SUPREME COURT
OF THE UNITED STATES

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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NANCY WILLIAMS, ET AL.,   )

             Petitioners,   )

           v.   ) No. 23-191

FITZGERALD WASHINGTON, ALABAMA   )

SECRETARY OF LABOR,   )

             Respondent.   )

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Pages: 1 through 93

Place: Washington, D.C.

Date: October 7, 2024

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11   Washington, D.C.

12   Monday, October 7, 2024

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14   The above-entitled matter came on for

15   oral argument before the Supreme Court of the

16   United States at 10:05 a.m.

17

18   APPEARANCES:

19   ADAM G. UNIKOWSKY, ESQUIRE, Washington, D.C.; on

20   behalf of the Petitioners.

21   EDMUND G. LaCOUR, JR., Solicitor General, Montgomery,

22   Alabama; on behalf of the Respondent.

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1   C O N T E N T S

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1   P R O C E E D I N G S

2   (10:05 a.m.)

3   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We will hear

4   argument first this term in Case 23-191,

5   Williams versus Fitzgerald.

6   Mr. Unikowsky.

7   ORAL ARGUMENT OF ADAM G. UNIKOWSKY

8   ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS

9   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Mr. Chief Justice, and

10   may it please the Court:

11   Patsy and Felder control this case.

12   In Patsy, this Court held that a failure to

13   exhaust was not a defense to liability under

14   Section 1983. In this case, however, the

15   Supreme Court of Alabama dismissed Petitioners'

16   claims because Petitioners failed to exhaust,

17   contradicting Patsy's holding.

18   Felder confirms that Patsy applies in

19   state court. This Court reasoned that the

20   dominant characteristic of a civil rights claim

21   is that it's judicially enforceable in the first

22   instance, and that characteristic does not vary

23   depending on whether the suit is filed in

24   federal or state court. The same reasoning

25   applies to this case.

1   Respondent characterizes Alabama's

2   statute as a neutral procedural rule. But

3   there's nothing neutral about it. A claimant

4   has to seek relief from the Secretary before

5   suing the Secretary. The claimant never -- the

6   Secretary never has to seek relief from the

7   claimant for anything and never has any reason

8   to exhaust any remedy.

9   Respondent also emphasizes that

10   Alabama's law is jurisdictional. But this Court

11   has held that a state cannot avoid preemption by

12   defining the jurisdiction of state courts to

13   exclude cases in which the defendant asserts an

14   affirmative defense that this Court has held is

15   not available. And that's exactly what happened

16   in this case.

17   Finally and at a minimum, the Alabama

18   statute is preempted as applied to this case in

19   which the Alabama Supreme Court reached the

20   Kafkaesque conclusion that Petitioners could not

21   challenge their inability to exhaust precisely

22   because of their inability to exhaust.

23   I welcome the Court's questions.

24   JUSTICE THOMAS: Mr. Unikowsky, would

25   you have the same objection if Alabama required

1   these claims to be made in a lower state court?

2   MR. UNIKOWSKY: No, Your Honor. I

3   think the state is allowed to direct these

4   claims to a -- to a court as long as there's no

5   exhaustion requirement.

6   JUSTICE THOMAS: Well, what's the

7   difference? If it's -- if -- if -- let's say --

8   and I'm just speculating -- that it required

9   that it goes to something the equivalent of a

10   municipal court before it -- before it goes to

11   its trial court, how is that different from

12   going to an agency? Isn't it a similar

13   exhaustion problem?

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I don't think so.

15   When I think of an exhaustion requirement, I

16   think of a requirement to seek relief from the

17   very person you're planning to sue before suing

18   that person. So that's how Alabama's system

19   works. You have to seek relief from the

20   Secretary. You file a claim with an examiner,

21   who is -- reports to the Secretary. You appeal

22   to an appeals tribunal, which also reports to

23   the Secretary. So you're seeking relief from

24   the very entity that you're ultimately going to

25   sue.

1   And that's the defect the Court

2   identified in the Felder case. I view that as

3   different as the state setting up its judicial

4   system to direct courts -- parties to a

5   third-party neutral.

6   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: What if,

7   instead of the requirement you're complaining --

8   the exhaustion requirement, what if the

9   requirement were simply that parties had to go

10   through a mediation process?

11   I think several jurisdictions have

12   that. I mean, it may -- it may not last long,

13   but before you can proceed with your suit, you

14   have to sit down, and there's a mediator that

15   sees -- tries to see if you can work it out.

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I think that sounds

17   a little bit like the rule in Felder. So I -- I

18   probably would say that it's preempted, but I

19   think that would boil down to as to whether it's

20   really an exhaustion requirement.

21   The rule I extract from -- from Patsy

22   is that exhaustion requirements are -- are

23   preempted. You know, I think there are some

24   borderline cases about whether something really

25   qualifies as an exhaustion requirement. I think

1　that that question is not presented here because

2　it pretty clearly is a requirement of that

3　nature.

4　　　　　CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, I would

5　have thought that your -- your complaint is

6　focusing on the sort of delay, which is what the

7　exhaustion requirement simply imposes, and if

8　it's simply you've got -- you've got to try

9　mediation for a while, I don't know why you

10　would say that's also objectionable.

11　　　　　MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I think it would

12　depend on exactly what the nuts and bolts of the

13　requirements are. I mean, if you have to

14　present some version of a notice of claim to the

15　state agency and then go through a mediation

16　process, I might say that looks like the notice

17　of claim requirement in Wisconsin.

18　　　　　If you can sue right away and then the

19　court just sends the parties off to mediation

20　while the claim is pending, that doesn't sound

21　like an exhaustion requirement at all. It is

22　judicially enforceable in the first instance,

23　and then the court is just applying a particular

24　procedure to try to encourage a settlement.

25　　　　　So I think it would -- it would depend

1   on how the mediation rule worked.

2   JUSTICE BARRETT: Mr. Unikowsky, when

3   did the state statute of limitations start

4   running, or has it?

5   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I think that's an

6   -- an unresolved question whether it would be

7   tolled or not. I think there is some risk that

8   it wouldn't be tolled, that the state might say

9   that, you know, it expired before you got the

10   chance to exhaust because that would be the rule

11   in federal court. But I don't think that the --

12   the lower courts decided whether there would be

13   tolling during the exhaustion process.

14   JUSTICE BARRETT: Has it expired for

15   federal purposes? You know, if your -- if your

16   plaintiffs -- if your plaintiffs -- if your

17   clients were to file in federal court --

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: No, I don't think --

19   JUSTICE BARRETT: -- would they do so?

20   MR. UNIKOWSKY: We're seeking

21   forward-looking relief, injunctive relief, so

22   we're saying there's a continuing harm. So, no,

23   I think we could still file our -- our lawsuit

24   in federal court.

25   JUSTICE BARRETT: And just out of

1 curiosity, why didn't you file a lawsuit in

2 federal court? Why did you go to state?

3   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I think we felt the

4 state court was -- was best positioned to enter

5 an injunction against the -- the state agency.

6 State courts hear the overwhelming majority of

7 unemployment insurance claims. We just felt the

8 state court would be in the best position to

9 enter and administer an injunction. So that's

10 why we went to state court.

11   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm -- I'm very

12 confused by this system. First of all, I'm not

13 sure what the exhaustion is. Is it just merely

14 of the claim for benefits, or do you also have

15 to -- the way I read the lower court's decision,

16 supreme court decision, which is you have to

17 exhaust your due process claim before the agency

18 as well.

19   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Right. So that --

20   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They said both

21 things, not just that you have to exhaust trying

22 to get your remedies, but you have to go to the

23 very agency you're accusing of a due process

24 violation to cure it, correct?

25   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Correct. That was the

1   holding as a matter of state law. We argued

2   below that you had to exhaust your claim for

3   benefits but not the claim that the agency was

4   too slow. But we lost as a matter of state law

5   on that issue.

6   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. Just

7   so I'm clear in my own mind, I think what

8   Justice Barrett was getting at, and I -- and I'm

9   not sure I understand this completely, how this

10   would work, can you go to state court? You

11   can't go to federal court to claim a due process

12   violation until you've been denied the process,

13   correct?

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That's correct.

15   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So, if you -- do

16   you really have a workable alternative to go to

17   federal court as opposed to state court?

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well --

19   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: You have to file

20   with the state to claim the benefits to start

21   with, correct?

22   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Correct.

23   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And so you have to

24   be there. So how and when can you go to federal

25   court?

1   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I think --

2   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That -- that's

3   what I don't understand from the other side, but

4   do you understand it?

5   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I think you can go to

6   federal court at any time, and your claim might

7   lose on the merits if you haven't tried out the

8   process from the state court, but you can still

9   go. It's just the ground for dismissal wouldn't

10   be a lack of exhaustion.

11   JUSTICE GORSUCH: It might be a lack

12   of ripeness perhaps, though?

13   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Right. In principle,

14   a federal court could dismiss for lack of

15   ripeness, yes, but it just wouldn't be an

16   exhaustion dismissal.

17   JUSTICE GORSUCH: So what's --

18   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So you're really

19   stuck in a state process with a loop that you

20   can't get out of?

21   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, our view is that

22   if we went to federal court in this case, the --

23   the federal court would not dismiss for lack of

24   exhaustion under Patsy and would -- it would

25   entertain our due process claims on the merits.

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 1                JUSTICE GORSUCH:  Did you try a
 2     futility exception argument?
 3                MR. UNIKOWSKY:  I don't -- no, I don't
 4     think we -- we made that argument below.
 5                JUSTICE GORSUCH:  Do you -- do you
 6     have any reason to believe that Alabama doesn't
 7     recognize a futility exception requirement?
 8                MR. UNIKOWSKY:  Well, I -- I mean, we
 9     argued below that it would be absurd.  In our
10     brief --
11                JUSTICE GORSUCH:  Yeah.
12                MR. UNIKOWSKY:  -- we argued it would
13     be absurd to --
14                JUSTICE GORSUCH:  You argued it would
15     be absurd and Catch 22 and --
16                MR. UNIKOWSKY:  Right.
17                JUSTICE GORSUCH: -- Heller was trotted
18     out.  And we -- we hear that from time to time,
19     but that's what a futility exception exists to
20     -- to address.  And I'm just curious whether you
21     know whether Alabama law permits a futility
22     argument, and -- and -- and you're saying, as I
23     understand it, that none was attempted here in
24     any event?
25                MR. UNIKOWSKY:  So I don't know the
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1   answer to the question. Alabama does say this

2   is a jurisdictional limitation, which implies to

3   me that there aren't equitable exceptions like

4   futility, but I -- I'm not sure.

5   JUSTICE GORSUCH: You don't know?

6   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I don't know.

7   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Okay. And then,

8   if -- if one were challenging a benefits

9   decision by the federal -- by the federal

10   government, there -- there's almost assuredly

11   going to be an exhaustion requirement, Social

12   Security disability benefits or whatever, in --

13   in federal court, and I'm just curious what you

14   might say about the incongruity of refusing to

15   allow a state to have a similar exhaustion

16   requirement that the federal government imposes

17   on Americans.

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I don't think

19   it's incongruous at all because I think the

20   practical effect of our rule is that most claims

21   would be dismissed in state court if you're just

22   seeking benefits for -- for lack of merit

23   because you've gotten enough process.

24   In other words, if you -- if you just

25   file a claim in a state agency saying, I want

1   benefits, and then you get a bad decision from

2   the hearing examiner, and then you just go

3   straight to federal court and say, well, that

4   was a due process violation, I didn't get a good

5   hearing before the examiner, you would lose in

6   federal court. The federal court would say

7   there's no due process violation. You have

8   plenty of process in --

9   JUSTICE GORSUCH: No, I -- I --

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- the state court.

11   JUSTICE GORSUCH: -- understand that.

12   I think we're speaking past each other.

13   So you -- you're -- you're saying that

14   Alabama can't have an exhaustion requirement,

15   correct?

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Only as applied to

17   Section 1983 claims.

18   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

19   Right. Okay.

20   But, if I were to challenge my federal

21   disability benefit claim, identical claim, just

22   against a different government, here, instead of

23   the state, the federal government, you'd almost

24   assuredly have to exhaust your administrative

25   remedies before you could challenge that

1   decision, and I'm -- I'm just curious how you

2   reconcile that fact with -- with the relief you

3   seek here.

4   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I'm actually not

5   sure that's the case if it's the type of claim

6   we're asserting here. Like, suppose you filed a

7   Social Security claim and it was stuck in the

8   agency for five, 10, 15 years.

9   JUSTICE GORSUCH: You'd have a

10   futility argument for sure.

11   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yeah. I think you'd

12   be able to go to federal court.

13   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Yeah.

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That's right.

15   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Right. But,

16   otherwise, you'd have to exhaust, right?

17   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Right, unless --

18   JUSTICE GORSUCH: And that's what I'm

19   getting at, okay?

20   So, on the federal system, you have an

21   exhaustion requirement with a futility

22   exception. Assuming Alabama recognizes a

23   futility exception -- and I'll have that

24   question for counsel, I've done a little

25   research on it, it seems to have one -- why

1   shouldn't the state be allowed to have the exact

2   parallel situation that you'd have on the

3   federal system?

4   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I guess I think that

5   argument is incompatible with -- with the Felder

6   case. I mean, look at all the reasoning of the

7   Felder case. I think it would rebut that --

8   that suggestion. I mean, the Court held that

9   it's -- the state is not permitted to put that

10   type of barrier in front of the vindication of

11   the full right.

12   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: What -- what does

13   Felder -- because that is the linchpin of your

14   argument, is that we've already decided this.

15   So what does -- what kind of state procedural

16   rules or rules does Felder still leave, and how

17   would you define the scope of that?

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So Felder left two

19   categories of rules that the State could apply

20   in its own courts.

21   One are neutral procedural rules. So

22   it gave the example of rules governing

23   substitution of parties and service of process,

24   rules that don't just apply to plaintiffs who

25   sue governmental defendants.

1   And then the second category was

2   certain jurisdictional rules. And Haywood

3   elaborated on this. The Court said that

4   jurisdictional rules that reflect concerns over

5   competence over the subject matter and the power

6   over the person, that jurisdictional rules are

7   designed to protect.

8   So, you know, examples of such rules

9   would be like in the -- the Herb case, a

10   jurisdictional rule that a territory -- a city

11   court can only hear cases arising from its

12   territorial limits. The Court upheld such a

13   rule. Or a case saying that the state won't

14   exercise jurisdiction over out-of-state

15   defendants if it's an out-of-state plaintiff.

16   The Court upheld such a rule in the Douglas case

17   from 1929.

18   So those are the types of

19   jurisdictional rules --

20   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Do you --

21   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- that would --

22   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- do you view

23   Felder as a preemption decision then?

24   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yes, I view Felder as

25   a preemption decision.

          1   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And what -- on

          2   what basis was the preemption?

          3   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So the Court talked

          4   about purposes and objectives preemption in its

          5   opinion. And we actually have no problem with

          6   that. We agree with all of its analysis.

          7   I actually think there would be a --

          8   there's a straighter path to the result in

          9   Felder. I just think there's a -- a direct

         10   conflict because, when the Court helds -- holds

         11   that an affirmative defense is not available, it

         12   just means it's not available, regardless of

         13   whether the adjudicator is a federal or state

         14   judge.

         15   So I view sort of direct -- I view

         16   Felder as a direct conflict preemption case.

         17   The Court did couch it in -- in purposes and

         18   objectives language, possibly because, in that

         19   case, it actually wasn't clear whether it was an

         20   exhaustion requirement at all.

         21   Unlike typical exhaustion

         22   requirements, you don't have to wait for the

         23   agency to rule. And so one of Wisconsin's

         24   arguments in that case was this isn't exhaustion

         25   like in Patsy. I think that's why the Court

1   walked through all of the -- the reasons that

2   the statute conflicted with, you know, the

3   purpose of Congress. And then it said, well,

4   actually, we think it is an exhaustion

5   requirement, and then Patsy's reasoning just --

6   just follows.

7   JUSTICE JACKSON: What -- what I guess

8   I'm confused about from your answer to Justice

9   Kavanaugh is how the jurisdictional and neutral

10   requirements relate to the -- the analysis in

11   Felder.

12   I mean, Felder's rule about whether or

13   not it was preempted didn't seem to have

14   anything to do with whether the rule was

15   jurisdictional or neutral.

16   So why do you suggest that that's

17   somehow a way to get out of Felder's analysis

18   about preemption?

19   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I think -- so

20   Felder specifically said the rule in that case

21   wasn't neutral. So the Court has this whole

22   discussion about how, you know, it only applies

23   to -- to plaintiffs who sue the government. And

24   so that's -- that's not neutral as the Court --

25   JUSTICE JACKSON: Yeah, but that's not

 1   what --

 2   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- understood the

 3   question.

 4   JUSTICE JACKSON: I mean, I'm looking

 5   at the analysis in Felder and it -- as you said

 6   subsequently, it's a direct preemption case. It

 7   says that the notice of claim statute undermines

 8   the uniquely federal remedy that is Section 1983

 9   in several interrelated ways.

10   And then it talks about three ways,

11   one of which is that it conditions the right of

12   recovery that Congress has authorized. The

13   second is that it discriminates against the

14   federal right. And the third is that it -- it

15   looks like an exhaustion requirement, all right?

16   But, really, the reason it's preempted

17   is because it undermines the federal right. And

18   it seems to me that Alabama's law is doing all

19   of those three interrelated things. So I don't

20   understand why we care whether or not it's

21   jurisdictional or whether or not it's neutral

22   in -- in any given sense. It's doing what

23   Felder says you can't do because it undermines

24   the federal right.

25   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I agree the Court

1 doesn't have to care about any of that stuff.

2 In fact, there is language in Felder that says

3 that even if a rule is neutral and procedural,

4 it still -- if, you know, it -- it -- it -- if

5 it undermines a federal right, it's still

6 preempted. And we'd be perfectly fine if the

7 Court went in that direction.

8   JUSTICE ALITO: Well --

9   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I -- I don't think

10 it's neutral and procedural, but -- I'm sorry,

11 Your Honor.

12   JUSTICE ALITO: Well, do you contest

13 the principle that state courts are generally

14 completely free to define the jurisdiction of

15 their courts?

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: No, I don't contest

17 that general principle.

18   JUSTICE ALITO: But there are some

19 exceptions, right?

20   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yes.

21   JUSTICE ALITO: So why isn't that body

22 of case law the appropriate body of case law to

23 apply here since the Alabama Supreme Court tells

24 us that this rule is jurisdictional? We

25 assume -- presumably have to accept that. This

1   is a matter of state court jurisdiction.

2   So why don't we look to the body of

3   case law that explains when this general rule

4   that the state courts can define the

5   jurisdiction of their own courts gives way?

6   I know you want to talk about Patsy

7   and Felder, but why is that -- neither of those

8   involves jurisdiction.

9   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That's right. So this

10   Court has upheld some jurisdictional rules and

11   struck down others, and we're happy to talk

12   about those cases.

13   So, in Howlett and most recently in

14   Haywood, this Court held that jurisdictional

15   rules were preempted, and in both those cases,

16   the -- the rule of decision was that the state

17   courts in general hear 1983 claims and the state

18   courts sometimes hear claims against these

19   particular defendants, and so the state cannot

20   avoid preemption just by defining the

21   jurisdiction of the state courts to exclude

22   cases where this defense is asserted.

23   And, in fact, in the Howlett case,

24   there's actually this language that says that

25   Felder would not have come out the other way if

1   Wisconsin had said that state courts lack

2   jurisdiction over claims in which the notice of

3   claim requirement wasn't satisfied.

4   JUSTICE ALITO: Well, in Haywood, the

5   courts -- the Court concluded that the New York

6   rule evinced hostility toward 1983.

7   Can that be said here, when the

8   Alabama courts will entertain the 1983 claim,

9   it's just a question of when they will do it?

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I think that you

11   would -- I mean, "hostility" is too strong a

12   word. But I think the State has a policy

13   disagreement with Congress over the merit of

14   hearing unexhausted claims.

15   Respondent's brief emphasizes that

16   Alabama made the policy judgment that exhaustion

17   is a good idea, it really helps the claimant.

18   And that's the policy judgment that is

19   inconsistent with the policy judgment that

20   Congress made when it enacted Section 1983

21   without an exhaustion requirement.

22   JUSTICE KAGAN: You have a broad

23   argument, Mr. Unikowsky, that if it's an

24   exhaustion requirement, it -- it -- it can't get

25   in the way of a lawsuit.

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 1            You also have a narrower argument that

 2    has to do with this case.  But what would be --

 3    if you had to define a narrower class of cases

 4    that are preempted so that if we wanted to avoid

 5    the question of whether all preemption -- excuse

 6    me, whether all exhaustion requirements were

 7    preempted, what would that narrower class of

 8    cases look like, and what justifies the

 9    parameters?

10            MR. UNIKOWSKY:  So I think the Court

11    could say that it's not going to rule on whether

12    all exhaustion requirements are preempted, but

13    it's going to say that this particular statute

14    is preempted as applied to all 1983 claims.  And

15    that holding would avoid looking at the facts of

16    this particular case.

17            And I think the Court could reach that

18    conclusion by comparing the time limits here to

19    the time limits in Felder.  So, in Felder, the

20    Court held that the statute undermines Section

21    1983 because the claimant only had 120 days to

22    bring the suit, and, therefore, the practical

23    effect of the notice of claim statute was to

24    immunize the state against many types of 1983

25    claims.
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1   And so I think, you know, this case,

2   the time limits are actually much shorter. It's

3   -- it's seven days from receipt or 15 days from

4   mailing of a decision to file an internal appeal

5   to the appeals tribunal. It's also 15 days to

6   go to the board of appeals. One of the

7   Petitioners in this case alleges that he

8   couldn't appeal because that entire period came

9   and went when he was in the hospital on a

10   ventilator because of COVID.

11   So I think that the Court can hold

12   that this particular statute has the same type

13   of adverse effects on claimants as --

14   JUSTICE KAGAN: Just -- so it would be

15   a line about the degree of burden that's

16   attached to the 1983 right?

17   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That -- that's right.

18   It could -- it could go in that direction

19   because that was part of Felder's reasoning, and

20   so I think the Court can incorporate that.

21   JUSTICE KAGAN: I mean, it was part of

22   Felder's reasoning. Felder has this -- some

23   language that suggests a very broad rule

24   applying to all exhaustion requirements, but

25   then it also goes into the time limits. It has

1   a lot to do with, like, how much burden there is

2   on the 1983 right, and it also discusses the

3   purposes of the statute and whether those

4   purposes suggest a conflict with the policy of

5   1983.

6   And the relationship between or among

7   all of those things is not particularly clear

8   from the language of the opinion. It sort of

9   suggests that they don't really believe that

10   there's an absolute bar when it comes to

11   exhaustion requirements.

12   Do you agree with that? Do you have

13   any, you know, views about the relationship

14   among those three aspects of the Court's

15   reasoning?

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yeah, I -- I'm not

17   sure I agree with that because I think the

18   reason there were so many different arguments in

19   Felder was that it wasn't really clear that was

20   an exhaustion requirement in the typical way of

21   you file your claim to the agency, you wait for

22   a couple years, you're trapped in purgatory, and

23   then you leave the agency, right? Because it

24   was just a notice of claim requirement, you just

25   submit your claim, and if you wait a particular

 1   period and they haven't answered, you get to

 2   sue.

 3   And, in fact, in -- in -- in the part

 4   of the opinion talking about exhaustion and --

 5   and -- and Patsy, the Court says, well, you

 6   know, the state says it's de minimis, implying

 7   that, you know, maybe some exhaustion

 8   requirements fall under Patsy, but this just

 9   isn't one. And the Court says no, no, no, this

10   really looks like an exhaustion requirement.

11   But, because of that dispute, I think the Court

12   felt the need to go through, you know, all of

13   the other doctrinal machinery.

14   I think this exhaustion requirement is

15   exactly like the ones in Patsy. It's an

16   absolutely classic exhaustion requirement. You

17   go to the agency. You have to wait for it to

18   rule. As this case illustrates, you might have

19   to wait for several years before getting a

20   chance to go to court. And so I think Patsy's

21   reasoning that this is just not an affirmative

22   defense to a Section 1983 claim carries over to

23   this case.

24   JUSTICE BARRETT: Mr. Unikowsky,

25   how -- you know, we've said in our own contexts

1   about jurisdiction it's a term of many, many

2   meanings, too many. How are we supposed to --

3   like, let's say I agree with you that the

4   definition of jurisdiction has to be a federal

5   one.

6   How are we supposed to decide?

7   Because a different test does apply, right, if

8   this is a jurisdictional requirement than if

9   it's just a straight-up, you know, more

10   Felder-like scheme. So what is the test? How

11   do we decide if a state rule is really

12   jurisdictional or not?

13   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So the words of this

14   Court's cases, which I'm sure Your Honor knows

15   very well, is that it's really jurisdictional if

16   it reflects concerns over the power over the

17   person or competence over the subject matter

18   that jurisdictional rules are designed to

19   protect.

20   I certainly understand that that

21   formulation will not resolve any or even many

22   cases, but I think that just looking at how the

23   Courts in Howlett and Haywood reached their

24   conclusions -- so, in both cases, the Court held

25   that, number one, the state courts have general

1   jurisdiction over 1983 claims.

2   JUSTICE BARRETT: Mm-hmm.

3   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Number two, the state

4   courts in general had authority over these

5   defendants as long as certain other, you know,

6   conditions were satisfied. So, for example, in

7   Haywood, the Court emphasizes that you can get

8   injunctive relief against these defendants. And

9   so the Court said, well, if there's power over

10   1983 claims in general, power over these

11   defendants in general, the rule is not a bona

12   fide jurisdictional rule.

13   I think that that's the -- the

14   reasoning in those cases. And, again, carried

15   over to this case, I think you'd have the same

16   reasoning. Alabama courts generally have

17   jurisdiction over Section 1983 claims. There is

18   jurisdiction over this defendant as long as the

19   claim is exhausted. There's claim --

20   jurisdiction over unexhausted claims when there

21   is no exhaustion requirement in the particular

22   scheme.

23   All that's happening here is that the

24   state is cutting out from jurisdiction claims in

25   which the -- the -- the defendant has this

 1   particular affirmative defense, even though this

 2   Court has held that that's not a defense under

 3   Section 1983.

 4   And so I don't think the Court really

 5   has to elaborate the exact lines here. Its --

 6   the lines are a little bit blurry, but I think

 7   that, you know, as applied to these particular

 8   facts, you can just --

 9   JUSTICE BARRETT: It's like a claims

10   processing rule --

11   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Right. Exactly.

12   JUSTICE BARRETT: -- rather than a

13   jurisdictional rule?

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Exactly. So, I mean,

15   you know, I think there's going to be a lot of

16   borderline cases, but I don't think this is --

17   this is one.

18   JUSTICE ALITO: I --

19   JUSTICE BARRETT: And let me just ask

20   you one question about how this scheme works

21   because I agree it's very odd. Is there some

22   mechanism when you're before this intermediate

23   tribunal where you actually fill out a piece of

24   paper and say, I'm asserting a due process claim

25   in addition to my claim for benefits? How would

1   one even exhaust the due process portion of

2   this?

3   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I've been wondering

4   that too. I mean, maybe you can just go back

5   right now to the appeals tribunal and, like,

6   file, like, a 28(j) letter saying, hey, enough

7   time has passed; you know, there's a due process

8   violation. I don't -- I don't know if there's

9   any procedural mechanism to do that that I'm

10   aware of, but that does seem to be what the

11   state court is requiring here.

12   JUSTICE ALITO: I came into this case

13   thinking that perhaps there wasn't a great deal

14   at stake since a plaintiff like your plaintiffs

15   could always file in federal court and avoid the

16   exhaustion requirement by doing that.

17   But what you just said in response to

18   Justice Barrett makes me think that this could

19   be much more important because, if we are going

20   to read into the general rule that state courts

21   can define their jurisdiction, what we have done

22   in determining whether federal statutes are

23   jurisdictional, which is pretty much to say,

24   boy, it's really hard for us to conclude that

25   anything is jurisdictional, then you are really

1   asking for a significant weakening of this

2   general rule which has been a -- a -- a landmark

3   rule for hundreds of years.

4   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I'm not sure the

5   Court should engage in the sort of statutory

6   interpretation of state statutes that it would

7   engage in for federal statutes. That's not the

8   rule we're asking for, all right?

9   We're not quarreling with the state

10   court that, as a matter of state law, this is a

11   jurisdictional statute.

12   JUSTICE ALITO: Okay. Fine. All

13   right.

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Okay? What we're just

15   saying is that not all jurisdictional rules are

16   created alike for purposes of federal law, and

17   that distinction might sort of match the

18   jurisdictional versus claim processing type of

19   distinction that this Court has articulated --

20   JUSTICE ALITO: Okay.

21   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- in federal cases.

22   JUSTICE JACKSON: And are you saying

23   that, assuming this is a state jurisdictional

24   rule, it cannot or can be preempted? What is --

25   I thought this case was about preemption, not

1   about the characterization of the state law.

2   So, if we agree and assume that the

3   state law is jurisdictional, what implication

4   for whether or not it can be preempted by

5   federal law?

6   MR. UNIKOWSKY: In this case, I think

7   there's no implications. It's preempted

8   regardless of whether it's jurisdictional.

9   JUSTICE JACKSON: Why?

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Because this Court has

11   held as far back as, like, the Mondou case in

12   1912 that a state court cannot decline

13   jurisdiction over a federal claim because of a

14   disagreement with -- with the federal policy

15   allowing the claim to proceed.

16   And I think that's what's happening in

17   this case. Alabama has the view that exhaustion

18   is a good idea, and it has imposed that by

19   statute. But Congress has decided that that's

20   not the case, that you should be able to bring

21   1983 claims without having to exhaust. And so

22   the rule --

23   JUSTICE JACKSON: And so it's a

24   Supremacy Clause issue in terms of whether or

25   not that has to be the outcome?

1   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yeah. I think the

2   rule of decision applied by the state court in

3   this case is inconsistent with the rule of

4   decision that Section 1983 requires the state

5   court to adopt. So I think there's just direct

6   preemption in that way.

7   We're not disagreeing with the purpose

8   and objectives analysis in Felder. We agree

9   with that too. But I think there's an even more

10   straightforward way to get to the same outcome.

11   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Put aside Felder.

12   What is the problem with just going to federal

13   court?

14   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, we could have

15   gone to federal court, but there's a lot of

16   cases from this Court. I won't mention Felder,

17   but there's a lot of other cases --

18   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, what is the

19   real-world problem with just going to federal

20   court? Or maybe there aren't any and you're

21   just saying precedent says we can go to state

22   court. But do you have any real-world problems

23   with just going to federal court?

24   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yeah, I think there's

25   a lot of reasons that you would want to go to

1   state court. So, first of all, the Pennhurst

2   doctrine sometimes prohibits plaintiffs from

3   bringing state law claims in federal court.

4   Federal courts also often talk -- have

5   abstention doctrines that prohibit bringing the

6   claim in federal court. There's a -- there's a

7   brief from two religious freedom organizations

8   that talks about the abstention doctrines in

9   some detail.

10   Also, there's practical concerns.

11   Like, in some cases, lawyers would just be more

12   familiar with the local state court. The vast

13   majority of unemployment insurance litigation in

14   Alabama happens in state court. And so, if a

15   lawyer may be more familiar with that tribunal,

16   they may spend their entire career practicing in

17   state court, and if they have a civil rights

18   claim from a claimant, then it makes sense for

19   them to go to state court.

20   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And you mentioned

21   this earlier, but a procedural due process claim

22   usually requires that you go through the state

23   processes first. Maybe that's how this case got

24   on the -- on the wrong track.

25   Do you agree with that?

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 1              MR. UNIKOWSKY:  In general, yes.  I
 2    think that if you went to federal court and
 3    asserted your due process claim without
 4    exhausting, you'd usually lose, except in an
 5    unusual case like this, where you're actually
 6    challenging the inability to exhaust.
 7              CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:  Thank you,
 8    counsel.
 9              I want to make sure I have your
10    complete answer to the line of questioning I --
11    I understood Justice Kagan to be pursuing, I
12    mean -- and I think why you called this
13    Kafkaesque, which is because you're being told
14    you have to go to the state -- your -- your
15    claim is the state doesn't handle these things
16    in a timely fashion, they lose the papers, you
17    can't answer the phone, so why send them back?
18    If you have to go back there, that's -- your
19    whole point is you -- you -- you can't go back
20    there because they do such a -- that's what
21    you're challenging.
22              And I just want to make sure
23    whether -- if you had the most efficient state
24    procedure imaginable, you know, they answer the
25    phone on the first ring and they quickly give
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1   you a decision, would your argument be the same,

2   that it doesn't matter?

3   MR. UNIKOWSKY: It would be the same.

4   We would definitely lose in that scenario, but

5   it would be the same argument, that you wouldn't

6   have to exhaust. So, if such a claim was filed

7   --

8   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You would --

9   I'm just -- you would lose? In other words --

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: On the merits. On the

11   merits, we would lose.

12   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You would not

13   -- then the ruling would be you do not -- you --

14   you do -- you do have to go to the state before

15   pursuing your 1983 action?

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: We don't think that --

17   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I mean the

18   state agency.

19   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So we don't think

20   there should ever be an exhaustion requirement.

21   If you filed a suit in federal court

22   and said, you know, even though they answered on

23   the first ring, they should have been even

24   faster, there wouldn't be an exhaustion problem.

25   The federal court would just say there's no due

1   process violation. It's a great state agency.

2   It's very effective.

3   And we just want the state court to

4   apply the same rule of decision, right? You

5   don't have to exhaust, but your claim loses

6   because you're getting plenty of process and

7   there's no problem with the process.

8   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Okay. Well,

9   then what was Kafkaesque about the process? I

10   understood you to say that that was the problem,

11   that it was -- it imposed a burden on your --

12   the exercise of your -- your federal right.

13   MR. UNIKOWSKY: What was Kafkaesque is

14   the ruling that we couldn't challenge our

15   inability to exhaust precisely because we

16   haven't exhausted. That was the problem.

17   Like, our -- the problem was we can't

18   exhaust effectively, and the state court held

19   that because you didn't exhaust --

20   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, but what

21   if you can --

22   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- you can't challenge

23   that.

24   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: -- what if you

25   can exhaust effectively?

1   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, then you

2   wouldn't have a -- a claim.

3   I mean, I -- the problem is, as

4   applied to this fact pattern, I think it doesn't

5   make sense to apply an exhaustion requirement,

6   and that's why we think that, as applied,

7   effectively, what the statute is doing is

8   granting the state immunity in the state courts

9   from this.

10   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Okay. My last

11   question: You say "as applied to this fact

12   pattern."

13   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yes.

14   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So tell me

15   what the particulars of this fact pattern are

16   that may not be the case in other situations.

17   MR. UNIKOWSKY: The particulars of

18   this fact pattern is when the Petitioners are

19   challenging their failure to exhaust and they're

20   told that they can't challenge their failure to

21   exhaust until they have, in fact, exhausted.

22   The problem with that is that as a

23   practical matter, you're immunizing the state in

24   the state court from the 1983 claim because you

25   can't exhaust. So you're incapable of

1   challenging your inability to exhaust because

2   the state is saying you have to exhaust until

3   you can bring the challenge.

4   So there's no way to challenge in

5   state court at all, and so it's a de facto

6   immunity akin to the immunities that were in the

7   Haywood and -- and the Howlett case. So that's

8   our -- our narrowest argument on this.

9   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,

10   counsel.

11   Justice Thomas?

12   Justice Alito?

13   JUSTICE ALITO: Could you have sought

14   mandamus in state court to get a ruling in these

15   cases?

16   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So --

17   JUSTICE ALITO: An administrative

18   ruling in these cases?

19   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So there's a dictum

20   that is cited by Respondent from a 1997

21   intermediate appellate court case that says

22   that, in principle, mandamus could be available

23   if an agency intentionally sits on a claim and

24   drags its feet, but no mandamus claim was

25   asserted there.

1   I -- I think mandamus wouldn't be very

2   effective in this case for a few reasons.

3   So, first of all, of course, you have

4   to show a clear and indisputable right to the

5   writ, which is a higher standard than in an

6   ordinary civil case.

7   Also, you wouldn't -- the only thing

8   the state court could do is tell the state

9   agency to rule. It couldn't enter the other

10   remedies that -- that we're seeking in this

11   case. Mandamus is also a discretionary remedy,

12   and so I just don't think it's an effective

13   substitute for the 1983 claims we're asserting

14   today.

15   JUSTICE ALITO: What if a state has

16   a -- a regime under which the -- the -- the

17   person seeking the benefits first has to file

18   the claim and then there -- there's a -- there

19   are two levels of -- of appellate review,

20   administrative review, and after -- I assume

21   that you would admit that if the case were filed

22   in federal court, the -- the person would have

23   to seek the benefits in the first instance,

24   right?

25   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Yes. They wouldn't

1   have to -- it wouldn't be an exhaustion problem

2   under Patsy.

3   JUSTICE ALITO: No. Okay.

4   MR. UNIKOWSKY: They'd have to seek

5   the benefits because there's no violation if you

6   haven't tried the benefits.

7   JUSTICE ALITO: All right. And then

8   the -- then the -- the person says, oh, this

9   process is too long, I -- I want a quick

10   decision, they denied my claim. Then what?

11   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So --

12   JUSTICE ALITO: It's a violation of my

13   due process rights because this is more

14   elaborate than it needs to be.

15   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So, if your claim was

16   denied --

17   JUSTICE ALITO: Right.

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: -- you can go to

19   federal court and you can file your claim and

20   you can say there was a due process violation,

21   and the court would adjudicate that.

22   If you jumped the gun and didn't wait

23   for all the process to wrap up, then probably

24   the federal court would say that there's no due

25   process problem. The state's given you plenty

1   of process. And we'd want the state court to

2   reach the same ruling.

3   And if that's not the case, if you

4   were collaterally attacking the state court

5   administrative process and you finished it and

6   there was still a due process violation, then

7   maybe you'd win in federal court. And if you'd

8   win in federal court, you should win in state

9   court too. We're just asking to align the

10   rules.

11   JUSTICE ALITO: Thank you.

12   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice

13   Sotomayor?

14   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Counsel, I -- you

15   say this is not a neutral rule because, in every

16   other case where there's a due process violation

17   of an agent -- of an agency's process in some

18   way, people can go directly to state court,

19   correct?

20   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That -- that's one

21   reason it's not neutral. Another reason is

22   Felder's reason, which is that it only applies

23   to plaintiffs who sue the government.

24   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Plaintiffs who sue

25   the government but for this particular type of

1   benefit?

2   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Right.

3   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So it is sui

4   generis to just one class of plaintiffs on one

5   potential constitutional violation?

6   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That's right.

7   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Or take --

8   MR. UNIKOWSKY: It does apply to --

9   I -- it does apply to state law claims. I

10   acknowledge that. But it's not neutral in the

11   sense that it doesn't apply in private tort

12   litigation. It doesn't apply to other lawsuits

13   against the government.

14   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I -- I guess I'm

15   having trouble with the jurisdictional argument

16   that my colleagues are concerned about.

17   This is not jurisdictional in the

18   sense of we're telling state courts that they

19   can't hear a claim, correct?

20   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That -- I agree with

21   that, Your Honor.

22   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. We're

23   not saying this is a federal claim, so it has to

24   go to federal court. We're saying, no, you

25   state courts have the power to hear

1   constitutional -- 1983 constitutional claims.

2   That your legislature permits you to do.

3   So it's not as if they're -- filed a

4   neutral rule that says you can't hear 1983

5   claims, correct?

6   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Mm-hmm. I agree, Your

7   Honor.

8   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And so all we're

9   saying is you, state courts, should decide in

10   the first instance whether there is a due

11   process violation, correct?

12   MR. UNIKOWSKY: That's correct. We're

13   not saying in this Court that we necessarily

14   deserve to win. We just want a chance to be

15   heard.

16   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Thank you.

17   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice Kagan?

18   JUSTICE KAGAN: In the colloquy that

19   you had with the Chief Justice, you started with

20   the broad form of your argument and ended up

21   with a narrower form, a much narrower form. In

22   the delta between the two, it seems to me you're

23   going to lose on the merits anyway.

24   In other words, if somebody goes in

25   and says, I got $100, I really deserve $200,

1   they didn't listen to a certain category of

2   evidence, that's a due process violation. You

3   know, you've not made the argument, they're just

4   going to throw you out, whether it's -- you call

5   it on the merits or for -- for -- because your

6   claim isn't ripe.

7   So why should we go to the broad form

8   of the argument when nobody's going to win in

9   that category of cases anyhow?

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I -- I guess I just

11   think that's the cleanest reading of Felder. I

12   mean, Felder has lots of different rationales,

13   and I think all those rationales apply to

14   exhaustion requirements in general. Or, even

15   more narrowly, all those rationales apply to

16   this statute whenever it's applied.

17   So the Court could go narrow. I

18   just -- I just don't see a way of distinguishing

19   Felder from any other case in which the

20   exhaustion requirement is invoked.

21   But, you know, if the Court rules in

22   our favor narrowly, obviously, that's -- that's

23   fine from our perspective.

24   JUSTICE KAGAN: Thank you.

25   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice

 1   Gorsuch?

 2   JUSTICE GORSUCH: This new narrow

 3   theory, what -- what exactly does it encompass?

 4   What class of cases?

 5   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So the narrowest

 6   argument that I've articulated is, when there's

 7   a de facto immunity from the application of the

 8   rule, then there's a preemption problem.

 9   JUSTICE GORSUCH: When it's impossible

10   to exhaust? Is that -- is that another way of

11   saying it?

12   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, when the very

13   thing you're challenging is your failure to

14   exhaust, then the state can't say you -- you

15   failed to exhaust because, once you've

16   exhausted, then your -- then your claim goes

17   away because you -- you've exhausted and it

18   becomes moot at that point.

19   So, essentially, you're immunizing the

20   state from these claims that there's a due

21   process violation in connection with the

22   exhaustion procedure.

23   JUSTICE GORSUCH: I'm not sure I've

24   got it, but let me try. That it's impossible to

25   bring your claim?

1   MR. UNIKOWSKY: I think, applying this

2   rule, it's impossible to challenge the

3   exhaustion requirement in a state court, yes.

4   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Okay. And what if

5   it's not impossible here because of mandamus,

6   because you might have a futility argument? We

7   just don't know. Then what?

8   MR. UNIKOWSKY: So I don't think

9   Respondent has argued in favor of futility

10   arguments.

11   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Well, I think all of

12   this is kind of new, to be honest with you,

13   this -- this narrow theory. I -- I read your

14   brief as pressing the broad theory, but here we

15   are. Let -- let's say we just don't know

16   whether it is truly impossible here. What do we

17   do then?

18   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Well, I -- even if

19   it's not truly --

20   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Putting aside your

21   broad theory.

22   MR. UNIKOWSKY: No, I understand, Your

23   Honor.

24   Even if it's not truly impossible, I

25   still think that at least it -- it -- it puts a

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 1    condition, a significant condition in front of

 2    the vindication of the claim that's no less

 3    significant than the condition in -- in the

 4    Felder case.

 5              JUSTICE GORSUCH:  What if they're the

 6    same sorts of conditions that exist in the

 7    federal administrative realm?  When we're

 8    dealing with a federal benefit and an agency

 9    doesn't rule, I'd make a futility argument and

10    I'd maybe mandamus the agency.

11              MR. UNIKOWSKY:  I guess I think nine

12    -- Section 1983 is a special statute.  This

13    Court held --

14              JUSTICE GORSUCH:  Okay.

15              MR. UNIKOWSKY:  -- in Patsy that

16    there's no exhaustion requirement.  There's

17    immediate access to a judicial forum.  So I just

18    think that's different from the mine-run case in

19    which you're challenging a decision from the

20    Social Security agency.

21              JUSTICE GORSUCH:  Thank you.

22              CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:  Justice

23    Kavanaugh?

24              Justice Barrett?

25              JUSTICE BARRETT:  I just want to
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1   clarify your answer to Justice Gorsuch.

2   He asked you to stick to the narrow

3   theory, but to answer, you reverted to the broad

4   one, that Patsy just precludes exhaustion

5   requirements generally.

6   If we do not agree with your reading

7   of Patsy, can you articulate -- try one more

8   time to articulate that narrow theory that

9   doesn't rely on Patsy?

10   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Sure. I would say

11   that there is a significant barrier to the

12   vindication of a claim challenging the inability

13   to exhaust a remedy when the court holds that

14   you have to exhaust a remedy in order to bring

15   that claim.

16   I mean, what we're trying to do is get

17   the state agency to give us hearings and give us

18   adequate notice. And what the state court said

19   is that because you didn't exhaust those

20   remedies precisely because we didn't get the

21   hearing and the notice, you can't bring your

22   claim.

23   So, even if Justice Gorsuch is correct

24   that there's some theoretical way with mandamus,

25   which we don't think this is an adequate

 1   substitute, to bring the claim, I mean, there's

 2   still a very significant barrier which is -- to

 3   the bringing of the claim. So, you know, that

 4   does place the type of barrier that I think

 5   would conflict with Congress's objectives when

 6   it enacted Section 1983.

 7   JUSTICE BARRETT: Okay. Thanks.

 8   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice

 9   Jackson?

10   Thank you, counsel.

11   Mr. LaCour.

12   ORAL ARGUMENT OF EDMUND G. LaCOUR, JR.

13   ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT

14   MR. LaCOUR: Mr. Chief Justice, and

15   may it please the Court:

16   This Court finds historic state powers

17   to be preempted only when the text of federal

18   law makes that result clear. Nothing in 42

19   U.S.C. Section 1983 makes clear that it was

20   meant to preempt neutral jurisdictional rules

21   like the one at issue here.

22   Petitioners' reliance on Patsy ignores

23   the key difference between exhaustion rules

24   created by Congress and exhaustion doctrines

25   crafted by courts. The former may preempt, but

1   the latter do not. They are judge-made timing

2   rules, like ripeness and abstention, that do not

3   add elements to a federal right but merely

4   determine when a federal court is going to hear

5   it.

6   This Court's ripeness and abstention

7   holdings do not apply to state courts. Nor does

8   its determination that federal courts generally

9   should not send 1983 plaintiffs to the states.

10   Precedent confirms that 1983 does not contain a

11   categorical no-exhaustion element. In Johnson

12   v. Fankell, the Court did not require immediate

13   appellate review of a 1983 defense. In Ohio

14   Civil Rights Commission v. Dayton Christian

15   Schools from 1986, this Court applied Younger

16   abstention to force a 1983 plaintiff back into

17   state agency proceedings.

18   These decisions show that deferring

19   consideration of a federal right does not

20   necessarily alter or defeat it. Thus, while

21   some notice of claims rules, like the one in

22   Felder, are preempted as obstacles to

23   adjudication and liability, agency review is

24   typically a means of adjudication and does not

25   inherently conflict with 1983's remedial

 1   purpose.

 2   But, even if immediate judicial

 3   consideration were an unwritten element of 1983,

 4   neutral jurisdictional rules like Alabama's are

 5   still a valid excuse for declining jurisdiction.

 6   Reading 1983 to preempt such laws would raise

 7   serious constitutional questions that are best

 8   avoided.

 9   I welcome the Court's questions.

10   JUSTICE THOMAS: Well, Mr. Unikowsky's

11   argument as I understand it is that the

12   exhaustion rules in Alabama makes it impossible

13   for -- for him to pursue the due process claims

14   that he has under 1983.

15   So would you respond to that?

16   MR. LaCOUR: Yes, Your Honor. Two

17   points. One, as Justice Gorsuch was alluding

18   to, that is a new argument that was not

19   presented to the Alabama Supreme Court. It was

20   not passed upon by the Alabama Supreme Court.

21   It's not in the cert petition, and it's not

22   properly before this Court. Their only argument

23   is that even the most perfect agency

24   adjudication, if it has an exhaustion rule, is

25   preempted. And we think that, as Justice Kagan

1   was alluding to with Felder, that that rule has

2   already been rejected by this Court.

3   But looking at this as-applied

4   challenge to Alabama's law, we don't think that

5   it is the case that it functions as an immunity.

6   Mandamus is still available. There is still the

7   potential for a futility argument, one that was

8   not raised below.

9   And so it's simply not the case that

10   it is impossible to get an adjudication here.

11   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm not sure how

12   it is possible given that, as I read the court's

13   decision below, you have to bring the due

14   process argument to the agency, and I don't see

15   any procedure to do that within the agency.

16   MR. LaCOUR: Well, Your Honor --

17   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: There's nothing

18   that -- there's no mandamus within the agency.

19   I don't know how the mandamus court would have

20   jurisdiction because it requires exhaustion.

21   So you're in a loop that I'm not sure

22   how this claimant gets out of.

23   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I don't think

24   mandamus would require exhaustion. The point of

25   mandamus would be to break the sort of logjam

1   that Plaintiffs are complaining about here, but

2   they didn't take advantage of mandamus.

3   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, Alabama --

4   Alabama ruled very broadly. It didn't say that

5   Mr. Williams, for example, who had a final

6   judgment that he was attacking, had a claim that

7   could be heard in court. And you seem to

8   concede in your briefs that he did. He got his

9   claim thrown out because he didn't file a notice

10   of claim.

11   Then he brought a due process argument

12   saying that the notice he received was

13   inadequate or the time limits were not proper

14   under due process. And the Alabama court

15   dismissed his action as unexhausted. That

16   sounds to me as if the due process claim has to

17   be exhausted within the agency.

18   MR. LaCOUR: Well, Your Honor, if --

19   if he had exhausted it and it was final, he had

20   the ability to file a direct appeal to the

21   circuit court.

22   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: He did.

23   MR. LaCOUR: No, Your Honor --

24   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And the court --

25   he did. The court did what it did. And, all of

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 1   a sudden, he goes up to the Alabama Supreme

 2   Court and it dismisses it as unexhausted.

 3   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I think it's

 4   important to remember how this was actually

 5   litigated before the state courts. Their

 6   primary argument, if you go back to their briefs

 7   before the state courts, was that this

 8   exhaustion requirement didn't apply to sort of

 9   procedural challenges whatsoever. There was no

10   1983 claim --

11   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, please just

12   tell me what form -- where is it in this process

13   that tells litigants, if we're not acting, you

14   can go to the appeals council and file something

15   and get them to order the agency to do

16   something, and then, if the agency doesn't do

17   it, maybe you've exhausted and you have a

18   futility argument to go seek mandamus or to go

19   do something in state court.

20   This is a Kafkaesque type of process

21   that's going on here.

22   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I don't think

23   so. Alabama case law makes clear that mandamus

24   is available and that you may be able to raise

25   futility arguments.

 1   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: It's discretionary

 2   mandamus, isn't it?

 3   MR. LaCOUR: Correct, but we -- we

 4   presume that state courts --

 5   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And I don't know

 6   how --

 7   MR. LaCOUR: -- are going to follow

 8   the federal Constitution.

 9   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- I actually

10   don't know how mandamus operates with respect to

11   the exhaustion requirement.

12   MR. LaCOUR: Well, and that just

13   points out the waiver problems that I was

14   addressing earlier. None of this was briefed up

15   below. None of this was argued in the blue

16   brief either. And so what we are dealing with

17   here is this categorical rule. And we don't

18   think that even Patsy supports this categorical

19   rule.

20   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, General, on

21   -- on that question, you started the day but

22   with the -- the text of federal law does not

23   preempt, you know, and that's a fair argument

24   and a good argument. It's just the argument

25   that was in the dissent in Felder. Justice

1   O'Connor made exactly those same points, but it

2   was a dissent in Felder. And in the majority in

3   Felder, it made clear that the exhaustion

4   requirement by Wisconsin's law was problematic.

5   It said it "doesn't involve lengthy or expensive

6   administrative proceedings, but it forces

7   injured persons to seek satisfaction from those

8   alleged to have caused the injury in the first

9   place. Such a dispute resolution system may

10   have much to commend it, but that is a judgment

11   the current Congress must make."

12   In other words, the language in Felder

13   does seem -- contra Justice O'Connor's dissent,

14   the language in the majority in Felder does

15   seems to suggest that exhaustion requirements

16   generally -- and we can talk about how to define

17   those -- but generally are preempted even though

18   there's no text.

19   MR. LaCOUR: Well, a few things on

20   that point, Your Honor.

21   First is Felder did not just say Patsy

22   ruled and then, in a two-page opinion, end the

23   case. There was a detailed, nearly 15-page

24   preemption analysis there. And the Court made

25   clear there were really two key problems with

 1   the Wisconsin law. One was that, in purpose and

 2   effect, it minimized liability. And so there's

 3   your clear conflict. You have a federal law

 4   designed to impose liability and a state law

 5   designed to minimize it. I think that is the

 6   through line from Felder to Howlett to Haywood,

 7   is those are immunity laws.

 8   And, second, the Court said that the

 9   law in Wisconsin frequently and predictably

10   defeated the 1983 claim. Now "defeat" means

11   that you're going to exercise jurisdiction over

12   it and then dismiss it with prejudice because it

13   is an affirmative defense that the defendants

14   were handed by Wisconsin, and that did result in

15   dismissals with prejudice.

16   Jurisdiction -- like the law at issue

17   in Alabama, jurisdiction's not an affirmative

18   defense. You would never say that an amount in

19   controversy requirement is an affirmative

20   defense. And it doesn't defeat the right. It

21   simply says we're not going to consider it.

22   And so there's no way for Alabama to

23   alter the 1983 right by merely --

24   JUSTICE JACKSON: But that's not all

25   that Felder --

1   MR. LaCOUR: -- declining jurisdiction

2   over it.

3   JUSTICE JACKSON: Counsel, that -- I

4   appreciate that summary of what Felder said, but

5   in the section on page 141 where it talks about

6   what it means to undermine for preemption

7   purposes, it, first of all, has three things,

8   not just two, and the three things aren't just

9   minimizing liability and defeating the 1983

10   claim.

11   It says it conditions the right of

12   recovery that Congress has authorized and does

13   so for a reason manifestly inconsistent with the

14   purposes of the federal statute. So that's one

15   thing.

16   And I appreciate that it coloned to

17   minimize government liability --

18   MR. LaCOUR: Yes.

19   JUSTICE JACKSON: -- but the point is

20   that it's inconsistent with the purposes of the

21   federal statute.

22   Second, the notice provision

23   discriminates against the federal right, and it

24   talks about the differences in the time limits

25   in a way that discriminates.

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 1                 And then, finally, it operates in part
 2      as an exhaustion requirement.
 3                 Now I appreciate that your counsel on
 4      the other side is just homing in on the
 5      exhaustion requirement, but Felder seems to take
 6      it even beyond that.  So can you explain why
 7      Alabama's law is not doing the three things that
 8      mattered in Felder to the preemption analysis?
 9                 MR. LaCOUR:  Yes.  So agency
10      adjudication is not a means of minimizing
11      liability.  It is a means of adjudicating
12      whether or not claimants are entitled to money.
13      I think that's far different from the notice of
14      claims requirement in Felder, which had no
15      benefit whatsoever to plaintiffs.
16                 Unlike here, the exhaustion
17      requirement in Alabama law can be beneficial to
18      plaintiffs because it keeps their well-heeled
19      employers or the Secretary from taking them to
20      court immediately --
21                 JUSTICE JACKSON:  Right.  But can you
22      talk about the purposes of the federal statute,
23      right?
24                 MR. LaCOUR:  Yes.  And --
25                 JUSTICE JACKSON:  Because I understood
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1   preemption to be about inconsistency --

2   MR. LaCOUR: Right.

3   JUSTICE JACKSON: -- with the reasons

4   or the goals the federal statute was there.

5   So isn't a requirement like Alabama's,

6   which prohibits the ability to bring a due

7   process claim under these circumstances,

8   inconsistent with Section 1983, which is

9   supposed to be giving people the ability to make

10   these kinds of claims?

11   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, we're not

12   prohibiting anyone from bringing them. You get

13   to raise those very claims in front of the

14   agency first. And I think that's a key

15   difference between the Wisconsin law --

16   JUSTICE JACKSON: But not if the

17   agency won't process your papers.

18   MR. LaCOUR: Well, and -- and, Your

19   Honor, that's why we have mandamus. That's why

20   the futility arguments are -- are present as

21   well.

22   And then, second, there's -- there's a

23   key difference between going to an agency for an

24   adjudication and just being forced to go park

25   your claim for 120 days with the police officers

1   who purportedly beat you up, the law at issue in

2   Felder. Again, that in no way can benefit

3   plaintiffs. But the exhaustion requirement can

4   benefit plaintiffs.

5   And also, my -- my friend is -- is

6   incorrect. The exhaustion requirement does

7   apply to the Secretary as it applies to

8   claimants as well.

9   JUSTICE JACKSON: So your argument at

10   bottom is that this is consistent with

11   Congress's objectives in 1983? Because I

12   understood that to be the sort of umbrella

13   consideration with respect to preemption, which

14   is what I thought we were talking about here.

15   MR. LaCOUR: Yes. I -- I don't see

16   any conflict with the way Alabama has structured

17   judicial administration and with the purposes of

18   1983, which are to impose liability.

19   This is not a liability-minimizing

20   scheme. It was not designed to do that. It was

21   invented in 1935 to make unemployment benefits

22   available to people.

23   No one would think that the --

24   JUSTICE JACKSON: Has anybody ever

25   recovered in 1983 making these kinds of claims

1   in Alabama state court that you're aware of?

2   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I -- I'm not

3   aware. I have not -- not seen one cited by my

4   friends and have not found one myself.

5   But I don't think anyone would say

6   that the Social Security Administration is set

7   up as an obstacle to people who are trying to

8   get disability benefits. It is the avenue for

9   getting that.

10   And it's the same thing for Department

11   of Labor.

12   JUSTICE KAGAN: So can I ask about the

13   dimensions of your argument in two different

14   ways? I'll give you just a couple

15   hypotheticals.

16   So one is suppose we take this out of

17   the employment context. We're not talking about

18   a benefit of any kind. There's a person who

19   has, like, a quintessential 1983 claim, which is

20   the improper use of police force, and Alabama

21   sets up a scheme where you have to go to the

22   police department first and you have to go

23   through these three levels of review before you

24   can bring that to court.

25   Is that perfectly okay? Does -- or

1   does that change matters?

2   MR. LaCOUR: I think, Your Honor, if

3   we're talking about case by case, then I think

4   it's time to affirm the Alabama Supreme Court's

5   decision because it was just this categorical

6   argument.

7   But, second, to get to your question,

8   you need to look to see does this look like a

9   rule of judicial administration or not.

10   It may be looking a lot more like

11   Felder and thus might be more suspect, but --

12   JUSTICE KAGAN: I -- I don't

13   understand. What makes it more suspect?

14   MR. LaCOUR: Well, it -- it might be

15   what are -- like, who is it that's doing the

16   adjudication? What are the sort of requirements

17   that bind them?

18   JUSTICE KAGAN: Yeah, I mean, it's

19   sort of set up the same way, but there, it's a

20   police board. You know, police officers are on

21   these boards, and they make you go through

22   three -- three different stages, and we make you

23   do all that for police boards of different

24   levels before you can take the claim to court.

25   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, again, if

        1   it's particularly stringent, you might run into

        2   some problems like in the Brown case from 1949.

        3   If it looks like it's designed to minimize

        4   liability, you might run into some Felder

        5   problems.

        6   JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, if, if, if.

        7   Let's just say it's the same kind of

        8   thing, but it's in the police context.

        9   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor --

       10   JUSTICE KAGAN: It's the same time

       11   limits. It's the same everything. There's no

       12   piece of paper that says we're doing this to

       13   prevent good claims. You know, it's -- but --

       14   but it's in a -- it's in a different context, a

       15   non-benefits context, a quintessential 1983

       16   context.

       17   MR. LaCOUR: The Court has said in

       18   Howlett and Haywood that neutral rules of

       19   judicial administration are a valid excuse for

       20   refusing to entertain a federal claim.

       21   So, if that is a valid and -- and

       22   jurisdictional rule that's been set up, then I

       23   think that would be okay.

       24   JUSTICE ALITO: Well, why wouldn't --

       25   JUSTICE KAGAN: Okay.

1   JUSTICE ALITO: -- that look an awful

2   lot like Haywood itself, a -- a rule that

3   evinces hostility to the 1983 claim? Because

4   there's no tradition of requiring this sort of

5   thing when a plaintiff wants to sue -- wants to

6   bring a classic Fourth Amendment 1983 claim.

7   MR. LaCOUR: Well, I think that

8   history could factor in. But, at the same time,

9   in Haywood, there was no way to get into state

10   court whatsoever.

11   I took it in Justice Kagan's

12   hypothetical that you -- you would get to court

13   eventually to raise your claim. And so -- and

14   this Court has said -- I think this Court's

15   rulings show that merely deferring consideration

16   of a claim is very different than defeating it.

17   So look at Johnson v. Fankell, where

18   you had a 1983 defense of qualified immunity

19   that was denied at summary judgment stage in the

20   Idaho trial court, and they wanted to take that

21   up immediately to the Idaho Supreme Court and

22   were not able to do so. 1983 did not give them

23   some right of interlocutory appeal. And I think

24   that's essentially what Petitioners are asking

25   for here, is a right of interlocutory appeal.

1   JUSTICE ALITO: Well, I -- I don't

2   want to derail -- Justice Kagan, I think, had a

3   number of hypotheticals, but -- so I -- I don't

4   want to interrupt that. But then, eventually, I

5   do want to ask you about Mr. Unikowsky's narrow

6   argument.

7   Did you want to --

8   JUSTICE KAGAN: It -- it doesn't

9   matter which way we do it.

10   JUSTICE ALITO: Okay. I'm not sure I

11   can capture exactly what his narrow argument is.

12   But suppose the narrow argument is that there's

13   no exhaustion requirement in a 1983 case in

14   state court, where it is, as a practical matter,

15   impossible or extraordinarily onerous to get a

16   decision. How would the state be hurt by that?

17   What would be wrong with that?

18   MR. LaCOUR: I think there might still

19   be some -- some sovereignty interest if you're

20   going to be reading the statute to require state

21   courts to exercise jurisdiction that the state

22   has never given them jurisdiction to exercise.

23   And that's why the Court has been

24   careful in -- even in Haywood to say that these

25   neutral and -- and truly jurisdictional rules

1   are a valid excuse for declining jurisdiction.

2   That's the nature of any

3   jurisdictional rule. That's going to keep some

4   cases out of court, so that can't be the test.

5   JUSTICE GORSUCH: But it -- it --

6   couldn't it be, though, that in some of those

7   cases at least, where it's truly impossible and

8   it really is a Catch 22, that that is evincing

9   hostility to the plaintiffs' claims and a Felder

10   argument might be made there?

11   MR. LaCOUR: Absolutely. Or even a

12   Haywood argument.

13   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Or even a Haywood

14   argument. I mean, you -- we just don't know

15   whether that's the case here.

16   MR. LaCOUR: Right.

17   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Yeah. All right.

18   JUSTICE KAGAN: How about if -- you

19   know, in Felder, there is a lot of talk about

20   the time limits. Here, the time limits are even

21   more stringent than they were in Felder.

22   Suppose we make them even more

23   stringent still, and let's add another bunch of

24   things. Let's say that instead of three levels

25   of review, there are five levels of review.

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1       Let's say between each level you have to proceed

2       within five days, and then you have to bring

3       your court claim at the very end within five

4       days.

5              Let's say we have empirical evidence

6       that suggests that because the state

7       administrative process is very slow, it takes an

8       average of 10 years to actually get to court.

9              At that point, can we say that this is

10      so -- so onerous a process that it has to be in

11      conflict with 1983?

12             MR. LaCOUR:  Your Honor, that sounds

13      like it -- it could fall under Haywood and --

14      and potentially be in conflict with 1983 under a

15      Haywood theory.  Even if it is a truly

16      jurisdictional rule, that starts to look like an

17      evasion rather than something that's really

18      about the competence over the subject matter.

19             But, here, this truly is about

20      competence over the subject matter.  You have an

21      expert agency -- like, since these claims

22      existed for the first time in 1935, they've

23      always been adjudicated in the first instance by

24      these hearing officers.  They have expertise

25      when it comes to hearing these types of claims
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1   because they hear thousands or hundreds of

2   thousands a year. They're applying the statutes

3   and regs again and again.

4   It's the exact sort of situation that

5   this Court confronted in Elgin v. Department of

6   Treasury, a Thunder Basin case about the Merit

7   Systems Protection Board, where the Court

8   recognized that the MSPB has certain expertise

9   because they hear these personnel claims

10   again --

11   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You're making a --

12   JUSTICE BARRETT: But the expert --

13   oh.

14   The expertise is in adjudicating the

15   entitle -- entitlement to unemployment, not the

16   due process claim, right?

17   MR. LaCOUR: But, Your Honor, a

18   similar argument was made in Elgin that the MSPB

19   doesn't typically hear constitutional claims.

20   And what the Court recognized was well, no, they

21   are going to hear some similar types of claims

22   that are going to come up again and again in

23   this context. For example, it's not fair

24   because I didn't get my notice on time;

25   therefore, excuse my lack of -- of --

1   JUSTICE BARRETT: But --

2   MR. LaCOURT: -- of filing the appeal.

3   And then that can be considered by the board of

4   appeals, the appeals tribunal, or -- or the

5   circuit court eventually.

6   JUSTICE BARRETT: So tell me -- and

7   this is just the clarifying question I was

8   trying to ask Mr. Unikowsky -- how does one

9   assert these due process claims, say, before the

10   intermediate tribunal? Is there a mechanism for

11   doing that? It just seems like everything that

12   was a description in the briefs was talking

13   about how to pursue getting your unemployment

14   benefit. How does one go about making this due

15   process argument before the agency?

16   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, my

17   understanding is it's a fairly informal process.

18   I -- I think it would be as simple as arguing

19   that this is not fair because the notice was

20   ineffective, for example.

21   But, again, ultimately, that issue was

22   not thoroughly briefed because that wasn't the

23   argument they were pressing before the state

24   supreme court.

25   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You're making your

 1   position seem benign, but we have amicus briefs

 2   from a wide variety of groups, from ACLU and

 3   Public Citizen to religious liberty groups, to

 4   the Chamber of Commerce, all of which say that

 5   your rule will really hinder federal civil

 6   rights claims from getting into state court.

 7   The religious liberty plaintiffs say

 8   that your position would "grind religious

 9   litigants into submission before they are able

10   to have their claims heard in court." We see

11   the same thing from the ACLU's brief. You want

12   to respond to that?

13   MR. LaCOUR: Yeah. No, I think this

14   Court's precedents in cases like Felder and

15   Haywood help to guard against that. Plus, if

16   the --

17   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: They -- don't they

18   guard against it by saying that exhaustion is

19   not a requirement before you bring a 1983 suit

20   in state court?

21   MR. LaCOUR: No, I -- Felder, again,

22   did not deal with an agency adjudication. It

23   dealt with a law that said park your claim here

24   for four months and then -- and if you don't do

25   that, you have an affirmative defense you're

1   going to be facing and you're going to lose,

2   which I think is -- is far different than --

3   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Yeah, but every --

4   just to pause there, your answer suggests that

5   I'm misreading Felder. Every state supreme

6   court that has considered the issue, I think,

7   before the Alabama Supreme Court has read it

8   just the way I just said.

9   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I think -- I

10   think South Dakota was on our side, and then, in

11   some of those cases, you're dealing with --

12   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: The vast majority

13   of state supreme courts.

14   MR. LaCOUR: We're definitely on the

15   short side of the split, but we don't spend --

16   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And the short side

17   of the split is because those state supreme

18   courts, almost uniformly, have read Felder to

19   mean you can't have exhaustion requirements -- a

20   very simple rule, you can't have exhaustion

21   requirements for 1983 in federal or state court.

22   And you have a good argument to the

23   contrary. The problem is it's in the O'Connor

24   dissent, not in the majority in Felder.

25   MR. LaCOUR: No, Your Honor, I -- I --

 1   again, I think you have to read those statements

 2   from Felder in their context, and, of course,

 3   opinions are not statutes, but, if they were,

 4   I'd invoke the presumption against superfluity.

 5   There -- there's a lot more in Felder to suggest

 6   that what was really the problem was that it was

 7   trying to minimize liability. And there, the

 8   conflict couldn't be clearer with 1983.

 9   But I -- I cannot find in the text or

10   in Patsy this categorical no-exhaustion rule,

11   and I don't see how you square that with cases

12   like Ohio Civil Rights Commission, which I -- I

13   mentioned in my opening, and I apologize it's

14   not in the briefs, but it's a 1986 decision

15   where this Court applied Younger abstention to a

16   1983 claim to force that claimant back into a

17   state agency proceeding. Dayton Christian

18   Schools had fired a teacher on religious

19   grounds, sort of a precursor to Hosanna-Tabor.

20   The teacher went to the Civil Rights Commission

21   and said this was based on sex. And the

22   Commission opened an investigation. That 1983

23   plaintiff went to federal court and said we have

24   a free exercise right to be free from these

25   state proceedings altogether. And in an opinion

1   by then Justice Rehnquist, the Court said no,

2   take it up in the state agency, which again

3   shows that deferring consideration does not

4   defeat. And it also suggests that my friend's

5   position would lead to very strange outcomes

6   where a federal court in Ohio did not have to

7   hear that particular 1983 claim, but a state

8   court would have to. That just simply doesn't

9   add up.

10   And I think that gets to the point --

11   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You have just one

12   more. You -- you've invoked federalism and

13   respect for states, but I think the practical

14   effect of your rule, if we were to adopt it,

15   would be everyone or most people would go more

16   quickly to federal court and haul the state

17   before federal court. I'm just -- the irony of

18   that, can you comment on that?

19   MR. LaCOUR: I don't think so, Your

20   Honor. I don't think there's an incentive for

21   states to structure their courts in a way that's

22   necessarily going to send everything to federal

23   court. If they do, then so be it. But, at the

24   same time, that might be an incentive for --

25   JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, these kinds

1   of claims, if you had problems, you know, a free

2   exercise problem, a religion problem, or a

3   procedural due process problem with the

4   unemployment scheme in Alabama, you're just

5   going to go to federal court, right?

6   MR. LaCOUR: Right, and as

7   Mr. Unikowsky acknowledged, you'll lose on the

8   merits. So I don't think that's going to be a

9   serious problem here for Alabama.

10   JUSTICE JACKSON: Can I --

11   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That's the point

12   of suppressing the federal right in state court,

13   isn't it? If you make the hoops so difficult to

14   go through, then they have no remedy. Here,

15   Mr. Williams was thrown out of -- out of the

16   state process because he didn't receive notice

17   because he was unconscious because of COVID, and

18   he's had no remedy in their state court.

19   So, basically, what you're really

20   saying is no, we're not hostile to a federal

21   right because we know we're going to win no

22   matter what we do.

23   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I think --

24   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And -- and one

25   last question. Tell me where in your

1   regulations there is a process set out that --

2   that claimants can go through to speed up the

3   process.

4   MR. LaCOUR: Well, Your Honor --

5   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All of them have

6   told me that they've appealed on time, they've

7   called a -- not all of them, but we have 21

8   plaintiffs here. Many of them filed their

9   appeal notices, letter after letter, phone call

10   after phone call, years and years that passed

11   before they received anything or, when they

12   received something, with no explanation.

13   So tell me where in your regulations

14   you tell claimants what they can do before the

15   agency if there's a due process violation.

16   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, I don't have

17   chapter and verse for you because, again, this

18   was not raised --

19   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: You can provide a

20   letter. I don't want to hear about mandamus

21   or -- I want to hear where in the regulations

22   these people didn't do what the regulations said

23   they could have done.

24   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, mandamus is

25   not something they're required to do, but it is

 1   something that is available --

 2   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And it's --

 3   MR. LaCOUR: -- to them.

 4   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- discretionary,

 5   correct?

 6   JUSTICE JACKSON: Counsel, can --

 7   MR. LaCOUR: Yes, Your Honor, but it

 8   is one way to avoid due process problems.

 9   JUSTICE KAGAN: In the --

10   JUSTICE JACKSON: Counsel, can I just

11   -- oh, go ahead.

12   JUSTICE KAGAN: No, go ahead.

13   JUSTICE JACKSON: Can I just get you

14   to focus in quickly on Felder, and you -- you've

15   said many times that you see that case as the

16   problem being about minimizing liability.

17   But I'm quoting from the case when it

18   says that this is "essentially" -- "the question

19   is essentially one of preemption. Is the

20   application of the state's law to Section 1983

21   actions brought in state courts consistent with

22   the goals of the federal civil rights laws, or

23   does the enforcement of such a requirement

24   instead stand as an obstacle to the

25   accomplishment and execution of the full

1   purposes of the objectives of Congress?"

2   I thought we were thinking about is it

3   an obstacle, is it consistent? And what I'm

4   worried about is that if we start moving away

5   from that conception of what it means to be

6   preempted, that same kind of thought process and

7   doctrine is used in other laws, not just 1983.

8   For example, we have the Federal

9   Arbitration Act, which has a preemption standard

10   that is almost identical to what Felder just

11   said about whether or not it's consistent. And

12   we've repeatedly said that state laws that do

13   things like -- you know, related to contracts,

14   et cetera, et cetera, are preempted by the FAA

15   for the very same reasons.

16   So can you help us not to be concerned

17   about shifting the standard of what it means to

18   preempt and the way in which that might actually

19   implicate other preemption doctrines and other

20   laws?

21   MR. LaCOUR: So, Your Honor, I think

22   -- I think the real concern would be adopting

23   the view of preemption from my friend, which

24   doesn't really seem to line up with the more

25   disciplined and text-based approach that this

1   Court traditionally --

2   JUSTICE JACKSON: No, I -- we can --

3   MR. LaCOUR: -- takes in the

4   preemption context.

5   JUSTICE JACKSON: Let's say we reject

6   saying there's something about Felder that is

7   focused on exhaustion. I'm looking at Felder as

8   a preemption case that has a standard that talks

9   about the inconsistency with the purposes of the

10   federal statute --

11   MR. LaCOUR: Mm-hmm.

12   JUSTICE JACKSON: -- is it an obstacle

13   to the accomplishment and execution?

14   And I got to tell you, in the

15   Concepcion case in AT&T versus Mobility, that

16   exact same concept is governing what the Court

17   is doing with respect to preemption. So, if we

18   move from that, if we're focused more on

19   minimizing liability or whatever else you say

20   you think Felder means, I'm worried that that's

21   going to bleed over into these other kinds of

22   preemption areas.

23   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, what I'd say

24   to that is, why was the law an obstacle? And

25   the text answers that question. State officials

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 1      shall be liable.  What's the state law do?

 2      Minimizes liability.  So there is your

 3      text-based preemption problem right there on the

 4      face of the statute.

 5              JUSTICE JACKSON:  It's not in the text

 6      of the statute.

 7              MR. LaCOUR:  Shall be liable --

 8              JUSTICE JACKSON:  Minimizing liability

 9      is not in --

10              MR. LaCOUR:  Correct.  But the -- the

11      law at issue there was part of a broader

12      liability scheme -- the Felder Court recognized

13      this -- that was enacted after Wisconsin had

14      done away with judicial immunity.  The Wisconsin

15      Supreme Court had done away with judicial

16      immunity.  And so this new immunity statute was

17      enacted that had damages caps and also had this

18      notice of claims requirement.  Wisconsin

19      extolled this as a way to minimize liability.

20              So there wasn't really a question as

21      to what the law was doing.  But --

22              JUSTICE KAGAN:  You believe that

23      plaintiffs here could have brought suit

24      immediately in federal court, is that right?

25              MR. LaCOUR:  Yes, Your Honor.
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1   JUSTICE KAGAN: So, I mean, this is

2   Felder's -- it seems to me there's a lot going

3   on in Felder. But one -- its most essential

4   holding is it quotes Patsy, and it says -- you

5   know, Patsy said, too bad about an exhaustion

6   requirement. You have to be able to bring suit

7   in federal court immediately.

8   And then -- and this is on page 147 --

9   it said should there be any different rule with

10   respect to state courts, and it says, given the

11   evil at which the federal civil rights

12   legislation was aimed, there's simply no reason

13   to suppose that Congress meant to have that kind

14   of distinction.

15   So, I mean, that seems just like a

16   very clear-cut understanding of Felder, that

17   once we say that the exhaustion requirement does

18   not preclude suit in state courts, we understand

19   1980 -- does not preclude suit in federal court,

20   we understand 1983 to do the same thing with

21   respect to state courts.

22   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, even if I

23   grant you that, this is still a jurisdictional

24   rule, and you've still said in Howlett and

25   Haywood that neutral jurisdictional rules are a

1   valid excuse to keeping federal claims out.

2   So, even if there is some

3   get-to-court-immediately element of 1983, our --

4   our courts do not exercise jurisdiction over

5   that type of claim.

6   JUSTICE KAGAN: Thank you.

7   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,

8   counsel.

9   Justice Thomas, anything further?

10   Justice Alito?

11   Justice Sotomayor?

12   Justice Kagan?

13   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Your friend on the

14   other side said, if it went to federal court,

15   there might be a ripeness issue and an

16   abstention issue. What are your thoughts?

17   MR. LaCOUR: I think that is -- that's

18   likely true. We've seen that in a lot of courts

19   of appeals decisions. We cited Cotton

20   v. Jackson as a -- I think it's a 2011 circuit

21   decision, where they lost on the merits for not

22   taking advantage of the process and running to

23   federal court too soon.

24   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Okay. And I take

25   your point that -- as I understand it, it's --

 1   your argument is it's hard for this to be --

 2   an exhaustion requirement of administrative

 3   agency processes to be an obstacle that's

 4   improper given that the federal government has

 5   similar administrative exhaustion requirements.

 6   But there does seem to be a tremendous

 7   record of difficulty of -- of individuals

 8   accessing that administrative process here.

 9   What assurance do you have or can you

10   give us that -- that -- that the State is

11   addressing these claims in -- in a proper and

12   timely manner?

13   MR. LaCOUR: Yes, Your Honor, two

14   points.

15   The reason we point to the federal

16   analog is to show that this really does concern

17   competence over the subject matter, like the

18   Court has discussed in Howlett and Haywood.

19   And then, as to assurances that the

20   State is taking this seriously -- this is

21   obviously outside of the record because we're at

22   the motion to dismiss stage -- but we have

23   tripled the number of hearing officers we have

24   from eight to 25, and we have greatly reduced

25   the backlog. I think, in -- in January of 2022,

1   that backlog of people who had waited at least

2   21 days for a hearing was up to over 131,000.

3   Today, it's down to about 7,410, and we

4   anticipate clearing that backlog by the end of

5   the year.

6   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Was some of that

7   backlog due to COVID or -- or other things?

8   MR. LaCOUR: Absolutely, Your Honor.

9   I think a million additional unemployment

10   claims. And then, of course, when you have

11   COVID, it makes it harder to -- to hire people

12   and makes it harder to retain people too during

13   the height of the pandemic.

14   JUSTICE GORSUCH: Thank you.

15   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice

16   Kavanaugh?

17   Justice Barrett?

18   JUSTICE BARRETT: I asked

19   Mr. Unikowsky about the state statute of

20   limitations. I'm going to ask you the same

21   question. When does the state statute of

22   limitations start running on these claims?

23   And to clarify, my concern is, if

24   somehow the state statute of limitations is

25   running, you know, because the due process

1   violation has already begun in the agency, is it

2   the case that that statute of limitations might

3   run in state, for purposes of state court,

4   before they can even get there?

5   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, of course,

6   this hasn't been briefed. I -- I don't think

7   that would be an issue because, I mean, the due

8   process violation is incomplete until the

9   process has run out.

10   So I -- I think -- and, certainly, if

11   they were to appeal out of the agency proceeding

12   directly to the circuit court, there wouldn't be

13   any statute of limitations problem in that

14   situation either.

15   JUSTICE BARRETT: Okay. My other

16   question is: So a couple times in your brief

17   you called the agency proceeding a proper

18   proceeding for redress under 1983, and you said

19   there's no reason for this Court to distinguish

20   between bringing a 1983 claim in something

21   that's called a court versus sending it to an

22   agency.

23   Is that somehow different than the

24   exhaustion requirement? Can you just --

25   MR. LaCOUR: I think, Your Honor --

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 1                 JUSTICE BARRETT:  -- explain to me

 2      what you're saying?

 3                 MR. LaCOUR:  -- our -- our point there

 4      is that we think the language suggests that

 5      there is a great deal of discretion for the

 6      states in terms of structuring their

 7      adjudicatory processes.

 8                 And, in this instance, we have the

 9      agency first functioning sort of as an adjunct.

10      They compile a useful record.  That can then go

11      up for the circuit court to -- to review with de

12      novo review.

13                 And that -- that's particularly

14      helpful for uncounseled claimants who maybe

15      don't have a lot of means because they just lost

16      their job.  They can go through this informal

17      process, have a record.  They don't have to go

18      through formal discovery and have a lawyer to

19      have that record when they do get to the circuit

20      court.

21                 JUSTICE BARRETT:  So is the

22      argument -- I mean, I guess I'm trying to

23      distinguish between an exhaustion requirement,

24      which is almost kind of like a pregame thing,

25      you know, it's a -- it's a threshold.
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1   And this makes it sound like, if

2   you're saying this is part of the 1983 claim

3   itself or part of the adjudication, it's

4   actually not a delay of the 1983 claim. But is

5   your argument instead that this is actually part

6   of adjudicating the constitutional violation?

7   MR. LaCOUR: Your Honor, we -- we do

8   think it's advancing the purposes of 1983, which

9   are sort of remedial in ensuring that federal

10   rights are not being violated. But it's not a

11   1983 claim inside of the agency.

12   JUSTICE BARRETT: Okay. So that's --

13   okay. I just wanted to make sure I understood

14   your argument. Thank you.

15   MR. LaCOUR: Yes.

16   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice

17   Jackson?

18   Thank you, counsel.

19   MR. LaCOUR: Thank you.

20   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Rebuttal,

21   Mr. Unikowsky?

22   REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF ADAM G. UNIKOWSKY

23   ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS

24   MR. UNIKOWSKY: Thank you, Your Honor.

25   I just wanted to clarify one answer I

 1   gave to Justice Gorsuch about ripeness. I did

 2   acknowledge that ripeness is in general a

 3   defense that a federal court can vindicate in a

 4   Section 1983 case.

 5   I wasn't trying to suggest that in

 6   this particular case, if we went to federal

 7   court, there would be a ripeness defense. I

 8   think we waited long enough and our -- our claim

 9   is ripe. So it was more a general point about

10   federal courts' powers to dismiss cases.

11   I'd like to say a couple of words

12   about the Felder case.

13   There's a lot of discussion this

14   morning about whether or not exhaustion was an

15   independent holding or whether the decision was

16   partly based on exhaustion, partly on other

17   considerations.

18   Even if the latter formulation is

19   correct, I actually think that every single

20   consideration in Felder also applies to this

21   case.

22   It's true that Felder talked about

23   whether the state was trying to minimize

24   liability. And my colleague said that the

25   agency system in general wasn't trying to

1   minimize liability.

2   I don't think that's the question. I

3   think the question is whether the exhaustion

4   requirement in particular is trying to minimize

5   liability, and I think the answer has to be yes.

6   The sole function of the exhaustion

7   requirement is to cause claims to be dismissed

8   when they're brought in circuit court. And

9   because the time limits are so tight, claims are

10   going to be predictably dismissed a lot more

11   frequently than the notice of claim requirement

12   at issue in -- in Wisconsin. And so -- in -- in

13   the Felder case. And so, ultimately, I think

14   every single consideration in Felder really

15   applies with equal force to this case.

16   So the Court doesn't need to parse out

17   which aspects of -- of the holding were holding

18   and which were alternative holdings, which were

19   dicta, because I think the entire decision

20   applies to this fact pattern.

21   On the question of jurisdictional

22   rules, I think the Court would really have to

23   overrule a lot of cases dating back to 1912 to

24   vindicate the argument that this is a

25   jurisdictional argument that can survive

1   preemption.

2   I think it's notable that the amicus

3   brief by several states actually does advocate

4   overruling all these cases back to 1912.

5   Respondent doesn't ask for that. And I think,

6   if the Court keeps those cases, then the result

7   in this case follows.

8   As back -- as far back as 1912, the

9   Court said that to -- the Court -- a state court

10   cannot decline jurisdiction based on

11   disagreement with the policy judgment of

12   Congress that a defense is unavailable. And

13   that's simply the principle we're asking to

14   carry forward today.

15   Finally, on this as-applied challenge,

16   I just wanted to point out that in the

17   proceedings below, immediately after asserting

18   our argument based on Patsy, we said it would be

19   absurd to make us wait for years in the

20   administrative process and then bring our

21   claims, which I think is reasonably construed as

22   the same type of as-applied argument we're

23   making this morning.

24   And we did make this argument in the

25   blue brief as well as the yellow brief, so I do

1   think it's teed up for the Court's

2   consideration.

3   If there's no further questions, we'd

4   ask the Court to reverse.

5   CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,

6   counsel. The case is submitted.

7   (Whereupon, at 11:21 a.m., the case

8   was submitted.)

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10:05 [2] **1**:16 **3**:2
11:21 [1] **93**:7
120 [2] **24**:21 **62**:25
131,000 [1] **86**:2
141 [1] **60**:5
147 [1] **83**:8
15 [3] **15**:8 **25**:3,5
15-page [1] **58**:23
1912 [4] **33**:12 **91**:23 **92**:4,8
1929 [1] **17**:17
1935 [2] **63**:21 **70**:22
1949 [1] **66**:2
1980 [1] **83**:19
1983 [69] **3**:14 **14**:17 **20**:8
  22:17 **23**:6,8,20 **24**:14,21,
  24 **25**:16 **26**:2,5 **27**:22 **29**:
  1,10,17 **30**:3 **33**:21 **34**:4
  37:15 **39**:24 **41**:13 **45**:1,4,
  49:12 **51**:6,19 **52**:9,10,13,
  16 **53**:3,6,14 **56**:10 **59**:10,
  23 **60**:9 **62**:8 **63**:11,18,25
  64:19 **66**:15 **67**:3,6,18,22
  68:13 **70**:11,14 **73**:19 **74**:
  21 **75**:8,16,22 **76**:7 **79**:20
  80:7 **83**:20 **84**:3 **87**:18,20
  89:2,4,8,11 **90**:4
1983's [1] **52**:25
1986 [2] **52**:15 **75**:14
1997 [1] **40**:20

2

2011 [1] **84**:20
2022 [1] **85**:25
2024 [1] **1**:12
21 [2] **78**:7 **86**:2
22 [2] **12**:15 **69**:8
23-191 [1] **3**:4
25 [1] **85**:24
28(j [1] **31**:6

3

3 [1] **2**:4

4

42 [1] **51**:18

5

51 [1] **2**:6

7

7 [1] **1**:12
7,410 [1] **86**:3

8

89 [1] **2**:9

A

a.m [3] **1**:16 **3**:2 **93**:7
ability [3] **55**:20 **62**:6,9
able [6] **15**:12 **33**:20 **56**:24

67:22 **73**:9 **83**:6
above-entitled [1] **1**:14
absolute [1] **26**:10
absolutely [3] **27**:16 **69**:11
  86:8
abstention [7] **35**:5,8 **52**:2,
  6,16 **75**:15 **84**:16
absurd [4] **12**:9,13,15 **92**:
  19
accept [1] **21**:25
access [1] **49**:17
accessing [1] **85**:8
accomplishment [2] **79**:
  25 **81**:13
accusing [1] **9**:23
acknowledge [2] **44**:10 **90**:
  2
acknowledged [1] **77**:7
ACLU [1] **73**:2
ACLU's [1] **73**:11
Act [1] **80**:9
acting [1] **56**:13
action [2] **37**:15 **55**:15
actions [1] **79**:21
actually [17] **15**:4 **18**:5,7,19
  19:4 **22**:24 **25**:2 **30**:23 **36**:
  5 **56**:4 **57**:9 **70**:8 **80**:18 **89**:
  4,5 **90**:19 **92**:3
ADAM [5] **1**:19 **2**:3,8 **3**:7 **89**:
  22
add [3] **52**:3 **69**:23 **76**:9
addition [1] **30**:25
additional [1] **86**:9
address [1] **12**:20
addressing [2] **57**:14 **85**:
  11
adequate [2] **50**:18,25
adjudicate [1] **42**:21
adjudicated [1] **70**:23
adjudicating [3] **61**:11 **71**:
  14 **89**:6
adjudication [9] **52**:23,24
  53:24 **54**:10 **61**:10 **62**:24
  65:16 **73**:22 **89**:3
adjudicator [1] **18**:13
adjudicatory [1] **88**:7
adjunct [1] **88**:9
administer [1] **9**:9
administration [4] **63**:17
  64:6 **65**:9 **66**:19
administrative [11] **14**:24
  40:17 **41**:20 **43**:5 **49**:7 **58**:
  6 **70**:7 **85**:2,5,8 **92**:20
admit [1] **41**:21
adopt [2] **34**:5 **76**:14
adopting [1] **80**:22
advancing [1] **89**:8
advantage [2] **55**:2 **84**:22
adverse [1] **25**:13
advocate [1] **92**:3
affirm [1] **65**:4
affirmative [8] **4**:14 **18**:11
  27:21 **30**:1 **59**:13,17,19 **73**:
  25

agency [47] **5**:12 **7**:15 **9**:5,
  17,23 **10**:3 **13**:25 **15**:8 **18**:
  23 **26**:21,23 **27**:17 **37**:18
  38:1 **40**:23 **41**:9 **49**:8,10,
  20 **50**:17 **52**:17,23 **53**:23
  54:14,15,18 **55**:17 **56**:15,
  16 **61**:9 **62**:14,17,23 **70**:21
  72:15 **73**:22 **75**:17 **76**:2 **78**:
  15 **85**:3 **87**:1,11,17,22 **88**:9
  89:11 **90**:25
agency's [1] **43**:17
agent [1] **43**:17
agree [12] **18**:6 **20**:25 **26**:12,
  17 **28**:3 **30**:21 **33**:2 **34**:8
  35:25 **44**:20 **45**:6 **50**:6
ahead [2] **79**:11,12
aimed [1] **83**:12
akin [1] **40**:6
AL [1] **1**:3
ALABAMA [35] **1**:6,22 **3**:
  15 **4**:17,19,25 **12**:6,21 **13**:1
  14:14 **15**:22 **21**:23 **23**:8,16
  29:16 **33**:17 **35**:14 **53**:12,
  19,20 **55**:3,4,14 **56**:1,23 **59**:
  17,22 **61**:17 **63**:16 **64**:1,20
  65:4 **74**:7 **77**:4,9
Alabama's [8] **4**:1,10 **5**:18
  20:18 **53**:4 **54**:4 **61**:7 **62**:5
align [1] **43**:9
alike [1] **32**:16
ALITO [23] **21**:8,12,18,21
  23:4 **30**:18 **31**:12 **32**:12,20
  40:12,13,17 **41**:15 **42**:3,7,
  12,17 **43**:11 **66**:24 **67**:1 **68**:
  1,10 **84**:10
alleged [1] **58**:8
alleges [1] **25**:7
allow [1] **13**:15
allowed [2] **5**:3 **16**:1
allowing [1] **33**:15
alluding [2] **53**:17 **54**:1
almost [5] **13**:10 **14**:23 **74**:
  18 **80**:10 **88**:24
already [3] **16**:14 **54**:2 **87**:1
alter [2] **52**:20 **59**:23
alternative [2] **10**:16 **91**:18
altogether [1] **75**:25
Amendment [1] **67**:6
Americans [1] **13**:17
amicus [2] **73**:1 **92**:2
among [2] **26**:6,14
amount [1] **59**:18
analog [1] **85**:16
analysis [7] **18**:6 **19**:10,17
  20:5 **34**:8 **58**:24 **61**:8
Another [3] **43**:21 **47**:10 **69**:
  23
answer [10] **13**:1 **19**:8 **36**:
  10,17,24 **50**:1,3 **74**:4 **89**:25
  91:5
answered [2] **27**:1 **37**:22
answers [1] **81**:25
anticipate [1] **86**:4
anybody [1] **63**:24

anyhow [1] **46**:9
anyway [1] **45**:23
apologize [1] **75**:13
appeal [9] **5**:21 **25**:4,8 **55**:
  20 **67**:23,25 **72**:2 **78**:9 **87**:
  11
appealed [1] **78**:6
appeals [8] **5**:22 **25**:5,6 **31**:
  5 **56**:14 **72**:4,4 **84**:19
APPEARANCES [1] **1**:18
appellate [3] **40**:21 **41**:19
  52:13
application [2] **47**:7 **79**:20
applied [11] **4**:18 **14**:16 **24**:
  14 **30**:7 **34**:2 **39**:4,6,11 **46**:
  16 **52**:15 **75**:15
applies [8] **3**:18,25 **19**:22
  43:22 **63**:7 **90**:20 **91**:15,20
apply [15] **16**:19,24 **21**:23
  28:7 **38**:4 **39**:5 **44**:8,9,11,
  12 **46**:13,15 **52**:7 **56**:8 **63**:
  7
applying [4] **7**:23 **25**:24 **48**:
  1 **71**:2
appreciate [3] **60**:4,16 **61**:
  3
approach [1] **80**:25
appropriate [1] **21**:22
Arbitration [1] **80**:9
areas [1] **81**:22
aren't [3] **13**:3 **34**:20 **60**:8
argued [6] **10**:1 **12**:9,12,14
  48:9 **57**:15
arguing [1] **72**:18
argument [58] **1**:15 **2**:2,7 **3**:
  4,7 **12**:2,4,22 **15**:10 **16**:5,
  14 **23**:23 **24**:1 **37**:1,5 **40**:8
  44:15 **45**:20 **46**:3,8 **47**:6
  48:6 **49**:9 **51**:12 **53**:11,18,
  22 **54**:7,14 **55**:11 **56**:6,18
  57:23,24,24 **63**:9 **64**:13 **65**:
  6 **68**:6,11,12 **69**:10,12,14
  71:18 **72**:15,23 **74**:22 **85**:1
  88:22 **89**:5,14,22 **91**:24,25
  92:18,22,24
arguments [5] **18**:24 **26**:
  18 **48**:10 **56**:25 **62**:20
arising [1] **17**:11
articulate [2] **50**:7,8
articulated [2] **32**:19 **47**:6
as-applied [3] **54**:3 **92**:15,
  22
aside [2] **34**:11 **48**:20
aspects [2] **26**:14 **91**:17
assert [1] **72**:9
asserted [3] **22**:22 **36**:3 **40**:
  25
asserting [4] **15**:6 **30**:24
  41:13 **92**:17
asserts [1] **4**:13
assume [3] **21**:25 **33**:2 **41**:
  20
Assuming [2] **15**:22 **32**:23
assurance [1] **85**:9

assurances [1] **85**:19
assuredly [2] **13**:10 **14**:24
AT&T [1] **81**:15
attached [1] **25**:16
attacking [2] **43**:4 **55**:6
attempted [1] **12**:23
authority [1] **29**:4
authorized [2] **20**:12 **60**:12
available [8] **4**:15 **18**:11,12
  40:22 **54**:6 **56**:24 **63**:22 **79**:
  1
avenue [1] **64**:8
average [1] **70**:8
avoid [6] **4**:11 **22**:20 **24**:4,
  15 **31**:15 **79**:8
avoided [1] **53**:8
aware [3] **31**:10 **64**:1,3
away [5] **7**:18 **47**:17 **80**:4
  82:14,15
awful [1] **67**:1

B

back [12] **31**:4 **33**:11 **36**:17,
  18,19 **52**:16 **56**:6 **75**:16 **91**:
  23 **92**:4,8,8
backlog [4] **85**:25 **86**:1,4,7
bad [2] **14**:1 **83**:5
bar [1] **26**:10
BARRETT [23] **8**:2,14,19,
  25 **10**:8 **27**:24 **29**:2 **30**:9,
  12,19 **31**:18 **49**:24,25 **51**:7
  71:12 **72**:1,6 **86**:17,18 **87**:
  15 **88**:1,21 **89**:12
barrier [4] **16**:10 **50**:11 **51**:
  2,4
based [4] **75**:21 **90**:16 **92**:
  10,18
basically [1] **77**:19
Basin [1] **71**:6
basis [1] **18**:2
beat [1] **63**:1
becomes [1] **47**:18
begun [1] **87**:1
behalf [8] **1**:20,22 **2**:4,6,9 **3**:
  8 **51**:13 **89**:23
believe [3] **12**:6 **26**:9 **82**:22
below [7] **10**:2 **12**:4,9 **54**:8,
  13 **57**:15 **92**:17
beneficial [1] **61**:17
benefit [8] **14**:21 **44**:1 **49**:8
  61:15 **63**:2,4 **64**:18 **72**:14
benefits [14] **9**:14 **10**:3,20
  13:8,12,22 **14**:1 **30**:25 **41**:
  17,23 **42**:5,6 **63**:21 **64**:8
benign [1] **73**:1
best [3] **9**:4,8 **53**:7
between [8] **26**:6 **45**:22 **51**:
  23 **62**:15,23 **70**:1 **87**:20 **88**:
  23
beyond [1] **61**:6
bind [1] **65**:17
bit [2] **6**:17 **30**:6
bleed [1] **81**:21
blue [2] **57**:15 **92**:25

blurry [1] 30:6
board [4] 25:6 65:20 71:7 72:3
boards [2] 65:21,23
body [3] 21:21,22 22:2
boil [1] 6:19
bolts [1] 7:12
bona [1] 29:11
borderline [2] 6:24 30:16
both [3] 9:20 22:15 28:24
bottom [1] 63:10
boy [1] 31:24
break [1] 54:25
brief [10] 12:10 23:15 35:7 48:14 57:16 73:11 87:16 92:3,25,25
briefed [3] 57:14 72:22 87:6
briefs [5] 55:8 56:6 72:12 73:1 75:14
bring [15] 24:22 33:20 40:3 47:25 50:14,21 51:1 54:13 62:6 64:24 67:6 70:2 73:19 83:6 92:20
bringing [5] 35:3,5 51:3 62:12 87:20
broad [7] 23:22 25:23 45:20 46:7 48:14,21 50:3
broader [1] 82:11
broadly [1] 55:4
brought [4] 55:11 79:21 82:23 91:8
Brown [1] 66:2
bunch [1] 69:23
burden [3] 25:15 26:1 38:11

C

call [3] 46:4 78:9,10
called [4] 36:12 78:7 87:17,21
came [3] 1:14 25:8 31:12
cannot [6] 4:11 22:19 32:24 33:12 75:9 92:10
caps [1] 82:17
capture [1] 68:11
care [2] 20:20 21:1
career [1] 35:16
careful [1] 68:24
carried [1] 29:14
carries [1] 27:22
carry [1] 92:14
Case [75] 3:4,11,14,25 4:16, 18 6:2 11:22 15:5 16:6,7 17:9,13,16 18:16,19,24 19: 20 20:6 21:22,22 22:3,23 24:2,16 25:1,7 27:18,23 29:15 31:12 32:25 33:6,11, 17,20 34:3 35:23 36:5 39: 16 40:7,21 41:2,6,11,21 43: 3,16 46:19 49:4,18 54:5,9 56:23 58:23 65:3,3 66:2 68:13 69:15 71:6 79:15,17 81:8,15 87:2 90:4,6,12,21

91:13,15 92:7 93:6,7
cases [30] 4:13 6:24 17:11 22:12,15,22 24:3,8 28:14, 22,24 29:14 30:16 32:21 34:16,17 35:11 40:15,18 46:9 47:4 69:4,7 73:14 74: 11 75:11 90:10 91:23 92:4, 6
Catch [2] 12:15 69:8
categorical [5] 52:11 57: 17,18 65:5 75:10
categories [1] 16:19
category [3] 17:1 46:1,9
cause [1] 91:7
caused [1] 58:8
cert [1] 53:21
certain [4] 17:2 29:5 46:1 71:8
certainly [2] 28:20 87:10
cetera [2] 80:14,14
challenge [11] 4:21 14:20, 25 38:14,22 39:20 40:3,4 48:2 54:4 92:15
challenges [1] 56:9
challenging [8] 13:8 36:6, 21 39:19 40:1 47:13 49:19 50:12
Chamber [1] 73:4
chance [3] 8:10 27:20 45: 14
change [1] 65:1
chapter [1] 78:17
characteristic [2] 3:20,22
characterization [1] 33:1
characterizes [1] 4:1
CHIEF [26] 3:3,9 6:6 7:4 36: 7 37:8,12,17 38:8,20,24 39: 10,14 40:9 43:12 45:17,19 46:25 49:22 51:8,14 84:7 86:15 89:16,20 93:5
Christian [2] 52:14 75:17
circuit [7] 55:21 72:5 84:20 87:12 88:11,19 91:8
circumstances [1] 62:7
cited [3] 40:20 64:3 84:19
Citizen [1] 73:3
city [1] 17:10
civil [9] 3:20 35:17 41:6 52: 14 73:5 75:12,20 79:22 83: 11
claim [86] 3:20 5:20 7:14, 17,20 9:14,17 10:2,3,11,20 11:6 13:25 14:21,21 15:5, 7 20:7 23:3,8 24:23 26:21, 24,25 27:22 29:19,19 30: 24,25 32:18 33:13,15 35:6, 18,21 36:3,15 37:6 38:5 39:2,24 40:23,24 41:18 42: 10,15,19 44:19,23 46:6 47: 16,25 49:2 50:12,15,22 51: 1,3 55:6,9,10,16 56:10 59: 10 60:10 62:7,25 64:19 65: 24 66:20 67:3,6,13,16 70:3 71:16 73:23 75:16 76:7 84:

5 87:20 89:2,4,11 90:8 91: 11
claimant [8] 4:3,5,7 23:17 24:21 35:18 54:22 75:16
claimants [6] 25:13 61:12 63:8 78:2,14 88:14
claims [51] 3:16 5:1,4 9:7 11:25 13:20 14:17 22:17, 18 23:2,14 24:14,25 29:1, 10,17,20,24 30:9 33:21 35: 3 41:13 44:9 45:1,5 47:20 52:21 53:13 61:14 62:10, 13 63:25 66:13 69:9 70:21, 25 71:9,19,21 72:9 73:6,10 77:1 82:18 84:1 85:11 86: 10,22 91:7,9 92:21
clarify [3] 50:1 86:23 89:25
clarifying [1] 72:7
class [4] 24:3,7 44:4 47:4
classic [2] 27:16 67:6
Clause [1] 33:24
cleanest [1] 46:11
clear [11] 10:7 18:19 26:7, 19 41:4 51:18,19 56:23 58: 3,25 59:3
clear-cut [1] 83:16
clearer [1] 75:8
clearing [1] 86:4
clearly [1] 7:2
clients [1] 8:17
collaterally [1] 43:4
colleague [1] 90:24
colleagues [1] 44:16
colloquy [1] 45:18
coloned [1] 60:16
come [2] 22:25 71:22
comes [2] 26:10 70:25
commend [1] 58:10
comment [1] 76:18
Commerce [1] 73:4
Commission [4] 52:14 75: 12,20,22
comparing [1] 24:18
competence [5] 17:5 28: 17 70:18,20 85:17
compile [1] 88:10
complaining [2] 6:7 55:1
complaint [1] 7:5
complete [1] 36:10
completely [2] 10:9 21:14
concede [1] 55:8
Concepcion [1] 81:15
concept [1] 81:16
conception [1] 80:5
concern [3] 80:22 85:16 86:23
concerned [2] 44:16 80:16
concerns [3] 17:4 28:16 35:10
conclude [1] 31:24
concluded [1] 23:5
conclusion [2] 4:20 24:18
conclusions [1] 28:24
condition [3] 49:1,1,3

conditions [4] 20:11 29:6 49:6 60:11
confirms [2] 3:18 52:10
conflict [10] 18:10,16 26:4 51:5 52:25 59:3 63:16 70: 11,14 75:8
conflicted [1] 19:2
conflicted [1] 19:2
confronted [1] 71:5
confused [2] 9:12 19:8
Congress [11] 19:3 20:12 23:13,20 33:19 51:24 58: 11 60:12 80:1 83:13 92:12
Congress's [2] 51:5 63:11
connection [1] 47:21
consider [1] 59:21
consideration [8] 52:19 53:3 63:13 67:15 76:3 90: 20 91:14 93:2
considerations [1] 90:17
considered [2] 72:3 74:6
consistent [4] 63:10 79:21 80:3,11
Constitution [1] 57:8
constitutional [6] 44:5 45: 1,1 53:7 71:19 89:6
construed [1] 92:21
contain [1] 52:10
contest [2] 21:12,16
context [8] 64:17 66:8,14, 15,16 71:23 75:2 81:4
contexts [1] 27:25
continuing [1] 8:22
contra [1] 58:13
contracts [1] 80:13
contradicting [1] 3:17
contrary [1] 74:23
control [1] 3:11
controversy [1] 59:19
correct [17] 9:24,25 10:13, 14,21,22 14:15 43:19 44: 19 45:5,11,12 50:23 57:3 79:5 82:10 90:19
Cotton [1] 84:19
couch [1] 18:17
couldn't [5] 25:8 38:14 41: 9 69:6 75:8
council [1] 56:14
counsel [12] 15:24 36:8 40: 10 43:14 51:10 60:3 61:3 79:6,10 84:8 89:18 93:6
couple [4] 26:22 64:14 87: 16 90:11
course [4] 41:3 75:2 86:10 87:5
COURT [207] 1:1,15 3:10, 12,15,19,19,24 4:10,14,19 5:1,4,10,11 6:1 7:19,23 8: 11,17,24 9:2,4,8,10,16 10: 10,11,17,17,25 11:6,8,14, 22,23 13:13,21 14:3,6,6,10 15:12 16:8 17:3,11,12,16 18:3,10,17,25 19:21,24 20: 25 21:7,23 22:1,10,14 23:5 24:10,17,20 25:11,20 27:5,

9,11,20 28:24 29:7,9 30:2, 4 31:11,15 32:5,10,19 33: 10,12 34:2,5,13,15,16,20, 22,23 35:1,3,6,12,14,17,19 36:2 37:21,25 38:3,18 39: 24 40:5,14,21 41:8,22 42: 19,21,24 43:1,4,7,8,9,18 44:24 45:13 46:17,21 48:3 49:13 50:13,18 51:15,16 52:4,12,15 53:19,20,22 54: 2,19 55:7,14,21,24,25 56:2, 19 58:24 59:8 61:20 64:1, 24 65:24 66:17 67:10,12, 14,20,21 68:14,23 69:4 70: 3,8 71:5,7,20 72:5,24 73:6, 10,20 74:6,7,21 75:15,23 76:1,6,8,16,17,23 77:5,12, 18 81:1,16 82:12,15,24 83: 7,19 84:14,23 85:18 87:3, 12,19,21 88:11,20 90:3,7 91:8,16,22 92:6,9,9,9 93:4
Court's [11] 4:23 9:15 26: 14 28:14 52:6 53:9 54:12 65:4 67:14 73:14 93:1
courts [41] 4:12 6:4 8:12 9: 6 16:20 21:13,15 22:4,5,17, 18,21 23:1,5,8 28:23,25 29: 4,16 31:20 35:4 39:8 44: 18,25 45:9 51:25 52:7,8 56:5,7 57:4 68:21 74:13, 18 76:21 79:21 83:10,18, 21 84:4,18
courts' [1] 90:10
COVID [4] 25:10 77:17 86: 7,11
crafted [1] 51:25
created [2] 32:16 51:24
cure [1] 9:24
curiosity [1] 9:1
curious [3] 12:20 13:13 15: 1
current [1] 58:11
cutting [1] 29:24

D

D.C [2] 1:11,19
Dakota [1] 74:10
damages [1] 82:17
dating [1] 91:23
day [1] 57:21
days [8] 24:21 25:3,3,5 62: 25 70:2,4 86:2
Dayton [2] 52:14 75:17
de [4] 27:6 40:5 47:7 88:11
deal [3] 31:13 73:22 88:5
dealing [3] 49:8 57:16 74: 11
dealt [1] 73:23
decide [3] 28:6,11 45:9
decided [3] 8:12 16:14 33: 19
decision [22] 9:15,16 13:9 14:1 15:1 17:23,25 22:16 25:4 34:2,4 37:1 38:4 42:

10 **49**:19 **54**:13 **65**:5 **68**:16 **75**:14 **84**:21 **90**:15 **91**:19
decisions [2] **52**:18 **84**:19
decline [2] **33**:12 **92**:10
declining [3] **53**:5 **60**:1 **69**: 1
defeat [4] **52**:20 **59**:10,20 **76**:4
defeated [1] **59**:10
defeating [2] **60**:9 **67**:16
defect [1] **6**:1
defendant [3] **4**:13 **29**:18, 25
defendants [7] **16**:25 **17**: 15 **22**:19 **29**:5,8,11 **59**:13
defense [16] **3**:13 **4**:14 **18**: 11 **22**:22 **27**:22 **30**:1,2 **52**: 13 **59**:13,18,20 **67**:18 **73**: 25 **90**:3,7 **92**:12
deferring [3] **52**:18 **67**:15 **76**:3
define [6] **16**:17 **21**:14 **22**:4 **24**:3 **31**:21 **58**:16
defining [2] **4**:12 **22**:20
definitely [2] **37**:4 **74**:14
definition [1] **28**:4
degree [1] **25**:15
delay [2] **7**:6 **89**:4
delta [1] **45**:22
denied [4] **10**:12 **42**:10,16 **67**:19
Department [3] **64**:10,22 **71**:5
depend [2] **7**:12,25
depending [1] **3**:23
derail [1] **68**:2
description [1] **72**:12
deserve [2] **45**:14,25
designed [6] **17**:7 **28**:18 **59**:4,5 **63**:20 **66**:3
detail [1] **35**:9
detailed [1] **58**:23
determination [1] **52**:8
determine [1] **52**:4
determining [1] **31**:22
dicta [1] **91**:19
dictum [1] **40**:19
difference [4] **5**:7 **51**:23 **62**: 15,23
differences [1] **60**:24
different [16] **5**:11 **6**:3 **14**: 22 **26**:18 **28**:7 **46**:12 **49**:18 **61**:13 **64**:13 **65**:22,23 **66**: 14 **67**:16 **74**:2 **83**:9 **87**:23
difficult [1] **77**:13
difficulty [1] **85**:7
dimensions [1] **64**:13
direct [8] **5**:3 **6**:4 **18**:9,15, 16 **20**:6 **34**:5 **55**:20
direction [2] **21**:7 **25**:18
directly [2] **43**:18 **87**:12
disability [3] **13**:12 **14**:21 **64**:8
disagreeing [1] **34**:7

disagreement [3] **23**:13 **33**:14 **92**:11
disciplined [1] **80**:25
discovery [1] **88**:18
discretion [1] **88**:5
discretionary [3] **41**:11 **57**: 1 **79**:4
discriminates [3] **20**:13 **60**:23,25
discussed [1] **85**:18
discusses [1] **26**:2
discussion [2] **19**:22 **90**: 13
dismiss [5] **11**:14,23 **59**:12 **85**:22 **90**:10
dismissal [2] **11**:9,16
dismissals [1] **59**:15
dismissed [5] **3**:15 **13**:21 **55**:15 **91**:7,10
dismisses [1] **56**:2
dispute [2] **27**:11 **58**:9
dissent [4] **57**:25 **58**:2,13 **74**:24
distinction [3] **32**:17,19 **83**: 14
distinguish [2] **87**:19 **88**: 23
distinguishing [1] **46**:18
doctrinal [1] **27**:13
doctrine [2] **35**:2 **80**:7
doctrines [4] **35**:5,8 **51**:24 **80**:19
doing [10] **20**:18,22 **31**:16 **39**:7 **61**:7 **65**:15 **66**:12 **72**: 11 **81**:17 **82**:21
dominant [1] **3**:20
done [5] **15**:24 **31**:21 **78**:23 **82**:14,15
Douglas [1] **17**:16
down [4] **6**:14,19 **22**:11 **86**: 3
drags [1] **40**:24
due [35] **9**:17,23 **10**:11 **11**: 25 **14**:4,7 **30**:24 **31**:1,7 **35**: 21 **36**:3 **37**:25 **42**:13,20,24 **43**:6,16 **45**:10 **46**:2 **47**:20 **53**:13 **54**:13 **55**:11,14,16 **62**:6 **71**:16 **72**:9,14 **77**:3 **78**:15 **79**:8 **86**:7,25 **87**:7
during [2] **8**:13 **86**:12

E

each [2] **14**:12 **70**:1
earlier [2] **35**:21 **57**:14
EDMUND [3] **1**:21 **2**:5 **51**: 12
effect [4] **13**:20 **24**:23 **59**:2 **76**:14
effective [3] **38**:2 **41**:2,12
effectively [3] **38**:18,25 **39**: 7
effects [1] **25**:13
efficient [1] **36**:23
eight [1] **85**:24

either [2] **57**:16 **87**:14
elaborate [2] **30**:5 **42**:14
elaborated [1] **17**:3
element [3] **52**:11 **53**:3 **84**: 3
elements [1] **52**:3
Elgin [2] **71**:5,18
emphasizes [3] **4**:9 **23**:15 **29**:7
empirical [1] **70**:5
employers [1] **61**:19
employment [1] **64**:17
enacted [4] **23**:20 **51**:6 **82**: 13,17
encompass [1] **47**:3
encourage [1] **7**:24
end [3] **58**:22 **70**:3 **86**:4
ended [1] **45**:20
enforceable [2] **3**:21 **7**:22
enforcement [1] **79**:23
engage [2] **32**:5,7
enough [3] **13**:23 **31**:6 **90**: 8
ensuring [1] **89**:9
enter [3] **9**:4,9 **41**:9
entertain [3] **11**:25 **23**:8 **66**: 20
entire [3] **25**:8 **35**:16 **91**:19
entitle [1] **71**:15
entitled [1] **61**:12
entitlement [1] **71**:15
entity [1] **5**:24
equal [1] **91**:15
equitable [1] **13**:3
equivalent [1] **5**:9
ESQ [3] **2**:3,5,8
ESQUIRE [1] **1**:19
essential [1] **83**:3
essentially [4] **47**:19 **67**:24 **79**:18,19
ET [3] **1**:3 **80**:14,14
evasion [1] **70**:17
even [26] **21**:3 **28**:21 **30**:1 **31**:1 **34**:9 **37**:22,23 **46**:14 **48**:18,24 **50**:23 **53**:2,23 **57**: 18 **58**:17 **61**:6 **68**:24 **69**:11, 13,20,22 **70**:15 **83**:22 **84**:2 **87**:4 **90**:18
event [1] **12**:24
eventually [3] **67**:13 **68**:4 **72**:5
everyone [1] **76**:15
everything [3] **66**:11 **72**:11 **76**:22
evidence [2] **46**:2 **70**:5
evil [1] **83**:11
evinced [1] **23**:6
evinces [1] **67**:3
evincing [1] **69**:8
exact [4] **16**:1 **30**:5 **71**:4 **81**: 16
exactly [8] **4**:15 **7**:12 **27**:15 **30**:11,14 **47**:3 **58**:1 **68**:11
examiner [3] **5**:20 **14**:2,5

example [6] **16**:22 **29**:6 **55**: 5 **71**:23 **72**:20 **80**:8
examples [1] **17**:8
except [1] **36**:4
exception [5] **12**:2,7,19 **15**: 22,23
exceptions [2] **13**:3 **21**:19
exclude [1] **4**:13 **22**:21
excuse [6] **24**:5 **53**:5 **66**:19 **69**:1 **71**:25 **84**:1
execution [2] **79**:25 **81**:13
exercise [8] **17**:14 **38**:12 **59**:11 **68**:21,22 **75**:24 **77**:2 **84**:4
exhaust [31] **3**:13,16 **4**:8, 21,22 **8**:10 **9**:17,21 **10**:2 **14**:24 **15**:16 **31**:1 **33**:21 **36**: 6 **37**:6 **38**:5,15,18,19,25 **39**: 19,21,25 **40**:1,2 **47**:10,14, 15 **50**:13,14,19
exhausted [8] **29**:19 **38**:16 **39**:21 **47**:16,17 **55**:17,19 **56**:17
exhausting [1] **36**:4
exhaustion [79] **5**:5,13,15 **6**:8,20,22,25 **7**:7,21 **8**:13 **9**: 13 **11**:10,16,24 **13**:11,15 **14**:14 **15**:21 **18**:20,21,24 **19**:4 **20**:15 **23**:16,21,24 **24**: 6,12 **25**:24 **26**:11,20 **27**:4,7, 10,14,16 **29**:21 **31**:16 **33**: 17 **37**:20,24 **39**:5 **42**:1 **46**: 14,20 **47**:22 **48**:3 **49**:16 **50**: 4 **51**:23,24 **53**:12,24 **54**:20, 24 **56**:8 **57**:11 **58**:3,15 **61**: 2,5,16 **63**:3,6 **68**:13 **73**:18 **74**:19,20 **81**:7 **83**:5,17 **85**: 2,5 **87**:24 **88**:23 **90**:14,16 **91**:3,6
exist [1] **49**:6
existed [1] **70**:22
exists [1] **12**:19
expensive [1] **58**:5
expert [2] **70**:21 **71**:12
expertise [3] **70**:24 **71**:8, 14
expired [2] **8**:9,14
explain [2] **61**:6 **88**:1
explains [1] **22**:3
explanation [1] **78**:12
extolled [1] **82**:19
extract [1] **6**:21
extraordinarily [1] **68**:15

F

FAA [1] **80**:14
face [1] **82**:4
facing [1] **74**:1
fact [10] **15**:2 **21**:2 **22**:23 **27**: 3 **39**:4,11,15,18,21 **91**:20
facto [2] **40**:5 **47**:7
factor [1] **67**:8
facts [2] **24**:15 **30**:8
failed [2] **3**:16 **47**:15

failure [4] **3**:12 **39**:19,20 **47**: 13
fair [3] **57**:23 **71**:23 **72**:19
fairly [1] **72**:17
fall [2] **27**:8 **70**:13
familiar [2] **35**:12,15
Fankell [2] **52**:12 **67**:17
far [4] **33**:11 **61**:13 **74**:2 **92**: 8
fashion [1] **36**:16
faster [1] **37**:24
favor [2] **46**:22 **48**:9
federal [100] **3**:24 **8**:11,15, 17,24 **9**:2 **10**:11,17,24 **11**:6, 14,22,23 **13**:9,9,13,16 **14**:3, 6,6,20,23 **15**:12,20 **16**:3 **18**: 13 **20**:8,14,17,24 **21**:5 **28**:4 **31**:15,22 **32**:7,16,21 **33**:5, 13,14 **34**:12,15,19,23 **35**:3, 4,6 **36**:2 **37**:21,25 **38**:12 **41**:22 **42**:19,24 **43**:7,8 **44**: 23,24 **49**:7,8 **51**:17 **52**:3,4, 8,19 **57**:8,22 **59**:3 **60**:14,21, 23 **61**:22 **62**:4 **66**:20 **73**:5 **74**:21 **75**:23 **76**:6,16,17,22 **77**:5,12,20 **79**:22 **80**:8 **81**: 10 **82**:24 **83**:7,11,19 **84**:1, 14,23 **85**:4,15 **89**:9 **90**:3,6, 10
federalism [1] **76**:12
feet [1] **40**:24
Felder [71] **3**:11,18 **6**:2,17 **16**:5,7,13,16,18 **17**:23,24 **18**:9,16 **19**:11,20 **20**:5,23 **21**:2 **22**:7,25 **24**:19,19 **25**: 22 **26**:19 **34**:8,11,16 **46**:11, 12,19 **49**:4 **52**:22 **54**:1 **57**: 25 **58**:2,3,12,14,21 **59**:6,25 **60**:4 **61**:5,8,14 **63**:2 **65**:11 **66**:4 **69**:9,19,21 **73**:14,21 **74**:5,18,24 **75**:2,5 **79**:14 **80**:10 **81**:6,7,20 **82**:12 **83**: 3,16 **90**:12,20,22 **91**:13,14
Felder's [6] **19**:12,17 **25**:19, 22 **43**:22 **83**:2
Felder-like [1] **28**:10
felt [3] **9**:3,7 **27**:12
few [2] **41**:2 **58**:19
fide [1] **29**:12
file [15] **5**:20 **8**:17,23 **9**:1 **10**: 19 **13**:25 **25**:4 **26**:21 **31**:6, 15 **41**:17 **42**:19 **55**:9,20 **56**: 14
filed [7] **3**:23 **15**:6 **37**:6,21 **41**:21 **45**:3 **78**:8
filing [1] **72**:2
fill [1] **30**:23
final [2] **55**:5,19
Finally [3] **4**:17 **61**:1 **92**:15
find [1] **75**:9
finds [1] **51**:16
fine [3] **21**:6 **32**:12 **46**:23
finished [1] **43**:5
fired [1] **75**:18

first [20] **3:**4,21 **7:**22 **9:**12 **35:**1,23 **36:**25 **37:**23 **41:**3, 17,23 **45:**10 **58:**8,21 **60:**7 **62:**14 **64:**22 **70:**22,23 **88:**9
FITZGERALD [2] **1:**6 **3:**5
five [4] **15:**8 **69:**25 **70:**2,3
focus [1] **79:**14
focused [2] **81:**7,18
focusing [1] **7:**6
follow [1] **57:**7
follows [2] **19:**6 **92:**7
force [4] **52:**16 **64:**20 **75:**16 **91:**15
forced [1] **62:**24
forces [1] **58:**6
form [5] **45:**20,21,21 **46:**7 **56:**12
formal [1] **88:**18
former [1] **51:**25
formulation [2] **28:**21 **90:** 18
forum [1] **49:**17
forward [1] **92:**14
forward-looking [1] **8:**21
found [1] **64:**4
four [1] **73:**24
Fourth [1] **67:**6
free [4] **21:**14 **75:**24,24 **77:**1
freedom [1] **35:**7
frequently [2] **59:**9 **91:**11
friend [3] **63:**5 **80:**23 **84:**13
friend's [1] **76:**4
friends [1] **64:**4
front [3] **16:**10 **49:**1 **62:**13
full [2] **16:**11 **79:**25
function [1] **91:**6
functioning [1] **88:**9
functions [1] **54:**5
further [2] **84:**9 **93:**3
futility [15] **12:**2,7,19,21 **13:** 4 **15:**10,21,23 **48:**6,9 **49:**9 **54:**7 **56:**18,25 **62:**20

G

gave [2] **16:**22 **90:**1
General [16] **1:**21 **21:**17 **22:** 3,17 **28:**25 **29:**4,10,11 **31:** 20 **32:**2 **36:**1 **46:**14 **57:**20 **90:**2,9,25
generally [6] **21:**13 **29:**16 **50:**5 **52:**8 **58:**16,17
generis [1] **44:**4
get-to-court-immediatel y [1] **84:**3
gets [2] **54:**22 **76:**10
getting [7] **10:**8 **15:**19 **27:** 19 **38:**6 **64:**9 **72:**13 **73:**6
give [6] **36:**25 **50:**17,17 **64:** 14 **67:**22 **85:**10
given [6] **20:**22 **42:**25 **54:** 12 **68:**22 **83:**10 **85:**4
gives [1] **22:**5
giving [1] **62:**9
goals [2] **62:**4 **79:**22

GORSUCH [37] **11:**11,17 **12:**1,5,11,14,17 **13:**5,7 **14:** 9,11,18 **15:**9,13,15,18 **47:**1, 2,9,23 **48:**4,11,20 **49:**5,14, 21 **50:**1,23 **53:**17 **69:**5,13, 17 **84:**13,24 **86:**6,14 **90:**1
got [8] **7:**8,8 **8:**9 **35:**23 **45:** 25 **47:**24 **55:**8 **81:**14
gotten [1] **13:**23
governing [2] **16:**22 **81:**16
government [10] **13:**10,16 **14:**22,23 **19:**23 **43:**23,25 **44:**13 **60:**17 **85:**4
governmental [1] **16:**25
grant [1] **83:**23
granting [1] **39:**8
great [3] **31:**13 **38:**1 **88:**5
greatly [1] **85:**24
grind [1] **73:**8
ground [1] **11:**9
grounds [1] **75:**19
groups [2] **73:**2,3
guard [2] **73:**15,18
guess [6] **16:**4 **19:**7 **44:**14 **46:**10 **49:**11 **88:**22
gun [1] **42:**22

H

handed [1] **59:**14
handle [1] **36:**15
happened [1] **4:**15
happening [2] **29:**23 **33:**16
happens [1] **35:**14
happy [1] **22:**11
hard [2] **31:**24 **85:**1
harder [2] **86:**11,12
harm [1] **8:**22
haul [1] **76:**16
Haywood [18] **17:**2 **22:**14 **23:**4 **28:**23 **29:**7 **40:**7 **59:**6 **66:**18 **67:**2,9 **68:**24 **69:**12, 13 **70:**13,15 **73:**15 **83:**25 **85:**18
hear [17] **3:**3 **9:**6 **12:**18 **17:** 11 **22:**17,18 **44:**19,25 **45:**4 **52:**4 **71:**1,9,19,21 **76:**7 **78:** 20,21
heard [3] **45:**15 **55:**7 **73:**10
hearing [8] **14:**2,5 **23:**14 **50:**21 **70:**24,25 **85:**23 **86:**2
hearings [1] **50:**17
height [1] **86:**13
held [11] **3:**12 **4:**11,14 **16:**8 **22:**14 **24:**20 **28:**24 **30:**2 **33:** 11 **38:**18 **49:**13
helds [1] **18:**10
Heller [1] **12:**17
help [2] **73:**15 **80:**16
helpful [1] **88:**14
helps [1] **23:**17
Herb [1] **17:**9
higher [1] **41:**5
hinder [1] **73:**5
hire [1] **86:**11

historic [1] **51:**16
history [1] **67:**8
hold [1] **25:**11
holding [7] **3:**17 **10:**1 **24:** 15 **83:**4 **90:**15 **91:**17,17
holdings [2] **52:**7 **91:**18
holds [2] **18:**10 **50:**13
homing [1] **61:**4
honest [1] **48:**12
Honor [41] **5:**2 **21:**11 **28:**14 **44:**21 **45:**7 **48:**23 **53:**16 **54:** 16,23 **55:**18,23 **56:**3,22 **58:** 20 **62:**11,19 **64:**2 **65:**2,25 **66:**9 **70:**12 **71:**17 **72:**16 **74:** 9,25 **76:**20 **77:**23 **78:**4,16, 24 **79:**7 **80:**21 **81:**23 **82:**25 **83:**22 **85:**13 **86:**8 **87:**5,25 **89:**7,24
hoops [1] **77:**13
Hosanna-Tabor [1] **75:**19
hospital [1] **25:**9
hostile [1] **77:**20
hostility [4] **23:**6,11 **67:**3 **69:**9
however [1] **3:**14
Howlett [8] **22:**13,23 **28:**23 **40:**7 **59:**6 **66:**18 **83:**24 **85:** 18
hundreds [2] **32:**3 **71:**1
hurt [1] **68:**16
hypothetical [1] **67:**12
hypotheticals [2] **64:**15 **68:**3

I

Idaho [2] **67:**20,21
idea [2] **23:**17 **33:**18
identical [2] **14:**21 **80:**10
identified [1] **6:**2
ignores [1] **51:**22
illustrates [1] **27:**18
imaginable [1] **36:**24
immediate [3] **49:**17 **52:**12 **53:**2
immediately [5] **61:**20 **67:** 21 **82:**24 **83:**7 **92:**17
immunities [1] **40:**6
immunity [9] **39:**8 **40:**6 **47:** 7 **54:**5 **59:**7 **67:**18 **82:**14, 16,16
immunize [1] **24:**24
immunizing [2] **39:**23 **47:** 19
implicate [1] **80:**19
implication [1] **33:**3
implications [1] **33:**7
implies [1] **13:**2
implying [1] **27:**6
important [2] **31:**19 **56:**4
impose [2] **59:**4 **63:**18
imposed [2] **33:**18 **38:**11
imposes [2] **7:**7 **13:**16
impossible [10] **47:**9,24 **48:**2,5,16,24 **53:**12 **54:**10

68:15 **69:**7
improper [2] **64:**20 **85:**4
inability [6] **4:**21,22 **36:**6 **38:**15 **40:**1 **50:**12
inadequate [1] **55:**13
incapable [1] **39:**25
incentive [2] **76:**20,24
incompatible [1] **16:**5
incomplete [1] **87:**8
incongruity [1] **13:**14
incongruous [1] **13:**19
inconsistency [2] **62:**1 **81:** 9
inconsistent [5] **23:**19 **34:** 3 **60:**13,20 **62:**8
incorporate [1] **25:**20
incorrect [1] **63:**6
independent [1] **90:**15
indisputable [1] **41:**4
individuals [1] **85:**7
ineffective [1] **72:**20
informal [2] **72:**17 **88:**16
inherently [1] **52:**25
injunction [2] **9:**5,9
injunctive [2] **8:**21 **29:**8
injured [1] **58:**7
injury [1] **58:**8
inside [1] **89:**11
instance [6] **3:**22 **7:**22 **41:** 23 **45:**10 **70:**23 **88:**8
instead [5] **6:**7 **14:**22 **69:**24 **79:**24 **89:**5
insurance [2] **9:**7 **35:**13
intentionally [1] **40:**23
interest [1] **68:**19
interlocutory [2] **67:**23,25
intermediate [3] **30:**22 **40:** 21 **72:**10
internal [1] **25:**4
interpretation [1] **32:**6
interrelated [2] **20:**9,19
interrupt [1] **68:**4
invented [1] **63:**21
investigation [1] **75:**22
invoke [1] **75:**4
invoked [2] **46:**20 **76:**12
involve [1] **58:**5
involves [1] **22:**8
irony [1] **76:**17
Isn't [8] **5:**12 **18:**24 **21:**21 **27:**9 **46:**57 **57:**2 **62:**5 **77:**13
issue [12] **10:**5 **33:**24 **51:**21 **59:**16 **63:**1 **72:**21 **74:**6 **82:** 11 **84:**15,16 **87:**7 **91:**12
itself [2] **67:**2 **89:**3

J

JACKSON [27] **19:**7,25 **20:** 4 **32:**22 **33:**9,23 **51:**9 **59:** 24 **60:**3,19 **61:**21,25 **62:**3, 16 **63:**9,24 **77:**10 **79:**6,10, 13 **81:**2,5,12 **82:**5,8 **84:**20 **89:**17
January [1] **85:**25

job [1] **88:**16
Johnson [2] **52:**11 **67:**17
JR [3] **1:**21 **2:**5 **51:**12
judge [1] **18:**14
judge-made [1] **52:**1
judgment [7] **23:**16,18,19 **55:**6 **58:**10 **67:**19 **92:**11
judicial [8] **6:**3 **49:**17 **53:**2 **63:**17 **65:**9 **66:**19 **82:**14,15
judicially [2] **3:**21 **7:**22
jumped [1] **42:**22
jurisdiction [27] **4:**12 **17:** 14 **21:**14 **22:**1,5,8,21 **23:**2 **28:**1,4 **29:**1,17,18,20,24 **31:** 21 **33:**13 **53:**5 **54:**20 **59:**11, 16 **60:**1 **68:**21,22 **69:**1 **84:** 4 **92:**10
jurisdiction's [1] **59:**17
jurisdictional [39] **4:**10 **13:** 2 **17:**2,4,6,10,19 **19:**9,15 **20:**21 **21:**24 **22:**10,14 **28:**8, 12,15,18 **29:**12 **30:**13 **31:** 23,25 **32:**11,15,18,23 **33:**3, 8 **44:**15,17 **51:**20 **53:**4 **66:** 22 **68:**25 **69:**3 **70:**16 **83:**23, 25 **91:**21,25
jurisdictions [1] **6:**11
JUSTICE [219] **3:**3,9 **4:**24 **5:** 6 **6:**6 **7:**4 **8:**2,14,19,25 **9:** 11,20 **10:**6,8,15,19,23 **11:**2, 11,17,18 **12:**1,5,11,14,17 **13:**5,7 **14:**9,11,18 **15:**9,13, 15,18 **16:**12 **17:**20,22 **18:**1 **19:**7,8,25 **20:**4 **21:**8,12,18, 21 **23:**4,22 **25:**14,21 **27:**24 **29:**2 **30:**9,12,18,19 **31:**12, 18 **32:**12,20,22 **33:**9,23 **34:** 11,18 **35:**20 **36:**7,11 **37:**8, 12,17 **38:**8,20,24 **39:**10,14 **40:**9,11,12,13,17 **41:**15 **42:** 3,7,12,17 **43:**11,12,12,14, 24 **44:**3,7,14,22 **45:**8,16,17, 17,18,19 **46:**24,25,25 **47:**2, 9,23 **48:**4,11,20 **49:**5,14,21, 22,22,24,25 **50:**1,23 **51:**7,8, 8,14 **53:**10,17,25 **54:**11,17 **55:**3,22,24 **56:**11 **57:**1,5,9, 20,25 **58:**13 **59:**24 **60:**3,19 **61:**21,25 **62:**3,16 **63:**9,24 **64:**12 **65:**12,18 **66:**6,10,24, 25 **67:**1,11 **68:**1,2,8,10 **69:** 5,13,17,18 **71:**11,12 **72:**1,6, 25 **73:**17 **74:**3,12,16 **76:**1, 11,25 **77:**10,11,24 **78:**5,19 **79:**2,4,6,9,10,12,13 **81:**2,5, 12 **82:**5,8,22 **83:**1 **84:**6,7,9, 10,11,12,13,24 **86:**6,14,15, 15,17,18 **87:**15 **88:**1,21 **89:** 12,16,16,20 **90:**1 **93:**5
justifies [1] **24:**8

K

Kafkaesque [5] **4:**20 **36:** 13 **38:**9,13 **56:**20

KAGAN [23] **23**:22 **25**:14, 21 **36**:11 **45**:17,18 **46**:24 **53**:25 **64**:12 **65**:12,18 **66**:6, 10,25 **68**:2,8 **69**:18 **79**:9,12 **82**:22 **83**:1 **84**:6,12
Kagan's [1] **67**:11
KAVANAUGH [19] **16**:12 **17**:20,22 **18**:1 **19**:9 **34**:11, 18 **35**:20 **49**:23 **57**:20 **71**: 11 **72**:25 **73**:17 **74**:3,12,16 **76**:11,25 **86**:16
keep [1] **69**:3
keeping [1] **84**:1
keeps [2] **61**:18 **92**:6
key [4] **51**:23 **58**:25 **62**:14, 23
kind [7] **16**:15 **48**:12 **64**:18 **66**:7 **80**:6 **83**:13 **88**:24
kinds [4] **62**:10 **63**:25 **76**: 25 **81**:21
knows [1] **28**:14

L

LABOR [2] **1**:7 **64**:11
lack [7] **11**:10,11,14,23 **13**: 22 **23**:1 **71**:25
LaCOUR [67] **1**:21 **2**:5 **51**: 11,12,14 **53**:16 **54**:16,23 **55**:18,23 **56**:3,22 **57**:3,7,12 **58**:19 **60**:1,18 **61**:9,24 **62**: 2,11,18 **63**:15 **64**:2 **65**:2,14, 25 **66**:9,17 **67**:7 **68**:18 **69**: 11,16 **70**:12 **71**:17 **72**:16 **73**:13,21 **74**:9,14,25 **76**:19 **77**:6,23 **78**:4,16,24 **79**:3,7 **80**:21 **81**:3,11,23 **82**:7,10, 25 **83**:22 **84**:17 **85**:13 **86**:8 **87**:5,25 **88**:3 **89**:7,15,19
LaCOURT [1] **72**:2
landmark [1] **32**:2
language [8] **18**:18 **21**:2 **22**:24 **25**:23 **26**:8 **58**:12,14 **88**:4
last [3] **6**:12 **39**:10 **77**:25
latter [2] **52**:1 **90**:18
law [35] **4**:10 **10**:1,4 **12**:21 **20**:18 **21**:22,22 **22**:3 **32**:10, 16 **33**:1,3,5 **35**:3 **44**:9 **51**: 18 **54**:4 **56**:23 **57**:22 **58**:4 **59**:1,3,4,9,16 **61**:7,17 **62**: 15 **63**:1 **73**:23 **79**:20 **81**:24 **82**:1,11,21
laws [6] **53**:6 **59**:7 **79**:22 **80**: 7,12,20
lawsuit [3] **8**:23 **9**:1 **23**:25
lawsuits [1] **44**:12
lawyer [2] **35**:15 **88**:18
lawyers [1] **35**:11
lead [1] **76**:5
least [3] **48**:25 **69**:7 **86**:1
leave [2] **16**:16 **26**:23
left [1] **16**:18
legislation [1] **83**:12
legislature [1] **45**:2

lengthy [1] **58**:5
less [1] **49**:2
letter [4] **31**:6 **78**:9,9,20
level [1] **70**:1
levels [5] **41**:19 **64**:23 **65**: 24 **69**:24,25
liability [19] **3**:13 **52**:23 **59**: 2,4 **60**:9,17 **61**:11 **63**:18 **66**:4 **75**:7 **79**:16 **81**:19 **82**: 2,8,12,19 **90**:24 **91**:1,5
liability-minimizing [1] **63**:19
liable [2] **82**:1,7
liberty [2] **73**:3,7
likely [1] **84**:18
limitation [1] **13**:2
limitations [6] **8**:3 **86**:20, 22,24 **87**:2,13
limits [11] **17**:12 **24**:18,19 **25**:2,25 **55**:13 **60**:24 **66**:11 **69**:20,20 **91**:9
linchpin [1] **16**:13
line [4] **25**:15 **36**:10 **59**:6 **80**: 24
lines [2] **30**:5,6
listen [1] **46**:1
litigants [2] **56**:13 **73**:9
litigated [1] **56**:5
litigation [2] **35**:13 **44**:12
little [3] **6**:17 **15**:24 **30**:6
local [1] **35**:12
logjam [1] **54**:25
long [6] **5**:4 **6**:12 **29**:5,18 **42**:9 **90**:8
look [8] **16**:6 **22**:2 **24**:8 **65**: 8,8 **67**:1,17 **70**:16
looking [6] **20**:4 **24**:15 **28**: 22 **54**:3 **65**:10 **81**:7
looks [4] **7**:16 **20**:15 **27**:10 **66**:3
loop [2] **11**:19 **54**:21
lose [10] **11**:7 **14**:5 **36**:4,16 **37**:4,9,11 **45**:23 **74**:1 **77**:7
loses [1] **38**:5
lost [3] **10**:4 **84**:21 **88**:15
lot [15] **26**:1 **30**:15 **34**:15,17, 25 **65**:10 **67**:2 **69**:19 **75**:5 **83**:2 **84**:18 **88**:15 **90**:13 **91**: 10,23
lots [1] **46**:12
lower [3] **5**:1 **8**:12 **9**:15

M

machinery [1] **27**:13
made [10] **5**:1 **12**:4 **23**:16, 20 **46**:3 **58**:1,3,24 **69**:10 **71**:18
mailing [1] **25**:4
majority [6] **9**:6 **35**:13 **58**:2, 14 **74**:12,24
mandamus [21] **40**:14,22, 24 **41**:1,11 **48**:5 **49**:10 **50**: 24 **54**:6,18,19,24,25 **55**:2 **56**:18,23 **57**:2,10 **62**:19 **78**:

20,24
manifestly [1] **60**:13
manner [1] **85**:12
many [8] **24**:24 **26**:18 **28**:1, 1,2,21 **78**:8 **79**:15
match [1] **32**:17
matter [15] **1**:14 **10**:1,4 **17**: 5 **22**:1 **28**:17 **32**:10 **37**:2 **39**:23 **68**:9,14 **70**:18,20 **77**: 22 **85**:17
mattered [1] **61**:8
matters [1] **65**:1
mean [24] **6**:12 **7**:13 **12**:8 **16**:6,8 **19**:12 **20**:4 **23**:11 **25**:21 **30**:14 **31**:4 **36**:12 **37**: 17 **39**:3 **46**:12 **50**:16 **51**:1 **65**:18 **69**:14 **74**:19 **83**:1,15 **87**:7 **88**:22
meanings [1] **28**:2
means [10] **18**:12 **52**:24 **59**: 10 **60**:6 **61**:10,11 **80**:5,17 **81**:20 **88**:15
meant [2] **51**:20 **83**:13
mechanism [3] **30**:22 **31**:9 **72**:10
mediation [5] **6**:10 **7**:9,15, 19 **8**:1
mediator [1] **6**:14
mention [1] **34**:16
mentioned [2] **35**:20 **75**:13
merely [4] **9**:13 **52**:3 **59**:23 **67**:15
merit [3] **13**:22 **23**:13 **71**:6
merits [8] **11**:7,25 **37**:10,11 **45**:23 **46**:5 **77**:8 **84**:21
might [18] **7**:16 **8**:8 **11**:6,11 **13**:14 **27**:18 **32**:17 **48**:6 **65**: 11,14 **66**:1,4 **68**:18 **69**:10 **76**:24 **80**:18 **84**:15 **87**:2
million [1] **86**:9
mind [1] **10**:7
mine-run [1] **49**:18
minimis [1] **27**:6
minimize [8] **59**:5 **60**:17 **66**: 3 **75**:7 **82**:19 **90**:23 **91**:1,4
minimized [1] **59**:2
Minimizes [1] **82**:2
minimizing [5] **60**:9 **61**:10 **79**:16 **81**:19 **82**:8
minimum [1] **4**:17
misreading [1] **74**:5
Mm-hmm [3] **29**:2 **45**:6 **81**: 11
Mobility [1] **81**:15
Monday [1] **1**:12
Mondou [1] **33**:11
money [1] **61**:12
Montgomery [1] **1**:21
months [1] **73**:24
moot [1] **47**:18
morning [2] **90**:14 **92**:23
most [6] **13**:20 **22**:13 **36**:23 **53**:23 **76**:15 **83**:3
motion [1] **85**:22

move [1] **81**:18
moving [1] **80**:4
MSPB [2] **71**:8,18
much [6] **25**:2 **26**:1 **31**:19, 23 **45**:21 **58**:10
municipal [1] **5**:10
must [1] **58**:11
myself [1] **64**:4

N

NANCY [1] **1**:3
narrow [8] **46**:17 **47**:2 **48**: 13 **50**:2,8 **68**:5,11,12
narrower [5] **24**:1,3,7 **45**: 21,21
narrowest [2] **40**:8 **47**:5
narrowly [2] **46**:15,22
nature [2] **7**:3 **69**:2
nearly [1] **58**:23
necessarily [3] **45**:13 **52**: 20 **76**:22
need [3] **27**:12 **65**:8 **91**:16
needs [1] **42**:14
neither [1] **22**:7
neutral [20] **4**:2,3 **6**:5 **16**:21 **19**:9,15,21,24 **20**:21 **21**:3, 10 **43**:15,21 **44**:10 **45**:4 **51**: 20 **53**:4 **66**:18 **68**:25 **83**:25
never [5] **4**:5,6,7 **59**:18 **68**: 22
New [5] **23**:5 **47**:2 **48**:12 **53**: 18 **82**:16
nine [1] **49**:11
no-exhaustion [2] **52**:11 **75**:10
nobody's [1] **46**:8
non-benefits [1] **66**:15
none [3] **12**:23 **57**:14,15
Nor [1] **52**:7
notable [1] **92**:2
nothing [3] **4**:3 **51**:18 **54**: 17
notice [18] **7**:14,16 **20**:7 **23**: 2 **24**:23 **26**:24 **50**:18,21 **52**: 21 **55**:9,12 **60**:22 **61**:13 **71**: 24 **72**:19 **77**:16 **82**:18 **91**: 11
notices [1] **78**:9
novo [1] **88**:12
number [4] **28**:25 **29**:3 **68**: 3 **85**:23
nuts [1] **7**:12

O

O'Connor [2] **58**:1 **74**:23
O'Connor's [1] **58**:13
objection [1] **4**:25
objectionable [1] **7**:10
objectives [6] **18**:4,18 **34**: 8 **51**:5 **63**:11 **80**:1
obstacle [6] **64**:7 **79**:24 **80**: 3 **81**:12,24 **85**:3
obstacles [1] **52**:22
obviously [2] **46**:22 **85**:21

October [1] **1**:12
odd [1] **30**:21
officers [4] **62**:25 **65**:20 **70**: 24 **85**:23
officials [1] **81**:25
often [1] **35**:4
Ohio [3] **52**:13 **75**:12 **76**:6
Okay [20] **13**:7 **14**:19 **15**:19 **32**:12,14,20 **38**:8 **39**:10 **42**: 3 **48**:4 **49**:14 **51**:7 **64**:25 **66**:23,25 **68**:10 **84**:24 **87**: 15 **89**:12,13
once [2] **47**:15 **83**:17
one [35] **13**:8 **15**:25 **16**:21 **18**:23 **20**:11 **25**:6 **27**:9 **28**: 5,25 **30**:17,20 **31**:1 **43**:20 **44**:4,4 **50**:4,7 **51**:21 **52**:21 **53**:17 **54**:7 **59**:1 **60**:14 **63**: 23 **64**:3,4,16 **72**:8,14 **76**:11 **77**:24 **79**:8,19 **83**:3 **89**:25
onerous [2] **68**:15 **70**:10
ones [1] **27**:15
Only [8] **14**:16 **17**:11 **19**:22 **24**:21 **41**:7 **43**:22 **51**:17 **53**: 22
opened [1] **75**:22
opening [1] **75**:13
operates [2] **57**:10 **61**:1
opinion [5] **18**:5 **26**:8 **27**:4 **58**:22 **75**:25
opinions [1] **75**:3
opposed [1] **10**:17
oral [4] **1**:15 **2**:2 **3**:7 **51**:12
order [2] **50**:14 **56**:15
ordinary [1] **41**:6
organizations [1] **35**:7
other [24] **11**:3 **13**:24 **14**:12 **22**:25 **27**:13 **29**:5 **34**:17 **37**: 9 **39**:16 **41**:9 **43**:16 **44**:12 **45**:24 **46**:19 **58**:12 **61**:4 **80**: 7,19,19 **81**:21 **84**:14 **86**:7 **87**:15 **90**:16
others [1] **22**:11
otherwise [1] **15**:16
out [23] **6**:15 **8**:25 **11**:7,20 **12**:18 **19**:17 **22**:25 **29**:24 **30**:23 **46**:4 **54**:22 **55**:9 **57**: 13 **64**:16 **69**:4 **77**:15,15 **78**: 1 **84**:1 **87**:9,11 **91**:16 **92**: 16
out-of-state [2] **17**:14,15
outcome [2] **33**:25 **34**:10
outcomes [1] **76**:5
outside [1] **85**:21
over [27] **17**:4,5,6,14 **23**:2, 13 **27**:22 **28**:16,16,17 **29**:1, 4,9,10,15,17,18,20 **33**:13 **59**:11 **60**:2 **70**:18,20 **81**:21 **84**:4 **85**:17 **86**:2
overrule [1] **91**:23
overruling [1] **92**:4
overwhelming [1] **9**:6
own [4] **10**:7 **16**:20 **22**:5 **27**: 25

Respondent's [1] 23:15
response [1] 31:17
result [4] 18:8 51:18 59:14
  92:6
retain [1] 86:12
reverse [1] 93:4
reverted [1] 50:3
review [9] 41:19,20 52:13,
  23 64:23 69:25,25 88:11,
  12
rights [10] 3:20 35:17 42:
  13 52:14 73:6 75:12,20 79:
  22 83:11 89:10
ring [2] 36:25 37:23
ripe [2] 46:6 90:9
ripeness [8] 11:12,15 52:2,
  6 84:15 90:1,2,7
risk [1] 8:7
ROBERTS [23] 3:3 6:6 7:4
  36:7 37:8,12,17 38:8,20,24
  39:10,14 40:9 43:12 45:17
  46:25 49:22 51:8 84:7 86:
  15 89:16,20 93:5
rule [56] 4:2 6:17,21 8:1,10
  13:20 17:10,13,16 18:23
  19:12,14,20 21:3,24 22:3,
  16 23:6 24:11 25:23 27:18
  28:11 29:11,12 30:10,13
  31:20 32:2,3,8,24 33:22
  34:2,3 38:4 41:9 43:15 45:
  4 47:8 48:2 49:9 53:24 54:
  1 57:17,19 65:9 66:22 67:
  2 69:3 70:16 73:5 74:20
  75:10 76:14 83:9,24
ruled [2] 55:4 58:22
rules [27] 16:16,16,19,21,
  22,24 17:2,4,6,8,19 22:10,
  15 28:18 32:15 43:10 46:
  21 51:20,23 52:2,21 53:4,
  12 66:18 68:25 83:25 91:
  22
ruling [5] 37:13 38:14 40:
  14,18 43:2
rulings [1] 67:15
run [4] 66:1,4 87:3,9
running [4] 8:4 84:22 86:
  22,25

S

same [26] 3:24 4:25 25:12
  29:15 34:10 37:1,3,5 38:4
  43:2 49:6 58:1 64:10 65:
  19 66:7,10,11 67:8 73:11
  76:24 80:6,15 81:16 83:20
  86:20 92:22
satisfaction [1] 58:7
satisfied [2] 23:3 29:6
saying [21] 8:22 12:22 13:
  25 14:13 17:13 31:6 32:15,
  22 34:21 40:2 44:23,24 45:
  9,13 47:11 55:12 73:18 77:
  20 81:6 88:2 89:2
says [18] 20:7,23 21:2 22:
  24 27:5,6,9 34:21 40:21

42:8 45:4,25 59:21 60:11
  66:12 79:18 83:4,10
scenario [1] 37:4
scheme [7] 28:10 29:22 30:
  20 63:20 64:21 77:4 82:12
Schools [2] 52:15 75:18
scope [1] 16:17
second [6] 17:1 20:13 59:8
  60:22 62:22 65:7
SECRETARY [9] 1:7 4:4,5,
  6 5:20,21,23 61:19 63:7
Section [16] 3:14 14:17 20:
  8 23:20 24:20 27:22 29:17
  30:3 34:4 49:12 51:6,19
  60:5 62:8 79:20 90:4
Security [4] 13:12 15:7 49:
  20 64:6
see [8] 6:15 46:18 54:14 63:
  15 65:8 73:10 75:11 79:15
seek [9] 4:4,6 5:16,19 15:3
  41:23 42:4 56:18 58:7
seeking [5] 5:23 8:20 13:
  22 41:10,17
seem [7] 19:13 31:10 55:7
  58:13 73:1 80:24 85:6
seems [8] 15:25 20:18 45:
  22 58:15 61:5 72:11 83:2,
  15
seen [2] 64:3 84:18
sees [1] 6:15
send [3] 36:17 52:9 76:22
sending [1] 87:21
sends [1] 7:19
sense [5] 20:22 35:18 39:5
  44:11,18
serious [2] 53:7 77:9
seriously [1] 85:20
service [1] 16:23
set [4] 64:6 65:19 66:22 78:
  1
sets [1] 64:21
setting [1] 6:3
settlement [1] 7:24
seven [1] 25:3
several [4] 6:11 20:9 27:19
  92:3
sex [1] 75:21
shall [2] 82:1,7
shifting [1] 80:17
short [2] 74:15,16
shorter [1] 25:2
shouldn't [1] 16:1
show [4] 41:4 52:18 67:15
  85:16
shows [1] 76:3
side [6] 11:3 61:4 74:10,15,
  16 84:14
significant [5] 32:1 49:1,3
  50:11 51:2
similar [5] 5:12 13:15 71:
  18,21 85:5
simple [2] 72:18 74:20
simply [8] 6:9 7:7,8 54:9
  59:21 76:8 83:12 92:13

since [3] 21:23 31:14 70:21
single [2] 90:19 91:14
sit [1] 6:14
sits [1] 40:23
situation [3] 16:2 71:4 87:
  14
situations [1] 39:16
slow [2] 10:4 70:7
Social [4] 13:11 15:7 49:20
  64:6
sole [1] 91:6
Solicitor [1] 1:21
somebody [1] 45:24
somehow [3] 19:17 86:24
  87:23
sometimes [2] 22:18 35:2
soon [1] 84:23
sorry [1] 21:10
sort [15] 7:6 18:15 26:8 32:
  5,17 54:25 56:8 63:12 65:
  16,19 67:4 71:4 75:19 88:
  9 89:9
sorts [1] 49:6
SOTOMAYOR [33] 9:11,20
  10:6,15,19,23 11:2,18 43:
  13,14,24 44:3,7,14,22 45:8,
  16 54:11,17 55:3,22,24 56:
  11 57:1,5,9 77:11,24 78:5,
  19 79:2,4 84:11
sought [1] 40:13
sound [2] 7:20 89:1
sounds [3] 6:16 55:16 70:
  12
South [1] 74:10
sovereignty [1] 68:19
speaking [1] 14:12
special [1] 49:12
specifically [1] 19:20
speculating [1] 5:8
speed [1] 78:2
spend [2] 35:16 74:15
split [2] 74:15,17
square [1] 75:11
stage [2] 67:19 85:22
stages [1] 65:22
stake [1] 31:14
stand [1] 79:24
standard [4] 41:5 80:9,17
  81:8
start [4] 8:3 10:20 80:4 86:
  22
started [2] 45:19 57:21
starts [1] 70:16
state [145] 3:19,24 4:11,12
  5:1,3 6:3 7:15 8:3,8 9:2,4,
  5,6,8,10 10:1,4,10,17,20
  11:8,19 13:15,21,25 14:10,
  23 16:1,9,15,19 17:13 18:
  13 21:13 22:1,4,16,17,19,
  21 23:1,12 24:24 27:6 28:
  11,25 29:3,24 31:11,20 32:
  6,9,10,23 33:1,3,12 34:2,4,
  21 35:1,3,12,14,17,19,22
  36:14,15,23 37:14,18 38:1,

3,18 39:8,8,23,24 40:2,5,
  14 41:8,8,15 43:1,4,8,18
  44:9,18,25 45:9 47:14,20
  48:3 50:17,18 51:16 52:7,
  17 56:5,7,19 57:4 59:4 64:
  1 67:9 68:14,16,20,21 70:6
  72:23 73:6,20 74:5,13,17,
  21 75:17,25 76:2,7,16 77:
  12,16,18 79:21 80:12 81:
  25 82:1 83:10,18,21 85:10,
  20 86:19,21,24 87:3,3 90:
  23 92:9
state's [2] 42:25 79:20
statements [1] 75:1
STATES [7] 1:1,16 52:9 76:
  13,21 88:6 92:3
statute [29] 4:2,18 8:3 19:2
  20:7 24:13,20,23 25:12 26:
  3 32:11 33:19 39:7 46:16
  49:12 60:14,21 61:22 62:4
  68:20 81:10 82:4,6,16 86:
  19,21,24 87:2,13
statutes [5] 31:22 32:6,7
  71:2 75:3
statutory [1] 32:5
stick [1] 50:2
still [15] 8:23 11:8 16:16 21:
  4,5 43:6 48:25 51:2 53:5
  54:6,6 68:18 69:23 83:23,
  24
straight [1] 14:3
straight-up [1] 28:9
straighter [1] 18:8
straightforward [1] 34:10
strange [1] 76:5
stringent [3] 66:1 69:21,23
strong [1] 23:11
struck [1] 22:11
structure [1] 76:21
structured [1] 63:16
structuring [1] 88:6
stuck [2] 11:19 15:7
stuff [1] 21:1
subject [5] 17:5 28:17 70:
  18,20 85:17
submission [1] 73:9
submit [1] 26:25
submitted [2] 93:6,8
subsequently [1] 20:6
substitute [2] 41:13 51:1
substitution [1] 16:23
sudden [1] 56:1
sue [9] 5:17,25 7:18 16:25
  19:23 27:2 43:23,24 67:5
suggest [5] 19:16 26:4 58:
  15 75:5 90:5
suggestion [1] 16:8
suggests [6] 25:23 26:9
  70:6 74:4 76:4 88:4
sui [1] 44:3
suing [2] 4:5 5:17
suit [9] 3:23 6:13 24:22 37:
  21 73:19 82:23 83:6,18,19
summary [2] 60:4 67:19

superfluity [1] 75:4
supports [1] 57:18
suppose [5] 15:6 64:16 68:
  12 69:22 83:13
supposed [3] 28:2,6 62:9
suppressing [1] 77:12
Supremacy [1] 33:24
SUPREME [17] 1:1,15 3:15
  4:19 9:16 21:23 53:19,20
  56:1 65:4 67:21 72:24 74:
  5,7,13,17 82:15
survive [1] 91:25
suspect [2] 65:11,13
system [7] 5:18 6:4 9:12
  15:20 16:3 58:9 90:25
Systems [1] 71:7

T

talked [2] 18:3 90:22
talks [5] 20:10 35:8 60:5,24
  81:8
teacher [2] 75:18,20
teed [1] 93:1
tells [2] 21:23 56:13
term [2] 3:4 28:1
terms [2] 33:24 88:6
territorial [1] 17:12
territory [1] 17:10
test [3] 28:7,10 69:4
text [6] 51:17 57:22 58:18
  75:9 81:25 82:5
text-based [2] 80:25 82:3
Thanks [1] 51:7
theoretical [1] 50:24
theory [7] 47:3 48:13,14,21
  50:3,8 70:15
there's [59] 4:3 5:4 6:14 8:
  22 13:10 14:7 18:8,9 22:
  24 26:10 29:9,19 30:15 31:
  7,8 33:7 34:5,9,15,17,24
  35:6,6,10 37:25 38:7 40:4,
  19 41:18 42:5,24 43:16 47:
  6,8,20 49:16,16 50:24 51:1
  54:17,18 58:18 59:2,22 62:
  22,22 64:18 66:11 67:4 68:
  12 75:5 76:20 78:15 81:6
  83:2,12 87:19 90:13 93:3
therefore [2] 24:22 71:25
they've [3] 70:22 78:6,6
thinking [2] 31:13 80:2
third [1] 20:14
third-party [1] 6:5
THOMAS [5] 4:24 5:6 40:
  11 53:10 84:9
thoroughly [1] 72:22
though [5] 11:12 30:1 37:
  22 58:17 69:6
thoughts [1] 84:16
thousands [2] 71:1,2
three [10] 20:10,19 26:14
  60:7,8 61:7 64:23 65:22,
  22 69:24
threshold [1] 88:25
throw [1] 46:4

thrown [2] 55:9 77:15
Thunder [1] 71:6
tight [1] 91:9
timely [2] 36:16 85:12
timing [1] 52:1
today [3] 41:14 86:3 92:14
tolled [2] 8:7,8
tolling [1] 8:13
took [1] 67:11
tort [1] 44:11
toward [1] 23:6
track [1] 35:24
tradition [1] 67:4
traditionally [1] 81:1
trapped [1] 26:22
Treasury [1] 71:6
tremendous [1] 85:6
trial [2] 5:11 67:20
tribunal [7] 5:22 25:5 30:
  23 31:5 35:15 72:4,10
tried [2] 11:7 42:6
tries [1] 6:15
tripled [1] 85:23
trotted [1] 12:17
trouble [1] 44:15
true [2] 84:18 90:22
truly [7] 48:16,19,24 68:25
  69:7 70:15,19
try [5] 7:8,24 12:1 47:24 50:
  7
trying [10] 9:21 50:16 64:7
  72:8 75:7 88:22 90:5,23,
  25 91:4
two [10] 16:18 29:3 35:7 41:
  19 45:22 53:16 58:25 60:8
  64:13 85:13
two-page [1] 58:22
type [9] 15:5 16:10 25:12
  32:18 43:25 51:4 56:20 84:
  5 92:22
types [4] 17:18 24:24 70:25
  71:21
typical [2] 18:21 26:20
typically [2] 52:24 71:19

U

U.S.C [1] 51:19
ultimately [3] 5:24 72:21
  91:13
umbrella [1] 63:12
unavailable [1] 92:12
unconscious [1] 77:17
uncounseled [1] 88:14
under [12] 3:13 11:24 27:8
  30:2 41:16 42:2 53:14 55:
  14 62:7 70:13,14 87:18
undermine [1] 60:6
undermines [5] 20:7,17,
  23 21:5 24:20
understand [13] 10:9 11:3,
  4 12:23 14:11 20:20 28:20
  48:22 53:11 65:13 83:18,
  20 84:25
understanding [2] 72:17

83:16
understood [6] 20:2 36:11
  38:10 61:25 63:12 89:13
unemployment [7] 9:7 35:
  13 63:21 71:15 72:13 77:4
  86:9
unexhausted [4] 23:14 29:
  20 55:15 56:2
uniformly [1] 74:18
UNIKOWSKY [109] 1:19 2:
  3,8 3:6,7,9 4:24 5:2,14 6:
  16 7:11 8:2,5,18,20 9:3,19,
  25 10:14,18,22 11:1,5,13,
  21 12:3,8,12,16,25 13:6,18
  14:10,16 15:4,11,14,17 16:
  4,18 17:21,24 18:3 19:19
  20:2,25 21:9,16,20 22:9
  23:10,23 24:10 25:17 26:
  16 27:24 28:13 29:3 30:11,
  14 31:3 32:4,14,21 33:6,10
  34:1,14,24 36:1 37:3,10,16,
  19 38:13,22 39:1,13,17 40:
  16,19 41:25 42:4,11,15,18
  43:20 44:2,6,8,20 45:6,12
  46:10 47:5,12 48:1,8,18,22
  49:11,15 50:10 72:8 77:7
  86:19 89:21,22,24
Unikowsky's [2] 53:10 68:
  5
uniquely [1] 20:8
UNITED [2] 1:1,16
unless [1] 15:17
Unlike [2] 18:21 61:16
unresolved [1] 8:6
until [4] 10:12 39:21 40:2
  87:8
unusual [1] 36:5
unwritten [1] 53:3
up [19] 6:3 42:23 45:20 56:
  1 57:14 63:1 64:7,21 65:
  19 66:22 67:21 71:22 76:2,
  9 78:2 80:24 86:2 88:11
  93:1
upheld [3] 17:12,16 22:10
useful [1] 88:10

V

valid [5] 53:5 66:19,21 69:1
  84:1
variety [1] 73:2
vary [1] 3:22
vast [2] 35:12 74:12
ventilator [1] 25:10
verse [1] 78:17
version [1] 7:14
versus [4] 3:5 32:18 81:15
  87:21
view [8] 6:2 11:21 17:22,24
  18:15,15 33:17 80:23
views [1] 26:13
vindicate [2] 90:3 91:24
vindication [3] 16:10 49:2
  50:12
violated [1] 89:10

violation [19] 9:24 10:12
  14:4,7 31:8 38:1 42:5,12,
  20 43:6,16 44:5 45:11 46:
  2 47:21 78:15 87:1,8 89:6

W

wait [7] 18:22 26:21,25 27:
  17,19 42:22 92:19
waited [2] 86:1 90:8
waiver [1] 57:13
walked [1] 19:1
wanted [5] 24:4 67:20 89:
  13,25 92:16
wants [2] 67:5,5
WASHINGTON [3] 1:6,11,
  19
way [25] 9:15 19:17 22:5,25
  23:25 26:20 34:6,10 40:4
  43:18 46:18 47:10 50:24
  59:22 60:25 63:2,16 65:19
  67:9 68:9 74:8 76:21 79:8
  80:18 82:19
ways [3] 20:9,10 64:14
weakening [1] 32:1
welcome [2] 4:23 53:9
well-heeled [1] 61:18
whatever [2] 13:12 81:19
whatsoever [3] 56:9 61:15
  67:10
whenever [1] 46:16
Whereupon [1] 93:7
whether [32] 3:23 6:19,24
  8:6,12 12:20,21 18:13,19
  19:12,14 20:20,21 24:5,6,
  11 26:3 31:22 33:4,8,24
  36:23 45:10 46:4 48:16 61:
  12 69:15 80:11 90:14,15,
  23 91:3
whole [2] 19:21 36:19
wide [1] 73:2
will [5] 3:3 23:8,9 28:21 73:
  5
WILLIAMS [4] 1:3 3:5 55:5
  77:15
win [6] 43:7,8,8 45:14 46:8
  77:21
Wisconsin [10] 7:17 23:1
  59:1,9,14 62:15 82:13,14,
  18 91:12
Wisconsin's [2] 18:23 58:
  4
within [5] 54:15,18 55:17
  70:2,3
without [3] 23:21 33:21 36:
  3
wondering [1] 31:3
word [1] 23:12
words [6] 13:24 28:13 37:9
  45:24 58:12 90:11
work [2] 6:15 10:10
workable [1] 10:16
worked [1] 8:1
works [2] 5:19 30:20
worried [2] 80:4 81:20

wrap [1] 42:23
writ [1] 41:5

Y

year [2] 71:2 86:5
years [8] 15:8 26:22 27:19
  32:3 70:8 78:10,10 92:19
yellow [1] 92:25
York [1] 23:5
Younger [2] 52:15 75:15