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Democracy and the Threat of Redistribution in Latin America

[Michael Albertus](#)

University of Chicago - Department of Political Science

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Abstract:

Recent work on the causes of democratic transition and duration highlights the obstacle inequality poses to democracy due to the redistributive threat from below. Yet inequality and democracy are much more compatible empirically than predicted by recent theory, and nowhere is this more pronounced than in Latin America. New data on land reform in Latin America from 1951-1990 demonstrates that autocracy, not democracy, is more likely to implement heavy redistribution. This finding has important theoretical implications. If elites out of government recognize that a powerful autocratic regime can at times pose a greater threat to their interests than democracy, democratization is more likely despite high inequality, particularly if these elites can use their power to win favorable policies under democracy.

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Contact Information

Michael Albertus (Contact Author)

University of Chicago - Department of Political Science ([email](#))

Chicago, IL 60637

United States