influence are considered, on average, to have the most positive influence in the region.

[2] The differences in the proportions of these responses are significant at 95% confidence Paired t test. P-value: 0.0000. Confidence interval: 3.511; 3.586.

Figure 9. China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean: level of influence and assessment of its effects



The negative relationship between a high level of influence and a positive assessment of that influence is not only found in the case of China. As can be seen in the following figure, the two countries with the greatest influence in the region, according to survey respondents, are among the three countries with the perceived most negative influence (only surpassed by Russia). Countries such as Germany or Japan, that are considered to have a relatively low influence in the region, are, in turn, those with the highest average positive influence in the region.



Regardless of their socio-demographic profile, almost 80% of the opinion leaders surveyed s consider Beijing's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean to be high. In other words, differences in age and profession do not predict differences in the levels of influence attributed to the Asian giant. Opinion leaders' opinion of the government of their countries of residence do not reveal significant changes in the perception of China's influence either.

Figure 10. China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean disaggregated by age

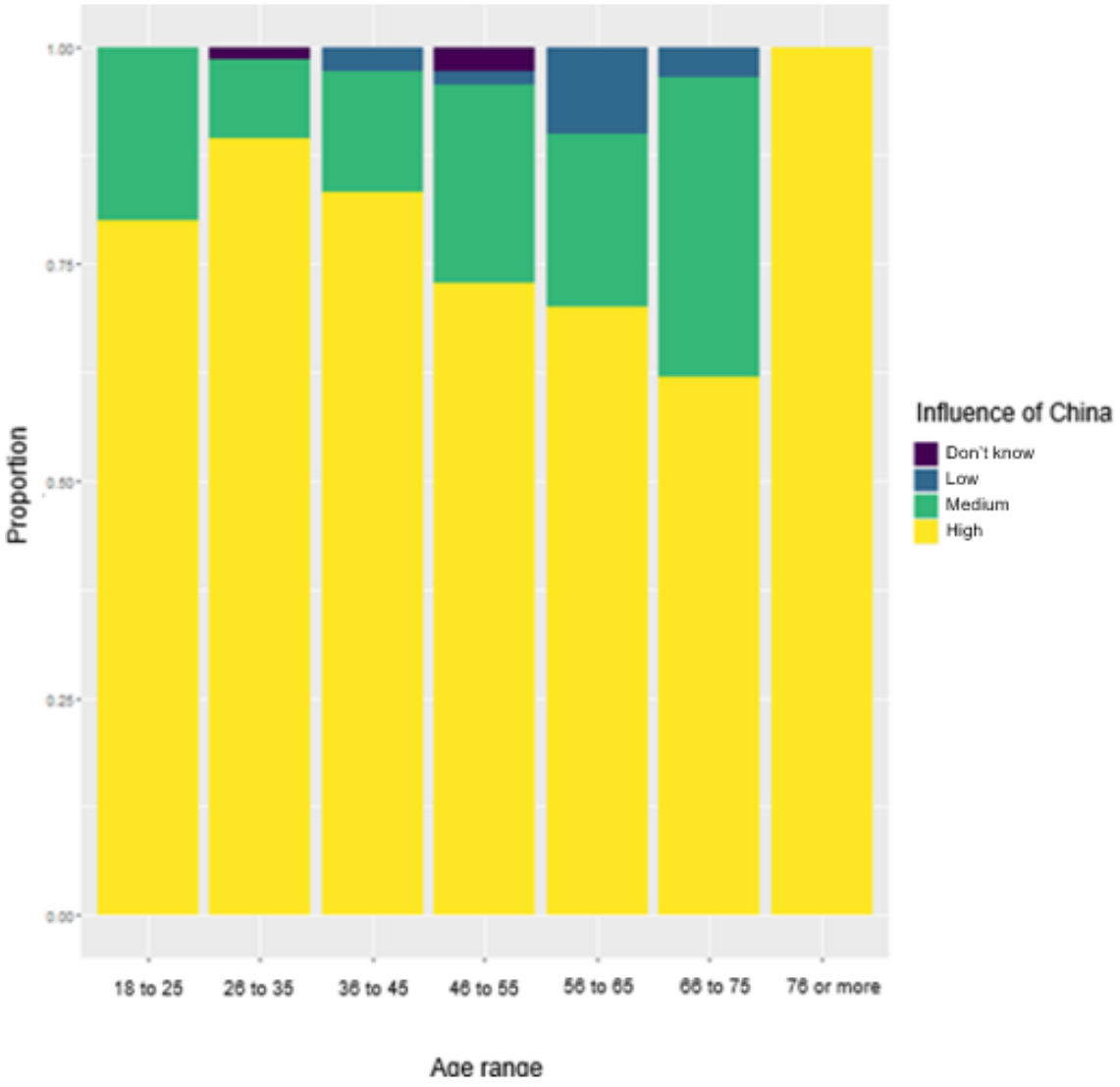


Figure 11. China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean disaggregated by occupation

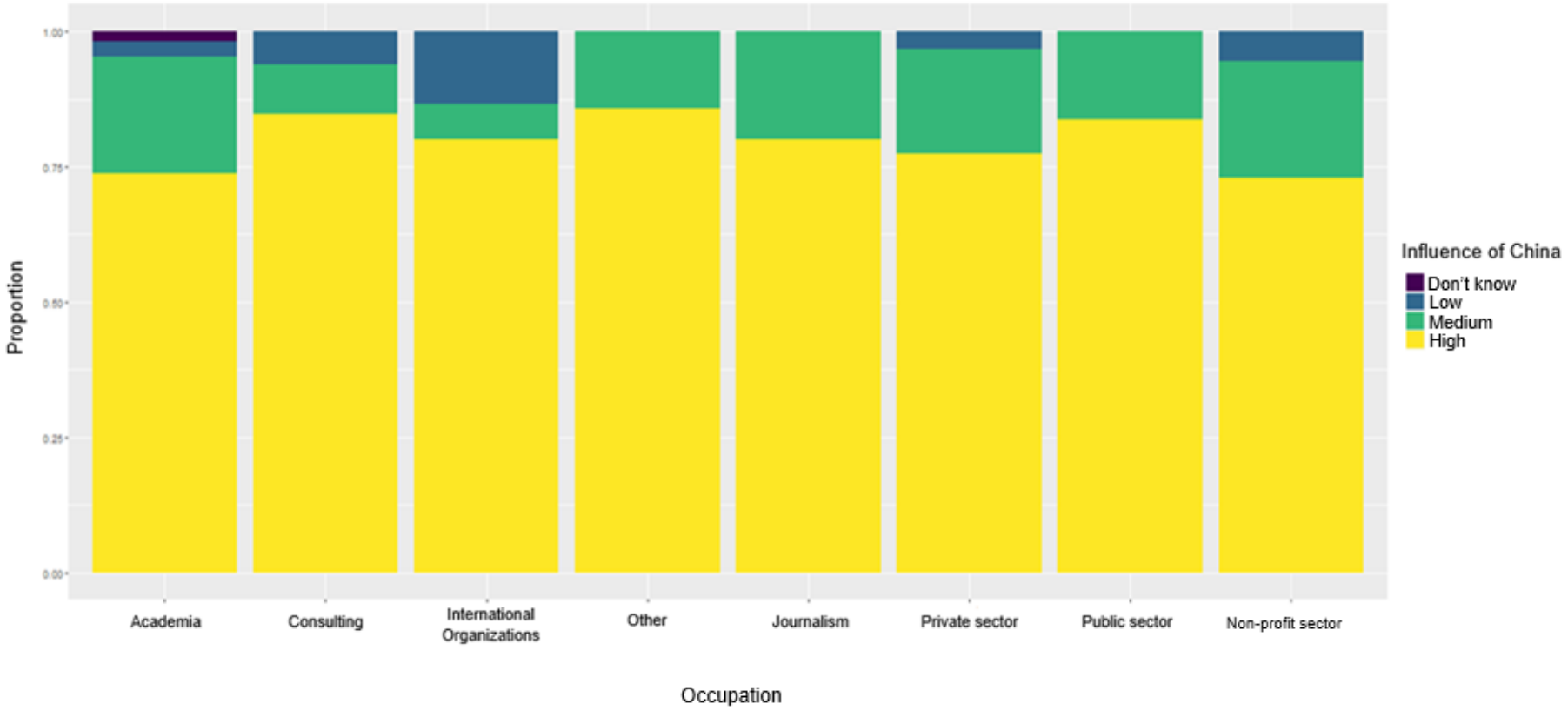


Figure 12. Influence of China in Latina America and the Caribbean disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 1 countries

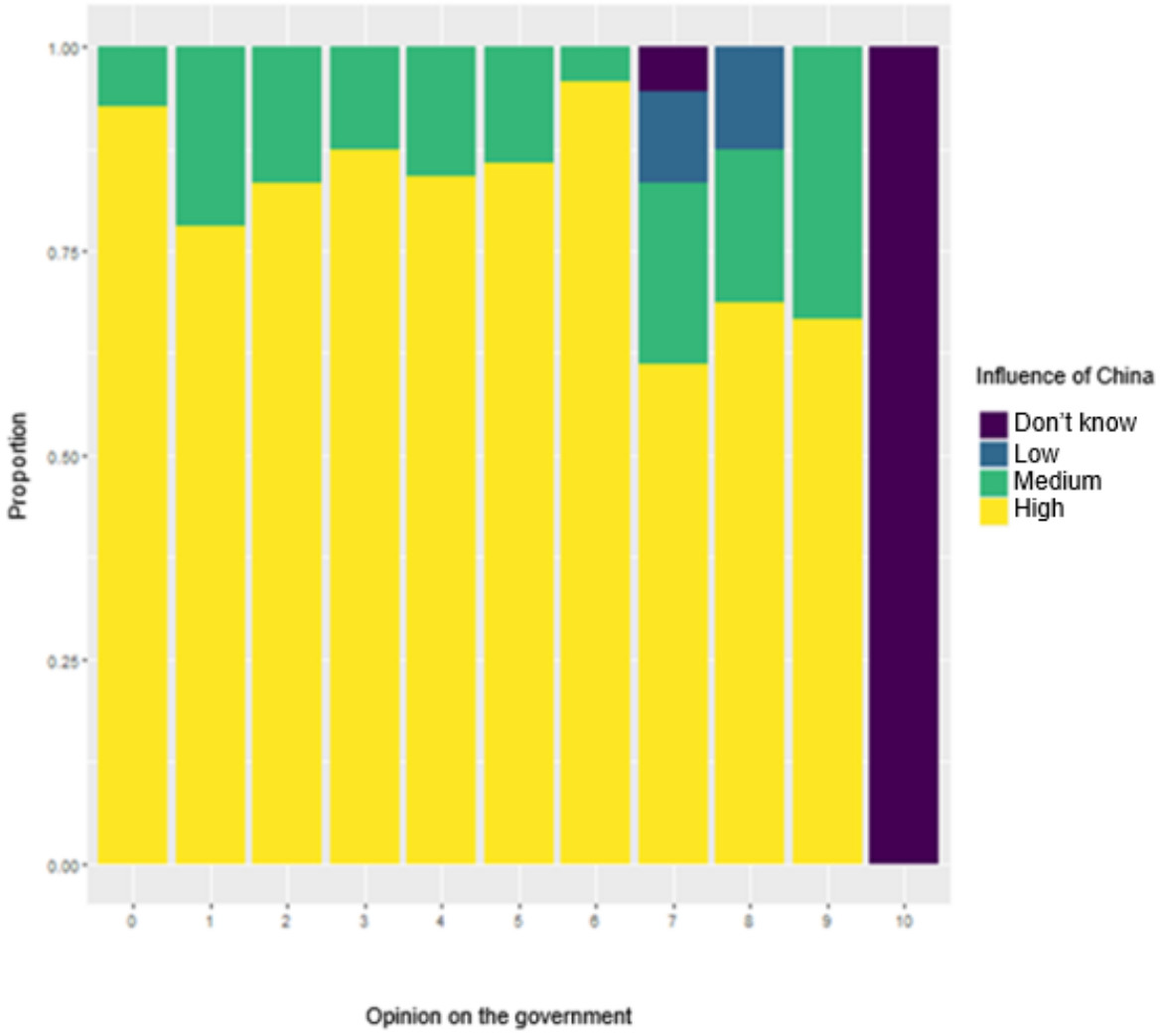
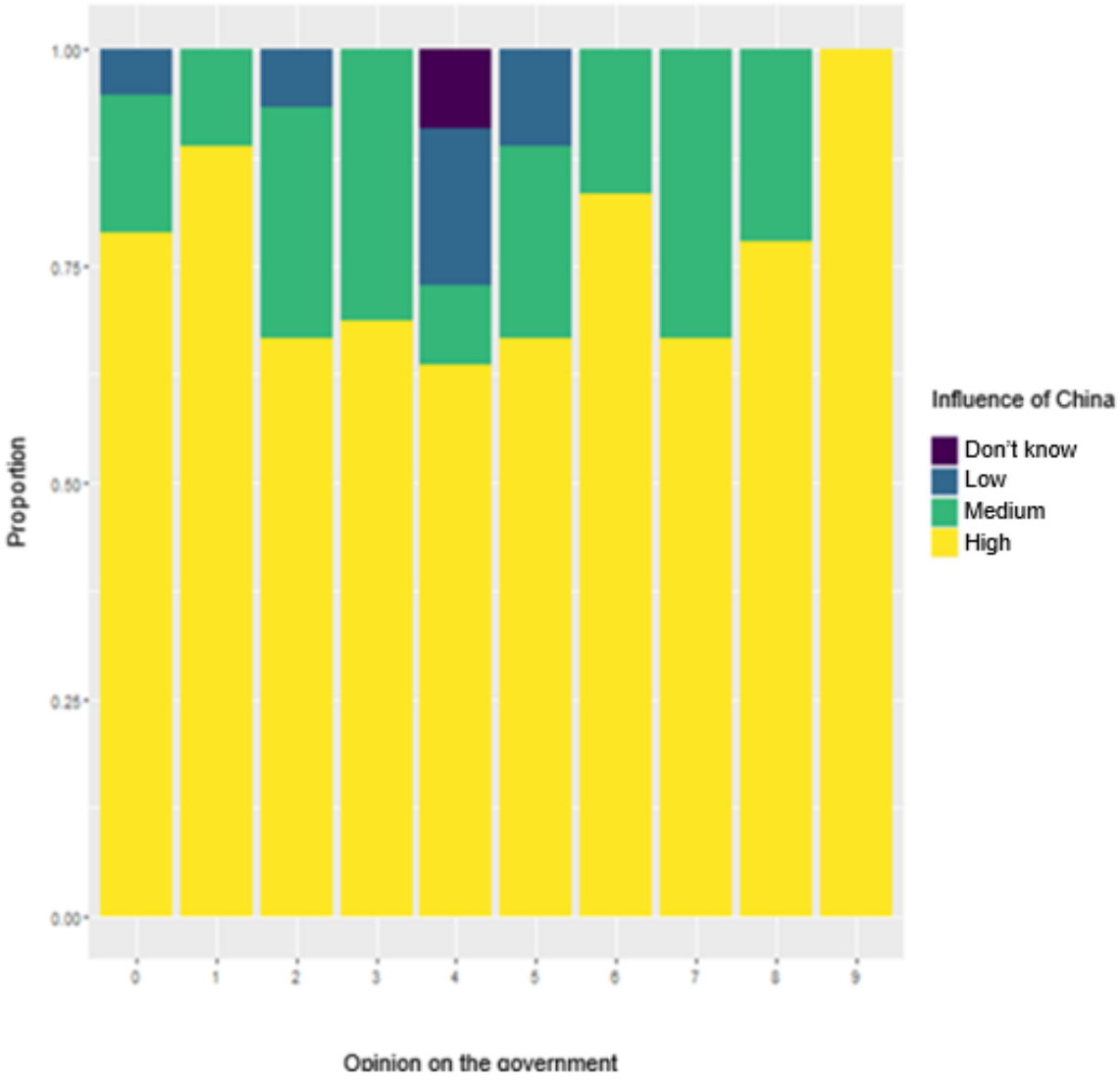


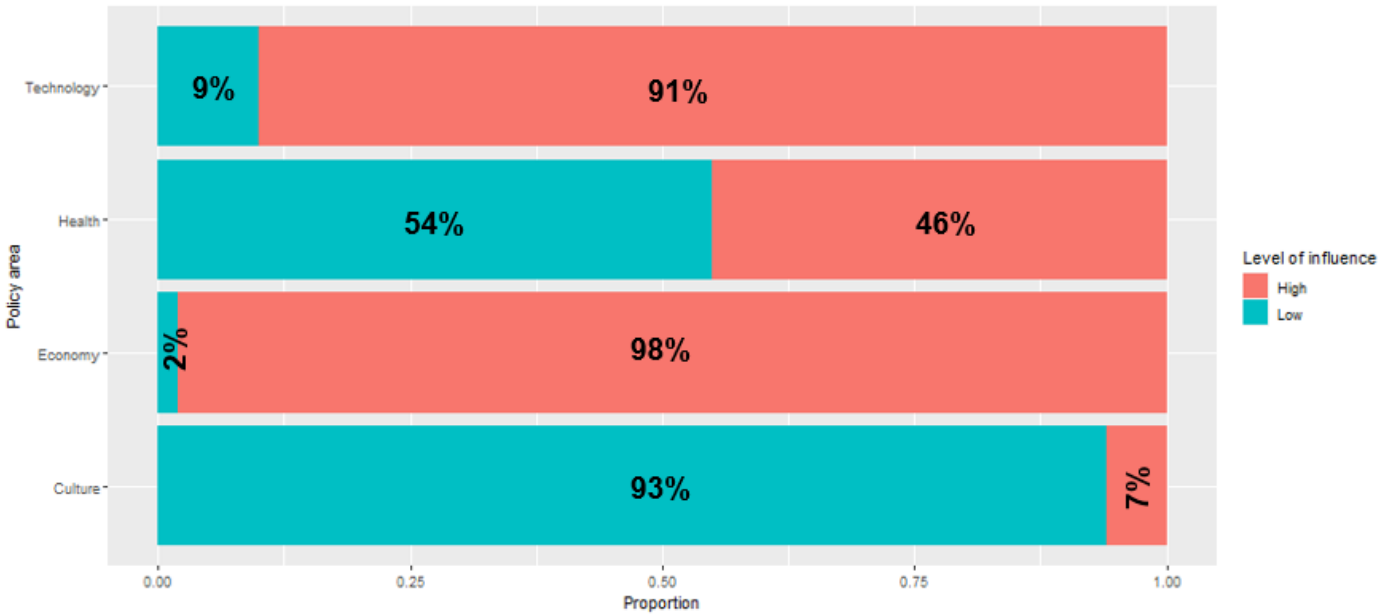
Figure 13. Influence of China in Latina America and the Caribbean disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 2 countries



A. China's influence by policy area

Chinese influence in the region is not considered homogeneous across different policy areas. When opinion leaders were asked about Beijing's influence in culture, economic affairs, health and technology, almost 90% of those surveyed indicated that China's influence is high in economics, with less than 5% deeming it relevant in the area of culture. The influence of the Asian giant is concentrated in the economic area, followed by technology, while its penetration in the region seems to be lower in health or culture. If we consider only those respondents who chose to answer that Beijing's influence is "High" or "Low", we find that 98% consider China's influence on the Latin American economy to be high, while 91% consider its influence to be high in the area of technology. While the views on health are more evenly distributed, the opinion leaders have a more homogeneous perception that Beijing's influence is low in the area of culture, as only 7% of respondents who chose one of these two response options consider China's influence to be high in this area.

Figure 14. China's influence by policy area



China is among the countries with the highest percentages of respondents who consider its influence high in the areas of economy, health and technology (only surpassed in all these areas by the United States). Yet in the area of culture, the percentage of opinion leaders who consider China to have a high level of influence in Latin America is lower than for six of the other eight countries, surpassing only Russia and India. In other words, Chinese influence is perceived as concentrated mainly in the areas of economy and technology, followed by health, where it is regarded as highly influential.

Figure 15. Influence of outside powers by policy area in Latin America and the Caribbean

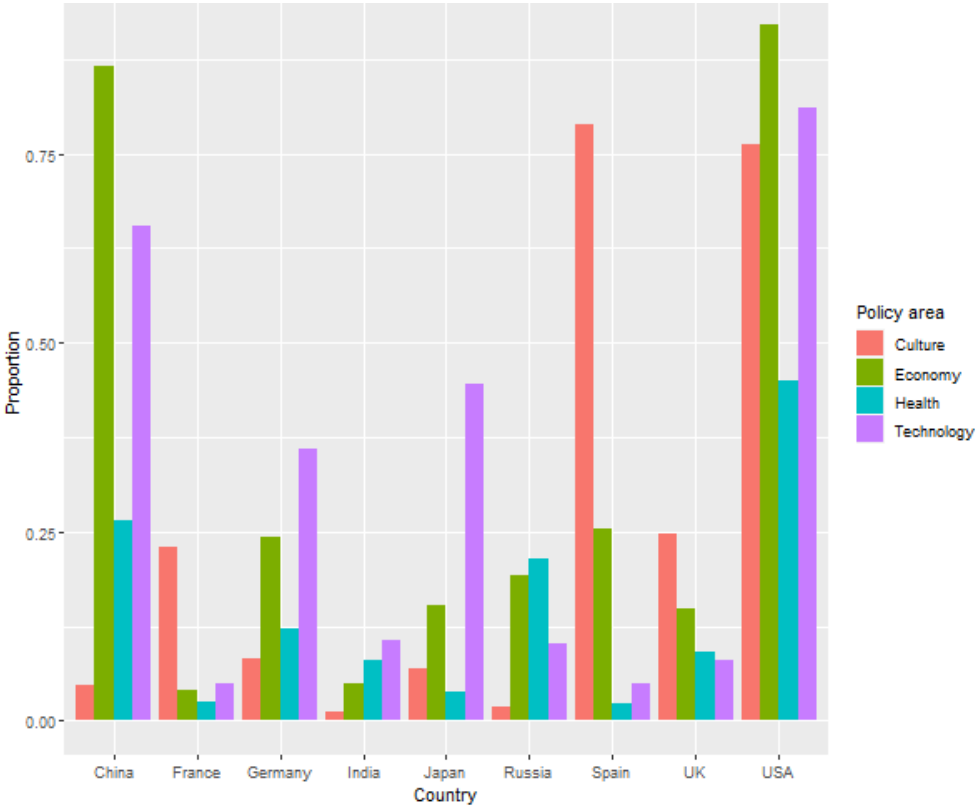
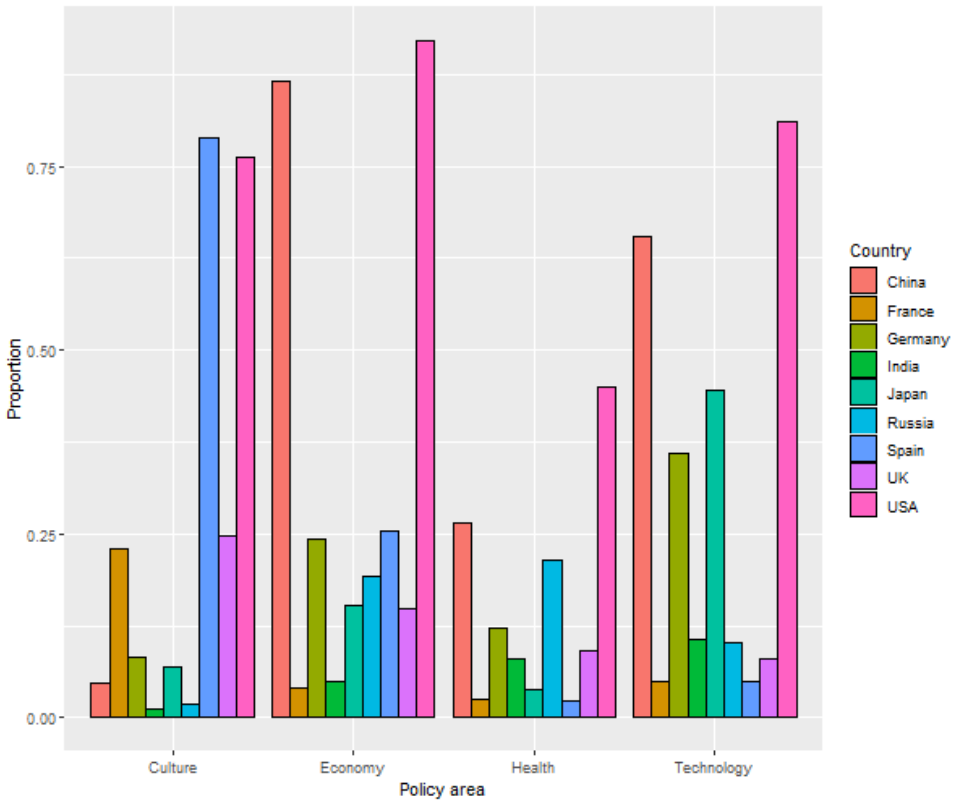


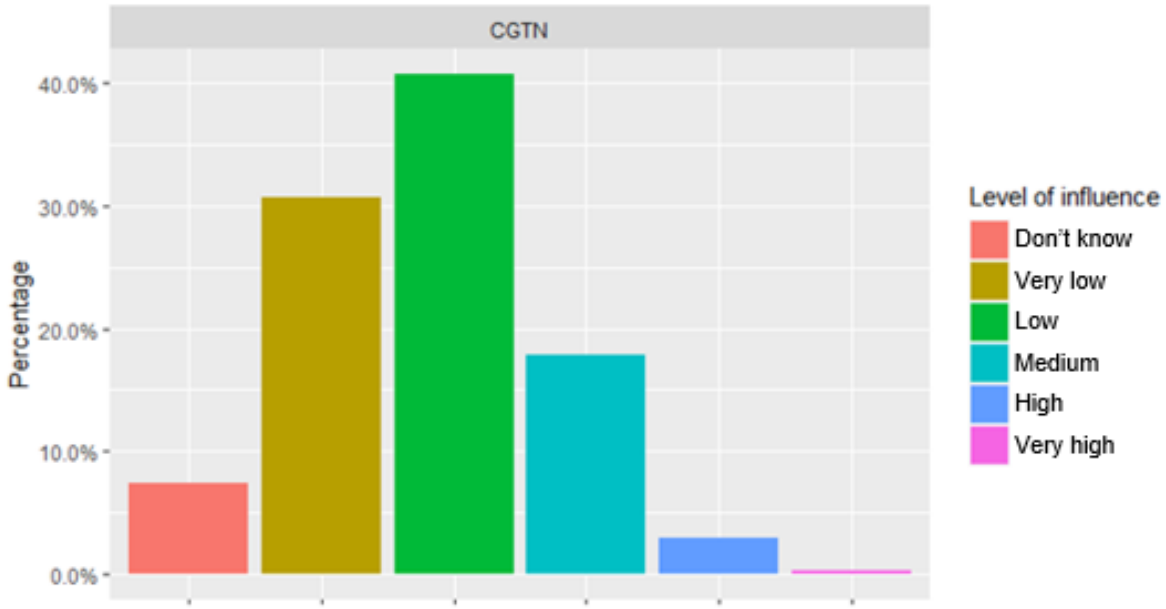
Figure 16. Policy areas and influence of outside powers



B. China’s media influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

China’s influence appears not to be the result of the country’s media diplomacy. Indeed, people we surveyed consider the Asian giant's media influence in the region, measured by China Global Television Network’s (CGTN) influence, to be very low. Fewer than 4% consider this influence to be high or very high, while 41% consider it to be low and 31% very low. Thus, nearly three quarters of survey respondents consider the Chinese media to have a low or very low influence in the region.

Figure 17. China's media influence exerted through CGTN



The above data contrasts with the perception of the influence of US’ media diplomacy in the region, where more than 65% of the opinion leaders agree that CNN's influence is high or very high. In comparison with four other extra-regional powers and Venezuela with Telesur, Chinese media diplomacy is perceived by the opinion leaders as the one that generates the least influence in the region. Thus, CGTN is perceived as having less influence than CNN, BBC, Telesur, RT and FR24.

Figure 18. Influence of the media in Latin America and the Caribbean

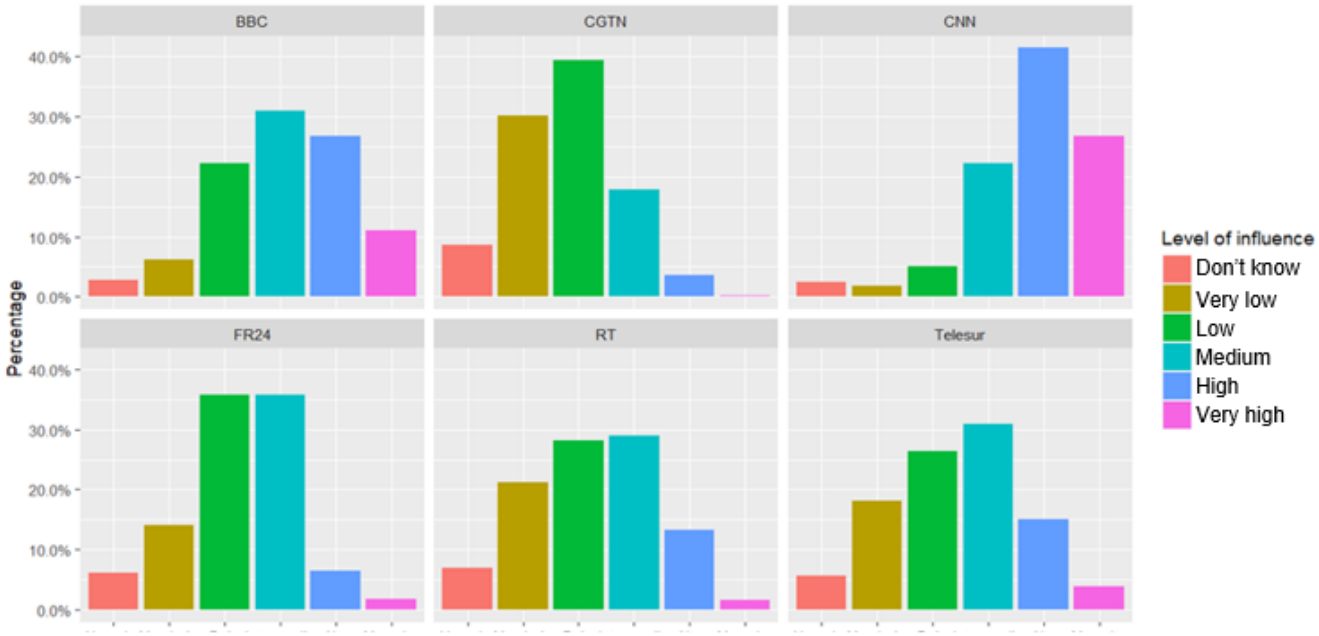
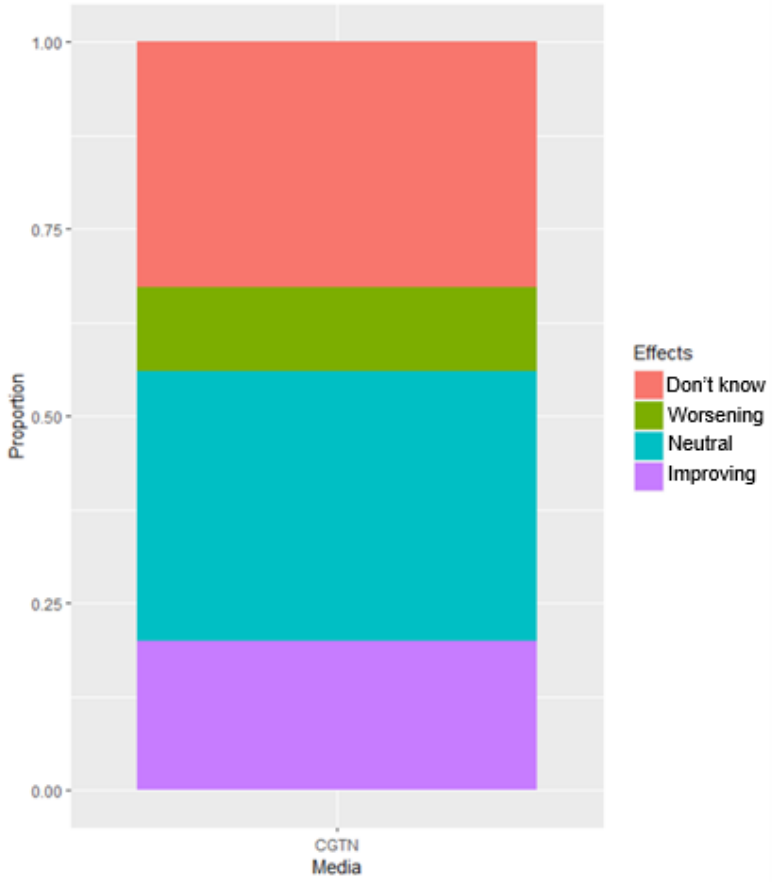


Figure 19. CGTN's effect on Latin American and Caribbean opinion toward China



The effect that CGTN has on Latin American and Caribbean public opinion of China is, on average, relatively similar to the effect that CNN has on the assessment of the United States. In turn, the average effect, measured in terms of whether it is positive (3), neutral (2) or negative (1), does not seem to be correlated with the perceived level of influence that these media have in the region. Thus, media that are perceived to have a similar level of influence can be seen as having a rather positive (BBC) or a rather negative (Telesur) influence on how public opinion evaluates the media's country of origin.

Figure 20. Scatterplot: media influence and effects on public opinion

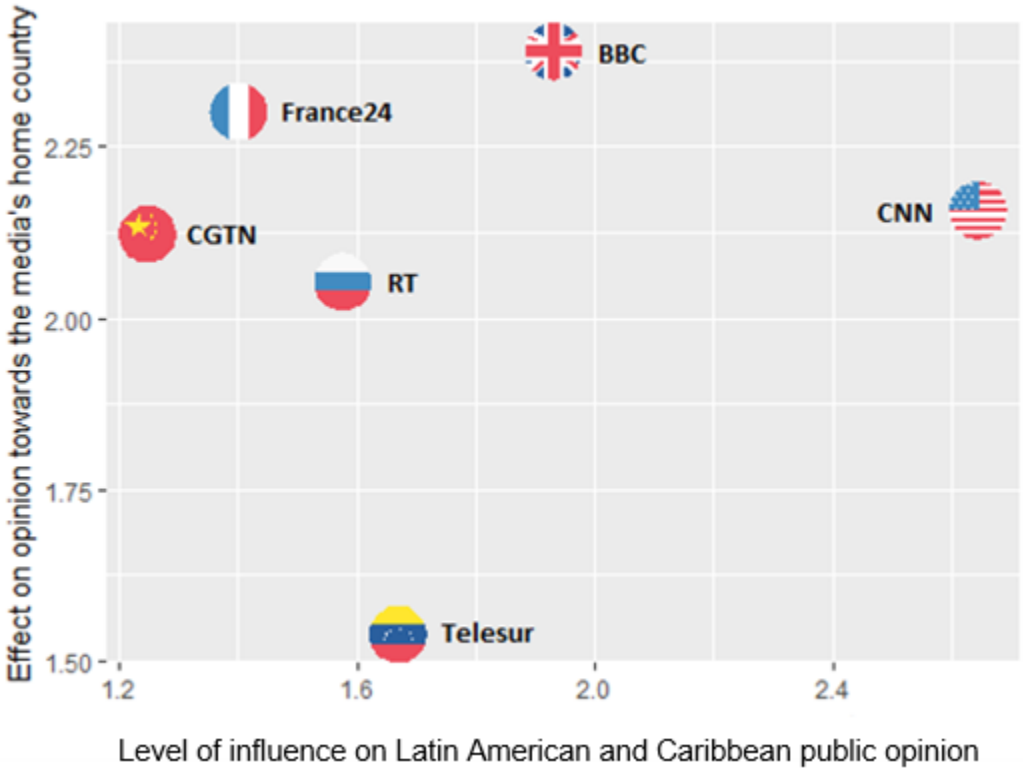


Figure 21. China's media influence in Latina America and the Caribbean disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 1 countries

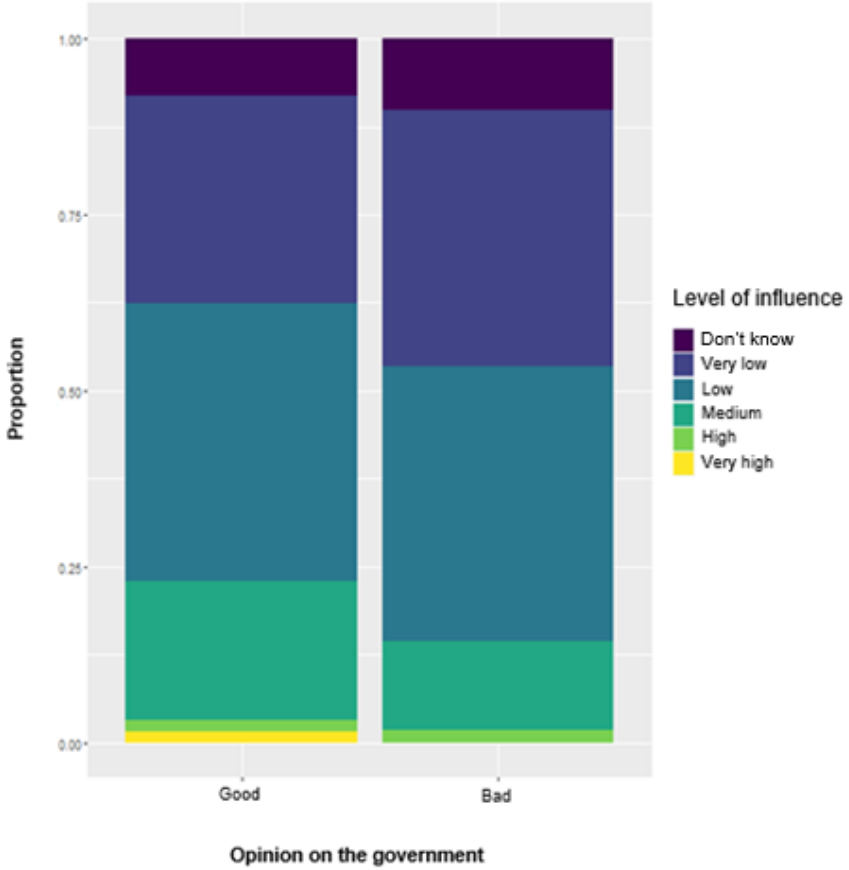
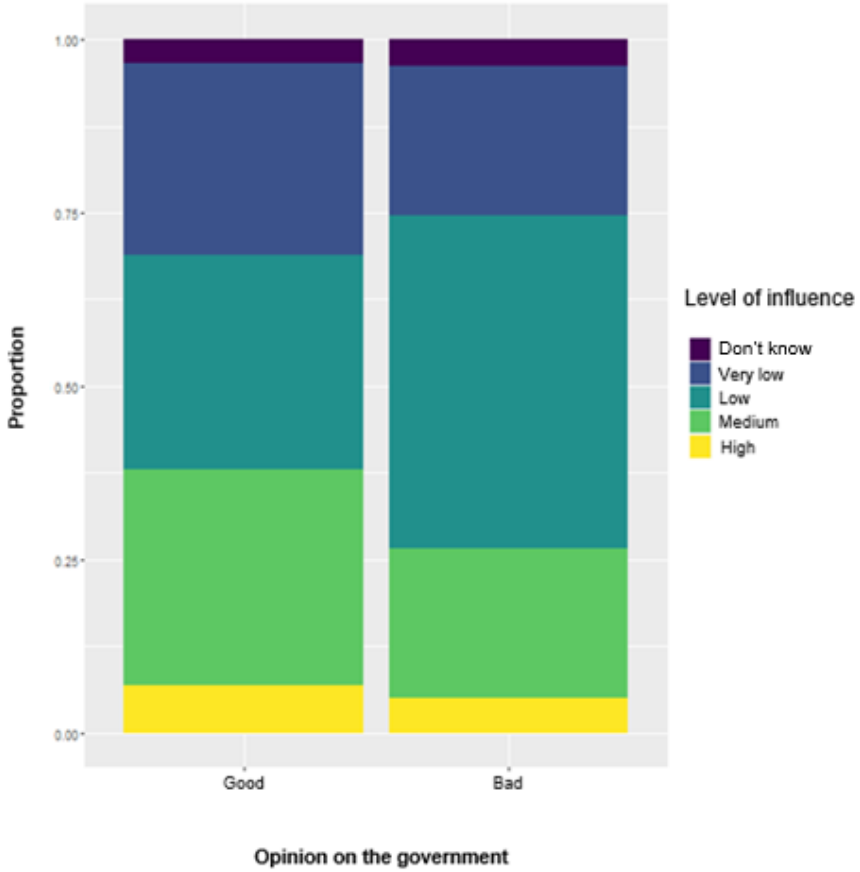


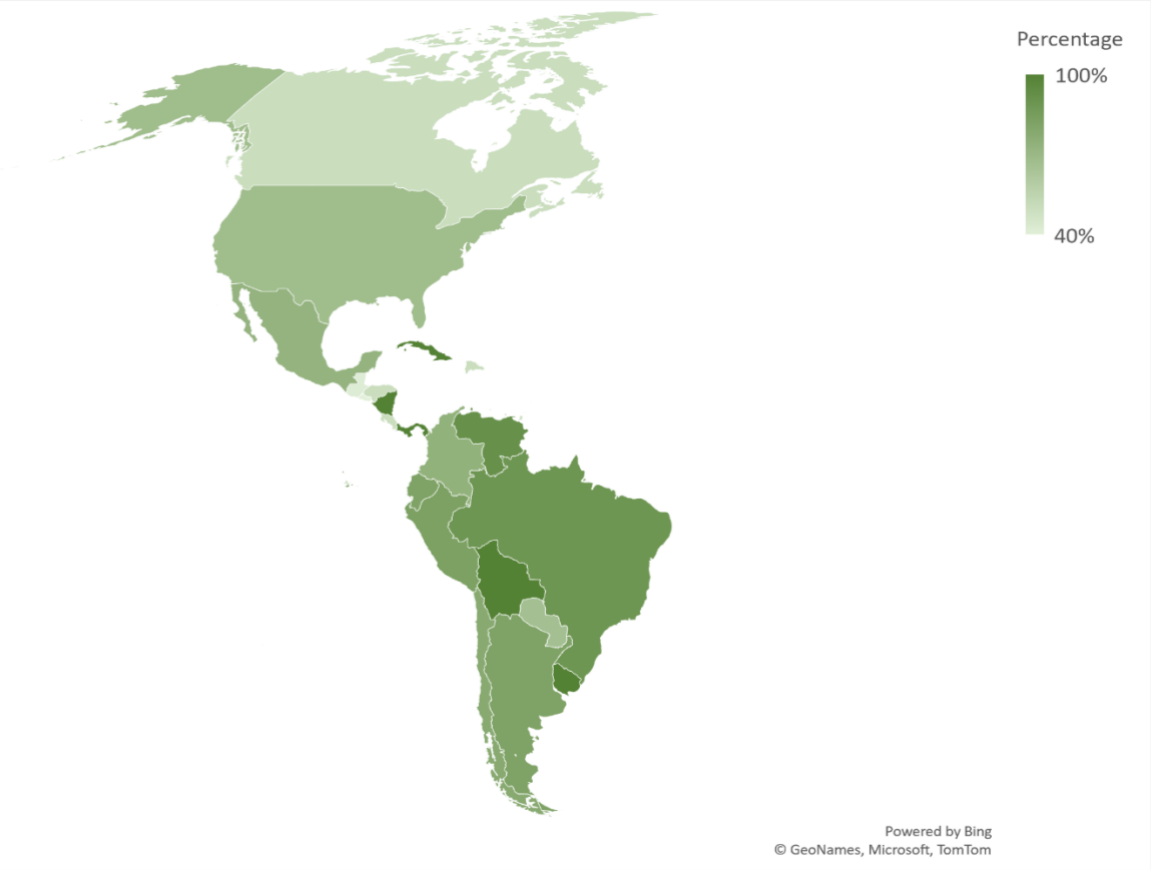
Figure 22. China's media influence in Latina America and the Caribbean disaggregated by opinion on government in Group 2 countries



V. Conclusion: Growing influence and stagnation of media diplomacy

There is consensus among opinion leaders that China exerts significant influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, and that its influence is expanding vis a vis the United States. In particular, opinion leaders consider that Beijing's influence in the region is concentrated in the areas of economy and technology, while its influence in health and culture is significantly lower. Still, the general consensus is that China's overall influence is very high. Indeed, looking at the 23 countries of origin of respondents to our surveys, no country has a majority of opinion leaders indicating that Beijing's influence is low. On the contrary, the average for most countries indicates that influence is high, while a small group of countries has an average perception of intermediate influence.

Figure 23. Percentage of respondents within each country who consider China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean to be high



However, the landscape is heterogeneous when looking at the degree of China's media influence. In this field, the great consensus among the opinion leaders is that the Beijing's influence through media is low. When asked whether they considered that the influence of CGTN, one of the main Chinese media for foreign consumption, has a high influence on the public agenda or on regional public opinion, the majority response was that Beijing's media influence is minimal. As a result, when comparing Figure 23 with Figures 24 and 25, it is clear that China's perceived overall influence is not related to Beijing's media influence (which is low across the region). When visualizing China's overall influence (Figure 23), in most countries the majority of survey respondents consider Beijing's overall influence in the region to be high. In the case of media influence, the opposite is true: the majority from most countries consider China's media influence to be low (Figure 24). When looking at the percentage of respondents within each country who consider Beijing's media influence to be low, Figure 25 shows that the majority from most countries perceived Chinese media to have low influence in the region.

Results presented in this report show a complex picture of China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. The opinion leaders' survey focused on general perceptions about China's influence and more specifically on media influence in the region. However, the focus has been on media rather than other potentially important sources of influence, for example social media and the provision of content for local outlets. Moreover, since this is ongoing research is about influence by outside powers, further research is needed to better understand the perceived influenced by other outside powers. This 2021 survey is an initial contribution to assessing a complex and rapidly evolving phenomena.

Figure 24. Percentage of respondents within each country who consider China's media influence in Latin America and the Caribbean to be high

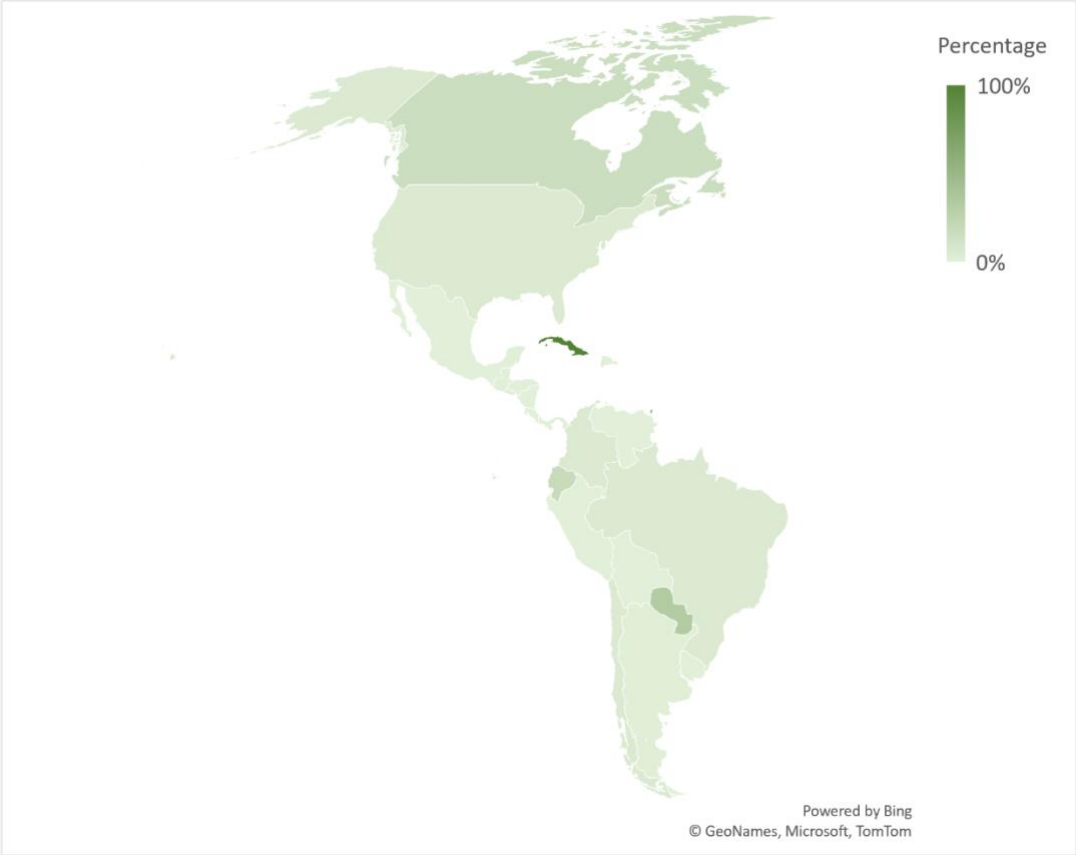
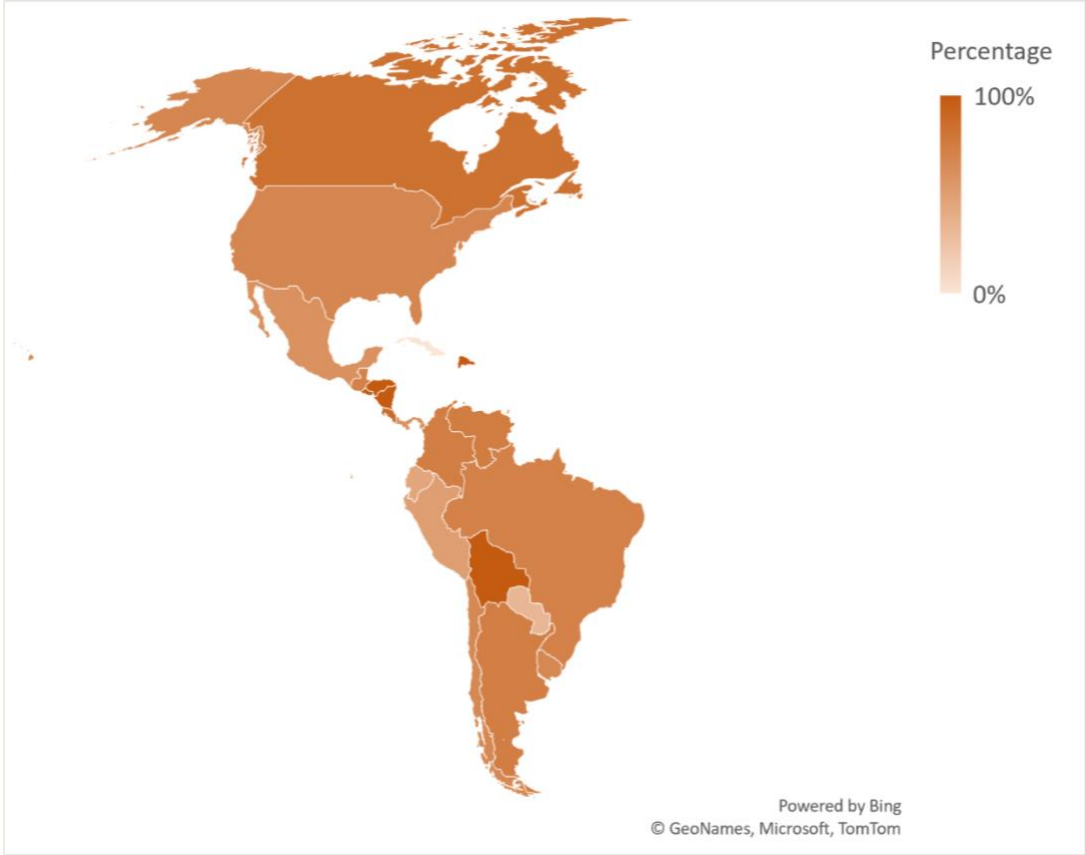


Figure 25. Percentage of respondents within each country who consider China's media influence in Latin America and the Caribbean to be low



Annex 1: Division of opinion leaders by country of residence

Country	Group	Explanation
Argentina	1	Countries belonging to group 1 have a foreign policy oriented to the "Global South". It is necessary to differentiate their opinion about the government of the country of residence with those belonging to group 2.
Bolivia	1	
Cuba	1	
Mexico	1	
Nicaragua	1	
Venezuela	1	
Barbados	2	Countries belonging to group 2 have a foreign policy oriented to the "Global North". It is necessary to differentiate their opinion about the government of the country of residence with those belonging to group 1.
Brazil	2	
Chile	2	
Colombia	2	
Costa Rica	2	
Ecuador	2	
El Salvador	2	
Guatemala	2	
Honduras	2	
Paraguay	2	
Peru	2	
Panama	2	
Dominican Republic	2	
Trinidad and Tobago	2	
Uruguay	2	

Annex 2: Questionnaire[3]

Question 1: What is your opinion about the following countries?

	Very bad (1)	Bad (2)	Neutral (3)	Good (4)	Very good (5)	Don't know (6)
China (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
France (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Germany (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
India (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Japan (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Russia (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Spain (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○
United Kingdom (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○
United States (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

[3] Annex B displays the questions incorporated in this report.

Question 2: What is, in your opinion, the influence of the following countries in Latin America?

	Level of Influence in Latin America	Assessment of the effects in the region
China (1)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
France (2)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
Germany (3)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
India (4)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
Japan (5)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
Russia (6)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
Spain (7)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
United Kingdom (8)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know
United States (9)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Negative; Neutral; Positive; Don’t know

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Question 3: Specifically in the Latin American context, how would you evaluate the influence of the following countries in the areas listed below?

	Economy	Culture	Health	Technology
China (1)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
France (2)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
Germany (3)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
India (4)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
Japan (5)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
Russia (6)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
Spain (7)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
United Kingdom (8)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know
United States (9)	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know	Low; Medium; High; Don't know

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Question 4: What is the relative priority the country in which you reside should give to the following options in its engagement with China? (Select the priority that each option should have: 1 being the highest priority and 6 being the lowest priority)

_____ Strengthen commercial ties (1)
_____ Strengthen financial ties (2)
_____ Promote the inflow of foreign direct investment (3)
_____ Promote human rights abroad (4)
_____ Cooperate in multilateral institutions (5)
_____ Cooperate in the field of international security (6)

Question 5: What is the relative priority the country in which you reside should give to the following options in its engagement with United States? (Select the priority that each option should have: 1 being the highest priority and 6 being the lowest priority)

_____ Strengthen commercial ties (1)
_____ Strengthen financial ties (2)
_____ Promote the inflow of foreign direct investment (3)
_____ Promote human rights abroad (4)
_____ Cooperate in multilateral institutions (5)
_____ Cooperate in the field of international security (6)

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Question 6: What level of influence do you consider the following audiovisual media to have in the Latin American public agenda?

	Very low (1)	Low (2)	Medium (3)	High (4)	Very high (5)	Don't know (6)
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
China Global Television Network (CGTN) (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cable News Network (CNN) (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
France 24 (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Russia Today (RT) (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Telesur (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○

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Question 7: How would you evaluate the influence of the following audiovisual media in Latin American public opinion towards the media's home country?

	Level of influence on Latin American public opinion	Effects on the opinion of the media's home country
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, United Kingdom) (1)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know
China Global Television Network (CGTN, China) (2)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know
Cable News Network (CNN, United States) (3)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know
France 24 (France) (4)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know
RT (Russia) (5)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know
Telesur (Venezuela) (6)	Low; Medium; High; Don’t know	Worsening; Neutral; Improving; Don't know

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Question 8: In which country do you currently live?

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)

Question 9: How do you evaluate the performance of the government of the country in which you currently reside on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is a very bad performance and 10 is a very good performance?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Question 10: In which of the following areas do you mainly work professionally?

▼ Academia (1); Journalism (2); Public sector (3); Private sector (4); Third sector (NGOs, Foundations, Think Tanks) (5); Consulting (6); International organizations (7); Other (8)

Question 11: Please select the age range you belong to

▼ 18 to 25; 26 to 35; 36 to 45; 46 to 55; 56 to 65; 76 or more