The “left turn” that many South American countries made during the early years of the twenty-first century has been the first major continent-wide political trend about which Guillermo O’Donnell remained silent. Moreover, his vast arsenal of concepts is nowhere to be found in the copious scholarly literature that deals with the left turn and its bifurcation into radical and moderate variants. O’Donnell decisively shaped the intellectual agenda for the study of the rise of military dictatorships in the Southern Cone in the early 1970s; pioneered the analysis of authoritarian breakdowns and democratic transitions throughout the 1980s; and broke new conceptual ground for efforts to understand the problems of life after transition (including the issue of institutional quality) during the 1990s. Yet analyses of the left turn have dispensed with the ideas that O’Donnell developed over four decades of a singularly distinguished scholarly career.

How can that be? The reasons are two. First, experts on the region have tended to see South America’s turn to the left as taking place at the level of policy outputs, whereas O’Donnell focused more deeply, examining regime outcomes or underlying state capacities. O’Donnell’s analytical framework was designed to capture large-scale institutional transformations. In order to be effective, this framework had to abstract from features at the level of policy such as the ones that define the left turn and divide it into two variants: the wholesale reversal of trade liberalization and privatization seen in the radical cases of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and especially Venezuela; and the more restrained center-
left reforms within free-market parameters seen in the moderate cases of Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.¹

Second, even when observers have moved beyond policy differences, the key distinction that they make between variants of the left turn is one that hinges on populist versus institutional forms of rule. This contrast resembles O’Donnell’s celebrated distinction between low-quality “delegative” democracy and high-quality representative democracy, but only on a superficial level.² Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela, for instance, should not be called a delegative democracy, not for lack of delegative features but for the weakening of its democratic ones. The most pressing worry about the left turn in Venezuela, and to a lesser extent Ecuador and Bolivia, is that they may be morphing into authoritarian regimes, albeit of the “electoral” sort. (Electoral authoritarianism is a regime type in which competition for power exists but is systematically biased against the opposition by things such as excessive state control of the media.)³ O’Donnell’s later work was an effort to craft a conceptual framework for the study of the quality of democracies. By definition, such a framework cannot be applied to cases that have gradually lost the attributes needed to merit that name.

O’Donnell’s scholarship remains relevant, however, for if astutely adapted it can improve our grasp of the most significant ongoing political process in South America today. In addition to the different policies that they respectively favor, the moderate and radical left-turn cases are divided from one another by deeper differences at the level of macropolitical structures. O’Donnell’s later work on institutional quality and political accountability can aid the task of describing such deeper variations. Moreover, O’Donnell’s early work on the coalitional sources of different regime types can assist in explaining how the divide within the left turn came about, not only at the level of policies and policy-making style but also, and more crucially, at the level of regime type. O’Donnell can help to tell us why some left-turn countries are drifting toward the concentration of vast powers in the hands of a plebiscitarian president with little horizontal accountability, while others are moving in the opposite direction.

When it comes to the exercise of state power, all four radical left-turn cases have similar regime features. Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and especially Venezuela display a new and intensely plebiscitarian version of “superpresidentialism” in which the president dominates the entire decision-making process at the expense of the national legislature and receives nothing more than nominal scrutiny from other branches of government or nonpartisan oversight agencies. Differences among these countries in the way that access to state power is gained—elections in Argentina are more genuinely competitive than those in Venezuela—have obscured more basic commonalities regarding how power is exercised.
Yet the plebiscitarian form that the superpresidentialist exercise of power takes across all the radical cases is too systematic a feature—and forms too stark a contrast with the moderate cases—to belong anywhere but in the forefront of analysis. Plebiscitarian superpresidentialism forms an overarching set of attributes that covers both illiberal democracies (Argentina) and cases of electoral authoritarianism (Venezuela). The distinction between access and exercise—how power is gained and how it is wielded—provides a framework for classifying regimes that adapts and broadens O’Donnell’s distinction between vertical and horizontal accountability as well as the contrast that other analysts have drawn between the democratic and the liberal aspects of regimes.

The similarities in the way power is exercised across the radical left-turn cases spring from the rise to dominance in all these countries of a new “rentier-populist” coalition. In its extreme form, rentier populism is crafted from the peak of the state, based on the votes of informal and unemployed workers, and funded by windfall gains from natural-resource exports. The coalition comprises two winning partners: the government, which redistributes income derived from mineral or agricultural sources to the informal sectors; and the informal sectors, which reward the government with political support.

Income redistribution occurs via extraction or expropriation from the natural resources’ private owners, who are rentier populism’s main losers. O’Donnell was a central figure in the first generation of Latin America specialists who drew on ideas from Karl Marx and Max Weber in order to explain regime variations as flowing (at least in part) from underlying economic changes that reshape coalitional dynamics. The rentier-populist coalition forms what Barrington Moore, Jr., would call the “social basis” of the plebiscitarian superpresidentialism that marks the radical left-turn cases.

The roots of South American rentier populism lie far away across the oceans, in India and China. It was the rise of those two huge countries—together they hold about a third of all humanity—as industrial superpowers and voracious consumers of raw materials and proteins that launched the global commodities boom which has been rentier populism’s jet fuel. Starting in 2002, surging prices for oil, minerals, and agricultural commodities not only reversed a decades-long trend of “deteriorating terms of trade” for South American countries, but also sparked an extraordinary period of economic growth whose speed and consistency were like nothing the region had ever seen. In 2000, buying the most basic cellphone cost the equivalent of fifteen barrels of oil. In 2013, a barrel and a half will buy an iPhone of the latest generation save one. In 2002, a hundred metric tons of soybeans—a major Argentine agricultural export—had the same value as a small Honda car. Ten years later, that same amount of soybeans would buy a BMW convertible.

The commodities boom made the rentier-populist coalition possible,
but not inevitable. Chile, a major minerals exporter, has ridden the boom without experiencing either rentier populism or its political concomitant, plebiscitarian superpresidentialism. The boom has been a necessary but far from sufficient condition for the rise of today’s more radical left-wing regimes in South America.

To go from boom to superpresidentialism, political choices have been required. These decisions have not been blank-slate affairs, of course, but rather have been strongly shaped by structural conditions related to the nature of national party systems and of global capital markets. Let us begin by assuming that all politicians—and especially those who have what it takes to climb high up the greasy pole—wish to gain and keep as much power as they can for as long as they can. All politicians, in other words, desire to become indefinitely reelected “superpresidents” unless they face serious constraints.

Three Temptations

With that in mind, we can understand the commodities boom as something that threw three temptations in the path of South American presidents. The first temptation—call it the “urge to expropriate”—was to maximize the government’s cut of the massive natural-resources windfall. What better path is there to accumulating and preserving power, after all, than a large and expanding government budget? The second was the “populist temptation,” which invited presidents to use the new natural-resources income for short-term consumption rather than long-term investment. This temptation is especially hard for presidents to resist during election years. Third and finally, presidents who had succumbed to the first two then faced the “absolutist temptation.” Giving in to it meant mobilizing popular support—if necessary through plebiscitarianism—in order to get rid of checks and balances on the executive. In some cases, absolutism could extend to overturning constitutional limits on reelection. Presidents who gave in to the first two temptations created rentier populism. Once they had done that, the third temptation promised to give them all the advantages that come with plebiscitarian superpresidentialism.

Since the commodities boom laid the three temptations before all the presidents of South America’s resource-rich countries—and since as power-maximizers all the presidents can be assumed to have wanted to give in—we must ask why radical rentier populism did not simply sweep the entire continent as it did Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Why, in other words, are there any “moderate” left-turn cases at all? The answer lies in external checks that came in two forms—one direct, the other indirect. The direct check was embodied in political parties that were rivals to the president’s party, eager and able to compete with it for power. The indirect check was imposed by creditors as well as private firms large enough to place some constraints on economic policy.
For any president pondering a foray into rentier populism, then, the state of parties and capital markets must be a key consideration. If they are vibrant and have the power to “push back,” then populist plebiscitarianism will face hard going. The countries where rentier populism succeeded were places where the commodities boom came at a time of protracted crisis in the party system and the financial markets. The party crisis had leveled citizen trust in traditional politicians, while the market crisis had wrecked investor confidence in macroeconomic conditions. With these twin crises came a bulldozing of barriers against expropriation, economic populism, and superpresidentialism.

The Superpresidents’ Best Friend

The four radical left-turn cases of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela are as one when it comes to rejecting neoliberalism but not when it comes to institutions of access to power. Argentina has remained democratic, while the three Andean countries—and Venezuela most of all—are turning increasingly authoritarian as the opposition faces serious restrictions on political competition. As we turn our gaze from access to exercise, however, uniformity once again becomes the dominant note: Whether in Argentina or the Andean countries, presidents are working to remove constraints on their own powers. In every one of the radical left-turn cases, the president has maximized executive control over decision making, pushing liberal oversight institutions aside and moving ahead on the basis of a plebiscitarian mobilization of political support. The plebiscite is the superpresident’s best friend. In the moderate left-turn cases, by contrast, some mix of judges, legislators, comptrollers, and independent bureaucrats has set effective checks in the president’s way.

At first glance, the rise of plebiscitarian superpresidentialism in some Latin American countries may seem like old news—this is the region, after all, that gave the term caudillo to the world’s political vocabulary. But in truth, we are dealing with something new. Today’s superpresidential regimes have features that set them apart from their closest cousins, the populist presidencies of the mid-twentieth century and the delegative presidencies that led the introduction of market reforms in the 1990s. In contrast to the latter, which demobilized popular sectors and handed vast economic powers to technocrats, the new superpresidential regimes typically intensify lower-class mobilization and reject technocracy (Bolivia under President Evo Morales has been a partial exception on the last score). In contrast to classical populism, the new superpresidentialism recruits support for the chief executive from the legions of “informal” workers rather than the ranks of organized industrial laborers.

Moreover, whereas earlier populist and delegative presidents relied
on informal emergency agreements and evolving political balances, the new plebiscitarian superpresidents typically seek the formal institutionalization of their enormous powers. This may occur via changes to the constitution (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela), or else through ordinary laws that transform emergency powers over the economy into regular presidential capacities subject to minimal legislative oversight (Argentina).

Institutional similarities between Argentina and the Andean region’s three “Bolivarian” cases (so called from the late Hugo Chávez’s well-known insistence that he acted in the spirit of nineteenth-century independence leader Simón Bolívar) run even deeper. These resemblances make the contrast with the moderate left-turn cases even starker. In all four radical cases, the size of the state (measured by central-government spending as a share of annual GDP) grew from a “neoliberal” average of 27 percent at century’s end to an average of nearly 40 percent ten years later—enough to land all these countries squarely in the “statist” category. In the moderate left-turn cases, average state size was 32 percent before the left turn and actually shrank to 31 percent by 2010.

Thus in every radical case not only does the president have more control over the government than any predecessor, but the government itself is nearing an unprecedented level of control over the economy. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Chávez in Venezuela have dominated their societies to a degree that has few, if any, antecedents in the modern histories of their respective nations. Concentration of political power in the radical left-turn cases, then, has proceeded in two steps (not necessarily sequential): The state expanded its control over the economy, and the presidents maximized their control over the state. This two-track concentration of power is what truly sets the radical left-turn countries apart from their more moderate neighbors. More obvious distinctions at the level of rhetoric or personality are either accidents or effects, not causes, of the dual concentration of power that underlies the radical cases.

Today’s superpresidentialist cases form an empirically distinct group sharing a key set of regime features, but they exhibit huge differences in other respects. Plebiscitarian superpresidentialism has emerged in countries with small economies and deep ethnic cleavages (Bolivia and Ecuador), a country with a large oil industry that used to have one of the region’s most durable democratic regimes (Venezuela), and a country with a large and diverse economy but a history of political instability (Argentina). Moreover, the radical, superpresidential left-turn regimes consolidated themselves during the same period when the moderate left-turn countries were busy deepening the quality of their own democracies.

These variations can help us to isolate the causes of plebiscitarian superpresidentialism by a process of elimination. This regime type can-
not spring from the existence or deepening of ethnic cleavages (these are conspicuously absent from Argentina and Venezuela); from vast mineral wealth (Argentina has little); from a lack of democratic power-sharing traditions (Venezuela and to a lesser degree Bolivia had these); from some idiosyncratic feature peculiar to the Andean region (Argentina belongs to the Southern Cone); or from some Latin cultural affinity for paternalism (which should also be present in the moderate cases). The main proximate cause behind plebiscitarian superpresidentialism is “none of the above.” It is not oil, it is not ethnicity, it is not something subregional or cultural. Instead, it is the rise of rentier populism.

**Rentier Populism in Theory**

In the extreme case of rentier populism—a case that does not actually exist but is useful to imagine for purposes of illustration—the ruling alliance comprises only the government and the informal sectors. The former is sole owner of a natural resource that commands a high price in world markets. The government distributes the revenue from the natural resource to the informal sectors, which comprise a majority of the population. Exploiting the resource requires no substantial investments within the politically relevant time horizon. The necessary technology and physical capital are either cheap or have been seized from private investors. In exchange for redistribution (economic incorporation), the informal sector provides votes as well as “street power” to intimidate economic and political losers (political incorporation). The rentier-populist coalition fully integrates itself into the international market for goods, but refrains from participating in financial markets. It needs the former as much as it can dispense with the latter. Foreign trade is the fundamental source of rent, whereas international capital is an unneeded and unwanted source of conditionalities.

The economic and political bases of rentier populism define its structure of accountability. Popular electoral ratification is the cheapest way to stay in power because the informal sector’s vote costs the least to buy. Ignoring the majority and trying to rule through repression is more expensive and less certain. Like any other dominant coalition, rentier populism has no spontaneous reasons to set checks and balances on presidential authority. The groups most interested in placing or preserving horizontal controls on the executive branch are the sections of the population that are least likely to become partners in the dominant coalition and are most worried about the discretionary use of political power. These include individuals or firms that have made heavy long-term investments in human or physical capital and present the most appealing targets for expropriation.

The effectiveness of groups demanding checks and balances is a function of their relevance within the political economy of the dominant
coalition. When rentier populism rules, the effectiveness of demands for horizontal accountability is negligible. Rentier-populist rulers do not need the minorities in the formal economy in order to gain reelection, and the informal majority requires only the plebiscitarian mechanism to secure a steady flow of transfers. Plebiscitarian concentration of presidential power is a regime structure that is tailor-made for rentier populism: Horizontal controls on the executive go down (superpresidentialism) while vertical ratifications flow up (plebiscitarianism). The rentier-populist coalition “causes” plebiscitarian superpresidentialism.

A plebiscitarian superpresident at the helm of a rentier-populist ship seems unbeatable. But that is only so as long as certain conditions all obtain at once: Resource prices need to stay high, exploitation costs need to stay low, and the informal sector needs to stay large. If there is a change—even a small one—in any of these conditions, the rentier-populist coalition will come under heavy pressure, and the superpresidential regime might even collapse. If the international price of the key commodity falls below the threshold required for revenues to match the costs of keeping up the coalition, or if the informal sector no longer has the numbers to dominate elections, the end of the regime is at hand. A new coalition replaces the old one, or the plebiscitarian superpresident expands the coalition to encompass formal economic sectors that will demand institutional guarantees against predation (a bigger role for congress in the economic-policy process, for instance). Finally, if the costs of the technology for exploiting the natural resource become higher than the savings rate of the economy, rentier populism will be forced to end its isolation from international financial markets and, in exchange for fresh capital inflows, accept conditionalities that will curb the hegemonic features of the regime. Strong while the conditions for rentier populism last, plebiscitarian superpresidentialism is extremely fragile in the face of small variations in the political economy that undergirds it.

As recently as the dawn of this century, rentier populism was nowhere to be seen in Latin America. There were lots of informal workers, to be sure, but resource rents were negligible until the commodities boom came along in 2002. Even then, only Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela went all-in on the assembling of rentier-populist coalitions behind plebiscitarian superpresidents. Between the availability of the economic and demographic building blocks of rentier populism and the actual construction of a new ruling coalition came a cluster of local economic and political conditions that hampered populism in some cases but helped it in others.

The original “fork in the road” on the way to rentier populism is the political decision to seize the booming natural resource—or in other words, to surrender to the “expropriation temptation.” In the ruler’s cost-benefit analysis, the world price of the commodity, how much of it the country has, and the size of the country’s informal sector define the
potential reward. The costs, on the other hand, must be gauged in the form of damage to the country’s reputation in international capital markets, and the resistance of domestic political forces that fear what rentier populism will mean for them and their interests. The costs are shaped by financial markets and party systems, which also act as structural constraints. These structures, however, are substantially more malleable and less stable than the ones that define the incentives (the largely fixed physical structure of the economy and the slow-moving social structure of the underlying population). Party-system volatility, in fact, had become endemic in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela by the end of the twentieth century, making the party system in each of these countries less like a structure and more like a flux.

Financial-reputation costs are especially high in countries with long track records of receptiveness to foreign investment and debt repayment. All Andean countries are endowed with sufficient reserves of mineral wealth for expropriation to be a tempting political option in boom times. In Colombia, Peru, and especially Chile, the financial-reputation costs have provided immunization against expropriation: The foreign investment that could be lost far outweighs the gains to be expected from resource seizure.

This condition has been crucial in the case of Peru, which in contrast to Colombia and Chile meets all the other requirements for the rise and consolidation of a plebiscitarian superpresidency. President Ollanta Humala, who otherwise might be tempted by rentier populism, has probably concluded that the sound financial reputation Peru has inherited from presidents Alejandro Toledo (2001–2006) and Alan García (2006–2011) is simply too precious to throw away. At the opposite extreme, the physical structure of the Argentine economy—it is urban-industrial with a strong agricultural sector too, but no great stock of oil or mineral wealth—does not seem well suited to rentier-populist ventures. Yet by the time commodities started to boom, the financial-reputation costs to Argentina of expropriation (or confiscatory taxes) had become negligible. In 2001, the Argentine government defaulted on a gigantic volume of foreign debt and doomed the country to years of abysmal credit ratings. For President Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007), resisting the rentier-populist temptation could not have brought a payoff (in the form of a painstakingly restored Argentine financial reputation) within any politically relevant time horizon. When Argentina’s vast and fertile farmlands

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began pouring soybeans—a crop with manifold uses—onto world markets at eye-poppingly high prices, the move to seize a large share of the resulting income stream for political purposes must have seemed like the obvious choice. When Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia in 2005 and Rafael Correa won election to Ecuador’s presidency the following year, each country’s credit rating fell to an all-time low. For the fiscal needs of their coalitional projects, expropriation was much more effective than patient reconstruction.

The party system, the other source of costs for a leader tempted by rentier populism, prevents expropriation if the incumbent party has a solid constituency in the formal economy or the opposition parties have enough organizational strength. The economic recession that lasted from 1998 to 2002 was a watershed moment for South America’s party systems. The parties that had implemented neoliberal reforms lost vital reserves of political capital. Only two established left-wing parties had remained steadily in the opposition during the era of market reforms: the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT) and the Uruguayan Broad Front. Free from the blame for economic pains, they gave voters who felt disillusioned with neoliberalism a fresh but institutionalized place to turn. In Chile, the economic crisis was mild (the recession was over by 2000), neoliberal reform did not cause the same level of disappointment, and the Socialists, although partners in the ruling coalition, also became a credible postneoliberal choice.

The PT, the Broad Front, and the Chilean Socialists all had historic ties to formal-sector workers; taking the path of rentier populism (with its focus on informals) would have meant wrecking these bonds. A more promising course of action for each of these parties was to seek the gradual incorporation of informals as an added layer of constituents. In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, party systems were already in crisis—wracked by decades of cartelization and corruption—when the economic slowdown began. In Argentina, by contrast, the crisis of representation came after the recession. In all four cases, however, party-system volatility peaked and stable parties (aside from Argentina’s Peronists) virtually disappeared. Presidents would henceforth face the prospect of being able to rule without organized opposition.

Political barriers to the emergence of rentier populism vanished as parties lost the strength to resist expropriation. In Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, the flip side of party deinstitutionalization under the pressure of economic collapse (Argentina and Venezuela) or stagnation (Bolivia and Ecuador) was mass praetorianism, mainly in the guise of informal-sector mobilization. Massive street protests gave presidents Chávez, Correa, Kirchner, and Morales opportunities to go beyond the strictly economic incorporation of the informal sectors adopted in Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay in the direction of political incorporation. Informals became a key component of the winning electoral
coalition, making it possible for presidents to claim plebiscitarian rati-
ification of their agendas. In between elections, informals could turn out
on the streets in large numbers and intimidate the opposition.

**Cases and Mechanisms**

In 2001, the two-year-old Chávez administration decided that Ven-
ezuela’s state-owned oil company, known as PDVSA, should be the
majority shareholder in all the country’s oil fields. This affected 33
multinational companies with operations in the Orinoco Basin. A year
later, Chávez raised royalties on private oil companies from 1 percent
to 30 percent and hiked their taxes from 34 percent to 50 percent. A
2007 presidential decree raised the floor of PDVSA’s share in exploi-
tation joint ventures from 51 percent to 78 percent. Increased state
control over oil rents allowed the creation of the so-called Bolivarian
Missions, which comprised the institutional centerpiece of Chávez’s
strategy for incorporating the informal sector into his coalition. In-
deed, it is PDVSA, and not some other arm of the state, that admin-
isters the Missions. The programs created between 2003 and 2004 in-
cluded Misión Robinson and Misión Ribas to promote literacy and
basic education, Misión Barrio Adentro to provide health services, and
Misión Mercal to provide subsidized food.

In Bolivia, Morales nationalized the country’s hydrocarbon resources
four months after assuming the presidency. In a primarily symbolic ac-
tion, he sent troops to occupy the Tarija natural-gas fields, the second
largest such reserves in Latin America. Petrobras, the Brazilian oil gi-
ant, was the most affected firm as its facilities came under the control
of the Bolivian state company YPFB. At the same time, Morales re-
purchased the remaining privately held shares of YPFB and changed
its various drilling projects from joint ventures, in which private firms
received a share of profits, to service contracts based on flat fees. Taxes
also rose from 18 percent to 82 percent, reversing the division of earn-
ings between the state and private firms.

In relative terms, no government benefited from nationalization and
the commodity boom as much as did Bolivia’s. Revenues from min-
eral royalties grew 929 percent from 1997 to 2007, and hydrocarbon
taxes 626 percent. The key political consideration behind hydrocarbon
nationalization was the incorporation of the informal sector. Revenue
from gas rents has financed the creation of the Bono Juancito Pinto, a
family allowance of US$29 for each child enrolled in primary school
(October 2006); the Renta Dignidad, a payment of $340 to all seniors
(April 2007); and the Bono Juana Azurduy, which gives $257 to preg-
nant women and mothers who undergo periodic medical checkups (May
2009).

Despite Ecuador’s large oil deposits, its government was not depen-
dent on mineral rents in the 1990s. Oil companies paid on average a fifth of their revenues in taxes, which was far from enough to sustain a populist coalition. Yet Correa, first as finance minister in President Alfredo Palacio’s transitional government (2005–2006) and later as president himself, raised hydrocarbon taxes, which reached 50 percent in 2006 and 80 percent in 2007. As a result, Petrobras decided to gradually pull out of Ecuador, and almost every other multinational firm dropped plans for any new investments. The added taxes strengthened the Correa administration’s fiscal position and allowed it to launch the Bono de Desarrollo Humano, a redistribution program that covers 1.5 million households (45 percent of the population).

With much smaller reserves, Bolivia and Ecuador cannot reach the degree of rentierism of which Venezuela is capable. With an economy that is more diversified than Venezuela’s and larger than those of Bolivia and Ecuador, Argentina remains the least dependent on rents. Further, its resource, land, has natural barriers against state expropriation and exploitation. Yet the state can still extract massive rents by setting up a monopsony for agricultural products, as it did under President Juan Perón in the late 1940s, or by taxing exports. Although President Carlos Menem eliminated export taxes in the 1990s, transitional president Eduardo Duhalde reinstated them in March 2002 under the name retenciones. Originally set at 5 percent for processed soybeans and 10 percent for unprocessed, the retenciones quickly rose to 20 percent in order to fund unemployment benefits for almost two-million people. President Néstor Kirchner maintained the tariff levels and the allocation of revenues almost until the end of his term. Ahead of the 2007 presidential election, Kirchner raised duties to 24 percent for processed soybeans and 27 percent for unprocessed in order to subsidize consumption in low-income sectors. After his wife Cristina won the race to succeed him, tariffs rose again to 32 percent and 34 percent to cover the debts incurred during the campaign. Soybean rents, which the central government has refused to share with the provinces, have brought Argentina closer to full-scale rentierism than ever before.9

No case perfectly fits the ideal type of rentier populism. During the commodity boom, however, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have moved closer to the ideal type, while Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay have moved away. Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela also differ among themselves in terms of closeness to the extreme. For purposes of causal inference, the key point is that in each case the degree of rentier populism tracks closely with the extent of plebiscitarianism and presidential concentration. Venezuela, the case that best approximates absolute rentier populism, is also the closest to plebiscitarian superpresidentialism. Argentina is the case with the most tenuous attributes of both types, while Bolivia and Ecuador are somewhere in between. But correlation does not equal causation. Since the number of cases is too small for statistical anal-
ysis, we must find and describe causal mechanisms. In other words, what are the processes through which rentier-populist coalitions give rise to the institutions of plebiscitarian superpresidentialism?

Once rentier populism has consolidated as the dominant coalition, two mechanisms foster concentration of power in the executive. The rising living standards among informals that the boom and its redistribution make possible also encourage presidents to intensify the use of plebiscites—the president “shares the wealth” and expects the happy recipients to vote in his or her favor. In turn, popular ratification emboldens the president to wrest remaining powers away from the other branches of government, and to portray anyone or anything that resists presidential hegemony as the minion of an antidemocratic conspiracy. The string of ratifications dispels any doubt about the validity of the majority’s verdict. Frequent plebiscitarian consultations extend a blank check for the unconstrained use of presidential superpowers. The other mechanism is fiscal. When prices are high enough, natural-resource rents cover all the coalition’s expenses. State control means that the government requires no negotiations in order to secure revenues, and thereby grants rulers independence from any group, national or international, that might otherwise demand a certain level of institutional quality in return for taxes paid or investments made.

From Policies to Regimes and Coalitions

In South America today, the radical left differs from the moderate left not only on policy grounds but also—and more deeply—in terms of regime type and dominant coalition. The radical left-turn cases reveal resemblances in the way in which power is exercised (via plebiscites and presidential superpowers) that different methods of gaining access to state power must not be allowed to obscure. The radical left-turn cases include a Southern Cone democracy (Argentina) as well as several Andean autocracies of varying intensities (Venezuela trailed by Bolivia and Ecuador). Yet every one of these countries is a place where the president dominates the government virtually without constraint, having achieved this whip hand largely through plebiscitarian methods of political mobilization. When it comes to power concentration and consolidation methods, plebiscitarian superpresidential regimes have written their own unique chapter in the annals of South American political life.

The institutional innovations at the level of the regime type in the radical cases reflect a transformation in the underlying coalitional dynamics. The institutional concentration of power in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela has been the result of the rise of rentier populism, a new political alliance between a government that has managed to gain control over the income from natural resources, and the informal sectors of the economy, which receive economic transfers in exchange
for political support. The new coalition was in turn made possible by the commodity boom of the 2000s, a change in international prices that involved a global redistribution of economic wealth with substantial repercussions for national economies.

Ultimately, what divides the radical left-turn cases from the moderate ones is that in the former it was the state—and not a certain economic class or industry—that became the commodity boom’s big winner. Radical governments used nationalization, taxation, or some combination of the two to claim the lion’s share of the rent derived from the newly elevated international prices. The moderate cases had one or more levels of institutional immunization against the expropriationist, populist, and absolutist temptations that the circumstances of the new century dangled before most South American presidents. In Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, barriers in the party system and the capital markets were ravaged by the combination of a drawn-out representation crisis and a deep financial crash. When these countries won the commodity lottery, radical presidents preferred a swift accumulation of power to patient reconstruction of multiparty institutions and ties to international investors.

Mainstream accounts depict variants of the left turn as variations along a socioeconomic-policy spectrum decisively influenced by political leaders’ choices. In the spirit of the young Guillermo O’Donnell, I argue that such policy choices are driven primarily by the exigencies of building and maintaining (alternative) sociopolitical coalitions, and that these choices are strongly conditioned by underlying distributions of wealth and power—in particular by distinct combinations of world commodities prices on the one hand, and national party systems and financial markets on the other. The old O’Donnell showed little interest in debates about Latin America’s left turn, in part, I suspect, because the left turn was never considered in light of “the regime question.” What I hope to have shown is that we are in fact dealing with variations at the level of the regime. Yet in partial disagreement with the old O’Donnell, I hold that the varying degrees of democracy observed across the radical cases are less important than the similar path that all four cases have trod toward the piling up, via plebiscites, of presidential superpowers.

Will plebiscitarian superpresidents last? They will last as long as the boom in natural-resource prices. And no boom lasts forever.

NOTES

1. For detailed and nuanced accounts of the left turn and its variants, see Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., The Resurgence of the Latin American Left (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); and Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, eds., Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


5. On the key regime transition that took place in Argentina in 2006, see María Angélica Gelli, “De la delegación excepcional a la reglamentación delegativa (Acerca de la reforma a la ley Administración Financiera),” *La Ley: Suplemento Constitucional*, 22 August 2006.


7. At least two works have also traced variations within the left turn to differences across parties and party systems. Nevertheless, these accounts explain policy variations, not coalitional or regime outcomes. See Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts, “Latin America’s ‘Left Turn’: A Framework for Analysis,” in *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*, 1–28; and Gustavo A. Flores-Macías, “Statist vs. Pro-Market: Explaining Leftist Governments’ Economic Policies in Latin America,” *Comparative Politics* 42 (July 2010): 413–33.
