

No. _____

In the
Supreme Court of the United States

Joseph Michael Easton,

Petitioner,

v.

United States of America,

Respondent.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari
to the United States Court of Appeals
for the Fifth Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

Whether 18 U.S.C. §922(g) permits conviction for the possession of any firearm that has ever crossed state lines at any time in the indefinite past, and, if so, if it is facially unconstitutional?

Whether 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1) comports with the Second Amendment?

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

Petitioner is Joseph Michael Easton, who was the Defendant-Appellant in the court below. Respondent, the United States of America, was the Plaintiff-Appellee in the court below.

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PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioner Joseph Michael Easton seeks a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The unpublished opinion of the court of appeals is reported at *United States v. Easton*, No. 22-10375, 2023 WL 4401114 (5th Cir. July 7, 2023). It is reprinted in Appendix A to this Petition. The district court's judgment and sentence is attached as Appendix B. The factual resume in support of plea is Appendix C.

JURISDICTION

The panel opinion and judgment of the Fifth Circuit were entered on July 7, 2023. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1254(1).

RELEVANT STATUTE AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION

Section 922(g)(1) of Title 18 reads in relevant part:

(g) It shall be unlawful for any person—

(1) who has been convicted in any court of, a crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year

to ship or transport in interstate or foreign commerce, or possess in or affecting commerce, any firearm or ammunition; or to receive any firearm or ammunition which has been shipped or transported in interstate or foreign commerce.

Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution provides in relevant part:

The Congress shall have Power

To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes...

The Second Amendment provides:

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Facts and Proceedings in District Court

Petitioner Joseph Michael Easton pleaded guilty to a single count of violating 18 U.S.C. §922(g), by possessing a firearm after a felony conviction. *See* [Appendix C]. He entered into a plea agreement that waived appeal, save certain express exceptions not relevant here. The factual resume stated that the firearm had moved from one state to another, but alleged no more robust connection to interstate commerce. *See* [Appendix C]. The court imposed a sentence of 48 months imprisonment. *See* [Appendix B].

B. Appellate Proceedings

Petitioner appealed arguing that the Congressional power to regulate interstate commerce did not permit it to criminalize Petitioner's conduct: the mere possession of a firearm that happened to cross state lines at some point in the indefinite past, with no causal connection between the defendant's conduct and the interstate movement of the gun. He thus argued that to the extent that 18 U.S.C. §922(g) actually reached his conduct, it was facially unconstitutional. Alternatively, he contended that the statute should be construed to require a greater connection to interstate commerce than that admitted in the defendant's "Factual Resume" in support of the plea. Petitioner conceded that these claims were foreclosed by circuit precedent and the court of appeals agreed, [Appx. A, at 1]; *United States v. Easton*, No. 22-10375, 2023 WL 4401114 (5th Cir. July 7, 2023)(unpublished)(citing *United States v. Alcantar*, 733 F.3d 143, 145-46 (5th Cir. 2013); *United States v. Daugherty*,

264 F.3d 513, 518 (5th Cir. 2001); *United States v. De Leon*, 170 F.3d 494, 499 (5th Cir. 1999)).

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

I. This Court should grant certiorari to resolve the tension between *Scarborough v. United States*, 431 U.S. 563 (1963), on the one hand, and *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus. v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. 519 (2012), and *Bond v. United States*, 572 U.S. 844 (2014), on the other.

A. *Scarborough* stands in tension with more recent precedents regarding the Commerce Clause.

“In our federal system, the National Government possesses only limited powers; the States and the people retain the remainder.” *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus. v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. 519, 533 (2012). Powers outside those explicitly enumerated by the Constitution are denied to the National Government. *See Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus.*, 567 U.S. at 534 (“The Constitution’s express conferral of some powers makes clear that it does not grant others.”) There is no general federal police power. *See United States v. Morrison*, 529 U.S. 598, 618-619 (2000). Every exercise of Congressional power must be justified by reference to a particular grant of authority. *See Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus.*, 567 U.S. at 535 (“The Federal Government has expanded dramatically over the past two centuries, but it still must show that a constitutional grant of power authorizes each of its actions.”). A limited central government promotes

accountability and “protects the liberty of the individual from arbitrary power.” *Bond v. United States*, 572 U.S. 844, 863 (2011).

The Constitution grants Congress a power to “regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.” Art. I, § 8, cl. 3. But this power “must be read carefully to avoid creating a general federal authority akin to the police power.” *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus.*, 567 U.S. at 536

Notwithstanding these limitations, and the text of Article I, Section 8, this Court has held that “[t]he power of Congress over interstate commerce is not confined to the regulation of commerce among the states,” and includes a power to regulate activities that “have a substantial effect on interstate commerce.” *United States v. Darby*, 312 U.S. 100, 118-119 (1941). Relying on this expansive vision of Congressional power, this Court held in *Scarborough v. United States*, 431 U.S. 563 (1963), that a predecessor statute to 18 U.S.C. §922(g) reached every case in which a felon possessed firearms that had once moved in interstate commerce. It turned away concerns of lenity and federalism, finding that Congress had intended the interstate nexus requirement only as a means to insure the constitutionality of the statute. *See Scarborough*, 431 U.S. at 577.

It is difficult to square *Scarborough*, and the expansive concept of the commerce power upon which it relies, with more recent holdings of the Court in this area. In *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus. v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. 519 (2012), five members of this Court found that the individual mandate component of the Affordable Care Act could not be justified by reference to the Commerce Clause. *See Nat’l Fed’n of Indep.*

Bus., 567 U.S. at 557-558 (Roberts., C.J. concurring). Although this Court recognized that the failure to purchase health insurance affects interstate commerce, five Justices did not think that the constitutional phrase “regulate Commerce ... among the several States,” could reasonably be construed to include enactments that compelled individuals to engage in commerce. *See id.* at 550 (Roberts., C.J. concurring). Rather, they understood that phrase to presuppose an existing commercial activity to be regulated. *See id.* (Roberts., C.J. concurring).

The majority of this Court in *NFIB* thus required more than a demonstrable effect on commerce: the majority required that the challenged enactment itself *be* a regulation of commerce – that it affect the legality of pre-existing commercial activity. Possession of firearms, like the refusal to purchase health insurance, may “substantially affect commerce.” But such possession is not, without more, a commercial act.

To be sure, *NFIB* does not explicitly repudiate the “substantial effects” test. Indeed, the Chief Justice’s opinion quotes *Darby*’s statement that “[t]he power of Congress over interstate commerce is not confined to the regulation of commerce among the states...” *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus.*, 567 U.S. at 549 (Roberts., C.J. concurring); *see also id.* at 552-553 (Roberts., C.J. concurring)(distinguishing *Wickard v. Filburn*, 317 U.S. 111 (1942)). It is therefore perhaps possible to read *NFIB* narrowly: as an isolated prohibition on affirmatively compelling persons to engage in commerce. But it is difficult to understand how this reading of the case would be at all consistent with *NFIB*’s textual reasoning.

This is so because the text of the Commerce Clause does not distinguish between Congress's power to affect commerce by regulating non-commercial activity (like possessing a firearm), and its power to affect commerce by compelling people to join a commercial market (like health insurance). Rather it simply says that Congress may "regulate ... commerce between the several states." And that phrase either is or is not limited to laws that affect the legality of commercial activity. Five justices in *NFIB* took the text of the Clause seriously and permitted Congress to enact only those laws that were, themselves, regulations of commerce. *NFIB* thus allows Congress only the power "to prescribe the rule by which commerce is to be governed." *Gibbons v. Ogden*, 22 U.S. 1, 196, 9 Wheat. 1 (1824).

And indeed, much of the Chief Justice's language in *NFIB* is consistent with this view. This opinion rejects the government's argument that the uninsured were "active in the market for health care" because they were "not currently engaged in any *commercial* activity involving health care..." *id.* at 556 (Roberts., C.J. concurring) (emphasis added). The Chief Justice significantly observed that "[t]he individual mandate's regulation of the uninsured as a class is, in fact, particularly divorced from any link to existing *commercial* activity." *Id.* (Roberts., C.J. concurring)(emphasis added). He reiterated that "[i]f the individual mandate is targeted at a class, it is a class whose *commercial* inactivity rather than activity is its defining feature." *Id.* (Roberts., C.J. concurring)(emphasis added). He agreed that "Congress can anticipate the effects on commerce of an *economic* activity," but did not say that it could anticipate a *non-economic* activity. *Id.* (Roberts., C.J. concurring)(emphasis added).

And he finally said that Congress could not anticipate a future activity “in order to regulate individuals not currently engaged *in commerce*.” *Id.* (Roberts., C.J. concurring)(emphasis added). Accordingly, *NFIB* provides substantial support for the proposition that enactments under the Commerce Clause must regulate commercial or economic activity, not merely activity that affects commerce.

Here, the factual resume does not state that Petitioner’s possession of the gun was an economic activity. *See* [Appx. C]. Under the reasoning of *NFIB*, this should have been fatal to the conviction. As explained by *NFIB*, the Commerce Clause permits Congress to regulate only activities, *i.e.*, the active participation in a market. But 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1) criminalizes all possession, *without* reference to economic activity. Accordingly it sweeps too broadly.

Further, the factual resume fails to show that Petitioner was engaged in the relevant market at the time of the regulated conduct. *See* [Appx. C]. The Chief Justice has noted that Congress cannot regulate a person’s activity under the Commerce Clause unless the person affected is “currently engaged” in the relevant market. *Id.* at 557. As an illustration, the Chief Justice provided the following example: “An individual who bought a car *two years ago* and may buy another in the future is not ‘active in the car market’ in any pertinent sense.” *Id.* at 556 (emphasis added). As such, *NFIB* brought into serious question the long-standing notion that a firearm which has previously and remotely passed through interstate commerce should be considered to indefinitely affect commerce without “concern for when the [initial] nexus with commerce occurred.” *Scarborough*, 431 U.S. at 577.

Scarborough stands in even more direct tension with *Bond v. United States*, 572 U.S. 844 (2014), which shows that §922(g) ought not be construed to reach the possession by felons of every firearm that has ever crossed state lines. Bond was convicted of violating 18 U.S.C. §229, a statute that criminalized the knowing possession or use of “any chemical weapon.” *Bond*, 572 U.S. at 853; 18 U.S.C. §229(a). She placed toxic chemicals – an arsenic compound and potassium dichromate – on the doorknob of a romantic rival. *See id.* This Court reversed her conviction, holding that any construction of the statute capable of reaching such conduct would compromise the chief role of states and localities in the suppression of crime. *See id.* at 865-866. It instead construed the statute to reach only the kinds of weapons and conduct associated with warfare. *See id.* at 859-862.

Notably, §229 defined the critical term “chemical weapon” broadly as “any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. The term includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere.” 18 U.S.C. §229F(8)(A). Further, it criminalized the use or possession of “any” such weapon, not of a named subset. 18 U.S.C. §229(a). This Court nonetheless applied a more limited construction of the statute, reasoning that statutes should not be read in a way that sweeps in purely local activity:

The Government’s reading of section 229 would “alter sensitive federal-state relationships,” convert an astonishing amount of “traditionally local criminal conduct” into “a matter for federal enforcement,” and “involve a substantial extension of federal police resources.” [*United*

States v. Bass, 404 U.S. [336] 349-350, 92 S. Ct. 515, 30 L. Ed. 2d 488 [(1971)]. It would transform the statute from one whose core concerns are acts of war, assassination, and terrorism into a massive federal anti-poisoning regime that reaches the simplest of assaults. As the Government reads section 229, “hardly” a poisoning “in the land would fall outside the federal statute’s domain.” *Jones [v. United States]*, 529 U.S. [848,] 857, 120 S. Ct. 1904, 146 L. Ed. 2d 902 [(2000)]. Of course Bond’s conduct is serious and unacceptable—and against the laws of Pennsylvania. But the background principle that Congress does not normally intrude upon the police power of the States is critically important. In light of that principle, we are reluctant to conclude that Congress meant to punish Bond’s crime with a federal prosecution for a chemical weapons attack.

Bond, 572 U.S. at 863

As in *Bond*, it is possible to read §922(g) to reach the conduct admitted here: possession of an object that once moved across state lines, without proof that the defendant’s conduct caused the object to move across state lines, nor even proof that it moved across state lines in the recent past. But to do so would intrude deeply on the traditional state responsibility for crime control. Such a reading would assert the federal government’s power to criminalize virtually any conduct anywhere in the country, with little or no relationship to commerce, nor to the interstate movement of commodities.

The better reading of the phrase “possess in or affecting commerce” – which appears in §922(g) – therefore requires a meaningful connection to interstate commerce. Such a reading would require either: 1) proof that the defendant’s offense caused the firearm to move in interstate commerce, or, at least, 2) proof that the firearm moved in interstate commerce at a time reasonably near the offense.

Petitioner did not challenge either the sufficiency of his Factual Resume or the constitutionality of the statute in district court. This probably presents an insurmountable vehicle problem for a plenary grant in the present case. Nonetheless, the issue is worthy of certiorari, as discussed above, and the Court has no shortage of cases presenting it.

If this Court grants certiorari to address this issue, it should hold the instant Petition pending the outcome. In the event that the constitutionality of §922(g) is called into question, or that its scope is limited, it should grant certiorari in the instant case, vacate the judgment below, and remand for reconsideration. *See Lawrence on Behalf of Lawrence v. Chater*, 516 U.S. 163, 167 (1996).

There is a reasonable probability that Petitioner would receive relief if his view of the statute and/or the Commerce Clause were vindicated by this Court, notwithstanding the existence of an appeal waiver lacking an applicable express exception. It is well-settled in the court below that a defendant cannot waive the right not to be convicted or imprisoned for conduct that does not constitute the charged offense. *See United States v. Trejo*, 610 F.3d 308, 312-313 (5th Cir. 2010); *United States v. Hildenbrand*, 527 F.3d 466, 474 (5th Cir. 2008); *United States v. Baymon*, 312 F.3d 725, 727 (5th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Spruill*, 292 F.3d 207, 215 (5th Cir. 2002); *United States v. White*, 258 F.3d 374, 380 (5th Cir. 2001). If Petitioner's view of the statute and/or Commerce Clause is correct, then the factual resume does not admit all elements necessary to conviction.

II. The courts of appeals have divided as to the constitutionality of 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1). Further, this Court has granted certiorari in a case that will decide the constitutionality of a related statute.

The Second Amendment guarantees “the right of the people to keep and bear arms.” Yet 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1) denies that right, on pain of 15 years imprisonment, to anyone previously convicted of a crime punishable by a year or more. In spite of this facial conflict between the statute and the text of the constitution, the courts of appeals uniformly rejected Second Amendment challenges for many years. *See United States v. Moore*, 666 F.3d 313, 316-317 (4th Cir. 2012)(collecting cases). This changed, however, following *New York State Rifle & Pistol Ass’n, Inc. v. Bruen*, __U.S.__, 142 S. Ct. 2111 (2022). *Bruen* held that where the text of Second Amendment plainly covers regulated conduct, the government may defend that regulation only by showing that it comports with the nation’s historical tradition of gun regulation. *See Bruen*, 142 S. Ct. at 2129-2130. It may no longer defend the regulation by showing that the regulation achieves an important or even compelling state interest. *See id.* at 2127-2128.

After *Bruen*, the courts of appeals have split as to whether 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1) trenches on rights protected by the Second Amendment. The Third Circuit has sustained the Second Amendment challenge of a man previously convicted of making a false statement to obtain food stamps, notwithstanding the felony status of that offense. *See Range v. Attorney General of the United States*, 69 F.4th 96 (3rd Cir. 2023). By contrast, the Eighth Circuit has held that §922(g)(1) is constitutional in all instances, at least against Second Amendment attack. *See United States v.*

Cunningham, 70 F.4th 502 (8th Cir. 2023). And the Seventh Circuit thought that the issue could be decided only after robust development of the historical record, remanding to consider such historical materials as the parties could muster. See *Atkinson v. Garland*, 70 F.4th 1018, 1023-1024 (7th Cir. 2023).

This circuit split plainly merits certiorari. It involves a direct conflict between the federal courts of appeals as to the constitutionality of a criminal statute. The statute in question is a staple of federal prosecution.¹ It criminalizes primary conduct in civil society – it does not merely set forth standards or procedures for adjudicating a legal dispute. A felon living in a neighborhood beset by crime deserves to know whether he or she may defend himself against violence by possessing a handgun, or whether such self-defense is undertaken only on pain of 15 years imprisonment.

If the Court grants certiorari to decide the constitutionality of §922(g)(1), it should hold the instant case pending the outcome, then grant certiorari, vacate the judgment below, and remand if the outcome recognizes the unconstitutionality of §922(g)(1) in a substantial number of cases. Although the defendant has previous convictions for assaultive conduct, this Court may well find that the Second Amendment supports a broad or facial challenge to §922(g)(1). The dissenters in *Range* expressed serious doubts as to whether the logic of that decision could be

¹ See United States Sentencing Commission, *Sourcebook of Federal Sentencing Statistics*, Table 20, Federal Offenders Sentenced under Each Chapter Two Guideline, p.2 (FY 2022) (showing that 9,367 people were sentenced under USSG §2K2.1 in FY 2022, which governs prosecutions under 18 U.S.C. §922(g)), available at <https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/annual-reports-and-sourcebooks/2022/Table20.pdf> , last visited October 3, 2023.

contained to those convicted of relatively innocuous felonies. *See e.g. Range*, 69 F.4th at 131-132 (Krause, J., dissenting). Likewise, the Seventh Circuit has expressed doubt as to whether the Second Amendment distinguishes between violent and non-violent felonies. *See Atkinson*, 70 F.4th at 1023. And the Southern District of Mississippi has sustained a Second Amendment challenge to a defendant previously convicted of aggravated assault and manslaughter. *See United States v. Bullock*, No. 3:18-CR-165-CWR-FKB, 2023 WL 4232309, at *2-3 (S.D. Miss. 2023). In its view, the government's authorities showed a right only to punish those who possessed a firearm after conviction of a death-eligible offense, or after a finding of dangerousness that prospectively disarmed the defendant. *Bullock*, 2023 WL 4232309, at *2-3.

It is true that the Second Amendment challenge was not preserved in district court, and that any review will therefore eventually have to occur on the plain error standard. *See Fed. R. Crim. P. 52(b)*. This means that to obtain relief Petitioner must show error, that is clear or obvious, that affects substantial rights, and that seriously affects the fairness, integrity, or public reputation of judicial proceedings. *See United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725, 732 (1993). But as shown above, there is at least a reasonable probability that the Defendant could establish clear or obvious violation of his Second Amendment rights if this Court evaluates the constitutionality of 9§22(g)(1), which it should quickly do. And the obviousness of error may be shown any time before the expiration of direct appeal. *Henderson v. United States*, 568 U.S. 266 (2013). Finally, a finding that the Defendant has been sentenced to prison for

exercising a basic constitutional right would affect the outcome and cast doubt on the fairness of the proceedings, to say the least.

It is also true that the Second Amendment was not briefed in the court below. But the court below has considered issues raised for the first time in a certiorari petition, when the case is returned to it via GVR. *See United States v. Ross*, 708 Fed. Appx. 206 (5th Cir. 2018)(unpublished)(remanding after GVR), *see also Appellant's Brief in United States v. Ross*, No. 18-11318, 2019 WL 324502 (5th Cir. Filed Jan. 22, 2019)(showing that the issue giving rise to the GVR was not raised in the first Initial Brief).

Finally, this Court should remand notwithstanding the presence of a waiver of appeal. As noted, the court below has recognized that the defendant cannot waive the sufficiency of the factual resume, as such would imply the ability to volunteer for conviction on the basis of conduct that does not constitute a punishable offense. *See United States v. Trejo*, 610 F.3d 308, 312-313 (5th Cir. 2010); *United States v. Hildenbrand*, 527 F.3d 466, 474 (5th Cir. 2008); *United States v. Baymon*, 312 F.3d 725, 727 (5th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Spruill*, 292 F.3d 207, 215 (5th Cir. 2002); *United States v. White*, 258 F.3d 374, 380 (5th Cir. 2001). If Petitioner's view of the Second is correct, then the conduct admitted in the Factual Resume does not state an offense that may be lawfully prosecuted.

Alternatively, this Court should hold the instant Petition pending the outcome of *United States v. Rahimi*, 22-915, __U.S.__, 2023 WL 4278450 (June 30, 2023)(granting cert.), which will decide the constitutionality of 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(8).

That statute forbids firearm possession by those subject to a domestic violence restraining order.

Of course, if Rahimi prevails in that case, it will tend to support constitutional attacks on other sections of §922(g). Likely, a victory for Rahimi will involve a rejection of the government’s contention that the Second Amendment is limited to those Congress terms “law abiding.” *See United States v. Rahimi*, 61 F.4th 443, 451-453 (5th Cir. March 2, 2023)(considering this argument), *cert. granted* 2023 WL 4278450 (June 30, 2023). It will also require the Court to consider and reject historical analogues to §922(g)(8), including some that have been offered in support of §922(g)(1). ***Compare* Rahimi**, 61 F.4th at 456-457 (considering government’s argument that Congress could disarm those subject to restraining orders because some states disarmed enslaved people and Native Americans at founding), ***with Range***, 69 F.4th at 105-106 (considering government’s argument that Congress could disarm felons because some states disarmed enslaved people and Native Americans at founding). But even if Rahimi does not prevail, the opinion may be of significant use to Petitioner. If, for example, this Court were to decide that Rahimi may be stripped of his Second Amendment rights because he is objectively dangerous, Petitioner may argue that his convictions do not mark him as such. In short, the Court has granted certiorari in a closely related issue, and should hold the instant Petition.

CONCLUSION

Petitioner respectfully submits that this Court should grant *certiorari* to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

Respectfully submitted this 4th day of October, 2023.

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